

City of Bits

Domenico Quaranta

Critical text written for the exhibition *GameScapes. Videogame Landscapes and Cities in the Works of Five International Artists* (Monza Civic Gallery, October 13 – 29, 2006). Curated by Rosanna Pavoni

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“My name is wjm@mit.edu”. These are William J. Mitchell’s opening words in *City of Bits* (1995), his classic exploration of the evolution of the concept of city in the internet age. It is a line which reveals not only a new identity, but also a new form of citizenship. Ten years on the American artist Cory Arcangel performed his public “Friendster Suicide”, removing himself from one of the biggest online communities: maybe not a very spectacular suicide, but not for that any less painful than the real kind.

Between these two extremes, the revolution we are experiencing has rewritten a number of concepts that had remained unaltered in our culture for centuries: landscape, the city, life, identity. Alongside the tangible landscape there is now the information landscape; citizens have become netizens, and while our concrete jungles are being dug up to accommodate the information highway, we spend less and less time there, preferring the isometric gardens of *Sim City* or the 107 million inhabitants of *myspace.com*. It is time to update the concept of life, and has been since the advent of *Second Life*, while the idea of identity is still reeling from the complications heralded by nicknames, aliases, IDs, accounts, profiles and avatars.

Videogames play a central role in this process of transformation. On the one

hand their iconography, like that of all popular phenomena, infests our urban areas, while on the other computer games peddle their own urbanistic theories, offer development platforms for new urban sites or new types of communities, reflect our grandest utopias (or our worst dystopias), and train us for life in real cities. At times they offer up innovative models, but more often than not they rework stereotypes which are deeply rooted in our society and culture.

It comes as no surprise that the artists who work in this medium feel the need to explore these issues. Social life and urban space, along with gender issues (sexism in videogames) and the hot question of violence, are all central in game art. To date there has been no meticulous exploration of the results of this work, but it would necessarily include the works and artists presented here.

In *Super Mario Movie*, Cory Arcangel, playing with the bits of a Nintendo cartridge, appears to delight in destroying the underlying social model present in all the Super Mario games, which another important video game artist has aptly dubbed “yuppie-style level climbing”. The self-made man of the 80s – progressing alone on his way to fulfillment – here plummets downwards through a shattered psychedelic 8bit city.

In *Average Shoveler*, Carlo Zanni draws on a similar aesthetic – taking his inspiration from another 80s classic, *Leisure Suit Larry I* – to tell the story of your average citizen, forced to process mountains of information that he is seldom capable of filtering, understanding or using, to form an opinion about the world around him. The contrast between the retro look of the game and the constant stream of news updates and hyper-realism of the CNN website, is like a juxtaposition of two different rhythms. The first (ours) is blocked, while the second (that of the flows of information) is frenetic.

The approach adopted by Jon Haddock is diametrically opposed to this. His *Screenshots* use the isometric perspective and conventions of the gaming world to explore a present which is already history. On the one hand he reveals the lack of

difference between reality and art, history and entertainment, and on the other he demonstrates that videogames have become a mature, pliable tool for representing reality. But, as Mauro Ceolin appears to respond, games are also capable of creating a version of reality which is tangible, solid, inhabitable, as worthy of artistic representation of any urban or natural landscape. And as the works of Eddo Stern point out, this is a world with its own fashions and styles, like the neo-medievalism which is all the rage in multiplayer online role play games, which the artist sees as the result of Western civilization looking to its roots to justify its hold over the world.

Art Gamers

In *At the Edge of Art* (2006), Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito describe the art that uses media and the new technologies as an antibody against media and the new technologies. It is not a cure, but it exposes us to the media to enable us to develop the necessary defence mechanisms. The immediate corollary of this theory is the figure of the artist/hacker, keen user and capable manipulator of the media. A figure who has achieved a precarious equilibrium between passion and critical vision, with a capacity for resistance which has developed alongside the desire for exposure to the virus. A figure for whom creating art means playing with fire, because this is a person who loves fire and wants to help us understand it.

The artist is always a player. And sometimes a videogame player. Thus it may occur that the artist depicts landscapes and characters in videogames, modifies existing games, transfers their rules and mechanisms onto real life and records play sessions, or plays above the rules and creates his or her own toys. The motivation behind this lies in the fact that art is about manipulating the stereotypes of one's culture, and videogames are part of our cultural panorama: Super Mario is to Cory Arcangel as Marilyn Monroe is to Andy Warhol. Because art is about recycling, rehabilitating objects which are part of the tangible and media landscape: America's Army is to Eddo Stern as the Monalisa is to Duchamp.

Because art is about experimenting with new idioms, and videogames are a new idiom: videogames are to Carlo Zanni as video is to Nam June Paik. Because this artist loves videogames, but at the peak of involvement has developed a further level of awareness, a detachment that has not destroyed this love story, but made way for a more mature form of love. This is why an artist can play Counterstrike for hours but then warn us about the violence in videogames and their use as propaganda. For this reason, as Laura Baigorri says (2004), game art is “in itself a subversive act which implies a dual intention: criticism (review) and creativity (regeneration).”

Criticism and regeneration of a medium and the society it reflects. We could say – at risk of becoming tautological – that artists use videogames because they are creating art.

Bibliography:

Joline Blais & Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2006.

Laura Baigorri, “GAME as CRITIC as ART. 2.0”, June 2004. Republished in *aminima*, n° 16, 2006, pp. 6 – 17.