

Alter Gaming

Considering the Different Gaming Realities of our times

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Play has always been with us. It has guided the course of the world from the very beginning (Eigen & Winkler, 1993). It has always been a way of experiencing, discovering, getting to know yourself and the others. Different forms of play pervaded our civilization and reflected our lives. As Huizinga (1950) writes the great archetypal activities of human society were permeated with play from the start and he indicatively refers to language, myth and ritual which gave birth to law, commerce, art and science. Play has also been social, involving ourselves and others, demanding participation, communication and collaboration. Moving to our times while these elements still remain, play has got into a new sphere of continuous observation and has become the object of thorough analysis and research for many disciplines. The main factor for this evolution has been of course technology and the birth of the videogame genre. Videogames gradually became the most popular form of play and entertainment in contemporary culture. From the 70s until today videogames are creating worlds and systems of play and communication that form identities and offer new grounds of exploration and understanding. Although these features may apply to all kinds of play, there is one significant difference. Videogames are not just games; they are also a powerful and pervasive medium. They surpass entertainment and influence various significant sectors of our society. Games are now basic composites as tools in education, politics, advertisement, technology and the military as well as in art and culture. Games are part of today's life and a subsequence of the digital realm that has been formed by its people. As correctly Henry Jenkins points out, the generation that grew up with the first video games is now entering the workplace and the politics and as this is the medium they know best, video games from now on will be used for a variety of functions (Jenkins 2006).

In this context, from the mid nineties, grows an independent and artistic game scene that explores the potentialities given by the gaming culture and constructs new forms of meaning and expression. Following famous predecessors like the artists of the Dada and the Surrealism, the Situationists and the Fluxus, artists working on games, see play as a means of challenging the stereotypes, reversing the rules and offering new ways of playing and understanding. Games developed by artists are often characterised by a sense of irony and humour, by a disposition to work beyond the dominant media structures (Lee 2003). The player's goal in many cases is not to win or to succeed but to reveal the hidden message, "la raison d'être" of the particular game. Like in other media, in cinema or literature the development of an alternative scene is crucial. Creativity, experimentation and critical thinking are vibrant elements that confront the hyper-real commercial games and their high budgets and challenge the structures of the medium itself (Morgana 2006). The numerous conferences and festivals that more and more are taking place focusing on video games have an important role to play in the establishment and empowerment of an independent scene. Their support and promotion can greatly enhance the endeavour and work of creators working on this direction.

The exhibition of medi@terra 06 focusing on the gaming realities of our times hosts a selection of projects created by artists that present different -often unseen- sides of today's gaming culture. The games are characterised for their interdisciplinary character, the socio-political messages they convey, the technical and aesthetic innovations they introduce and the subversion of game standards imposed by the gaming industry. Their forms vary from online games, game mods and sound based games to game installations, stand alone game applications, and video projects. The common ground for these projects is the element of play and the development of new narratives which in some cases is celebrated as the joy of the action and in others it leads to further exploration and decoding of the visual data given. Visitors are invited to come and get involved, to fully engage themselves with the new conditions of play. As Huizinga (1950) puts it "play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of cosmos".

TRANSFORMING PLAY

As the new desire for play evokes machines, technologies take upon to form the new locations where people get to play together. Some of the game installations and applications hosted in medi@terra are projects that, by taking advantage of the potentialities offered by technology today, transform older play forms into new ones. The games keep their rules and goals but obtain

new aspects of excitement and exploration, new means of relating to the things around you and perceiving the others. The *Jumping Rope* developed by Orna Portugaly, Daphna Talithman and Sharon Younger integrates a familiar game in the computerized world. Participants are invited to jump in an area between two opposing screens where two characters are turning a rope. The physical and the virtual world merge while real players are playing with virtual ones. Synchronization with the rope remains the goal of the game, or the players lose. Another example of this type is the *Himalaya's Head*, a multi-user installation developed by DEVART where the player is asked to play snow war with opponents projected on the screens. Users wear specially built head beacons with infrared leds that are tracked by a camera. In both cases technology is the intermediary and the crucial element that changes aesthetics and the game experience. *Interactive Circus* developed by Marie-Hélène Tramus and Cédric Plessier is a different kind of game installation with sensors. Players wear and use interactive equipment and are entering a gaming world where they can "lead the show" with their moves. These projects, apart from the game experience they offer, also give people the opportunity to get familiar with uncommon features of technology, and encourage their disposition to play and talk with other players. Interestingly, in the same venue a game reverses and criticizes the "aura of technology" that surrounds games. The *5 Euro Dance Pad* created by Dimi Christopoulos is a low cost, self built dance-pad made from spare material. The dance pad can connect to any PC and the user can play old style video games in a different way. While dancing and moving around on this self made dance pad, even if the "aura" has gone, the excitement remains the same.

The experience changes and physical gestures lessen in games, where emphasis is put on the aesthetic of graphics and representation and on a developed physics engine that supports them. *NetOdrom* is a simulation of a fictional motor race. Players get into pods with bumpers that remind us of those we drove in amusement parks. Christoph Anthes has developed a different motor race taking us in an usual imaginary trip from Austria down to Turkey, passing by highways and cities, that you do not expect to see. A different game type, *Semiomorph* created by Troy Innocent focuses on mixing digital games, generative systems and computational semiotics. He takes signs of game characters, decodes and transmutes them in a personal imaginary context. Meaning is made by their transformation and movement within the space as the graphical representation is under continuous change.

[RE]DEFINING NEW AND OLD GENRES

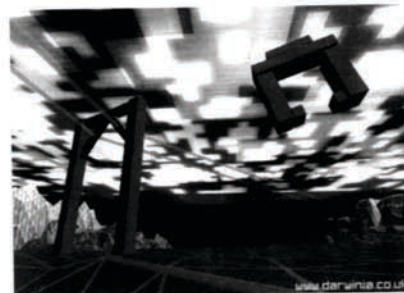
Back in the 90's the genres in video games were an important feature for their categorization and distinction. Today the boundaries between them blur more and more as old types of games vanish and new ones emerge with intermixed elements. Creators from the independent field, coming from various backgrounds experiment with new features that give birth to new narratives. These experimentations shall be taken under consideration not only for the new approaches of game experience and participation they introduce but also for the hybridization that lead to the future game forms.

Darwinia created by Introversion Software is a game that brings down the genre stereotypes. The gameplay combines the tactical elements of the real time strategy games with graphics inspired by retro games and their 8bit sounds. Artificial intelligence has been used to enhance the player experience which is based on an original and complex narrative. This approach of using exceptional features from different genres has created a post genre, neo classical game that has been characterised as the future of video games by the public and the critics.

A completely different game experience is being formed by the game *Façade*. *Façade* developed by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern falls into the new category of interactive drama, as described by its creators. This hybrid form has come to fill in a part that was missing in computer games. Games deal with violence, death, mystery, power and winning but the emotional part and the emotional engagement of the user is always absent (Woods 2004). *Façade* breaks down this rule and turns to human relationships, to common people's lives. Based on an advanced text interpreter and artificial intelligence, the player gets involved in a couple's life, affects the characters' reactions and controls the outcome of the story. Even if not exactly a game, the project certainly opens to new types of narrative and entertainment for the years to come.



Himalaya's Head, Devart, 2005



Darwinia, Introversion Software, 2005



Façade, Michael Mateas & Andrew Stern, 2005

Nick Montfort, on the contrary, revives an old form, the predecessor of video games and attributes new meaning to it. *Book and Volume* is a text adventure game [or else an Interactive Fiction] where the player shall type the proper commands to find out what is happening in the environment of the game and control it. While the gaming industry has surpassed this genre after the 80's when visual graphics advanced, Montfort's research and work gives new potentialities to this genre as he develops projects where language understanding and riddle solving are the focal point in the worlds these games create (Montfort 2004)

REVINDICATING POLITICS

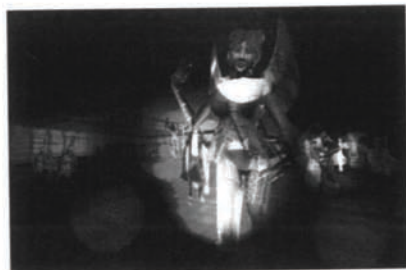
In the last years, a new genre of games emerged by creators that look into the potentialities of expression and critical thinking on social and political issues. Political video games - as they are often named - are not games of propaganda, but subversions that challenge and deconstruct the media [mis]information of our times. Such projects demand research on the theme tackled and are often developed by a network of people bearing characteristics from different fields that give an interdisciplinary character in the project.

Some political games refer to particular geographical zones and their history, their cultural, social and political features. Such an example is *The making of the Balkan Wars: The Game* created by the Personal Cinema. The project counteracts the sensational spectacle of war presented by the media by deconstructing stereotypes, focusing on the distortion of identities, and revisiting the dominant logic of explanation. In the form of a 3D online multiplayer video game, it hosts videos, sounds, images and texts contributed by more than 50 participant artists who look into the Balkan territory and way of life. The 20 different spaces of the game shape an imaginary shopping mall, which is actually an elevation of social, historical and cultural elements of the Balkans.

The Soviet Unterzegersdorf - The adventure Game is a project by the art-technology-philosophy group Monochrom. The group puts the player through a series of puzzling questions and decisions in the shoes of a brave citizen living in the last remaining appendage republic of the USSR, the village of Unterzegersdorf that "still resists". Monochrom depict an old popular game genre, that of adventure to develop a project on cultural and collective memory and discuss in a humorous way topics of historiography, socialism and utopia.

The Eastwood Group with the project *Civilization IV* made a game and possibly a statement for the world around us. Based on the game engine of *Civilization III*, the project criticizes the systems of social and cultural formation as shown in the famous *Civilization* series. *Civilization IV* (named as such before the date of *Civilization IV* by Meier) puts the emphasis on information technologies and the networks and reveals relationships between aspects of our society like the military entertainment complex, the immaterial labour, the pharmaceutical industry and the net economy. Eastwood's project questions the appropriation of the word *Civilization* by the game industry and the rebuilt of linguistic memory in our contemporary society.

Computer and video games have a power to pass messages and convey meanings, to show world models. Such a description would remind us of an advertisement and the relation is not really far. The two fields met and in the last decades games have been greatly explored for the use of advertising and sales. Realising this, groups of game designers and artists have recently started to work on a new type of political game, which could be described as the Anti-Advergaming. Creators here take an ironic and humorous stance and provokingly proceed to form games that reveal how dominant companies work. Two well known examples of such games are presented in this year's exhibition. Molleindustria participate with the *McDonald's Videogame*, an online game where the player is asked to undertake one of the biggest food companies and learn all the "dirty secrets" to achieve maximum profits. *Disaffected by Persuasive Games* targets the FedEx stores and puts the player in the position of the "incompetent" employee who can not make it. With the use of cute graphics and internet distribution, these groups react to the hyper-real 3D commercial worlds and reach out to audiences with games that ask people to think and take action. As both groups state in interviews, the most important feature of videogames is their immediacy, a feature that can be taken advantage of, in order to describe to people complex social and political issues in the most familiar way (Pedercini 2006).



The making of Balkan Wars: the Game, by Personal Cinema, 2004

A different inside view of the state of things is given by the initiative by Fiambrera who created *Border Games*. The game, which is still being created, is the outcome of a series of workshops with young Moroccan immigrants. A team was formed to work together on new technologies and learn to the young immigrants how to use technologies for their own benefit and progress. The game developed is based on the personal experiences of the young immigrants and is a reflection of their lives. It seems there is no way to succeed or win in this game - the story told is as the story is. A social phenomenon is simulated in this game in the most accurate way as the realities of these people create the several narratives that form the gameplay.

Moving towards the direction of education, a very interesting project presented is *Global Conflicts: Palestine*, designed by Serious Games Interactive. The game is to be used as a tool for school teachers to make students engage with serious political issues on a more personal level. Being a journalist in Palestine, the player of the game gets to listen to two opposing sides and is asked to remain as objective as possible. Creative and critical approach is principally encouraged in this game that does try to keep a balance between entertainment and education. The user can be attracted by the well designed and familiar graphics but he does engage to the game mainly through the dialogue appearing and the questions posed.

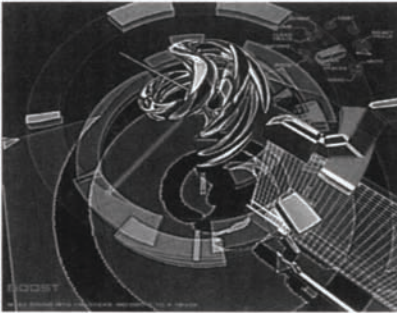
ALTERING THE EXISTING GAME REALM

Mods and patches have played an important role in forming the game spaces and new approaches we are now discussing. Back in the mid nineties when the source code of Doom was released, one could not suspect what would follow. Many artists would soon discover in video games such as the Quake, the Unreal, the Velvet Strike or the Half Life a new platform of expression that was different to other art forms and reached the public. Their intervention on the game did not only alter the story told or the aesthetics of the original game but reversed some of the standards the game industry had previously posed. The user was becoming a creator, a producer, a programmer and he was becoming part of a new network. Shareware economy was born as an exchange of mods and patches through the internet started then to be taking place. Today, after a decade has passed, we can see that this parasiting game creation as Schleiner (1999) described it continues to offer new perspectives in the different features of the gaming culture.

Philosopher Death Match is an interesting example of a mod which transforms a famous first person shooter into an arena where some of the world's most famous philosophers come to fight till death. Benjamin Chang's use of philosophy and sense of humour reverses the violence and bloodshed that sovereign the original game by inserting ontological questions and existential angst.

Unreal is one of most popular games used for modification. Various artists have explored and modified the game characteristics giving a different aesthetic, developing a different concept. For *Nowhere*, Unreal has been used to create an audiovisual installation, a virtual 3D space with sounds, spoken words, pictures and architectural images where the user can freely move in. The work created by Sylvia Eckermann, Gerald Nestler, Christof Cargnelli and Oliver Irschitz expresses a will to transfer the user in a dream world, a simulation of an utopia which is influenced by the works and ideas of the Glass Chain movement of 1920. A more provocative approach in modification is given by Jodi with *Max Payne Cheats Only*. Like in most of the projects they develop, Jodi confuse the viewer and make fun. For this work they have created a 10 video loop tutorial focusing on Max Payne 'cheats', and have put the hero through a number of ridiculous situations and they tell users how to cheat in the game. The user is surprised at first but soon he enjoys what he sees. The work of Jodi questions the very structure of the game reminding us that rules are there to be broken.

The exhibition also presents games that focus on sound and music experimenting with game platforms that generate soundscapes. Mathias Fuchs' *Postvinyl* has used Unreal as a tool to create a game on the history of vinyl records. The spaces of the game have been modified into new sceneries with powerful colours adjoined by well known sounds and songs. The user is taken to an unknown pleasant trip with musical instruments as weapons that he controls as a DJ. Similarly, Vladimir Todorovic creates *Game Music*, an Unreal mod where sound atmospheres are mixed with



Fijuu2, Julian Oliver & Steven Pickles, 2006

unusual noises and rhythms. An environment of sound creation is formed where the user is the main author and the features of the original first person shooter game have turned into another direction exploring creativity. *Fijuu2* designed by Julian Oliver and Steven Pickles is also a work focusing on sound but in this case a new audiovisual game engine has been created. *Fijuu2* gives players the opportunity to create 3D instruments with PlayStation2-style gamepads and produce sound sculptures which are visually also represented on the screen. Game consoles are turned into sound consoles and players are the ones that can freely compose music and play.

SITUATING THE NEW GAMING LOCATIONS

Speaking of gaming realities, what are the new territories formed in the virtual and real space where people communicate, socialize and play? Apart from the undoubtedly important role MMORPG games are to play, alternative and new forms of gaming locations are also proposed and presented in the context of this exhibition.

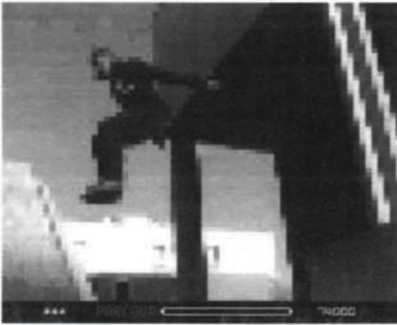
The endless forest is a multiuser online social screensaver where people meet and interact. The net artists Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn have created an imaginary place that counteracts the well known massive multiplayer on line worlds with a sense of play that is rarely seen. In the endless forest there is no goal to win, no antagonism and violence, all is peaceful and the game experience is based on joy. Although the players may feel unfamiliar with such an activity at first, they soon rediscover the pleasure and fun in communicating and socializing with one another in real time.

A different territory mixing the virtual and the real world is proposed by the Blast Theory. The documentation screened presents their well known location based project *Can you see me know?*. The game that has been warmly welcomed by people in different cities is a chase game that happens simultaneously in the streets of a city and on the screens of users playing the game. People playing from the homes chase players running on the street. The game uses a city as a platform for a gaming activity and poses questions of presence and absence. Location based games offer a new ground where strong feelings of agony, care, excitement and joy can be born and reframe again the public space.

The Ludic Society inspired by the philosophical and art movements of the 20th century connects and documents activities of play and life in a most unique way. *Ready Played* is a video project on the suburbs of today's cities and to the people living in them. The Ludic Society takes action back to the streets where real life is and where people play using their own bodies. They add props to them as they would do in a MMORPG and these people become the real players. The aesthetic representation given, the "pixelation" and the game status bar takes a stance on the philosophical notion of play for the real players found in the cities today.

In contrast to the above given works comes the work of Axel Stockburger who comments on the experiences of video game players today. The video *Boys in the Hood* shows three players of the popular game Grand Theft Auto who describe in detail the locations and situations they confronted in the game. Everything seems completely real and the tone of the players' voices greatly contributes to this aspect. Stockburger documents and observes people's participation in this realm and comments on the gaming environments of successful video games as they are lived by its players.

Medi@terra in the context of this year's theme also hosts game applications created by young artists and students who work on the new media. The games presented have different features and experiment on gaming platforms in different ways. *Lykno* has been developed by David Gauthier, Henri Marino, Laurie Prevot, Jean Batiste Spieser, students of ATI - Paris 8 who have worked together to create a fairytale landscape, a city deep down the ocean that the player shall save. *Ariadne's Sonic Threadball* by KoDIN group and Chrisoula Alexandraki takes the inspiration from the famous myth and takes the user in a labyrinth where sound is the threadball for his exit. *Coin Snatch* by sheismartha and Alexandros Plakidas Dasios focuses more on the aspect of play with a tracking system while *Kalamiotou 02* by the mamayans unfold a story of enclosure and imprisonment for the player. Finally *History Lost Redux* designed by a group of the University of Aegean experiments with an interactive narrative form to build a story on international illegal trade of antiquities.



Ready Played, The Ludic Society, 2006

CONCLUSION

The games presented in the exhibition of Gaming Realities, and in general the games built by artists and independent creators nowadays have a significant role to play in the future development of the medium. These works look into the potentialities of video games and open up new directions. Realising that they can offer much more than entertainment, they reach out for a higher cultural impact, they bring up social and political themes, they involve more the engaging emotional factors, they encourage critical thinking, they address to a wider audience and to special groups excluded from the digital world. They refer to people and their lives directly. The independent and artistic games are the art of our times and of the times to come. With the contribution of people from different disciplines as theory, philosophy, activism, politics, social sciences, arts and the new media, these games propose new alternatives for the emerging digital realm we will be living in. But what needs to be added here is that this powerful scene that is now being formed should not be an exception in the entertaining field of the gaming industry, and therefore an excuse for the latter to keep its character intact (Samyn & Harvey 2006). Its potentialities and novelties introduced should be taken seriously under consideration for a development of the gaming field in different directions. More options can be given to players, more opportunities for creation, communication and critical thinking. Gaming realities are not only the virtual gaming worlds we have come to inhabit, but all these different aspects and potentialities that are arising for the various sectors of society today.

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