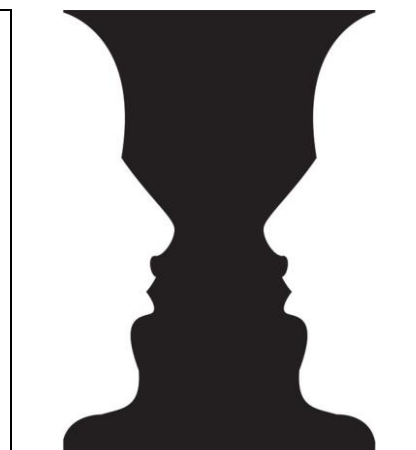

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Once upon a bit: Ludic identities in Italy, from militant nostalgia to frivolous divertissement

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Abstract

The relation between gaming consumption and subcultural feelings represents an issue challenging to explore because of the current multiplication of identity affiliations. Furthermore, games are a cultural sector characterized by constant turning points and a persistent growth of audiences in numerical and variety terms. The ‘game culture’ itself has become an ephemeral concept, while digital entertainment is catalyzing the public attention and influencing the habits of other gaming sectors. This article aims to shed light on the relation between old and new (or less old) ludus as social and identity frame. Applying a mixed approach between Sociology and Cultural Studies, I have interviewed 64 subjects among common players, gatekeepers, association’s leaders, publishers, shop’s owners and game designers associated with non-digital game cultures in Italy. The intent was to explore the impact of the diffusion of digital games on already established gaming environments and then the ‘identity bricolage’ acted by individuals between the two sides.

Keywords

Game culture, Italy, qualitative methodology, cultural studies, identity, non-digital games

Games and culture rely on a multi-faced interaction. Even if several scholars and game designers highlight the importance of the relation (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Sylvester 2013), the interpretation of the second term is often rough and quite abstract – i.e., the so-called ‘core culture’ described by Crane (1992) as the mainstream culture that surrounds and leads us. By the way, the issue becomes more problematic if we focus on

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concrete and grounded settings: indeed, usually culture becomes something more fragmented and incoherent when we are on the field and put it to test.

In addition, the exploration of peculiar cultures (e.g., subcultures, game-related lifestyles) is getting harder in comparison with the past: cultural identities are now more fluid, plural and relational (Hall 1997), and several Western values and reference systems (political ideologies, religions, etc.) have been reformulated (Griswold 2012). Consequently, current cultural frames appear multi-perspectival and not defined at all. In other words, a coherent 'scene' - i.e., a social phenomenon with clear and unique boundaries to study (Straw 2001) - is demanding to picture. In addition, media have become an important landscape of references (Coudry 2005) for identity and community affiliations across productive and institutional processes (Thorton 1996; Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998), problematizing the analysis. Unsurprisingly, neo-marxist (Hebdige 1979) and functionalist (Parson 1960) views on culture, based on social class-influenced aggregations and static values, have showed all their limits and must be declined on a more flexible and subjective level.

Similarly, games as cultural practice entail a challenging topic exacerbated by the popularization of digital entertainment; with its economic and technological evidence, it exercises a relevant influence on other gaming markets, from wargames and tabletop roleplaying games (RPG) to boardgames and live action roleplaying games (LARP). This contraposition between digital and non-digital plays can mean a significant frontier to assess. If we interpreted identity as a socio/cultural construction based on differences (Hall 1996), videogames are a forced reference for every type of gamer: with a business of 100 billions of dollars (Gartner data) and a population of consumers that has crossed the 1 billion in 2015 (Spil Games data), they represent the most important sector of the global entertainment. From an empirical point of view, the comparison with digital games can work as a key-tool in order to elicit non-digital gamers' consciousness and then their own culture.

Thus, in order to understand how digital entertainment affects traditional gaming identities, I have conducted a qualitative research involving through in-depth interviews 64 subjects connected to non-digital gaming sectors in Italy. The article is structured as follows: in the first paragraph the theoretical framework is presented and the concepts of identity and culture are framed according to gaming practices; in the second, I describe the research design and method; the third focuses on the results and the fourth is about conclusions and further developments.

Exploring identity, culture and games

The identity as fluid play

Even though identity is a controversial word with uncountable definitions, in Social Sciences the common interpretation pictures it as the merger between two different processes:

- Identification: what makes an individual similar to other ones.
- Individualization: what makes an individual unique (Sciolla 2007).

These tendencies can be synergic as in contraposition, fluid as rooted. They should be visualized as the sides of a dynamic dialogue, whose balance vary embracing multiple types of relations. Concerning this bond, Ricoeur (1990) proposes the concept of 'narrative identity' interpreted as the effort acted by people with the aim to stage an inner coherence in their actions and positions. It is an operation performed in what Giddens (1984) defines the 'discursive consciousness': what we are able to express about our experiences and perspectives in a discursive form. However, this 'simplifying summary' toward ourselves is not an automatized act but rather a dynamic one. According to Cultural Studies approach, identity 'does not signal that stable core of the Self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change' indeed; rather, identity concerns processes more related to the becoming than to the being. Furthermore, identity becomes the meeting crossroad between 'the discourses and practices which ... speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and ... the process ... which construct us as subjects which can be spoken' (Hall 1997: pp. 3-4). Consequently, apparently stable identities are cultural and historical constructs: we are fluctuant and ongoing objects split between conventions and breaking experiences that can reformulate them (Lotman 1994).

Accordingly, the rhetoric of coherence makes way for the dynamic of 'difference'. Specifically, the other, the opponent, the 'different' from me acquires importance in defining who I am; in essence, 'difference' means a framing act toward ourselves (e.g., the men versus the women, the black versus the white, the democrats versus the republicans). The effectiveness of diversity as cultural, identity and discursive driver is well synthesized in the concept of '*différance*' suggested by Derrida (1982): a 'particular constitutive relation of negativity in which a subordinate term ... is a necessary and internal force of destabilization existing within the identity of the dominant term' (in Hall 1996: p. 90). Cultural Studies field is characterized by such research of conflictual lines as 'significant spaces' (Rose 1996; Hall 1997); in other disciplines like Media Studies and Game Studies we find out compatible suggestions (Huizinga 1938; Appadurai 1996). Concerning digital entertainment, the issue is particularly evident when, for instance, the distance between hardcore and casual gamers and male and female audiences and gatekeepers (e.g., see the controversy of Gamergate) are debated. As observed by Bateman and Boon (2006), the categories of gaming consumers are embracing a fragmentation along with the extension (and then the diversification) of the medium reaching other cultural domains and frames (gender, journalism, etc.). In conclusion, 'differences' work as effective tool in order to stimulate and reveal identity positions. This is true both theoretically and empirically: during interviews, the use of opposite concepts and positions is usually functional in fostering subjects' reactions (Silverman 2004).

To recap, we can interpret identity as a line of temporary gravity centres, sometimes stable and sometimes not, in which we attach and reformulate our belongings across stereotypes, breaking events and significant counter-positions. On

second thoughts, our personal narration becomes similar to a game chronicle: a summary of fights, lessons and problems solved exploiting tactics and strategies and figuring out a winning genealogy (Rose 1996). In addition, media acquire the status of new symbolic and imaginary domains (Appadurai 1996) for personal stories: interpretive frames in which refine, experiment and stress feelings and trace out our characteristics (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998).

Concerning the manner in which we handle such a fluid identity, according to Gergen (1991) people are able to live a multiple self without a core structure; instead, for others like Castells (1997), a need of coherence, also in functioning terms, leads this tension: individuals try to arrange some redundant principles in order to rule their own dimensions. Regardless, identity is increasingly described as a 'self-organization space', whose connections are flexible, dynamic and under construction by subjects who constantly monitor themselves (Deleuze & Guittari 1980; Giddens 1984). The dimensions in which this self-observation happens are two according to Ricoeur (1990): the memory and the present. We always try to find an inner coherence in our past, linearizing our actions and positions (diachronic identity) in a univocal way; the French philosopher calls it '*idem*'. Moreover, we attempt to stage a conscious perspective on the 'here and now' (synchronic identity) enabling a personal planning able to reformulate our previous assumptions; it is the '*ipse*'. As written above, proposing different/opposite references can be effective in triggering and eliciting such complex narrations.

We can find game-related identities in certain types of audiences; games are relevant for several reasons in our society but they evoke self-narration spaces only for certain persons. Actually, some gaming practices are widely significant due to their relation with shared belongings (e.g., national sports like the soccer in Italy or the cricket in India). Contrariwise, other ones are more elitist because they require relevant efforts in terms of skills and participation (e.g., LARPs and wargames) and/or they are neither legitimated nor popular. Regardless, games may cover important segments of personal articulations, setting what I define a 'ludic identity': a self-gravity center based on feelings and positions concerning and toward gaming.

The cultural tool

Developing what written in the previous paragraph, culture becomes the general frame in which the research of personal coherence takes place, giving people bricks and guidelines to build their own perspectives. Despite 'culture' is another buzzword in academic treatises as common discourses, in last decades its definition was characterised by a glaring turn: from a monolithic and static assemble of values (Parson 1960) it became a subjective and dynamic asset of resources (e.g., Bourdieu 1988; Giddens 1984).

As suggested by Swidler (1986), culture can be interpret as 'a tool of action': in a few words, the scripts and schemata that rule our everyday life routines. This vision is compatible with the semiotic interpretation of the term, focused on culture as symbolic system ruled by a contextual and dynamic encyclopedia (Eco 1975). Such perspective concerns also media and creative industries, which are now important cultural *humus* and

frames of reference. The attention to cultural production has increased and changed from the pessimistic vision of the School of Frankfurt (e.g., Jay 1973), which accused the mass culture to homologate the humankind according to capitalistic values. For instance, the Cultural Studies approach has revealed that audiences are active in interpreting and constructing social meanings and that the relation between producers and consumers is bi-directional rather than linear (e.g., Du Gay et al. 1997). The consumption itself becomes a significant cultural practice through which individuals create and reformulate meaning. Now more than ever individuals are relatively able to take, harness and manipulate the cultural resources that society (then also media) offers to them in order to stage their own patterns with a remarkable impact on personal stories (Sewell 1992). Therefore, identity and culture become deeply intertwined even through media consumption (Thorton 1996). Games can be conceived as part of this potential repertory. Indeed, they embody cultural systems (Mäyrä 2008) and contents, which may generate and feed feelings of passion, affiliation (Consalvo 2007; Elias et al. 2012; Schell 2008) and even diversity and opposition (Bateman & Boon 2006). The redundancy of games in human history (Caillois 1958; Huizinga 1938; Koster 2010) but also current gaming communities (Shivonen 2011) and phenomena such as the Gamergate (which caused glowing debates about gender bias within game industry) are indicative of the cultural halo that surrounds the medium.

Going forward, it is a matter of fact that digital entertainment is taking a central position within the overall game culture. Its numbers and popularization are affecting also the non-digital ludic cultures in a variety of ways. Accordingly, my intent is to enlighten such an influence from an identity-related perspective. Usually game scholars focus their attention to specific declinations of digital gaming in order to analyse the related players' narrations (e.g., Crawford & Goslin 2009); conversely, my analytic lens addresses the following questions: how do videogames influence players from other gaming traditions? Consequently, can videogames be an effective comparison in order to elicit non-digital ludic identities (and how related gaming practices contribute to identity formation)?

According to my theoretical premises, I will explore non-ludic identities through three dimensions:

Diachronic coherence (*idem*) (1)

Synchronic position (*ipse*) (2)

Cultural practice (significant consumption) (3)

In order to achieve this goal, I intend to interpret and use digital entertainment as main 'cultural opposition/counterpoint' with the aim to shed light on the identity narrations of non-digital gamers.

The research

Following this purpose, I have involved 64 subjects characterized by a strong bond with physical gaming. Their passion often mean an active and professional engagement in the related scenario: association leaders, game designers and specialized journalists (etc.);

however, I contacted also mere passionate gamers to reach a more complete sample. The gaming sectors explored were boardgames, RPGs, LARPs and wargames: ludic practices apparently contiguous to digital entertainment in the Italian context for settings, history and rules (Gandolfi 2014). Their reduced size in terms of events, magazines and production facilitated the selection of the opinion leaders, whose relevance and efforts were considered a proof of ludic identity. Common gamers were recruited through a snowball procedure among ludic associations instead.

Taking into account the limits of the social class-oriented lens on subcultures (Gelder 2007), I have adopted a qualitative methodology through in-depth interviews: they are indeed the most effective way to collect opinions, personal narratives and self-positions (Ferrarotti 2007; Silverman 2004). The main arguments proposed to subjects were personal memories about digital games, related current practices and individual, shared and institutional visions of the gaming medium. More precisely, the general debating topics followed the order reported below:

- Memories linked to ludic media (1)
- Difference and synergy between the main gaming passion (non-digital) and videogames (2)
- Personal gaming practices and related sociality (digital as non-digital) (3)
- Final position about the previous topics

The *fil rouge* of these themes was to harness digital entertainment as element of comparison (exploiting the effectiveness of difference in stimulating people response) in a both diachronic (past, memories) and synchronic (the present) way toward identity and culture. According to the theoretical premise, data were analysed through a frame analysis (Goffman 1974) (thus aimed to capture the main frames of references in self-reports) supported by the software *Nvivo v.10*. Consequentially, I interpreted the results adopting three lenses drawn on narrative (Ricoeur 1990) and Culturalist (Hall 1997) suggestions: the biography (digital and non-digital games as memory that subjects have to assess through their personal story); the positioning (digital and non-digital games as media that subjects have to evaluate ‘here and now’); and the practice (digital and non-digital games as everyday life practice that subjects have to report).

At first, I subdivided participants in three main categories according to their gaming involvement: players (common gamers characterized by a significant use of games), gatekeepers (who is in a filtering position like shop-owners, journalists, association leaders, etc.) and institutions (publishers, editors, game designers, narrators/masters: who creates products and experiences and/or is in the related productive processes).

From interviews four coherent groups of practice emerged reformulating the initial ones: boardgamers, LARP-RPGers, wargamers and *imaginationers*. The first three are clearly connected to gaming, whereas the last is more ambiguous: it implies a core attachment to imaginary worlds (Sci-fi, fantasy, etc.), which finds in games a recurrent cornerstone even though neither focused nor exclusive. Such categorization was functional in order to understand if gaming specialization and practice (e.g., gameplay traits) affect ludic identities. However, it entailed also a simplification: for instance, there

are strong differences between RPGs and LARPs, and wargamers share several elements with boardgamers; furthermore, fantasy/Sci-Fi genres are a recurring fascination among the groups. Finally, each category shows an internal complexity, and some individuals are active in different practices (e.g., wargamers often play boardgames); even if, according to interviews, usually only one is prevalent in their life. In next paragraphs, I will use the acronyms reported in table 1 in order to make the analysis more comprehensible.

Table 1 – subject profile acronyms

	BOARDGAME	LARP-RPG	WARGAME	IMAGINATION
PLAYERS	PB	PR	PW	PI
GATEKEEPERS	GB	GR	GW	GI
INSTITUTIONS	IB	IR	IW	II

There is an approximate equivalence in numerical terms, with a range of age from 24 to 60 year old (m: 36; wargame subjects are the older group) and a low presence of women (9 per cent); this disproportion makes impossible a significant reflection about gender differences. The subjects' geographical origin covers the entire Italian landscape, from North to South (in particular Turin, Milan, Modena, Bologna, Parma, Rome and Naples): however, the most studied region was Tuscany for its strong tradition of gaming associations and events (e.g., Lucca Comics & Games). The research lasted one year, from April 2012 to April 2013, and the single interviews were face to face when possible (n: 45) and on Skype in other cases (n: 19).

Results

Biography

There is a common assertion among people interviewed: videogames are part of their memory. The majority of them (the exception is of 7), also who is now negative about digital entertainment, states that the medium has played a significant role in the past. In essence, it connotes a sort of 'obligated step' (with masterpieces like *Quake* (ID Software 1996), *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), etc.) for every kind of gamer: claims like 'being a canonical nerd, I played every cornerstone' (Alessandro IR) and 'I followed the classic itinerary of my generation: Vic-20, Commodore 64, Amiga and PC' (Stefano IB) are recurring in each category.

This 'heredity' is evident in several references and metaphors used by subjects: 'we have tutorial plots [referring to LARP sessions] in order to introduce new players to the game, like in *Warcraft III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002)' (Antonino GR).

The most common nostalgias concern two genre-based periods: the golden age of Western RPGs and the hypogeum of simulation games (both between Nineties and the first years of current century), usually experienced by subjects in adolescence/young age. The former is connected to masterpieces like *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998),

Planescape Torment (Black Isle 1999) and *Vampire: Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004), whereas the latter is based on particularly articulated games, from *Caesar 3* (Impressions Games 1998) to *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* (Firaxis 1999). The first memory is frequent in all Imagination and LARP-RPG subjects: 'I played *Planescape Torment* (Black Isle 1999) with my daughter, now a woman. It was wonderful' (Stefano GI); 'A golden age, where inspiration and articulated gameplay were more important than market and fashion' (Marco PR); '*Vampire: Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004) is infinite like a building you cannot entirely explore because it changes under your own eyes' (Lorenzo PI). The second one is redundant among boardgamers and wargamers, who find a strong correlation in terms of rules and historical settings: 'an example of smart game is *Sid Meier's Civilization* (MicroProse 1991); it is a boardgame on computer [it was the transposition of the homonym boardgame by Hartland Trefoil and Avalon Hill indeed]!' (Andrea GB); '*Master of Orion II: Battle at Antares* (Simtex 1996), *Sid Meier's Civilization 2* (MicroProse 1996) ... you could pass an entire life and understand only a part of these games' (Michele PW). In essence, the intricate gameplay of those genres is associated with a smart thinking and a constant use of cognitive skills; factors that educated and supported subjects in their growth acquiring a formative value. Specifically, the most highlighted features of these games are 'possibility space' and 'randomness' (Adams & Dormans 2012): the first is the range of possibilities and actions available to players within the ludic system in terms of both strategies and plot-choices; the second is the unpredictability of gameplay in order to make dynamic and always fresh the play. Both can be labelled as sources of complexity and dynamicity within the ludic experience.

Coherently, even though the cause of the present decreasing quality of the medium (observed by n: 41) is blurry (market priorities, monetization of the experience, etc.), usually subjects describe current videogames as 'poor and excessively-driven experiences' in which user autonomy and reasoning are only apparent. Regardless, it is also evident a strong nostalgia toward a previous period in life in which responsibilities and worries were less and there was more time for deepening such articulated systems.

Unsurprisingly, above all LARP-RPG and imagination gatekeepers positively judge Kickstarter - i.e., the most important crowdfunding online platform with a business of more than 1 billion of dollars (Kickstarter data) and several old-style RPG and simulation projects financed through it - and certain independent productions: games like *FTL: Faster Than Light* (Subset Games 2012) and *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* (Capybara Games & Superbrothers 2011), and the return of old glories like *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) and *Elite* (Braben & Bell 1984) (etc.) are particularly appreciated representing an industrial revival and an attempt to rescue feelings of belonging through complex gameplay, high levels of randomness and vintage graphics. These titles aim to (re)establish alternative retro-cultures still active among old gamers. Unsurprisingly, also major companies are increasingly involved in this kind of strategy (e.g., the glaring support to the independent scenario by Sony and Microsoft) for the relevant economic potential to the extent that some subjects are aware of this process: 'Our golden age is returning ... and videogames are one of its symbols' (Mauro IR); 'We are fantasy-born generations, grown between fantasy and reality. Now we want to see

everything through adult lenses' (Luca GI). Furthermore, in those years digital games were the 'new technology' par excellence, able to break the tradition and set new styles of consumption among young gamers. In several interviews, such fascination is remembered as a transversal revolution and there are many confirmations of this 'echo' even in other media: movies like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Wright 2010), and *Pixels* (Columbus 2015) and novels such as *Ready Player One* (Cline 2011) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (Rushdie 2010) glaringly exploit this 'bit-appealing'.

Unexpectedly, Japanese game production is only relatively relevant. Subjects perceive it as fundamental corollary of the medium progress, but few underline its importance. Coherently, the majority of people interviewed is PC user with a related Western influence (n: 59), and only a recent console adopter (e.g., Xbox 360) (n: 31).

Finally, digital games were not the first gaming passion (the only exception is Emiliano IB), but rather a consequence. They represent more a constant presence in personal narrations (in other words, a secondary but always present consumption). According to every subject, non-digital passions always took the priority due to the social-community dimension that they were able to enable. Aside gameplay considerations and practice specifications, sharing tactics, challenges and then emotions, feelings and memories with other (family, friends, etc.) was the key-point. Instead, videogames were usually considered a strictly individual hobby, concretely hard to share; actually, during subjects' adolescence the online-multi orientation of the industry was yet to come in Italy. However, it happened sometimes that digital games were the main driver in being active in non-digital gaming: 'when they [a famous chain of videogames stores] proposed an absurd price for our used games, we realized that we had to open our own shop following a different philosophy' (Marta GI); 'the idea to develop a boardgame came to us playing a browser gamer, a city builder, beautiful and addictive' (Stefano IB).

Positioning

Despite the exception embodied by independent/nostalgic products described above, videogames are usually pictured as a coherent and uniform scenario. Paradoxically, almost an half of the subjects (n: 29) interprets this horizon in a double conflicting way. On the one hand, the popularization of digital entertainment is positively assessed in the light of a better legitimation of the overall game culture: 'nowadays people have discovered that they can play videogames without prejudice ... it is great, the same must happen for our sector now' (Fabio GB). On the other hand, digital games are a menace able to undermine through their competitive goal-oriented gameplay the strategic/social skills of new generations: 'digital games teach kids that winning is the most important thing, it does not matter how' (Tony, GR). This is particularly evident in boardgame category, probably because the boardgame target is ample and includes also casual audiences. Therefore, related institutions and gatekeepers, above all association's leaders and shop owners, are quite hostile: 'digital games are a good device and a possible form of art, but in my opinion they represent the social answer to the parental

incapacity to manage children' (Andrea, IB); 'digital games end in the single play session. You destroy all, after five or six hours you have finished and I do not know what remains ... maybe some epileptic attitudes' (Camillo GB); 'boardgames are a better hobby than videogames. A videogame is always a videogame. Boardgames are more dynamic, they change' (Fabio GB).

In essence, from boardgamers' perspective digital games imply a sort of impoverishment because of their reflexive-oriented and asocial mechanics, whose resulting gameplay damages both identification and individualization processes. Concerning the first lack (the poor quality of videoludic challenges), only simulation games (as written above, a memory) are partially safe because considered virtual boardgames. Regarding the second (the absence of human contact) and as partially argued by Juul (2010), such as resentment makes these subjects favourable to the 'more social' casual games. Moreover, we have to remember that modern boardgames received a substantial attention in Italy only from the hit *The Settlers of Catan* (Teuber 1995); thus, they are newer and more propulsive than the other categories in terms of establishment (events, associations, etc.) and dissemination (they want to expand the practice), respectively. This position is coherent with the common prejudice about videogames as factor of social exclusion. Accordingly, among these subjects the so-called 'interactive movies' (e.g., *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream 2013)) are particularly appreciated. The legitimation is external again due to the imitation of another medium (the movie); a way of expression that is older than digital games and not in competition with their own ludic sector.

LARP-RPGers are less negative instead. They have not forgotten the connection between their passion and digital entertainment in Nineties; such bond is still active in products such as *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED 2007) and in phenomena like Kickstarter. Therefore, these subjects are quite favourable to digital games, which are considered a sort of 'bequest' in some of their articulations. The feeling is empowered by a glaring pessimism about the current Italian RPG sector: 'we are getting old and we are increasingly a minority' (Fausto IR). Accordingly, digital RPGs represent for their passion a way to survive despite the medium switch. Indeed, the constitutive rule systems (Schell 2008) - i.e., the core structure of mechanics and processes - that still characterize the genre partially derive from RPG classics (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons*). Therefore, the original gameplay is safe at least concerning mechanics.

Wargamers are probably the most indifferent group concerning videogames. Even if they usually have a relevant expertise about them, they labelled their passion antecedent to digital entertainment and more multi-faced; actually, wargames are older than the other gaming practices analysed (Wells 1913) and composed by multiple activities (painting, historical research, etc.). Consequentially, these subjects find fewer similarities between the two media. However, for them the technological side of digital games seems to make a difference now.

Indeed and making a step backward, digital games disclose a controversial potential in terms of immersive and computational effectiveness. Someone evaluates

them a device less powerful than human imagination (highlighted in RPGs and LARPs), a cold technology that tends to quantification and impersonality: ‘more I got skilled with RPG, more videogames seemed to me poor and my related experiences became rarer’ (Alessandro IR); ‘I do not have enough time to play MMO, and the idea that you do not build anything of psychical does not convince me’ (Francesca IR). Furthermore, videogames sometimes appear as a surrogated consumption rather than a significant experience (according to memories previously reported) (n: 23): ‘I observe that many people, above all who has not companions in his hobby, satisfy the need of play with fast and escapist divertissements like digital games’ (Matteo IR).

On the contrary, wargame and even imagination subjects are enthusiast concerning the technological side of the digital entertainment: it is a promise of ‘something innovative’. In the first case, the increasing translation of wargames on tablets and online platforms (e.g., Vassal engine) is an evidence of how computation can facilitate particularly complex gameplays (as the ones staged by wargames): ‘I play more games on Facebook because I have the justification that I can learn stuff for my work [laughing]. Seriously, you can operate on many levels and be more efficient in playtesting phase without physical limitations’ (Alessio IW); ‘digital games can manage a lot of data and variables, something that human mind cannot do’ (Andrea GW).

In the second case, the involvement offered by graphics and augmented reality (emerging phenomena of the digital entertainment) represents a stimulating perspective for many: ‘try to imagine a working holodeck: you can see and interact with the dragon that you have only dreamt about’ (Umberto IR); ‘I love *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) and its periodical narrative evolution; *Watch Dogs* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) is the right move for Ubisoft: story and hybrid technology’ (Claudio IR). This approach is consciously naïve concerning the gameplay and more focused on plot, characters and aesthetics. The resulting position makes the imaginative group the most positive about digital games that are interpreted as a transversal technology in which the ludic system is not the priority. From this perspective, the evolution of the medium through annual sagas (e.g., *Assassin’s Creed*) and graphical empowerment is seen as a positive progression.

Common players consider digital games a positive force too: essentially, it is a glaring driver able to push beyond the horizon of the entire gaming culture. Once again, the trust in famous game designers and brands (e.g., *Syndicate* (Bullfrog Productions 1993) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED 2015)) is remarkable and casual/social games are tolerated: ‘they [casual/social games] are a good thing for the market, continuing the tradition of first videogames, which had to be immediately accessible for everyone’ (John PI). Conversely, the saturation of DLCs (DownLoadable Contents with fee) and the ‘achievement orientation’ (evident in Steam and in console systems) are negatively assessed: these trends prove the priority of money over art and talent acted by several publishers.

Nevertheless, sometimes (n: 21) it emerges a conscious reflection by subjects about their status of ex niche: ‘like inside a “fortress of arrogance”, I am looking for emulators to play *Final Fight* (Capcom 1989)’ (Max PR). Indeed, even if a frequent

perception is that modern digital games are 'without a soul', several subjects (n: 11) admit that it is a 'false claim': being the current offer of digital games so wide and articulated, they simply have neither time nor will to know it entirely.

Nevertheless, for everyone digital games represent now the gaming medium par excellence; they are the most important ludic practice. This is particularly evident according to gatekeepers and institutions: 'this popularization floors me, but it is comprehensible' (Lorenzo IR); 'I understand why boys prefer digital games to other types of hobbies: they are a bomb!' (Federico GI); 'digital games are the leading market and we have to learn from them: systems, behaviours, targets' (Claudio IB); 'their [of digital games] dynamics are interesting for taking inspiration and new ideas' (Matteo IR). Finally, despite several subjects (n: 45) are not used to play recent videogames, they often appear informed about the current state of industry through specialized press and more engaged friends revealing a still active interest in it.

Practice

Among institutions and gatekeepers of every category, it is recurrent the claim that digital games, online as single ones, have a fascination appealing; in a word, they entail a sort of 'black hole' effect able to use up all the time: 'I notice that when I begin a videogame it steals me every minute. I do not want to be slave of a machine' (Erminio GR); 'I do not have a console because I want to pass my time with friends' (Remo GB); 'due to the increasing work I needed more time, so I have bought a laptop without 3D graphic card: it is the only way to avoid videogames!' (Matteo IR). Furthermore and above all for LARP-RPG and imagination subjects, the perception of a landscape now richer than ever, which requires a strong attention usually hard to give, is frequent; we are talking about 'cultists' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998) - i.e., people whose passions are constantly maintained and 'feed' with a rigorous encyclopaedic approach - : 'please give me more time! I have great moments [with videogames] but I have a lot of work and I am constantly left behind. I am playing the first *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007), everyone is laughing at me' (Federico GI). These subjects have invested relevant efforts and resources in one specific gaming sector (usually complex in terms of rules, mechanics, etc.) and reformulating or expanding such life plan is not an easy goal to reach.

While boardgamers usually do not touch joypads and keyboards at all according to their aversion (with the only exception of direct porting of boardgames), wargamers and imaginationers/LARP-RPGers present specific styles of consumption. Even though both rarely and/or occasionally play digital games, the first group spreads the play on a long period ('I choose one game, usually a simulator, and I play it slowly, for one year ... or more' (Giorgio GW)), whereas the second is more 'one shot' oriented ('with me a videogame do not last for long ... I have to finish it as soon as possible, then I can also wait for months before buy another one' (Marco GI)). According to subjects, the former attitude is in conjunction with the importance of ludic system (that must be explored and completely understood) and the slow pace that characterize wargaming; the latter

instead is connected to the desire to experience the sensorial pleasure and reveal the plot (a sort of fascination impossible to stop): a tendency that subjects associate with their passion for imagination.

However, according to a transversal minority (n: 23), digital games remain an efficient way for continuing playing with their families and friends: 'I arrive at home, do my family business, and then I switch on my Xbox 360 and I have great moments with my friends' (Stefano IB); 'now we [he and his wife] have only a Nintendo Wii and I really love play the toy-guitars' (Matteo IR); 'I have fun in organizing thematic parties, trying to finish this or that title with my friends' (Alessandro IR). Thus, videogames return to be (and are legitimated by) a frame for social relations even if with a more frivolous attitude. The online features of the new generations of consoles and dedicated products like party and cooperative games support such declination of gaming practices. Common players are freer and more relaxed instead, living the play as leisure activity without stressing imperatives and specific goals to achieve. Their habits are more heterogeneous as the variety of games and genres played.

Conclusions

It is challenging to synthesize such a richness of perspectives; however, we can outline five significant insights.

First, videogames continue to play a relevant role in personal pasts. Even if the attacks to digital entertainment are both generic (videogames as bearers of social exclusion) and internal to the sector (old videogames are better than new ones), subjects have usually positive memories about them. Furthermore, the criticisms to the medium are often confused and without a clear coherence. On second thoughts, it emerged a sort of ongoing oscillation between a nostalgic feeling and an ill-concealed desire to be more involved in the current videoludic practices.

Second, the most influential gameplay toward identity is the social one able to be complex and articulated. Digital gaming as non-digital one are categorized and assessed by subjects through these two dimensions. While the foster relies on a sense of belonging (identification) the later is more personal and tied to individual development and legitimation (individualization). The only exception is the imagination group, which indeed is poorly interested in the ludic system itself.

Third, gatekeepers show an evident caution toward digital entertainment, above all boardgame ones who consider it a competitor. Despite this position, subjects are usually favourable, some even enthusiast, about the present and the future of videogames. While LARP-RPGers consider them a sort of bequest, wargamers and imaginationers are more focused on the future synergies between it and their passions in terms of immersive potential and sophisticated management guaranteed by computation.

Fourth, I noticed the preservation of a peculiar feeling of affinity through the independent game scenario, which is apparently safe from mainstream logics. Related to this connection, it is evident a sort of 'authorship hunger' - i.e., the need of a creative

single figure able to contrast mainstream routines through an autonomous attitude (the return on Kickstarter of legendary game designers like Richard Garriott and Brian Fargo is associable). Nevertheless, some software houses and publishers such as Bethesda and CD Projekt RED have proven to succeed in embracing this kind of sentiment despite their relevant productive size.

Fifth, subjects trace out a parallelism between non-digital attitude and digital one in consumption (or lack of), with a replication of attitudes, preferences and tastes. Moreover, the convenience of videogames as sustainable practice is a given for some implying a consequential transformation in escapist sports and social divertimento. Therefore, the gaming session becomes less individualization-oriented and more shared because of the little available time for leisure activities; an orientation that is supported by the increasing social dimension of the recent trends in game industry.

In conclusion, digital entertainment represents the main reference in order to define the current cultural boundaries of the non-digital gaming. It does not matter if the opinion about videogames is positive, negative or neutral: its social and economic evidence entails a forced comparison highlighted in almost every interview.

In my case, harnessing this relation was effective in exploring the game-oriented narratives of the subjects engaged above all when institutions and gatekeepers; conversely, common players show less incisive reactions. Probably, the professional effort done by the former category means a more defined and militant ludic identity. Regardless, the difference-oriented strategy applied was proven to be productive; potentially, it can support different types of analyses addressing cultural identities.

Finally, the study presents three vulnerabilities that can suggest future developments. First, its qualitative dimension does not allow to generalize the results but rather to exploit their significance for further quantitative analyses. Second, the ludic practices explored do not complete the overall Italian game culture: for instance, carding games and physical sports can be future fields to analyse, even if their connections to digital entertainment are thin actually. Third, the specific national context (Italian game designers, audiences, productive chains, etc.) remains a secondary topic and future studies could address it in a more specific and detailed way.

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