Future Gaming

Creative Interventions in Video Game Culture

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Introduction: Creative Game Studies

Future tellers

The medium of the video game is suffering from a peculiar kind of identity crisis. Until not long ago, industry experts, journalists and gamers were fairly confident on how to describe the medium, its users and the dynamics of production and consumption. However, the most elementary notions about the industry and culture of digital gaming now appear less simple to analyse, and we hear often contradictory descriptions of who plays and makes video games, and of what games are for.

Nowadays, it seems that video games are being played and made by unpredictable groups and categories of producers and consumers (Anthropy 2012).[1] More complex issues are also being reconsidered and are becoming surprisingly problematic. Even the physical boundaries of game technologies and the ownership of both hardware and software are becoming controversial issues, as hacking, modifications, patches and upgrades are contesting the limits and uses of video games. The history of the medium, as it used to be described in textbooks on the topic (Herz 1997; Poole 2000; Kent 2001), looked like a fairly straightforward progression of technological inventions. But even the history of video games is suddenly becoming a complex issue. Until a few years ago we knew that video games were made by white male geek programmers for an audience of people of the same class, race,

[1] Even former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has made his own video game: Churchill Solitaire. As reported on The Wall Street Journal, January 22, 2016, Donald Rumsfeld has designed a digital version of a card game, allegedly the favourite of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who used to play the game in his spare time during World War II. Rumsfeld, as the article reports, does not know how to code but that did not stop him from making the game.

gender and education. However, nowadays industry experts, journalists, commentators and gamers appear quite insecure and do not fully know how to make sense of some of the changes that occurred in recent years in regards to the demographics of game developers.

The emergence of uncertainties about the medium resembles the dynamics of a collective psychological disorder, one of those that suddenly force the patient to look back at the past in search of safe notions, and to reconsider the future trying to find reassurance that nothing will dramatically change. In fact, most of these recent changes around production and consumption of video games might not be new at all. Most of these allegedly new practices, that now require new responses from those involved in the industry, have probably always been around but received little or no attention. The reason for such distraction is probably due to the destabilising effect that the new emerging questions bring with them.

As it typically happens when a psychological disorder manifests itself, the response given so far to such crisis has been one of denial. The denial consists not in hiding the new dynamics of the game industry and of game culture, which are quite evident, but in confirming the same answers. The previous actors of the game industry are replaced with new ones while preserving the old structures of discourse surrounding the medium. We are often told, for example, that the previous stereotypical male gamer is now being replaced by a new category of consumer, that is the women who play video games on consoles, smartphones and social networks, but also by more casual consumers of various ages (Juul 2010). Video games are now produced by individual or small groups of people, and rarely by large companies, in what is known as the phenomenon of independent gaming. We also often hear from experts on gamification and serious games that games are not just played for fun anymore, but also for educational purposes, as tools for marketing, or to get fitter and healthier. The events surrounding the hacking of PlayStation Network, discussed in this book,

have also offered the opportunity to redefine who has the authority to decide about the ownership, legitimate uses and also physical and temporal limits of a video game console; while in the past this position was occupied by the console manufacturer, we have been told by many commentators that it should now be taken by those who actually buy the console.

Replacing the old actors with new ones has a reinforcing effect on the notions that we used to repeat ourselves until not long ago regarding the medium of the video game. In light of the examples just briefly introduced, we could legitimately conclude that the alleged revolutions of the medium still preserve our knowledge about it intact: we are still told that video games are marketable products with an identifiable audience, made by programmers and designers, those products are bought for an explicit reason and have legitimate uses and defined physical boundaries. However, these answers are only strategic, partial, and do not fully grasp what is going on. In other words, what used to be a simple entertainment medium now appears to be quite mysterious and unpredictable.

At a closer inspection, most of these concerns can be grouped together as broader questions about the future of the medium. The imagined evolution of the medium of the video game has been mostly presented through narratives of technological progression, and questions about the future have always been dominant when discussing the improvement of technologies for digital gaming. The video game industry is organised around a series of events that predict, explain and illustrate its own future. Since 1995 the gaming industry has its own trade show, the Electronic Entertainment Expo, also known as E3. The event usually takes place in Los Angeles, California. The E3 gives to the video game industry a separated space from the other trade shows on electronic and digital products, such as CES (Consumer Electronics Show), where it was previously being hosted. But E3 is not just a display of the current products of the gaming industry; it is mostly a showcase of what is yet to come.

Presentations, slogans and announcements to the press all evoke the future, the imminent next-stage in a process of constant upgrade and update of video game titles, the 'evolution' to be 'experienced' as the main title of E3 2015 suggested (Entertainment Software Association 2015).

Events such as the E3 signal crucial moments in the yearly schedules of the main video game companies, and well-received presentations can bring a positive influence to the stock market rates, particularly for major publishers such as Sony, Microsoft, Valve and Nintendo. However, it is not just during the three days of Californian heat that the future of the gaming industry is discussed. The whole industry appears to be structured on the very idea that the future needs to be narrated almost constantly. Video game magazines, since their origins around the 1980s, have been publishing previews and speculations on the games to be released. These might be imminent game products as well as projects set to appear in one or more years from the time of writing. Occasionally the games previewed are later cancelled or dismissed by their publishers and never hit the shelves, thus becoming elusive games that many have seen, in pictures and videos, and no one has ever played.

The promises of the industry leaders and the predictions of the journalists are not the only contexts in which the medium of the video game is discussed at the future tense. Particularly in recent years, digital games have been the object of a re-evaluation in terms of their social acceptance and potential for bringing changes in our lives. Previously seen as a dangerous medium, capable of corrupting a generation of teenagers and likely to ruin our entire civilization, now video games appear to have become a tool that could redeem our social, economic and cultural issues, while occasionally achieving artistic accomplishments (Carbone and Ruffino 2012). On these occasions, what video games can do is always seen as projected in a more or less imminent future.

Since 2011 we know, for example, that video games will fix the world. This is how Jane McGonigal introduced her TEDtalk (TED 2010). McGonigal presented on stage her plan for solving every single problem of this world by gathering the energies spent by gamers while playing their video games. Her proposal is simple: if so many gamers put so much effort in solving trivial issues while playing games, what could happen if their collective intelligence could be channelled towards real-life problems? In her view, the problems of the planet could be reduced to design problems, and game design, so successful in attracting millions of players, could prove useful in structuring solutions that are appealing and engaging for a large number of people.

In the future we are probably going to use video games for doing real things. This is what McGonigal believes, as well as many other design and marketing consultants. The practice of using game design techniques in serious contexts has been named *gamification* in recent years, and it is now a widespread concept for online and digital businesses (Deterding et al. 2011; Fuchs et al. 2013). In these contexts gamification is seen as a useful technique for attracting and retaining new customers by engaging them in game-like scenarios and challenges. These are supposed to create affiliation to the brand, and encourage sharing one's activities in the games with friends and contacts, who might as well become new customers (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011).

Stories around the potential of the medium have attracted also those who believe that games could be used for social purposes and activism. These current positive discourses on the medium have influenced the position of several public institutions in the United States and in many European countries. During the Computer Science Education Week in December 2013, in what soon became a popular speech among communities of gamers, US President Barack Obama invited students to not 'just play a video game' but also to 'make

one' (De Loura and Paris 2013). The speech was part of a longer series of direct appeals promoting a wider adoption of computer science in educational programmes. Previously, Obama's administration also promoted the use of video games to 'solve problems' (Gaydos 2012). In March 2011 Obama invited the students of the Tech Boston Academy to 'be stuck on a video game that's teaching you something other than just blowing something up' (Lee 2011). The video game industry is here seen as being capable of generating jobs (that academic institutions should prepare to) and, at the same time, fostering the cultural production of a nation.

In a similar fashion, in March 2012 the British chancellor George Osborne secured tax breaks for the video game industry in the country, and Richard Wilson, representative of trade body TIGA, reacted stating that: 'by making this announcement, the government has recognised that games are culturally as important as films […]. The second thing is, it will mean a massive financial boost to the games sector – we should see £188m of investment expenditure because of this proposal' (Stuarth 2012). The European Union has also been investing in video games as technologies for fixing the future. In the Horizon 2020 funding scheme, 'Gaming and Gamification' is one of the many areas where public and private institutions can apply. The scope of the funding is to 'mainstream the application of gaming technologies, design and aesthetics to non-leisure contexts, for social and economic benefits', as 'gaming and gamification will not only create new solutions and methodologies to address societal issues, but it will also help […] to seize new business opportunities' (European Commission Research and Innovation 2016).

In the future video games might save us all. Video games are seen as the solution for our future healthcare, economy and culture. What is the problem, then?

Promises, promises

These and other similar promises about the future of gaming do not match with the problematically shifting scenario that the medium is currently facing. As consolatory narratives these do not work very well. In fact, these stories about the medium only hide the complexities of the problems they seek to resolve, and are reassuring for many precisely because they do not change anything. To explore this further we could look, as an example, at an advertisement which is apparently celebratory of the medium.

The *In the Future* campaign commissioned by international bank HSBC to the agency JWT Dubai, released in January 2013, looks at video games as one among many other examples of how the bank could foster the businesses of the future (JWT Dubai 2013). In the video we see Emir, a young man from Istanbul, making a video game called *Sticky Weasel*. In the plot of the advertisement, the game suddenly and unexpectedly reaches worldwide popularity, with people everywhere in the world playing it on their mobile phones. The boy decides to protect the trademark, merchandise the game and further expand the brand. Ultimately *Sticky Weasel* inspires the production of a film and Emir goes to Hollywood, where he is interviewed on the red carpet of the movie premiere. All this happens thanks to HSBC, which guarantees funding of the project and lets it attain popularity in a global market. In the final scene, Emir's mother stops her son from working and reminds him it is time for dinner, which should probably remind us that HSBC is a global bank that also preserves local values, as is repeated in their slogan.

This and the previous examples are not only paradigmatic of the wide popularity reached by a new and positive understanding of the medium of the video game also on the

part of political and financial organisations. These are also examples of the contradictions and of the rather repetitive nature of the stories that are usually told, by industry experts and commentators, about the things that gamers can now do with video games, and that games can do to gamers.

The allegedly liberating and innovative effects of the technological and social evolution that awaits us are moderated by the not-too-subtle confirmation of already existing economic and power relations. HSBC remind us that for each Emir, or any other self-made, one-person company and independent entrepreneur who accepts President Obama's suggestion to make games, there must be a significant investment that makes that dream possible and guarantees a safety net in case of failure.

Moreover, the advertisement does not mention that the independent game development scene, to which it inexplicitly refers, does not feature, at the time of writing, any significant game developer from Turkey;[2] or, for that matter, from any other country where the game industry is not already solid (that is, United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries). The message is clear: anyone can make a video game, as long as he or she is already equipped with the same education, technical competency, financial security and immersed in the same cultural context of the old actors of the video game industry. In these promises around the potential of video games we can see, with certain regularity, a denial of the inequalities and difficulties that prevent them to be fulfilled. Moreover, these visions of the future work as a reinforcement of the same economic, political and social conditions of the present. The alleged democratisation of the development tools that should

[2] After prolonged research, I was able to find one exception: TaleWorlds Entertainment, an independent video game group, is based in Turkey. Indeed, there can be exceptions, but these mostly confirm the trend.

now allow anyone to make and publish a video game has in fact failed to appeal to any significant group of people who was not already sufficiently educated and competent to work in the game industry. Not coincidentally, Obama's speech was addressed to students who can afford both college education and economic uncertainty, two requisites nowadays for anyone who wishes to attempt a career in gaming.

Research reveals that…

Interests from political institutions about the potential of digital games start even earlier than the Obama administration. As pointed out by Jennifer Whitson and Bart Simon (2014), the American National Security Agency (NSA) had already expressed interest in digital gaming as a new context where to operate massive surveillance and political propaganda. In December 2013, when Edward Snowden released NSA documents from 2007 and 2008, video games and virtual environments appeared in the reports of intelligence operations, and were also debated in their utility as an 'interactive influence medium'. An entire chapter on the 'exploitation and function of games' has precise directions for security agencies and shows how and why these should pay attention to the current developments of the video game industry. The NSA offers three main reasons for looking at digital games. First, the new tools of production make video games easier to manufacture and release, thus allowing large portions of the population to potentially make their own game. Secondly, video games are popular among the American population and globally, and there is a precise suggestion in the document that the 18-35 year old male audience category might still be the most involved in the consumption of games. Finally, games can be used for political propaganda and to influence the public opinion, and even for military recruitment and training. In the conclusive

chapter, titled 'winning hearts and minds *virtually',* the NSA makes explicit suggestions on how the medium can be used to both promote American values and counter controversial propaganda. Also, the NSA outlines strategies for exploiting online gaming to collect intelligence data on players and control communications within the game (Whitson and Simon 2014, 310-311).

From the point of view of the NSA, the future of gaming does not look very playful. In fact, the future we are presented with looks rather disheartening, filled with inequalities and injustice, and at the service of the same ideologies and authorities that frame the current political and economic scenario. This future looks very similar to the present. Mostly, I argue, because the voices that are telling us about the future (the main publishers who gather at E3, HSBC, the NSA and the other above mentioned institutions from within and outside the game industry) are the same who are currently shaping the present narratives around the medium. From these points of view, it is certainly comforting to narrate a future which confirms and reinforces the conditions of the present. Narratives of the future involve statements about technology, finance, education and politics, all areas which are looked at from the safe stand point of the analysis, of the lucid perspective and the data-driven research.

It is quite significant to look at the sources used to justify these visions of the future. In the introduction to the leaked document by the NSA, the authors explain that most of the ideas around 'Games and Virtual Environments' have been collected over the course of one year of research on 'academic journals and papers, newspaper and magazine articles, textbooks, non-fiction works, in-game exploration and personal interviews on games, psychology and sociology [*sic*], as well as attendance at seminars on these issues (for example the Serious Games conference or SAIC's Cyber-Influence Conference series)' (ProPublica 2013). Whoever worked on this document looked for opinions and

interpretations by gamers and academic scholarship, which were probably seen to provide 'sociological and psychological' evidences. The Serious Games Conference, for instance, offers insights to business, educational and political institutions about the uses of games in non-playful contexts, while SAIC is a company specialised in security and surveillance for governmental, military and commercial institutions. The report by the NSA is based on sources that are expected to convey a safe and reassuring confidence on the facts around technologies, and around video games in particular. The document is, after all, nothing more than a comforting overview which reassures that terrorism can and will be defeated also thanks to a detailed understanding of the present and the future of the medium.

In a similar fashion, Jane McGonigal and other promoters of gamification never forget to mention numbers and facts about the supposedly beneficial effects of video games. On McGonigal's personal website a page is significantly titled 'SuperBetter: Show me the Science!'[3] Here we find all the links to the research supporting McGonigal's online game SuperBetter, a game where players give themselves a real life goal and are guided through it on a step-by-step series of actions, involving mental, physical and social exercises. The tasks are allegedly based on scientifically demonstrated facts, and the website offers an overview of the key academic publications that have inspired the game (we are also told that we 'can get even more science' by buying the book).

The problem with using facts, data and statistics is that these are presented with the pretence of explaining how things are and will be, by repeating the *research reveals* mantra as a *passe-partout*. The problem is not in research itself, which might indeed be inaccurate

[3] The 'science' is available at: http://janemcgonigal.com/2014/01/06/superbetter-show-me-the-science/ (Last access July 28 2016)

and surely is partial and limited, but in its use as a reference to hide the presence of the speaker. The act of revelation is problematic, because it hides the hands that are lifting the veil, and the purposes for which the revelation is enunciated in the first place.

Katherine Hayles, while debating the role played by narratives in framing research into artificial life, argued against

> […] those who maintain that scientific inquiry transcends culture, that it does not matter where or by whom it is carried out or in what cultural contexts it is embedded. Even positing this view of transcendent science requires that one tell a story, in this case a story about how science tells truth and about how truth is the same no matter who says it. (Hayles 1996, 162)

Evidences and facts about video games are presented in a variety of circumstances, but it matters by whom, where and when these truths are enunciated.

If we accept that the medium of the video game is experiencing an identity crisis and a period of uncertainty, then the scientific analyses and reports are for the readers like pills of Xanax: they calm and comfort, but only postpone the problem. As argued by Marshall McLuhan (1966), one of the first effects of the narcotisation operated by media on our bodies and brains is the false idea that these are tools separated from our view, rather than things we are deeply involved into (intellectually, bodily, and neurotically).

As in the popular saying, 'when a wise man points at the moon, the imbecile examines the finger', I believe that the position of the imbecile could be re-evaluated: we need to start asking ourselves why the moon has been pointed to us, by whom, and from

which position of authority the man has been defined as 'wise'.[4] We need to start *playing with* the future of gaming, as this practice will offer to us different kinds of understanding of the medium. But it is first necessary that we start moving the finger around by pushing it to point in different directions. We have to start acting like imbeciles.

What this book is not about

This book will *not* offer a guide to the future of video games. Stories about the future of video games are already abundant and rarely satisfy their predictions. This book will instead offer an overview and a critique of how the future of the medium is currently being told, at the present moment, and argue how differently it could be narrated.

As a response to the confidence of NSA, political administrations, financial groups and visionaries of the future of digital technologies, who draw extensively on truthful, data-based, explicatory accounts on the medium, in this text I will offer a personal, partial, involved and, probably, occasionally untruthful perspective on the future of digital games. I believe this could be a method to address the identity crisis of gaming: not by offering supposedly more correct answers, but embracing and accepting the persistence of a point of view when talking about the future, the present and the past. The identity crisis will never be fixed, but we can accept it and bring it to its consequences while looking at the contemporary discourses around the medium of the video game, resisting the temptation of being too confident and introducing, instead, temporary theories and strategic readings.

[4] For a detailed analysis of the old saying, this conversation on Reddit is quite exhaustive: https://www.reddit.com/r/quotes/comments/2o4e3y/explanation_required_when_a_wise_man_points_at/ (Last access July 28, 2016)

To be clear, in this book I do not intend to take the position of being yet another analyst of the medium of the video game. The video game analysts are professional figures responsible for quantifying, drawing metrics, filtering variables and creating models in order to scientifically understand games (El-Nasr, Drachen and Canossa 2013). Analysts are considered quite useful in detailing development strategies of video game products. In respect to the psychological crisis that derives from the continuous effort to understand video games, the game analysts often resemble psycho-analysts. In the context of the video game industry, analysis and analytics are often used to understand and fix a problem that cannot be fixed, that of the partiality and temporality of knowledge.

Instead, the therapy will be approached in this book as a process of invention of alternative ways of enjoying the crisis itself or, in other words, another mode of *playing with* video games. I believe to be involved in this crisis as much as many other gamers and scholars, but I would like to see what can be learnt from it, and how we could enjoy it.

Creative Game Studies (or, how to do things with Microsoft Word)

There are good reasons for moving towards a new mode of writing about video games. What I think we need at this stage is something called *creativity*. Creativity is one of the most common keywords used to define the intellectual and (im)material labour of the contemporary generation of workers involved in the fashion, music, film and also game industries. As noted by Angela McRobbie, creativity in these contexts usually mean little more than 'having ideas', and it has been used to frame the concept of the creative industries, where the over-individualisation of workers makes social critique impossible and opens to practices of self-exploitation and self-blame (McRobbie 2001).

In the context of this book, creativity means something quite different, although it can be seen as a response to the emergence of the term in contemporary practices of labour. Creativity is used here to imagine a modality of work for those involved in the study of the medium of the video game. However, in a practice where 'having ideas' is already the norm, what else could creativity introduce?

Creativity is intended with reference to Henry Bergson's philosophical understanding of the notion, as illustrated in *Creative Evolution* (2007) and in *Time and Free Will* (2001). Bergson argues that creativity is that faculty that makes it possible for us to grasp the surrounding reality not just intellectually but also intuitively. Both intelligence and intuition have specific meanings in the work of Bergson. Intellectual approaches to reality understand it pragmatically, analytically and quantitatively. Intelligence makes us look at things in their homogeneity, so that these can be counted and quantified. Bergson presents the example of a flock of sheep, which can be seen as a homogenous group but where each sheep can be spatially separated from the other and enumerated – this is what Bergson calls a quantitative multiplicity (2001, 76-77). Intuition offers a different capacity to our minds, one that reconnects us with the vital impulse (*élan vital*) that is shared by all living species. Intuition looks at the world for its qualitative differences, and as it mutates and unfolds in time. Through intuition we understand duration, continuity and change. Bergson makes the example of the feeling of sympathy towards another human being. The feeling qualitatively changes in time, but without ever making it possible for us to spatially separate the different kinds of sympathy that we have been experiencing through time (2001, 18-19). I will refer again back to these notions in the following chapter, while looking at the concepts of time and movement in relation to gamification technologies.

We can look at intelligence and intuition also in relation to the stories we are told about digital gaming. For example, the introduction of a new game console is often described as belonging to a new generation of products. In the jargon of console manufacturers, the release of consoles can be divided in historical ages, often associated with the kind of processor used: from the 8-bit and 16-bit era of Nintendo historical consoles we have processed to Sony's PlayStation, the most famous 32-bit console, and then to Nintendo64 (named after its 64-bit processor) and so on until the contemporary generation of PlayStation4 and Xbox One, usually referred to as the eight generation or cycle of consoles (the amount of bits is now considered less relevant and generations are conventionally numbered in a progressive order). Likewise, Sony Computer Entertainment has been promoting the vision of Gaming 3.0 as a leading concept for their business in this decade (Radd 2007; Krotoski 2008). According to Sony executives, Gaming 3.0 follows the 1.0 era of the early home consoles and the 2.0 era of online gaming. In the first two ages video game products remained unmodified by players after their purchase. Gaming 3.0 focuses instead on the personalisation of the gaming experience, on continuous updates and, more importantly, on the user rather than the developer as a key figure in the production of new content within the game.

The problem with these stories about the past, present and future of video games is that these put the medium in a dead end, as it makes only use of an intellectual approach to understand the mutations of games and gamers, as these happen in time.

First of all, narratives of technological progression offer a *teleological* vision, one where there is an explicit direction in the continuous development of technologies for digital gaming. These stories proceed from the past towards the future and through the present. The very idea of the future is grounded on the obsession for newness that pervades not only the

video game industry but most hi-tech media sectors. New, future products are not just important for marketing talk. These also serve to replicate a temporal narrative in the understanding of media and their relation to society and culture.

Also, the problem of an intellectual understanding of time brings with it other significant issues. First, it limits technologies into *boxes*, often equivalent to the products sold on the market, to be periodically replaced by new, better boxes. The users of these constantly updating technologies are similarly thought of as limited in imaginary boxes from where they could either use technologies or be influenced by these. Therefore, the second issue brought about by temporal visions around media is one of *causality*: for instance, we are often said that the alleged democratisation of video game development is happening because of open-access game production tools such as Twine, Unity and the Unreal Engine. Likewise, the new video game culture is supposedly being shaped by the emergence of new consumers, as if these could just happen in the history of gaming and break an otherwise static scenario.

Moreover, teleological narratives of technological progression bring to the *freezing* of the present condition and of the previous ones. Kember and Zylinska, in *Life After New Media* (2012), effectively summarise how linear narratives of technological progress are entangled with a *deterministic* view of media, one that freezes media into isolated tools. They also argue that such a process of isolation has to do with the temporality of a 'developmental narrative':

> The old versus new division […] not only brings together affect and matter but also inscribes media into a progressive developmental narrative. In other words, it introduces the question of time into debates on media while simultaneously freezing this question by immediately dividing 'media time' into a series of discrete

> spatialized objects, or products that succeed one another. Thus we are said to progress from photography to Flickr, from books to e-readers. (2012, 3)

The narrative of progression from what Sony had named the 1.0 era of gaming to the 2.0 and eventually 3.0 can be seen as also establishing those ages and at the same time necessarily freezing the current scenario (Gaming 3.0) in an isolated space in the proposed linearity of technological development.

Intellectual readings of the history and future of video games offer a rather linear, homogenous and paced progression. Also, these are rather predictable narratives: we know already that the next generation of video game consoles will augment the number of polygons visible on screen of a number which is exponentially higher than previous consoles. While describing the future of video games, these narratives simultaneously stop it at the present.

Thus, we need Creative Game Studies. Creativity enables us to look at things also *intuitively*, thus giving things a new sparkle of life (as Tim Ingold 2011 put it). First, intuition looks at how things mutate in time not just quantitatively, but qualitatively, and re-introducing duration and movement in our accounts of the world surrounding us. In fact, intuition involves ourselves in the world we look, as intuition happens in time and has its own duration as much as the things surrounding us. Intuition is about entering into things, rather than just observing them.

Creativity allows us to think intuitively, thus also *timely* and in time, participating in the duration of things as they mutate and happen. In chapter 3 I will look more specifically at the hacking of PlayStation Network. The boundaries of the console and online service offered by Sony have been mutating not just physically but also in time, and qualitatively, as their definitions were decided and contested by institutionalised actors participating at the trials

that involved Sony. A creative reading of the hacking of PlayStation Network brings a destabilising view on this story, as a never ending process of remediation in which we are involved as we speak (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Latour 2005; Michael 2000).

Creativity forces us to think of our study as *performative*, as immersed and participating in the things it says and writes. Being part of video game culture as we write about it, we are also responsible for making it happen and bringing it about. A creative reading is always and necessarily implicated in, and constitutive of, the narratives it creates. A discourse that attempts to be contaminated by the categories it otherwise critiques eschews analysis, ontology and observation in favour of participation.

A participative theory, in its own turn, involves the responsibility of having to make choices and posing questions that are going to be part of the discursive formation in which it intervenes. A creative game studies that takes into account its own performative potential is also necessarily *ethical* (Zylinska 2005). The ethical question that I intend to pose, and not necessarily resolve, throughout the rest of this book concerns precisely the position of the researcher in the process of forming knowledge: what are the implications of avoiding essentialist and hegemonic approaches, and of attempting instead to multiply particularisms and differences through the invention of alternative narratives?

Moreover, the presentations of orderly successions of game products rarely take into account the ideologies of progress associated with it, while taking the timely progression of technology as granted and as narrated by neutral voices. Thus, Creative Game Studies must also be *anti-authoritarian*, in that it will question the ways in which we are presented with fossilised interpretations of the dynamics of the practices that compose video game culture. Rather than replicating distinctions such as producer and consumer, independent and

mainstream, or terms such as ownership, democratisation and freedom, Creative Game Studies will inquire into how such expressions have been framed, how they came into being and how else they could be. Creative Game Studies should produce anti-authoritarian narratives around video game culture, and these narratives should be produced as events of game culture, as timely intuitions that question the other co-existent stories around the medium.

Last but not least, Creative Game Studies is necessarily going to bring with it a sufficient dose of *anxiety* for the researcher. Surely, thinking of video games as things that mutate in time, in which we are implicated, and that also mutate while we look at them, rather than identifiable and finished products, can seem like an unsafe territory from which it is impossible to speak. However, academic scholarship has the imperative of 'making a cut', at one point, in these ongoing processes of mediation (Kember and Zylinska 2012). But how can we operate significant cuts, in this fluid scenario? To borrow the question posed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted by Grusin (2015), we need to ask 'where do we find ourselves' if we are not at any of the extremes but always and necessarily in the connection itself, in mediation?

Jacques Derrida expressed a similar feeling of unsafety while describing his own theory of deconstruction. Ultimately, in this book I turn to his understanding of anxiety to indicate the path to a creative study of gaming. Deconstruction offers to abandon the comfortable presence of the existing categories and of the possibilities that resulted from them for theoretical discourse. Derrida (1980) argues that anxiety is probably a necessary consequence of deconstruction but also a sign of being really (or we might say, ethically) involved in the 'game':

> The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game. (Derrida 1980, 248)

Creative Game Studies seeks to re-evaluate the possibility of being at play, within a study of gaming which becomes itself a form of play. This way of looking at things plays with given unities of discourse and aims to deconstruct the similarities and differences between groupings. The anxiety implied in this perspective results from acknowledging that there are always differences between the things that are usually kept together, and similarities between those things that are kept separate. The creative cut, the process of invention, consists in imagining those similarities and differences that are rarely, if ever, brought about.

Finally, what is Creative Game Studies? Creative Game Studies is just like a new video game. A video game available on Mac and PC, and to be played on pre-installed text editing software. It is the digital version of a previous pen-and-paper game. The game is played by writing words about video games, words that are constitutive of the medium itself. In this book I offer the results of a prolonged session of mine with this new video game. Creative Game Studies proposes to be an *intuitive*, *timely*, *performative*, *ethical*, *anti-authoritarian* and *anxious* way of writing about video games. Paraphrasing J. L. Austin (1962), Creative Game Studies poses the question of how to do things with Microsoft Word: how to intervene in video game culture by writing about it.

What is in this book

Throughout the chapters of this book I will propose different readings of recent events and stories that surround contemporary video game culture. Some of these stories will be very personal. In the first chapter, to begin with, I reflect on my personal experience with the NikeFuel wristband, a device used to count the daily steps and monitor the physical activity of the user. NikeFuel has been described by experts as an example of the larger trend of gamification, or the 'use of game design elements in non-game contexts' (Deterding et al. 2011). Allegedly, gamification aims at creating a deep 'engagement' (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011) with the user, in order to not just quantify their practices but also influence their behaviour. However, after two years of wearing NikeFuel, and spending so much time in physical contact with it, I felt that my engagement was becoming more similar to that of a couple in a romantic relationship. In the chapter I reflect on my own decision to break the relationship: a hard decision to take, particularly when the basic principles of gamification eliminate the possibility of any event or rupture, proposing instead a homogenous understanding of time and space. In such conditions, it was not easy to find a good excuse to justify why we should break up.

Eventually, I managed to stop wearing NikeFuel. In my life after gamification, I started playing again with my unquantified self. Ultimately I propose in the chapter the possibility of reimagining our engagement with games and technologies, and the very idea that both ourselves and the games we play with act and have an influence on each other. I introduce instead other modes for thinking of our relationships: as processes of dwelling in gamified technologies (Heidegger 1971a, Ingold 2011), and in terms of kinship (Haraway 2004; 2015). At stake, there is the possibility of imagining a more lively engagement with our

gamified selves, one that brings to partial, strategic and temporary knowledge about ourselves and the games we live with.

While looking at alternative forms of life with video games, I explored the stories of video game developers who decided to work independently by making and releasing their own video games. The field of independent game production, which has attracted many who worked in the industry in the last decade, has opened to new forms of management of the development process of a video game. It is relatively common, nowadays, for an individual or a small group to work on a video game independently, also thanks to freely available development software. The meaning of independence, in this context, is disputed. Does it mean that the developer works in opposition to the mainstream game industry? Does it involve the choice of tools used for programming the game? Or does it affect the content and aesthetic of the game itself? Is it a political choice, a business model, or mostly a style of video game design?

Indeed, the answer is not easy and differs from case to case. What I argue in chapter 2 is that independence is a concept that forces the individual developers to talk about and define themselves in terms of their own independence. Thus, it offers an original ethical question: independent developers discuss, in the many occasions in which they are asked to describe their own practice, about their own presence in the world, and in relation to the others (being them the other independents or the game industry). The creation of otherness is necessary in the development of the independent individual (Laclau 1996), but neither the individual nor its outside, the otherness to differentiate, can ever be fully grasped. As a floating signifier, independence is productive precisely because of its unresolvable condition. The notion of independence produces unstable and constantly negotiated boundaries between oneself and the others. Indeed, there are many different ways to structure this discourse of

self-definition: while incubators and workshops for independent developers ultimately offer a way of knowing and taking care of the self (Foucault 1998), other negotiations of the concept open to forms of self-ghettoisation, narcissism and solipsism. Ultimately, the ethical question of independence transforms the relation between the developer and their own game into a pressing issue, one that needs to be discussed almost constantly. At stake there is the possibility of imagining new forms of hospitality within the culture of video game development, by interpreting independence as an ethical question on how to best relate to the other-which-is-not-me (Zerilli 2006).

While independent developers define and construct themselves as independents, video game products are similarly subject to processes of negotiation and redefinition. In chapters 3 and 4, I explore two events of game culture, quite different from each other but each putting at the centre a question of what a video game ultimately is. In chapter 3 I look at the hacking of PlayStation Network. Sony's console and its online service have been hacked numerous times since March 2011, when Sony decided to remove one feature of the PlayStation3 console that could have been exploited for acts of digital piracy. Many consumers saw this decision as authoritarian and dishonest, as they had bought a console which was later altered by its producer. The series of events that started from that moment have opposed conflicting ideas about who owns a video game console, and who has the right and freedom to manipulate it. Ultimately, the question became ontological: what is PlayStation Network?

In the chapter I expand the problem, rather than resolving it, by looking at how Sony's attorney at the California State Court came up with a solution while defending the video game publisher. She pointed at the warranty that is given with the product which claims that Sony cannot be responsible for any malfunctioning after one year from the date of purchase. Thus, Sony could not be held responsible for having changed one feature of a

product which could just completely stop functioning without this having any legal repercussion on its publisher. However, by introducing the notion of time in the definition of what a video game console is, she suggested that definitions of digital products are temporary: these definitions are strategic, have their own timing (as the authorities and places when these are enunciated matter), and inscribe technologies in time, deciding what they are before and after the act of definition. Consoles become something else as we talk about them, as we decide what they are.

In the chapter I explore how we can understand the role of the hacker, the actor who modifies the PlayStation Network and transforms its boundaries and physical limits. The hacker can be seen as a hybrid mediator (Latour 2005, Michael 2000) who is involved in the same network he or she modifies. Being part of the network itself, the hacker can be reinterpreted as a much broader figure, one that includes Sony's attorney, for instance, and myself, author of this chapter, as further mediators of the story of the hacking of PlayStation Network, and also everyone who plays with the console and alters its shape by manipulating it physically, intellectually and intuitively. In the end, looking at our interventions and presence in the network of material and immaterial nodes that make a video game console, we can see how consoles leak not just when their database are illegitimately accessed, but *all the time*: consoles are malleable and are modified continuously, they are made of tangible and intangible nodes that, in time, change their state of matter and their relations with each other.

In chapter 4 I look at another event that destabilised the boundaries of what we conceive to be a video game. The story of E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial, a video game inspired by the movie by Steven Spielberg, has its roots in Atari's economic failure during the crash of the video game industry between 1982 and 1985. When Atari published the game, the sales were so disappointing that Atari could not afford to store all the unsold cartridges. As

the urban legend goes, Atari decided to dump these cartridges in the desert of New Mexico. After about 30 years, a movie company decided to shoot a documentary on this story and dig in the desert in search of a proof of the existence of E.T. What they found in the desert turned to be much more destabilising and unsettling than what they could have hoped.

The story of E.T. and its afterlife (Guins 2014) offers an example of how the telling of the past and future of the medium can work to reinforce its own present. The archaeological perspective (Huthamo and Parikka 2011; Parikka 2012; Suominen 2016) adopts the metaphor of the physical excavation – a metaphor which became literal in the case of E.T. However, while digging in mud to discover the past events of the history of a medium, it stabilises its own present by taking it for granted, as a safe point of destination of the historical developments. In particular, the story of E.T. reveals a certain obsession for thinking of video games as boxes, as tangible pieces of plastic and silicon. Even when looking at the disputed issue of the first video game ever, as I discuss in the chapter, the historiographies operate a reduction of the early computer experiments into identifiable unities. Thus, the history of video games is looked at as the history of its products and consumers, and stories such that of E.T. appear to us as stories of a failed product, as an exception that only confirms the homogenous progression towards what the medium is today. In the end, I turn to a history of the present, as intended in the genealogical project by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1970; 1972; 1991). In this view, the present itself becomes a unity of discourse caught while in its undoing. The apparent unity of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, in fact, revealed to be as porous and fragile as the Sony's PlayStation Network: as soon as it was uncovered from the mud, it became an unstable object, to the point of bringing us to question the conditions of possibility for talking about the past, present and future of a medium.

In chapter 5 I discuss about another series of recent events that have reinterpreted the history of the medium from a different standpoint than that of the video game archaeologists of E.T. The GamerGate controversy has been a series of misogynist attacks perpetuated by male gamers who were concerned with the presence of women in video game culture. The campaign started after game designer Zoe Quinn was accused of having a conflict of interest with a journalist for the online magazine Kotaku. The campaign quickly degenerated and targeted many of the women who took a stand in favour of Quinn, until it included even academia and the Digital Games Research Association as part of a supposed feminist plot to take over the game industry. The plot was allegedly aimed at controlling the medium by imposing gender equality. On the other side, the GamerGate supporters felt entitled to decide how the medium should be, defining themselves as the real passionate gamers who originally constituted the majority of consumers. GamerGate still generates tweets and posts on Reddit and 4chan, and at its peak, between 2014 and 2015, some of targeted women received death threats and personal accusations at their private addresses.

In this story of hate and misogynist campaigns, in all the conspiratorial narratives that were used to accuse women who make and write about games, where do we find ourselves? What can be said, and what is the value of speaking, when the amount of comments and stories is so abundant that any opinion seems equally irrelevant? In the chapter I start from one comment left on Reddit by one of the thousands of users who supported GamerGate. In the comment, the user accused academia of being like a parasite that does not produce anything. In respect to GamerGate, this is a particularly appropriate comment: it is almost impossible to have an influence on a debate that has generated so many uncountable, contradictory and conspiratorial narratives. However, the idea of being parasites might reveal to be a useful metaphor.

In the chapter I turn to the parasite (Serres 1982) as a figure to understand our roles within the stories of video game culture. A parasite, in the work of Serres, is understood as living in symbiotic relationship with another organism. The parasite is an exploiter, but at the same time also one that destabilises the boundaries of a system by living at its margins. The parasite is neither inside nor outside, neither part of the organism it exploits nor independent from it. In regards to GamerGate, thinking of ourselves as parasites means avoiding the binarism of being inside or outside of game culture, and as parasites we can look at the history of games not in terms of the categories of people who allegedly step in or out of it, but as something anyone can always relate to and rewrite. Being a parasite is not necessarily a negative condition, Serres argues, and writing about a medium necessarily puts us in a marginal position from where we take advantage of the context we write about while also giving it new life. I look at some examples, such as the stories of Roberta Williams (Nooney 2013) and Anna Anthropy (Anthropy 2012), of women who have been approaching digital games as parasites of the good kind by designing, talking and thinking about video games.

In the conclusions I try to answer one final question: what is the value of writing about video games? What is at stake in Creative Game Studies, in this new video game that I have been trying to play while writing this book? A new video game is released while finalising this manuscript, and it offers a possible answer. The game Pokemon Go, by Niantic, an instant success on the Apple and Google digital stores, reminds us in the opening screen to be 'alert at all times [and] stay aware of your surroundings'. Probably, I conclude, Creative Game Studies consists in this: it is a self-imposed pressure to be alert *of* all times and timings, those of the narratives of the industry but also the time needed to write about the medium of the video game. It invites to think of these different timings as possibilities for

alternative creative interventions within video game culture and, ultimately, to imagine different ways of being involved ‘in our surroundings’.

Chapter 1

Life after Gamification: how I broke up with NikeFuel

I decided to break up with NikeFuel after wearing the wristband for more than two years. After an initial period of enthusiasm I realised that I was not sure anymore whether I really wanted to continue using Nike's gadget. The problem I had with NikeFuel was not specifically related to the product itself, but with the broader concept of *gamification*, a trend in the design of digital products that has directly inspired the development of NikeFuel. In this chapter I would like to analyse my own relationship with NikeFuel, looking at how it started and then came to an end, and how this personal story might have repercussions on the notion of gamification. This will be for me a way of reflecting on what I have done, and what I want to be: after two years of intense relationship with NikeFuel I feel like it is now time to take care of my (un-quantified) self.

NikeFuel is often presented as an example of larger trends in the production of technologies for the control and improvement of the body through game-like scenarios. NikeFuel is a technology and unity of measurement produced by the sports company Nike. It is sold as a wristband to be worn by the user during the day and while carrying any activity. While NikeFuel is worn, an accelerometer inserted in the wristband converts the movement of the body in a score. The score is visible from the wristband itself, by pressing a button, or by connecting the gadget to a laptop or smartphone via Bluetooth. At midnight the score resets and the counting starts again from zero. NikeFuel is designed for sport practitioners as well as beginners, and it is advertised as a tool for self-improvement by self-tracking.

NikeFuel has been seen by many experts as an example of gamification: a pervasive trend in user experience that draws inspiration from the design of video games. Gamification is a current trend in the design of apps and services for self-improvement (through health, education and learning), and for attracting customers towards new or existing businesses. Deterding et al. defined gamification as the 'use of game design elements in non-game contexts' (2011, 1). The game design elements are there intended, broadly, as 'elements that are *characteristic to* games' (2011, 3). More specifically, these are usually interface and game design patterns such as badges, levels, scores, rankings, leaderboards and rewards.

Mathias Fuchs looks at gamification as part of a larger trend that spans across modernity, and that makes use of practices of quantification in diverse spheres of social life such as religion and the economy (Fuchs 2013). Joost Raessens thinks of gamification as part of the broader phenomenon of ludification, or the 'ludic turn': the permeation of ludic elements in real life and 'serious' experiences, a trend which is becoming more and more pervasive in our contemporary culture (Raessens 2013). Extensive use of the term has been reported from 2010, while its origins are probably to be found in a consultancy company, Conundra, founded in 2003 by game designer Nick Pelling, who claimed to be specialising in gamification (Deterding et al. 2011; Werbach and Hunter 2012). Conundra focused on offering consultancies to companies interested in attracting new customers by implementing game features in their offer. In more recent times, the idea of gamifying a business has re-emerged, not necessarily directly with reference to Pelling's first attempt but similarly presented as a technique to be sold to companies via consultancies.

Since 2011 the marketing/consultancy sector has been re-evaluating gamification as a potential source of revenue. The last few years have also witnessed the emergence of several events and publications that have contributed to defining gamification. Gabe Zichermann and

Christopher Cunningham's text *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps* (2011) is the most popular, as are Zichermann's website Gamification.co and the associated annual conference, Gamification Summit, held in San Francisco every year since 2011. Jane McGonigal's work, culminating in her contribution at the TEDtalk series in 2010, is also concerned with selling gamification to corporations. Jane McGonigal's talk at TED "Gaming can make a better world" has been viewed by more than 4 million people since its publication, according to the TED website (TED 2010). In McGonigal's view, gamification (although she does not use the same term explicitly) is a new goldmine for designers and business makers. It is also a tool for social policy and, more broadly, for changing and 'healing' the world (BBC 2016).

Gamification appears to group very different practices at once. On Gamification.co, the main online reference for finding out new experiments and products in the field, we can find gamification to be applied to the most different areas. Just by looking at the news of one week on Gamification.co, we can see that gamification can improve the learning of mathematics in schools ("Facilitating Math Learning with DreamBox Learning Platform", March 1 2016), brand loyalty and customer retention ("CataBoom: Sparking Brand Loyalty with Rewarding Games", February 29 2016), work environments and employees' health ("Welltok Gamifies Employee's Journey to Wellness" February 24 2016), as much as sexual life ("Gamifying Sexual Health with OhMiBod's Lovelife Krush", February 23 2016). Other of-cited examples are the Miles Club offer of airline companies, where customers receive bonuses by buying numerous flights with the same company, and coffee shops offering free drinks after a certain number of drinks bought at the same chain (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011; Schrape 2013).

In the textbooks on gamification, such as the one by Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), gamification is presented as a technique based on the collection and analysis of previous experiences in user engagement. Gamification is there presented as a series of practical and operational suggestions on how to involve users (be they customers, citizens, employees or gamers) and maximise their performance towards a specific goal. In order to achieve such ambitious goal, gamified technologies must collect and archive data about the user. Data needs to be first archived and processed to later become part of a game, and is collected according to a principle of transparency: gamification plays with the facts about the user, and attempts to assist the user in improving these same facts, these truths about him or herself.

This very notion of the self is evoked by the Quantified Self movement. The Quantified Self movement originated in a context similar to that in which gamification was first promoted. It was in the TED Talk series, in around 2010, that the idea of the Quantified Self received major exposure through the words of experts involved, mostly, in the editorial team of Wired magazine.[5] The movement promotes the introduction of technologies for the measurement of daily activities in the lives of individuals. Collection and data processing is oriented towards the improvement of life, here intended as the sum of the data about a person's body as it is generated during daily activities. The Quantified Self is also promoted as a solution to medical problems and for the improvement of certain characteristics of the body. Gamification can actually be seen as a further step in the process of quantifying the

[5] Gary Wolf, author and contributing editor at *Wired* magazine, presented his idea of the quantified self at a TED Talk in June 2010 (http://www.ted.com/talks/gary_wolf_the_quantified_self Accessed July 28, 2016) and during the "*Wired* Health Conference: Living by Numbers", October 2012 (http://fora.tv/2012/10/15/Wireds_Gary_Wolf__Kevin_Kelly_Talk_the_Quantified_Self Accessed July 28, 2016). Interestingly, Gary Wolf has often been presenting NikeFuel as an example of the Quantified Self.

self, in which the improvement of life happens through a game-like environment and towards the establishment of practices of participation between users.

The meaning of engagement

One of the keywords of the discourses surrounding gamification is *engagement*. Engagement is seen by many authors as the Holy Grail of gamification, as it is used to discuss and represent the extent to which players are using the game and being influenced by it. Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) start their text precisely with a definition of engagement:

> The term 'engagement', in a business sense, indicates the connection between a consumer and a product or service. Unsurprisingly, the term is also used to name the period in a romantic couple's relationship during which they are preparing and planning to spend the rest of their lives together. Engagement is the period of time at which we have a great deal of connection with a person, place, thing or idea. (2011, xvi)

However, for Zichermann and Cunningham this definition is a problem as it is too broad. Therefore they propose to create a metric to break down engagement:

> We would be better off thinking of engagement as being comprised of a series of potentially interrelated metrics that combine to form a whole. These metrics are: recency, frequency, duration, virality, ratings. Collectively, they can be amalgamated as an 'E' (or engagement) score. (2011, xvi)

Rather than taking this prosaic definition, I prefer to think through the metaphor of engagement in the broadest possible way, and possibly taking to its consequences the romantic interpretation that Zichermann and Cunningham so quickly dismissed. After all, my own engagement with NikeFuel lasted for such a long time that it is difficult now to evaluate the 'E' score of our relationship. Our engagement looked much more like that of a couple in a romantic relationship and, after two years, we could have easily spent the rest of our lives together. The relationship we had was actually very intimate. NikeFuel was always on my wrist, and I would always take it with me. NikeFuel knew a lot about me, but also needed my movement to increase the score on the wristband, and I had to recharge it regularly to keep it working. NikeFuel was completely dependent on my presence and care. I checked my score more than once during the day, while it was closely attached to my wrist. We were always touching each other.

Engagement is a special kind of relationship, one that precedes the passage towards a more binding relationship. It is a kind of relationship which is expected to change drastically at one point and transform itself into something different. A romantic engagement is supposed to change on the day of the wedding. In mathematics, sudden changes that alter a status of quiet and which result from minor alterations are defined as catastrophes. Although not everyone would agree that a wedding is a catastrophic event, it certainly has the characteristics of a catastrophe as mathematicians understand it: it is an event which radically changes the relationship between a couple, in a way that cannot be undone – it can of course be altered again if a separation, or a divorce, occur, but these would be again catastrophic events.

Thus engagement is, by definition, expected to end at one point and transform into something else. Engagement implies change and *movement* towards a catastrophic point of

modification of the relationship, or progress towards an event that will alter the terms of the engagement itself. Engagement makes sense only in its duration, in its mutations in time.

A static conception of movement

Movement, as a matter of fact, is the most important keyword in the marketing of NikeFuel. NikeFuel is advertised as a technology for the measurement of movement and movement is understood by Nike as equivalent to life. When I decided to buy NikeFuel and keep it on my wrist all the time, I was attracted by such a bold statement as presented in the advertisement of the product. A video published by the sports company in 2013 explains what the gadget is about:

> Our minds, our bodies and our experience all tell us that movement is life and that the more we move the more we live. It's something athletes have understood from the beginning. The kind of movement it takes to improve your game is the kind of movement it takes to improve your life. But unlike sport, life doesn't come with convenient ways of measuring movement. So we developed one. NikeFuel: a single universal unit uniquely designed to measure the movement of the entire human body for the entire human race, whatever your weight, whatever your gender, whatever your activity. It's that simple and that revolutionary. So get out there, find what fuels you and get moving. (Nike, Inc. 2013)

The video shows people of different ages and races practicing sports, at more or less professional levels. They all move, therefore, they all live, according to the syllogism implicated by the presentation given in the spot.

Indeed, the problem of quantifying movement is one of the oldest in Western philosophy, and Nike's product, from this point of view, certainly stands on the shoulders of giants. The philosophical question posed by the paradox of Zeno could receive a major contribution by NikeFuel. In this paradox, Zeno imagines that Achilles, one of the main characters in Greek's mythology and a notoriously fast runner, engages in a race with a tortoise. To compensate the disadvantage, the tortoise is given a certain margin of advantage over Achilles. When the race begins each contestant will run at constant speed, but while Achilles will move at a fast pace, the tortoise instead will proceed very slowly. Common sense suggests that Achilles will quickly outrun the tortoise. Instead, according to Zeno, Achilles will never reach the animal. In fact, Zeno argues, Achilles must first cover half the distance the separates himself from the tortoise, and before running half the distance, he has to cover a quarter of the distance. While he does so, the tortoise also proceeds further. The gap between the two will never be covered because it can be divided an infinite number of times, thus making the task of reaching the tortoise an infinite and impossible task for Achilles.

Henri Bergson challenged the paradox in his *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (Bergson 2001). In Bergson's view, Achilles will certainly reach and pass the tortoise. However, the example formulated by Zeno will remain unsolvable as long as movement is spatialised, as Bergson puts it. Intuition tells us that Achilles will run faster than the tortoise, and that is because movement has its own duration, and duration cannot be reduced to space. The space surrounding Achilles and the tortoise is homogenous and can be divided in infinitely smaller fragments. However, the movements of Achilles and the tortoise are not similarly homogenous, and happen in time as much as in

space. Movements are indivisible and different *in kind* in respect to the space occupied by Achilles and the tortoise:

> Why does Achilles outstrip the tortoise? Because each of Achilles' steps and each of the tortoise's steps are indivisible acts in so far as they are movements, and are different magnitudes in so far as they are space […]. This is what Zeno leaves out of account when he reconstructs the movement of Achilles […], forgetting that space alone can be divided and put together again in any way we like, and thus confusing space with motion. (2001, 113-114)

Bergson solves the paradox through what he names intuition, that is '[stating] a problem and [solving] it in terms of time rather than of space' (Deleuze 1991, 31). The sports company Nike, instead, reinforces the paradox by spatialising movement (and life with it). Bergson would say that Nike makes use of intellect, rather than intuition. As I have discussed in the introduction to this book, the two terms are crucial in Bergson's philosophy. While intellect is analytical, in that it divides and recomposes things in order to give us the knowledge we need to satisfy our needs, intuition instead gives us the knowledge of how things are in constant movement and always in the process of becoming other (Bergson 2007).

Space is homogenous but movement is not. Movement is an event which has its own duration, as it happens in time as much as in space. However, Nike understands movement and space in a way that reinforces the paradox of Zeno. The movement of the user must be recorded through an accelerometer and transformed in a score which can increase in quantity, but where every unity is qualitatively the same as any other unit: the movement needed to move from zero to one NikeFuel-points is supposedly of the same intensity and quality as that which is required to increase the score from one to two. Thus, in NikeFuel movement is

spatialised, as it is represented as a continuum of homogenous units. If Achilles and the tortoise were given a NikeFuel band, Zeno could have divided their scores in infinitely smaller portions to prove his argument.

Thus, Nike understands movement as something rather static, and I am afraid that such a static movement has been a major problem in my engagement with NikeFuel.

A technical fault

In fact, during our two years of engagement, one event had occurred which changed the relationship between myself and NikeFuel. It did not raise any particular concern at the time, but it gave me later a good reason to rethink the value of our engagement. After about nine months from the date of purchase, the wristband was not working properly. NikeFuel was retrospectively changing my scores when connected to the app on my smartphone, thus making the records unusable for comparisons. I wrote to Nike's account on Twitter (@NikeFuel) for several weeks, but despite their generous assistance I had to claim a replacement and collect a new wristband at the Nike Store in Oxford Circus, London. The new NikeFuel worked exactly like the previous one, and at first I did not consider this passage to be in any way significant for our engagement.

However, one year later I started questioning that moment in our relationship when the wristband was replaced. Was I engaging with the wristband I had once replaced, or with the new one? Or was I supposed to engage with NikeFuel as an abstract concept, with the score itself, regardless of the device on my wrist? Most importantly, and tragically: what if something happened to me? What if I stopped moving (or living)? Could my NikeFuel wristband replace me with someone else? If a different person would pick it up and wear it,

the product would have continued working in the same way as it did with me. In this relationship each one of us was replaceable.

Relationships often come to an end when an unexpected event (the beginning of another affair, moving town, changing job and so on) occurs, a rupture in an established order which makes the previous condition impossible to recover. Catastrophes of this kind cannot be undone. In those circumstances, it is usually said that nothing can be the same ever again. In my case, instead, I started to realise that by swapping the wristband with a new one everything will have always stayed the same, forever. Which is, unfortunately, much more dramatic.

In Zeno's paradox we can replace the two main actors, Achilles and the tortoise. The choice of these two characters works well in the narrative of the paradox because one represents a fast running mythological hero, while the other is a slow animal. However, the paradox becomes relevant because it is not just a personal problem of Achilles, or of the tortoise, but of our conception of movement in general, at any time and in any place. In Zeno's paradox, Achilles will never outrun the tortoise, but also, in the view of the Greek philosopher, no one else could in any other context, at any given time.

Zeno's paradox applies to any possible race or movement, performed by anyone, at any time and at any latitude or longitude of the globe. Similarly, the NikeFuel score matters for its user because it will be used to compare any future performance, and this is possible because NikeFuel will work in the same way at any time and any place. The score matters for the user because of its repeatability in other places and times. Nike says this explicitly in its advertisement: NikeFuel is supposed to 'measure the movement of the entire human body for the entire human race, whatever your weight, whatever your gender, whatever your activity'

(Nike, Inc. 2013). Nike will measure the user's movement, whoever and wherever he or she is or will be. It is crucial, for the gadget to have any value, that not just the movement happening at the present moment, but also any other movement in the future will be equally recorded. Time and space are, after all, of homogenous quality in the interpretation offered by Nike.

After these considerations, I came to the conclusion that NikeFuel and I could replace each other with no significant consequences. In other words, the daily scores accumulated over two years, while different from each other by their degree or intensity, were unlikely to ever become of a different *kind*, that is, of a different quality, one that would be incomparable and indivisible by the same criteria applied to all the other previous and future movements. Gamification aims at a kind of engagement which ultimately remains static, rather being in movement. Looking at NikeFuel as an example, it can be seen how the very tension towards the future is there crystallised. The game never ends, we only know that tomorrow our engagement will be measured and evaluated through the same criteria of the present. If this was a romantic engagement, it could be said that NikeFuel is a wristband which never becomes a ring.

Could the relationship be changed? Could I play differently with NikeFuel, and gamification in general? Could our engagement be, somehow, transformed into something different? NikeFuel cannot be easily hacked or modified into anything else than what it is at the time of purchase. The only choice left to the user consists in either wearing the wristband, or not wearing it. However, I believe we can rethink our engagement with gamified apps by reconsidering the distance between, on the one hand, the gadgets or apps that are supposed to quantify our own lives and, on the other, our bodies, minds, movements and intuitions. The problem with engagement in gamification (but the same could be said of the broader

Quantified Self movement) is that it implies a certain commitment and mutual influence between user and technology, while keeping both at distance. Such distance never really mutates, nor transforms into a different kind of intimacy. The influence exercised by the technology on the user and by the user on the technology, which texts on gamification define as engagement, can otherwise be defined as a problem with the unbridgeable distance that keeps user and technology separate and never completely immersed with each other. This notion is often discussed in terms of *agency*.

The problem with agency

Many scholars, particularly from video game studies, have expressed their severe criticism against gamification. Ian Bogost has been, in numerous occasions, a fervent critic of the emergence of gamification. In May 2011 a post on Gamasutra written by Bogost defined gamification as 'exploitationware', as it replaces 'real incentives with fictional ones', and 'real, functional, two-way relationships with dysfunctional perversions of relationships. Organizations ask for loyalty, but they reciprocate that loyalty with shams, counterfeit incentives that neither provide value nor require investment' (Bogost 2011a). In August 2011, Ian Bogost explored his position against gamification further, claiming that 'gamification is bullshit', as it is used to 'conceal, impress or coerce'. While gamification seems to be just a keyword now used to embellish thefts and scams, Bogost argues that other possibilities are open for game design to have an impact in areas such as health, education and work management (Bogost 2015).

Bogost explored this perspective in *How to do Things with Videogames* (2011b), which does not directly refer to gamification but could be read as a follow-up to the

aforementioned articles. Here the reference to Austin's "How to do Things with Words" (1962) is explicit in the title, and so is the attempt to introduce a debate on the potential of video games from a perspective that is possibly more nuanced than the one seen in the context of gamification. This means, according to Bogost, that a better understanding of the potential of digital games entails an expansion of the number of things attainable from them: to be used not only for entertainment or as part of marketing campaigns and self-help applications, as proposed in gamification, but also as objects with an artistic value or as elements of social and political campaigns, and much more. As Austin thought of language, more broadly, to have a performative potential, that is to bring changes in the world it mentions and describes, Bogost believes that games can do things, and enact the player in fairly controllable ways.

In *How to do Things with Videogames*, Bogost lists and analyses some of the possible uses of digital games as these have emerged in recent times, including games with political content, promotional games displaying in-game advertisements, games used for propaganda or activism, and those with artistic purposes. He also discusses, through several short chapters, how games could provoke 'empathy', 'reverence', 'relaxation', 'disinterest' and 'drill', among many other effects. Bogost argues that we can understand the relevance of a medium by looking at the variety of things it does: 'we can think of a medium's explored uses as a spectrum, a possibility space that extends from purely artistic uses at one end […] to purely instrumental uses at the other' (2011c, 3).

Bogost's answer to the debates on the potential of the medium of the video game is to avoid binaries and oppositions between serious and superficial technologies. He proposes instead what he calls an ecological understanding of the medium, inspired by Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman's theory of media. In this view, according to Bogost, media

affect the environment in which they are introduced at a variety of levels, not necessarily to be evaluated in positive or negative terms. Bogost's response to gamification, and more broadly to the idea that video games can be used for achieving specific effects, contests the institutionalisation and appropriation from the side of the marketing context of the alleged transformations of the medium currently happening through the emergence of gamification. However, it does little to debate where such views originate. More importantly, it does not yet tell us anything that could help complicate and possibly surpass the binaries he evokes, and therefore does not propose a way of thinking about video games that could be seen as radically different from what Jane McGonigal, Gabe Zichermann and colleagues evangelise about. The question of what we can do with video games receives a more varied response from Bogost than any of the gamification gurus. However, what persists is the idea that the medium of the video game has a certain impact on its users – an impact that could be more or less predicted and channelled through design.

The problem of this view can be summarised as a question on the role and value attributed to *agency*. When considering the agency of technologies we are looking at the potential of action that these have on ourselves, and that we have on them. Agency tells us that, as much as we use technologies, these have an effect on us, too. The problem with this notion is that it reduces the mutual effects between ourselves and technologies (our engagement) in transitive and hypothetical flows that move from our bodies to the tools we use and vice versa. The transitivity of agency is also reflected in the verbs usually chosen to discuss about it: we hear that we and technologies influence, affect, alter, cause, consume, produce, do something to each other. These are transitive verbs that imply movement towards, from subject to object, while keeping the two distant.

Agency, and the essentially transitive actions that it implies, has been questioned in the work of Martin Heidegger, who offered instead the concept of 'dwelling', in the essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1971). Dwelling, an intransitive verb, is not directed towards an object and should not be taken as the direct consequence, or as the opposite, of the act of building (as, for instance, consumption could be seen in relation to production). Dwelling is rather a way of being, which is understood as becoming rather than as something permanent. It helps us understand ways in which we make sense of the environment not as static points, standing in one place, and separated from the things we look at and use, but as deeply involved in the reality surrounding us.

Tim Ingold explored the work of Heidegger further and put it in relation to the notion of agency (Ingold 2010; 2011). As Ingold would put it, agency is a term often brought into a debate in order to resuscitate the concept of materiality. In this view, objects have a certain material presence that does something to us; they have a certain agency with regard to the surrounding environment. However, Ingold suggests, while thinking in this way we tend to be suffocated by 'the dead hand of materiality' (2011, 28): all that is material stands still, engages with the surrounding environment and is put in motion by a sort of 'magical mind-dust' (2010, 2) that is agency. Agency and materiality are not only forms of abstraction that overshadow the nuanced relations between human beings and the surrounding environment, but, as concepts, they also actively produce this distinction.

We can start seeing that the problem of agency is deeply entwined in the ideas of movement and quantification as presented by discourses on gamification, as these notions tend to immobilize ourselves and the tools surrounding us. Agency assumes an unbridgeable gap between us and the environment. The gap is what effectively prevents our engagement with gamified apps to ever mutate in time and transform into something different. To fill that

gap we need an intuition of a different *kind*, which could transform our engagement with gamification, games and technologies in general, into something radically different.

A different game: from agency to life

Thus, agency appears as the central, not yet investigated issue around which discourses of engagement with games and gamification are framed. The *things to do with* games imply that both we, players, and them, games, have a potential of action, a margin of influence and impact on each other.

My argument is that the problem of agency in relation to gamification has been understood so far in a rather rationalist manner, that is through a perspective where 'the concatenation of causes and consequences […] does not trigger any dramatic effect, because, precisely […] the consequences are *already there* in the cause: no suspense to expect, no sudden transformation, no metamorphosis, no ambiguity. Time flows from *past to present*' (Latour 2014, 11). NikeFuel, for instance, is a system that is designed to receive and record already predicted signals; it rewards precise events that are already expected by the simulation. The runner/player of NikeFuel is encouraged to comply with a frame of rules that works as a regulatory frame, where only specific events are expected, saved, calculated and evaluated. Through this practice of compliance, the runner/player of NikeFuel is normalised, and regulates him or herself in order to maintain and progress in a process of constant self-normalisation and discipline (Foucault 1977; Whitson 2015).

Latour notes that agents have meaning because of their acting, which also means that 'for all agents, acting means having their existence, their subsistence, come *from the future to the present*' (2014, 13). In what he names the 'scientific world view', instead, Latour argues

that ‘nothing happens any more since the agent is supposed to be “simply caused” by its predecessor’ (14). What does this lack of events amount to? Agency becomes a rather strangling perspective on the world surrounding us. Actors are seen as abstracted from the environment and acting on the nearby objects through a cause-effect relation, one in which temporality is linear, irreversible, and as spatialised and homogenous as the actions that happen through it.

For NikeFuel to achieve a felicitous engagement with its user, we have to imagine that the two formed objects that participate in the relationship (the user and the wristband) can influence each other by proximity. For this event to happen through the agency of the two participating actors, both sides need to be put in motion by a force which is neither easy to define, nor to grasp intellectually.

To bypass the dead-end of agency, Tim Ingold proposes to rethink how we participate in the environment around us. An essential step for doing this is to think less about objects, and more about *things*. Ingold argues that the distinction between objects and things can be crucial when evaluating what is at stake in the debates around agency and, as I will argue, it could prove useful when evaluating gamification. He draws on Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Thing” (1971b) and comments:

> The object stands before us as a *fait accompli*, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very ‘overagainstness’ in relation to the setting in which it is placed (Heidegger 1971b, 167). The thing, by contrast, is a ‘going on’, or better, a place where several goings on become entwined. To observe a thing is not to be locked out but to be invited in to the gathering. (Ingold 2010, 4)

Ingold follows from this that things are in constant flow, constantly mutating and in contact with each other through their surfaces. Such a process of continuous mutation is intended as a contrast with the notion of agency. According to Ingold, agency acts as a solution to resuscitate the otherwise 'dead' objects by giving them a sort of 'sprinkle' of life. While imagining the environment to be populated by objects suggests the image of an excavated world, similar to a piece of Swiss cheese (2011, 24), Ingold argues, things instead fill the environment and are entangled with one another, in 'a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement' (2010, 4).

The perspective offered by Ingold is more than an attempt to avoid a sort of *horror vacui* of an environment where objects are cut and surrounded by an empty space. There is still, for Ingold, the need to make sense of our own participations, as things ourselves, participating in the world. For this reason, Ingold brings focus to the *life* of things. He writes: 'In effect, to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency' (2010, 7). Life is a crucial concept here for Ingold, and he explicitly mentions Bergson and his *Creative Evolution* as one of the major influences on his work (2010, 13). From Bergson, Ingold develops the notion of life as movement and duration. To be alive, Ingold argues, means to participate in the generative fluxes and currents of a world of materials, and join in their transformation. This participation is an act of re-telling of the flows, mixtures and mutations of the materials surrounding ourselves.

Conclusion: feeling kinship with video games

How can my engagement with NikeFuel be retold, then? How could it possibly be transformed into something more *lively*? How can the idea of living with video games

possibly surpass the problems associated with the static understanding of engagement that gamification gurus allegedly propose? Ingold suggests that life is a process of involvement, of tying together the different elements and materials that surround us. It also requires that we acknowledge both intellectually and intuitively how different settings make different relations and entities emerge. To quote Donna Haraway, it could then be said that, if the world is made of connections, 'it matters which connections are made and unmade' (1991). The connections I have been making (and unmaking) so far with NikeFuel give the impression that our engagement could not bring to any new form of life, that is, to a movement which could be different in kind and quality from the previous. The gadget itself is, after all, sold with the promise of providing a safe and certain knowledge about the quantification of movement, and not one which can ever be unsettled.

In the end I have decided to break up with NikeFuel: our relationship, which was supposed to be since its very beginning focussed around movement, was not really going anywhere. I do not know yet what our engagement will become, and I might as well continue having contradictory standpoints on the role which should be played by NikeFuel in my life (should I use it occasionally? Should I re-sell it? Keep it in a drawer?). I do not know what to do with it, not yet. However, uncertainty could open to new possibilities: it is only through uncertainty and by means of contradictions that an otherwise homogenous engagement might become something else.

In the conclusion, I propose that we think of our relationships with gamification, and more broadly with our quantified selves, not in terms of engagement but in terms of *kinship*, as intended by Donna Haraway (2004; 2015). Following Haraway, kinship is open to uncertainty and to the possibility that relations might change, and might also end. Engagement, at least as it is understood by the gamification gurus, implies instead that time

and space are homogenous and predictable. What could be a gamification that welcomes uncertain and catastrophic events, which happen in time and cannot be undone? Could an experience be gamified, so that to allow the emergence of 'unstable and permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (Haraway 1991, 154)? Our ways of understanding gamification could also be seen as interventions, in the relationships between us and video games, which are personal, intuitive, timely and unique. At least, such approach would contrast with the idea that gamification can improve our lives by an absolute and transparent knowledge of our bodies and minds: knowledge itself would become ironically unsettled, by introducing into our engagement the possibility of its own mutation. Becoming kin with the games we play will introduce events in our gamified lives, and bring to partial and strategic knowledge about ourselves and the games we play *with*.

Accidentally, this might also become a suggestion for those involved in the design and development of gamified apps and services. The expected engagement between users and games could be imagined as more similar to that of a romantic relationship, where both sides might change and influence each other radically, in ways that cannot be reversed. Can gamification also work while considering the mutations that happen in time, opening to movements of different kinds, and allowing uncertainty about what will happen in the future? That would be a different, more interesting in my opinion, and surely much more fun way of playing with our (quantified) selves.

Gamification could also be rethought as a different way of interpreting the title of Bogost's text *How to do Things with Videogames*. "With" could be re-thought as "in company of", "together with", rather than "by using" video games: dwelling in video games, and living with them, rather than using them for a specific purpose. Gamified apps can only remain static as long as we think of them as tools, but these might still be interesting

companions to do things together with. Gamification, intended as the development of a relation of kinship with a video game, would force users to re-world and re-tell their own engagement and presence in the gamified environment, and re-draw the boundaries continuously, without knowing what could happen next.

In the next chapter I will be looking at how relations of kinship between humans and video games have been narrated by a certain number of actors who have recently been defined by specialists and gamers as independent game producers. In these contexts, being independent means being responsible for the conception, development and marketing of a video game. However, the definition of what independence really means, in video game culture, is disputed, and as I will argue the dispute is part and parcel of that destabilising uncertainty which makes these new forms of kinship significant. Independent video games have been at the centre of festivals, conferences and workshops, and have influenced new business models and modes of thinking about authorship in digital gaming for more than one decade. In the discourses surrounding this phenomenon there seems to be a certain difficulty in explaining how the game developer should relate to his or her own work, and how making video games contributes to the identity of the developer. Independent developers are invited almost constantly to discuss what forms of relations are going on when making, playing and thinking of a video game – and not just any video game, but one which is *their own*.

Chapter 2

Independent Gaming: Take Care of Your Own Video Game

In the last decade new discourses have been emerging that re-defined the affective relationship between video games and their developers. In these discourses, replicated mostly by industry experts, journalists and gamers, and presented at conventions and conferences on gaming, the game designer has been re-evaluated as an *author*, that is, as someone who is the sole responsible for the conception, development and release of a video game. The justification for the appraisal of this new figure has often been centred on technological change. New development tools such as Twine, the RPG Maker and the now dismissed Microsoft's XNA have been seen as responsible for facilitating the production of games. Thanks to these freely available tools, we have been told that an individual could decide to give up a job in the industry and become a video game author, or learn from scratch how to make a game. In 2015 the companies behind the most commonly used development tools in the industry, Unity and the Unreal Engine, decided to follow up the trend and release their software for free, asking to be paid only in case the user reaches a certain amount of earnings. Allegedly, anyone now can download the same tools used by the largest video game companies, and use them to make and release a digital game.

Indeed, the appearance of new forms of production of video games and new modes of organisation of the development cycle are not only due to the release of free software packages. Discourses from the creative industries, where the individual is now seen as an

entrepreneur in the fashion, cinema or music industries, have provided a background from where to frame the idea of the game author. The video game industry has generally been conforming, since its early years, to patterns of production and publishing established in other cultural and creative industries (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 358-362). The emergence of individual developers and small companies similarly appears to replicate what already happened in other sectors.

This change in the understanding of the relation between a video game producer and his or her video game product is often narrated in terms of *independence*. Many creative industries (film, music, fashion and so on), where the previous conditions of work allowed only large companies to participate, are now welcoming the presence of independent individuals, or independent groups, who work in the field part or full time. Video game culture has seen a similar acceptance of the alleged benefits of becoming independent producers. In the context of video game culture, independence generally refers to the possibility of financing, developing and releasing a video game independently of a mainstream publisher, that is, by marking the difference between oneself, or a relatively close group one belongs to, and the broader digital entertainment industry. Such a new form of self-organisation is expected to bring benefits to whoever decides to work outside of the mainstream industry. The developer can in fact work at his or her own pace while experimenting with new forms of design, controlling the production process from beginning to end and potentially receiving, on top of personal satisfaction, all revenues from sales or in-game advertising. In this view independence is not only the result of a changing technological paradigm but also of a personal research for self-expression, or for a more remunerative business model.

However, the liberating effects of independence are often disputed. Mainstream publishers have quickly managed to appropriate some of the channels of digital distribution of those games, offering game producers visibility on these spaces and, consequently, higher revenues. This has reintroduced, for many independents, relations of power and control that were already in place in the previous, non-independent condition of work. Valve's Steam online network is, for many, the only place where it is reasonably possible to reach a significant audience. However, this is a controlled space, owned by one of the largest video game publishers, which takes around 30% of the total revenues for offering visibility to independent game makers.

Nowadays, independence appears to mean very different things to those who profess to be part of it. For many game developers who attempt to receive attention and visibility on distribution channels controlled by new or pre-existing publishers, independence appears as a different way of organising work, taking sole responsibility for a larger and more diverse number of issues (game concepts, programming, storyline, budgets and so on) that would instead be assigned to specialised personnel in a non-independent production. In this understanding, independence appears as a new mode of work management (Martin and Deuze 2009). For others, independence mostly constitutes the opportunity to express oneself outside the logic of the market, releasing games for free and claiming a larger degree of freedom in the choice of content and style in a game.

The variety of independent relationships between game developers and their games has been narrated, particularly in recent years, also in its contradictions and complexities. The reports by the industry expert Brendan Sinclair on GameIndustry.biz (a website for news and trends on the business side of gaming) are significantly putting into the spotlight the disappointments and frustrations of those who decided to become independents. On March

31, 2016 an exhaustive interview with indie designer Joshua Boggs shows how the search for independence can sometimes be driven by an unhealthy and self-destructive vanity. Boggs recalls how the myth of the author led him to conflicts with his own team, and how the fear of disappointing himself and those who supported his work brought him to suffer from periods of severe anxiety. As he argues in the interview, the constant attention received was for him like a drug, and he always needed more to keep it going. The spiral was fuelled by being at the front of the project, connected to his own game both intimately and publicly: '[…] the independent scene, it's always names and faces. The success of your game is often tied to you as a person, so what we end up doing is putting all our self-worth in it' (Sinclair 2016a). In another interview with Tim Dawson, developer for the indie game Assault Android Cactus, Sinclair highlights the developer's feelings of inadequacy and the fear of not being good enough to accomplish what he promised to those who backed the project on Kickstarter. The relationship with the game is presented as paranoid and conflicting, fuelled by fear of not receiving the necessary attention to make his work successful, or simply not delivering what he promised to himself and to the players (Sinclair 2016b).

Feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, along with accomplishment and self-fulfilment, all seem to appear around a mesh of diverse and contradictory discourses where the relationship with one's own video game is put at the centre. While critics of this concept currently claim that being independent might not mean anything in particular nowadays, precisely because of the large variety of very inconsistent practices and games labelled as such, I believe and propose in this chapter that the notion could still be of use in video game culture. As an academic and gamer, I believe the novelty of the concept is not to be dismissed too quickly as it might still generate valuable creative interventions. I am not referring to

specific modes of game design but rather to new questions within the culture of game development that could help destabilise pre-existing notions of production and consumption.

While many have tried to define what independence actually means (Lipkin 2013) or whether independent games have a defining style that makes them unique (Juul 2014), in this chapter I would like to offer a slightly different perspective by looking at the difficulty per se of such a definition. I argue that independence can be seen as a repressive and productive concept at the same time, which forces game developers to confront their own definition and position in relation to their own game and to other forms of independence and non-independence. As I will discuss in what follows, the need to answer this question performs a double function. On the one hand, it reduces the possibilities of what should count as independent, putting boundaries around this notion so as to include and exclude specific practices. On the other, it produces the notion of independence and the idea of the independent game developer, giving it a clearer set of characteristic duties and responsibilities. However, it is through the irremediable impossibility of defining what independence finally means, for anyone and at any one point, that the concept provides interesting grounds for the introduction of a novel question on the *ethics* of gaming. Indeed, at stake in these issues there is much more than the understanding of a phenomenon of video game culture: the ways in which independence is currently being discussed in this field could tell us something about how independence is more broadly interpreted as a political concept. Moreover, the use of independence to define the relations between different actors and the outcome of their work can shed light on how the relation with media and technologies is also interpreted by the actors involved. We can begin answering this question by looking at the conflicts between the independents and the so-called professional industry, where those who are not-independent allegedly work and fulfil their lives.

Trying not to be professional

A part for a few accounts that look at the discontents of the emergence of independent forms of game production, the phenomenon is most often narrated through a celebratory tone. In most cases the perspective is on the relation between the new independent scene and the world of professional, institutionalised game production. This is, for example, how independent gaming is described in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012) by James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot. In this documentary, well received by critics and awarded the prize for best World Cinema Documentary Editing at the 2012 edition of the Sundance Film Festival, the directors interview four of the most celebrated independent developers: Jonathan Blow, author of the game *Braid* (2008); Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes, authors of *Super Meat Boy* (2010); and Phil Fish, author of *Fez* (2012). The directors celebrate, through their interviews, the changes wrought by independent gaming and, in particular, the emotional attachment that independents have to their games. This attachment, according to the documentary, has begun to diminish in the most recent major productions, where much larger budgets and numbers of developers are now required. In mainstream productions, according to this narrative, it is necessary to cover the initial input by trying to appeal to an overly broad audience. Meanwhile, the production process is broken down into undistinguished, mechanical tasks. In the same documentary we also see that mainstream productions are allegedly too polished and lacking in personality. Independent games represent, in the narrative replicated by those interviewed by Swirsky and Pajot, a sort of new opportunity where game designers are now finally free to express themselves as authors of their own work. In the words of independent designer Jonathan Blow:

> […] part of it is trying not to be professional. A lot of people come into indie games trying to be like a big company. What those game companies do is create highly polished things that serve as large as an audience as possible. The way that you do that is by filing off all the bumps on something. If there is a sharp corner you make sure it is not going to hurt anybody if they bump into it or whatever. That creation of this highly glossy commercial product is the opposite of making something personal. (*Indie Game: The Movie* 2012)

However, there are also different and co-existing interpretations of how independence relates to the mainstream game industry. Some game designers define themselves as radical independents functioning in an antagonistic relationship not only with the video game industry but also with the more famous indies popularised by game conventions, magazines and documentaries, such as Swirsky and Pajot's. According to these other independents, designers such as those interviewed in *Indie Game: The Movie* represent a sort of polished version of independence as they tend to replicate the same system of production and publishing as that embraced by mainstream productions, only on a smaller scale.

An example of this understanding of independence can be seen in the collective Molleindustria, who define their works on their website as 'radical games against the tyranny of entertainment' (Molleindustria 2016). Molleindustria conceive game design as a political practice for activism and social critique. Their games are not commercially released and are available for free on their website. Molleindustria's games usually articulate a political standpoint. Examples of this are *McDonald's Videogame* (2006), a game about the unsustainable business of food corporations, *Oiligarchy* (2008), a critique of the exploitation of natural resources, *Operation: Pedopriest* (2007), about the Vatican sex scandal, and *Unmanned* (2012), a game about the life of a drone pilot in the American army.

Moreover, the founder and main spokesperson of the group, Paolo Pedercini, has publicly expressed his view on independent gaming on many occasions. In a talk at the game conference IndieCade, Pedercini argued that independent designers can never consider themselves to be properly autonomous. The re-appropriation of independent productions operated by some of the major video game publishers undermines, according to Pedercini, the liberation of the video game developers. Pedercini further suggests that we need to reconsider how best to pursue independence, although never achievable in its purest form, and how different forms of independence could (and in fact do) co-exist and should be supported. As he put it himself at the 2012 IndieCade conference:

> There are a lot of people these days trying to come up with new definitions of independent development that take into account the various degrees of autonomy from platform owners and hardware manufacturers; the co-optation of styles, keywords and modes that used to be part of the 'indie' identity; and the mainstream acceptance and structural expansion of the most successful independent developers. (Pedercini 2012: online)

He suggests in the same speech that we consider independence as a spectrum whose extremes are, at one end, a sort of unreachable utopian autarchy and, at its opposite, a completely de-humanised activity where the worker does what he or she is told, with no emotional involvement in the final outcome. Pedercini argues that the utopian idea of complete independence can never be fully achieved but can nonetheless frame the practice of those game designers who aim to reach it.

In fact, major publishers have attempted to appropriate independent productions in recent years, further complicating the debate on what should count as independence. The

games presented in *Indie Game: The Movie*, as well as many of the most popular independent games and the movie itself, are on sale on the online markets of game publishers Valve and Microsoft, which are far from being grassroots companies or at the margins of the game industry. These two game publishers have promoted in recent years the indie channels of their online platforms for digital distribution (respectively, Steam and Xbox Live). The presence of these distributors has shaped a sort of alternative video game industry, which is parallel to the mainstream one. Individual, or small groups of, game developers design and promote video games in the hope of being offered the possibility of featuring on the indie channels of Valve or Microsoft, where they are sold next to the major productions of the game industry. Conceding part of the revenue is considered acceptable by these developers, who are often confronted with an increasing number of small-scale competitors and with the associated difficulties of competing against them in an open online market. Pedercini's argument appears to be a reasonable description of some of the current developments of the independent sector: the emerging practice of substituting the previous employers with new gatekeepers such as Valve and Microsoft can be seen to undermine some of the claims of independence. Furthermore, the new gatekeepers have a determining power with regard to which games will reach a sufficient audience and therefore be able to cover the initial investment and hence finance future projects.

However, the new conditions of precariousness do not seem to affect adversely the enthusiastic claims in favour of independent gaming. The documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* begins by showing the developer Tommy Refenes looking desperate in front of the homepage of Microsoft's XBox Live because it is not displaying his most recent game, as had been agreed with the publisher. Despite this mistake by Microsoft being described by the designer as a matter of life and death for his independent career, it does not hinder, in the rest

of the documentary, the celebration of independent gaming as a form of liberation for video game developers.

More recent debates within gamer communities have started to argue that, maybe, the label independent should be replaced with a more specific denomination. Tom McShea, in the video game web magazine *Gamespot*, has argued in a popular article that 'indie has become a term as nebulous as it is ubiquitous. […] It's time we put these categorisations to rest' (McShea 2014). Several days later on the same website, Alex Newhouse replied with an article claiming instead that we should not 'throw "indie" away just yet', as it is the only word we have to designate games in which the personalities of the authors 'shine through' (Newhouse 2014). In fact, the debate on the real meaning of independence in the context of video game culture has been parallel to the emergence of autonomous forms of video game development. In 2002, game designer and researcher Eric Zimmerman was already questioning whether truly independent games really exist (Zimmerman 2002). In any case, the lack of an agreed definition does not slow down the practitioners of independent gaming and the emergence of festivals, incubators for new companies, articles and awards centred on this phenomenon. Quite the opposite. The phenomenon is increasing in size and at the centre is the establishment of several institutions based around the production of independent video games.

I believe that it is precisely this undefined condition that stimulates the need to produce definitions of the concept of independence. The latter are often self-definitions, produced by game developers as they try to position themselves in relation to the existent independent scene. Furthermore, the re-appropriation of the indie label by the mainstream industry highlights the difficulty of understanding what a radical outside to the discourses of independence could be: to what extent is it possible to talk about such acts as forms of

appropriation or re-appropriation rather than seeing them as forms of the actual production of independence?

Independent game production appears to be stuck in this moment of negotiation where the main actors involved, by trying 'not to be professional', as Blow put it, are constantly brought to define what being professional means, and what could be a *good* way of *not* being that. Indeed, many of these modalities of not being professional might now be the standard, or the new professional, as the use of crowdfunding, micropayments, and online distribution are now common practice for productions of any magnitude. However, it is precisely because these negotiations between the independent territory and the non-independent, or professional, might be the new normal, that it is important to question where they might take us.

Too short a blanket - The productive potential of independence

Independence may appear in video game culture as a blanket that is too short: pulling it in one direction may reveal a gap in the other, leaving some self-professed independents in the cold. However, it is also as scarce as it is necessary. Independence is not only a label to put on oneself but is also productive of that very same notion of the self.

Through the work of Michel Foucault (1977; 1978; 1980, 78-108)[6] I intend to consider independence as a productive force, precisely because of its floating condition.

[6] The relation between power and knowledge is indeed central in the work of Michel Foucault, and will be addressed in the rest of this chapter through a variety of sources. In particular, the notion is well explained and summarised in the lecture he gave on 14 January 1976 at the College de France, collected in the text *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (1980).

Foucault, in his largely influential production, theorised that language is now just descriptive of reality but constitutive of it, and also of the very subjects of discourse. To summarise a large theoretical work in a few words, it could be said that according to Foucault when we talk about the world surrounding us we not only give it a structure, but also frame our position within it and those of the others. From his perspective, talking about independence in video game culture, specifically by saying things that are considered to be true about it, brings the very concept about. Consequently, the position of the independent developer is also framed within those discourses, as an imagined subject who embodies the values of independence. For the game developer who has decided to make and release his or her own game, the notion becomes a driving force to differentiate him- or herself and understand what it is that makes that product personal and unique from the undifferentiated outside of independence.

From this perspective independence becomes an enticement to a discourse of self-definition, a regulatory frame that produces the need to define and locate oneself in relation to this continuum. In Foucauldian terms, independence could be seen as a concept around which one organises a practice of care of the self. As Foucault argues: 'the care of oneself is a sort of thorn which must be stuck in men's flesh, driven into their existence, and which is a principle of restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life' (2005, 8). The techniques of knowledge of the self, analysed by Foucault in with respect to Greek and Latin times and later in with respect to Christian and contemporary culture, construct the possibility of arriving at and articulating the truth about oneself. The power of these discourses consists in their production of the individual, by fixating and naming the things that the individual has or has not done, and should or should not do. From this perspective the discursive articulation of independence and non-independence can be seen as immediately

productive of discourses and performances, and the productivity of such binary lies in the latter's unresolvable condition. As there is no solution to the problem of defining what becoming independent means, there is no end to the potential productivity of this concept and no final resolution to the quest for independence (as much as in the Foucauldian understanding of the care of the self, the *epimeleia heautou*, there is no method to test when complete self-sufficiency is reached, or when sanctity is achieved).

The indie channels on Steam and Xbox Live, or the sponsoring of independent festivals by mainstream companies can be seen as producing in their own turn further definitions of what independence is rather than being just belated attempts to exploit a pre-existing phenomenon. This process of moving and contesting the boundaries of independence is, I suggest, what constitutes independent gaming: it produces and incites verbal performances; it facilitates the production of games, events, articles and festivals, as well as forms of hospitality (such as inviting gamers to play for free or inviting designers to distribute their games through dedicated online channels), which all contribute to defining who and what is included in the independent territory.

Thus, we can look at the discursive performances where the definition of independence is brought about, and when its boundary is drawn to separate it from the alleged other side of the non-independent territory.

The outside of independence

Independent game developers often discuss, or are brought to discuss during public interviews, about what it is that makes them different from the conventional, mainstream industry. Finding this element of difference is one of the discursive strategies used in order to

construct their own individualisation. For example, independent developer Jonatan Söderström, also known as Cactus, became particularly well known in the independent games community for his ability to design and release a video game in no more than a couple of days. He is celebrated by the likes of the Independent Games Festival, where he was nominated in 2008 (Excellence in Visual Arts and Excellence in Audio with the game *Clean Asia!*) and won in 2010 (Nuovo Award with the game *Tuning*). When he received the Nuovo Award, given in the category of original visual design, he remained silent on the stage for some time, sipped some water, and finally thanked 'Jesus [and God] for the inspiration to make this game'.[7] With this intentionally irreverent presentation, Cactus provided an anticlimactic moment of bathos that clashed with the declamatory style of the award ceremony as a whole. Cactus marks his distance not only from the so-called mainstream but also from other independent designers such as Jonathan Blow, who instead appear as much more conformist in their attitudes to the established industry. Cactus marks his own difference through a variety of actions. His refusal to work for a stable company or to publish his games anywhere other than on his own website led to him being viewed as a representative of the advocates of pure indie gaming. Not coincidentally, when Cactus worked on his first commercially released game, *Hotline Miami* (2012), developed in collaboration with Dennis Wedin, he was asked to explain and rationalise the decision. In an interview published a few weeks before the release of the game, he claims that someone suggested to contact publisher Digital Devolver after seeing the demo, and that working for a commercially released game pushed him to 'try to be a bit more *polished*' (Procter 2012) – the same word used by Jonathan Blow to define professionally produced video games.

[7] The award ceremony and Cactus's speech can be seen on YouTube, "IGF Awards 2010 Part 2/2", min. 4'00''-5'58'', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDVZg9kZXEY [Last accessed July 22, 2016]

Claiming an irreducible particularism evokes a form of purity, which places Cactus in a different territory, not reducible to the rules of the universal one. However, the risk of claiming an absolute difference and particularism, is to relegate oneself to the periphery – a sort of self-ghettoization. This way of presenting oneself is also representative of an ethos, a way of working and living, in which every action (including the games produced) must somehow communicate a difference from the standards of the industry and from what is expected from a video game. Through the creation of its own particularism, Cactus also claims a radical separation, presenting himself and his video games as incompatible with the outside of his own limited territory.

The production of the independent territory happens through the production of video games as much as with words, and it involves political statements that regard the place occupied in the world by the independent developer. Thus, these acts of self-definition can also be interpreted from the standpoint of political theory. Ernesto Laclau looked at how emancipation is typically defined through a binary opposition between universalism and particularism (1996). However, claims of belonging to a particular and emancipated group deny the presence of connections and relations between groups. Each particular group necessarily belongs, at the same time, to the universal sphere that they otherwise neglect.

Laclau argues, while analysing the concept of apartheid, that 'if the oppressed is defined by its difference from the oppressor, such a difference is an essential component of the identity of the oppressed' (1996, 29). The problem with radical separation is not really the act of separation per se, but how such act effectively creates the other, the opposite side to be separated from. I propose that the issue to be considered here is what sort of outside is formulated in shaping these radically independent identities. Laclau continues: '[the oppressed] cannot assert its identity without asserting that of the oppressor as well' (29).

Oppression is not necessarily a physical coercion but it is, at the same time, a limiting power and, in Foucauldian terms, always already and necessarily productive. What comes to be produced is not only the independent territory but also its outside, which often appears as a uniform coercive force. That is, an undifferentiated side, where the economic, social, cultural and political aspects involved in the production of a video game are predictable and imposed on the workers.

When Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini argues that independence should be understood as a spectrum of possibilities, his assumption that 'the code monkey working on slot machines for Zynga'[8] would be the 'least independent developer' (Pedercini 2012) highlights that there is still a structural frame in this discourse that assumes the existence of the outside of independence, a supposedly non-independent condition, that we should avoid in preference for more autonomous forms of game production. Even when the number of potential conditions of non-independence are multiplied and acknowledged by Pedercini to be of different kinds and degrees, his argument still suggests a distinction between what is independent and what is not. Similarly, Cactus effectively creates the idea of a uniform otherness, the homogenous video game culture from which he claims to be different and independent. By doing so, independence is again defined by creating its own opposite.

A further development of this approach, I argue, is to consider instead the practices of production of video games as involving a multiplicity of particular approaches, none of them single-handedly constituting the independent and non-independent contexts. Rather, each is

[8] Zynga is one of the largest video game companies to become popular thanks to products developed for social networks such as Facebook. Zynga's games are typically produced for the largest possible audience, and are used in the context of Perdercini's talk as synonymous for games produced with no particular imagination or attention to originality.

delineating, in its own way, an element of difference. This approach, however, comes at the cost of re-analysing not only independence as a plurality of forms but also non-independence in its multiple variations. In other words, it would entail a redefinition of the very distinction between the two sides as a multiplicity of different practices of production, not completely consistent or equal to each other but all mutually defining the other through a process of self-differentiation. Thus, we need to look at again not only the particularism and uniqueness evoked by many independent developers in regards to their own practice, but also the universalism that is assumed to belong to the *others* of these discourses of self-definition. Both particularisms and universalisms need to be unpacked in their apparent unity.

As Laura Zerilli points out, reflecting on Laclau's political theory: '[…] universalism is not One: it is not a pre-existing something (essence or form) to which individuals accede but, rather, the fragile, shifting, and always incomplete achievement of political action; it is not the container of a presence but the placeholder of an absence, not a substantive content but an empty place' (2006, 102). For instance, Molleindustria's view does not suggest the presence of a further outside in the continuum between independence and non-independence. In his view each game developer is potentially involved in this continuum, which means that anyone who is involved in the production of a video game could be assessed according to his or her degree of independence (and non-independence). However, in this view the definition of where one is on the continuum precedes the understanding of how the subject is in relation with the 'fragile', universal other. I believe that the order should be reversed: the relation with the other is at the foundation of the very possibility of defining oneself as (more or less) independent, and such relation precedes the possibility of a self-definition. Thus, I argue, independence should be understood as a concept which implies its own opposite, its own

outside: a shifting and incomplete form of *otherness* to take into account, and which pre-exists the claim of independence.

It has often been argued that independent gaming recalls previous forms of video game production, such as the phenomenon of the bedroom coders, who were programming video games in the 1980s and 1990s individually or in small teams, and re-selling their work to major publishers when completed. However, we can see here that a difference is starting to emerge, one that makes in fact the contemporary trend of independent production rather unique and different from other similar forms of game development. The difference consists in how the independent developer is brought to explain, define and justify his or her independence, and how, while doing so, is also shaping the image of a Universal-other. But that universal is not singular: it is composed of people, games and practices of production that can sometimes be thought of as too professional and "polished" to be indie, and in some other circumstances these could instead be re-evaluated and included in a broader definition of independence.

The drawing of these shifting boundaries between the individual singular and the Universal-other appears often as a regulated practice, made of workshops and incubators where game developers are trained on how to think of themselves as independents, and on how to draw the boundary. The construction of independent game developers as individualised subjects takes place in workshops, meetings, conferences and incubators where game designers are instructed on how to become independent. The abundance of these almost educational contexts offers occasions to look at how precisely the constitution of a boundary between the first person and the others is solicited, curated and evaluated, and with what consequences.

Independence as regulated practice

Recent years have seen the rise of several contexts where presentations, workshops and meetings are organised to provide guidelines and suggestions to video game developers who want to be independent. On these occasions an expert or consultant usually provides instructional material on how to express oneself in a personal and unique form through a video game. This process involves advertising, communication with the press, direct contact with the audience through social networks, management of intellectual properties, relations with online distributors, and more issues focused on the economic sustainability of independent companies. These services satisfy the demand, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, to overcome the increasing competition among developers in the independent sector, where introducing a new product is relatively easy in economic terms. However, I believe there is a more pressing issue at stake here for the developers, apart from gaining the necessary visibility to sell a video game product. This sort of training focuses not only on how to market an independent video game but also on how to make sure it can belong to the category of independent.

What comes to be associated with independence is often a series of provisions and limitations on which actions are to be performed in order for a game designer to become independent. These often take the form of operational procedures, a series of dos and don'ts, lists and instructions. This process of becoming independent therefore appears to include not only verbal performances but also certain practical and operational behaviours. Independence comes to stimulate a need or desire (or probably a need to desire – the necessity of feeling

attracted) to be in control of one's own production. This solicitation also produces specific contexts where the drive to become independent is seen as an operation that can be instructed.

As I will soon discuss in relation to Execution Labs and the Indie Dev Day at the Develop convention, this and other similar institutions provide a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1998) that is grounded in the idea that game designers have an identity to express in their video games. Expressing one's own self is what a designer should desire, in this narrative. However, in order to be successful the desire might need to be instructed trough specific techniques. The individual plays a significant role in these narratives of independent gaming, as an actor who brings an element of their own personality to the final product. More importantly, in these examples the relation between producer and product comes to constitute the object of a form of knowledge. Some of the institutionalised practices that are now emerging in independent gaming are operating at both a conceptual and a practical level to create an institutionalised path to becoming independent. Such practices therefore come to constitute a further articulation of a more general self-regulatory practice, where the emergence of a different market and production process of video games materialises and is grounded in the constitution of individual identities, and of institutions where one can learn how to become this kind of independent individual.

The Execution Labs project, founded in Montreal, Canada, in 2012 and begun in January 2013, is one of the latest and major examples. Execution Labs proposes itself as an institution that knows how to channel ambition and personal motivation in the right direction and towards independence. In this narrative, creativity has to be regulated in order to become productive and marketable, and once this process is completed independence is supposedly achieved. The forms of mentoring and consultancy that Execution Labs offers are therefore oriented towards the regulation of the self, making a business out of the capacity to

communicate personal creativity through a video game. The main service offered by Execution Labs is assistance in regulating the constitution of a particularism, a difference from the universal context, which the independent subject then has to market to the community of video game players.

The production of the independent subject appears quite explicitly in some of the keynotes and presentations for aspiring independent developers. Eric Zimmerman has offered his own method to become a *good* independent developer when presenting at several institutions (including the aforementioned Execution Labs) for game designers and industry practitioners. At IndieCade 2012 he gave a presentation on 'being a game designer: principles for a thoughtful practice' (IndieCade 2012). Zimmerman introduces his lecture thus:

> Most talks on games focus on how to make a better product -- a more successful game. This session frames what game designers do in a different way. I want to ask the question: What does it mean to be a good game designer? […] Is it possible to think about game design as a way or mode of being? […] This is not meant as a "theoretical" talk that focuses on abstract design concepts, but is intended as more of a personal meditation. Rather than thinking about how to make great games, and how those games can transform our players' lives, I'd like to ask how it is that making games can transform their designers. (IndieCade 2012)

Such practice of transformation of the self is regulated through a process of knowledge, where the developer must learn to be honest about what the game truly is, and understand what he or she truly wants.

In Europe similar events take place in Scandinavian countries and in the United Kingdom. One of the most prominent events for independent game designers is the Indie Dev

Day, which takes place in Brighton, UK, during the Develop conference, addressed to the mainstream industry. On July 11, 2012, independent designer Michael Movel from game company Fat Pebble delivered a presentation addressed to independent developers. Interestingly, his case is particularly complicated because of an agreement with game publisher Zynga, one of the biggest publishers for online video games addressed to a casual audience. Despite this agreement, Movel explains how and why his work should be considered independent. According to Movel, an indie developer is someone who creates his or her own game, has creative control and cares about the quality of the final product. Movel argues that the absence of a marketing department is one of the three most important "indie power-ups", he says, the other two being the absence of any restraint ("you are free to push the boundaries, you don't have to make another First-Person Shooter or strategy game" Movel 2012) and individual passion, which contributes to the differentiation of each product. The absence of a marketing department, in particular, is also one of the greatest challenges, according to Movel. However, in his specific case, Zynga had stepped in during the production process to curate the marketing of the game. Movel points out that, despite the intervention of a publisher, he has full creative control and is therefore to be considered independent.

Movel then explains how, precisely, a video game should be marketed, presenting it as the result of a personal, almost intimate process. Part of the marketing takes place on social networks such as Twitter, where the independent designer is expected to present the game and narrate the production process itself, engaging in discussions with the potential players (and buyers) of the game. These comments are supposed to show the developer at work, while struggling to reach the final stages of the production process and communicating the personal fatigue of taking care of the whole process on one's own.

This process is regulated through a precise technique, where the number of tweets to deliver each day, the press releases and the preview videos are predetermined. They have to be consistent and engage the audience. The process is so precise that it can be put in the hands of a professional company, as happened to Movel with Zynga. Such a precise communication, and the possibility to outsource it to a separate company, does not undermine, according to Movel, the claims of freedom and self-expression often associated in the context of video game culture with independence. What is communicated is still a very personal and individual perspective, a passionate understanding of game design, despite this communication being strongly calculated, almost numbered.

Independent gaming, in this more recent development that I have introduced here, involves the emergence of practical organisational techniques, such as application forms, workshops and incubators. This way of approaching the notion of independence is not bringing us to an explicit understanding of what independence is but it is providing explanations of how to be independent, and where independence should be negotiated. On these occasions the process of becoming independent is transformed into the object of knowledge. Independence here becomes a *methodology* for the creation of difference and particularity.

The question I would like to pose, in the conclusions, is how such a methodology could be evaluated not just in terms of its effectiveness in guaranteeing autonomy to a game developer. I would like to question the possibility of introducing different criteria for deciding when independence is also what we might term a *good* independence (as Zimmerman similarly suggested). Incubators and workshops train game developers on how to do well in terms of the economic feasibility of their projects, the content and marketing of their work as independent. But how else can the practice of taking care of one's own video

game become, in the context of video game culture, a *good methodology*? What other standards could be introduced in deciding how to be a good independent? The question is not largely dissimilar to what festivals, incubators and workshops ask themselves: on these occasions there is an evaluation on how good a video game is, and whether the developer can truly fit in the category of the independents. However, if one has to take *ethically* the question of what good independence consists of, other criteria for its evaluation will have to be introduced, a part from the economic and maybe artistic ones.

In the final part of this chapter I will propose that independence might also become an ethical practice, precisely because of its undetermined condition and of its necessity to include a confrontation with a form of otherness, whether the rest of the video game industry or the other independent developers.

Conclusion: independence as ethics

Independent game design introduces novel questions around the production of video games. Developers do not just produce a video game, but also produce themselves: their own definition and difference from the others. This practice represents a re-evaluation of the practice of game development seen as necessarily entwined with a reflection on one's own presence in the world. What is involved in this *modus operandum* as it becomes a general *modus vivendum*? As proposed by Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* (2008), in relation to Hanna Arendt (1958), the practice of knowing oneself through a working practice can also become a form of politics, a means to know what you are doing.

Joanna Zylinska, in *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, argues about similar forms of self-management with regard to the phenomenon of blogging. Bloggers can be seen as being

part of a larger ‘neoliberal imperative for individualized productivity’ (2009, 96) but they can also be questioned with regard to the forms of hospitality that this individualisation entails. Individualization ‘necessarily’ becomes a form of narcissism but, as Zylinska argues, to what extent can we then think in terms of an ethical narcissism, ‘one which is more open to the experience of the other as other’ (88)?

Being an independent game designer could become a way of doing games through the ethical question of taking care of the other, of the non-independent or the diversely independent, the other forms of independence which-are-not-mine. This other, as we have seen, is always and necessarily there; he, she or it is intrinsic in the notion of independence. It can be the other to be separated from (the mainstream industry, for instance), or the other who has alternative and incompatible definitions of independence (the small company that makes clones of mobile games and the solo artist can both call themselves independent, while disagreeing with each other’s definition of independence). What independent gaming is introducing into video game culture is more than an alleged revolution in the management of game production, or in the broadening of the availability of the means to make and publish a game. The original aspect it is introducing rather lies in the need for game designers to relate themselves to a form of otherness, make this relation explicit and give it a certain value.

As Zylinska again argues, through Emmanuel Levinas, the infinite ‘alterity’ of the other and its un-decidability are at the foundation of discourse (Zylinska 2005, 14). Discourse needs confirmation in an interlocutor, or in a form of otherness that confronts, evaluates and judges it. Independent gaming is showing us that even the highest level of narcissism and separation from a more or less imaginary mainstream context, precisely because of this act of separation, needs to confront itself with a form of otherness. The difficulty that independence poses, therefore, is in how this otherness is accounted, taken care of and hosted. How, to what

extent and with what consequences can the narcissism of certain kinds of independent video game design remain open to such otherness and also become an ethical game design?

The most pressing question I have tried to approach in this chapter is how diverse claims of independence come to constitute a practice for the definition of the identity of the video game producers. From this perspective, it seems to me that independent gaming is a name given to a set of discursive practices related to the production of a video game through which the game developer seeks to answer the question, 'Who am I?' I am here generalising about a phenomenon that I have tried, so far, to keep untied in its multiple forms. But if a unifying proposition had to be found, for the sake of a summarising and conclusive note, then I believe that this quest to define oneself is what characterises independent gaming. More than a practice of production of video games, it appears to be mostly a practice of production of the self.

Moreover, the incessant emergence of discourses that attempt to describe what independent gaming is, how to be part of it and also how to succeed and make a living out of it, could also be reinterpreted as not only a practice of self-production from the side of the game developers but also a way to avoid, so to speak, self-consumption, or self-destruction. The risk of not regulating the self, not emerging as a defined first person singular, could come at the cost of disappearing in an undefined universalism 'which is not one' (Zerilli 2006).

Indeed, this also seems to be part of the anxiety inherent in the self-exploitative regimes that some independent developers prepare for themselves. In the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* there is a moment where this appears, I believe, quite clearly. It is when designer Phil Fish, developer of the game *Fez*, narrates his own personal story. The difficulties he is facing in concluding the video game are not only economic but existential:

> The game has become a bit of a reflection of me over time. It certainly wasn't the intention at first. […] and now we're here. We don't have any money. I'm over-worked and over-stressed. I'm on the line. Me. My name... my career. If this fails, I'm done. I don't think I'll work in games again. And it's not just a game, I'm so closely attached to it. It's me. It's my ego, my perception of myself is at risk. This is my identity: Fez. I'm guy [*sic*] making Fez. That's about it. If that doesn't work out then […] I would kill myself. I would kill myself. That's my incentive to finish it. Because then I get to not kill myself. (*Indie Game: The Movie* 2012)

Narcissism can turn into solipsism, and when the only thing that matters for the independent developer is the game he or she is making then, at the risk of making too big a statement, life itself can be under threat, as there is no form of otherness to account for, or to seek confirmation from. Independence forces one to look for different others. It appears as a necessity for tracing the boundary of one's own independence but also for looking for contamination and similarity, for finding other independents that can attribute value to an otherwise isolated work. Independence can be a repressive power that forces one to say what one *is not*, but it is also productive. It produces alterity in the first place, and movement towards the other.

I have offered in this chapter a reading of an ongoing practice, a phenomenon that is changing, quite literally, as I am writing about it. This, I believe, is one of the challenges and also one of the most interesting aspects of studying the phenomenon of independent gaming. Suicidal notes such as the one mentioned above by Phil Fish, claims of anarchy and political critique such as those pronounced by Molleindustria, and workshops on how to guide yourself and become successful independent designers, all co-exist as part of the process that

independent gaming is. This broad label can be seen as categorising a series of ongoing negotiations over the processes of individualisation of various video game producers.

In the next chapter I will look at the hacking of PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network. Gamers, hackers, and Sony itself as the publisher of these products, have been operating a series of contrasting modifications on the console PlayStation3 and the online gaming service PlayStation Network. These events will be discussed as attempts to claim ownership of a video game, through different means that those of the independent developers. However, at stake there is again the possibility of defining oneself in relation to the technologies we use for playing, and for our lives in general. The hacking of PlayStation Network has been discussed by many commentators in terms of ownership: who really owns a video game console? Who has the rights to decide how it can be modified and, ultimately, what it is? As I will argue in the next chapter, there is also a practice of self-definition at play, one that evokes the ethical question of taking care of other players, too.

Chapter 3

They Leak! Hacking PlayStation (as a) Network

On November 4, 2010, attorney Luanne Sacks was at work at the district court of San Francisco, California. Her role was to defend Sony Computer Entertainment in the litigation that resulted after the company's decision to remove the OtherOS feature from the PlayStation3 console. The feature allowed consumers to install any operative system in a PlayStation3 console. However, many were exploiting this feature to install the operative system Linux and use it to bypass the anti-piracy block and run copied versions of video games. Thus, Sony decided to remove it through a software update of the console, mandatory for all those who connected to the PlayStation Network (the online gaming platform for Sony's consoles).

When the suspension of OtherOS was announced on March 28, 2010, users expressed their dissatisfaction by posting comments on online forums and on the official PlayStation blog, where the news first appeared. The official release of the firmware was scheduled for April 1, 2010, a date that caused many PlayStation3 users to think that this was Sony's attempt at an April fool. This was not the case. The firmware was effectively released as announced, and its consequences were exactly those described by Sony. Even the official PlayStation blog shows the level of disappointment on the part of the consumers: the comments on the first announcement unanimously accused Sony of limiting the activity of its users (Seybold 2010). The protests gathered in a consumer association's complaint, supported by the Electronic Frontier Foundation. In this rapid turn of events, Sony was called, in the

person of Luanne Sacks, to defend their right to remove (or add) any feature on PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network, while consumers were claiming the right to own what they buy, and not have it forcedly changed by the producer.

The events that started in that period generated a series of conflicts that still have repercussions at the time of writing. In fact, the hacking of Sony's product did not only raise a debate about the ownership of the console, but more broadly about who has the legitimacy to decide the proper and improper uses of PlayStation3, and how consumers and producers can be defined with regards to their rights and duties. Furthermore, the debate turned almost immediately around a question on the physical boundaries of the video game console and its online services, as it was not clear to what extent consumer protection law could apply to features, software and parts of Sony's gaming service that are not exactly visible to the eye, or physically present in the packaging box. The debate also touched topics such as the temporality of the rights and duties of consumers and producers: for how long can Sony, or the consumers, claim ownership of the console, or the producer be liable for its failures? The questions of the court turned towards an ontology of video game consoles and electronic products: who has the legitimacy to manipulate PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network?; is this legitimacy subject to temporality?; what are exactly the boundaries of a video game console?

Abstract as they might sound, the questions had immediate consequences on the work that attorney Luanne Sacks was asked to do. The problem for her, and Sony, was to persuade the court that the 1-year warranty that comes with the video game console grants Sony with the authority to change any feature of the product after that time period, and even not be responsible for its entire malfunctioning. In fact, if after four years from the release of the product the console was still doing everything it was advertised to do, but one feature, Sony

could not possibly be held responsible. In Luanne Sacks own words: 'the only thing that Sony told anyone about the duration of any feature of the PlayStation3 is what it said in the one year express limited hardware warranty. It said one year' (Groklaw 2011).[9]

Approximately in the same period of the California State vs. Sony trial, Luanne Sacks was also working as attorney for Sony in another related case. The Sony vs. Hotz trial saw the corporation against the hacker George Hotz, responsible for having released a jailbreak to Sony's console which allowed users to re-install other operative systems, effectively re-introducing the OtherOS feature. Hotz had declared that PlayStation3, as any other product, is something you own once you buy, and ownership also implies the right to modify. He had already applied the concept in August 2007, in a famous hack of Apple's iPhone which unlocked the phone and allowed consumers to use it independently of the original carrier.

The details of these events will be discussed throughout the chapter, but it is important to notice that in these accusations and defences the questions focussed on the definition of what can be done with PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network, and who should be in charge of deciding the legitimate uses of the console. Ultimately, the debate opened the console itself to unlimited, uncountable forms of hacking – seen here as events that disrupt the apparently frozen boundaries of a video game console. These are interruptions that happen in time, and it is within the question of time ('it said one year') that, ultimately, Sony's attorney had to re-take for herself that position of authority that decides which events (hackings, modifications and so on) can be considered legitimate.

[9] The litigations between Sony and consumers, and Sony and the State of California, have been largely reported on Groklaw.net as the events unfolded. In this chapter I refer to the analyses of the trials as they appeared on the website between February and March 2011.

The series of events that became part of what was known as the hacking of PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network, as happened between 2010 and 2011 (and with continuous repercussion at least until 2015), has been the source of a multitude of discourses in which the objects – PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network – have been continuously reframed. In the rest of this chapter I will refer to the series of events as the *hacking of PlayStation Network*, including in this expression the modifications of the console PlayStation3 and the other interconnected online services that make the console work and that allow players to communicate with each other. Also, as I will argue in the final part of this chapter, the notion of *network* is particularly useful when looking at the fluctuating boundaries of Sony's product, as it makes us think of this story in terms of relations and transformations, rather than objects and definitions.

In relation to the hacking of PlayStation Network, individuals and groups of gamers took a stand to define their own position and freedom in relation to the games they were playing and to the publishers of those games. Defining what a video game console *is*, through its limits and boundaries in time and space, became the point of debate in a conflict of definitions, in which Sony and its representatives were claiming opposing ideas to those expressed by the consumers of their products.

As I will discuss, it is of course important to evaluate what the purposes of the hackings are, as these are not all the same. The ideologies surrounding these actions need to be considered, too, if we want to understand what could be a *good* hacking, or, an ethically responsible challenge to the pre-conceived notions on the limitations of a video game console. First, I will look at the many different stories that have been overlapping with each other around the hacking of PlayStation Network, and how the reconstruction of these events

is, by itself, a form of hacking: an intervention that modifies the facts and the stories that we have been told, by re-arranging them in a new order.

Consumers and producers of the PlayStation hacking

The PlayStation hacking, the series of events that started on March 28, 2010, has been described by journalists, video game players and industry experts as a revolution in the relations that Sony, one of the leaders in the video game industry, had with its consumers. The casus belli for hacking into the PlayStation3 system was the release of Sony's firmware 3.21, which removed the OtherOS option. This release was intended to prevent, or at least reduce, digital piracy, and was presented as an obligatory update for all PlayStation3 consoles, automatically downloaded as soon as the console connected to the Internet via the PlayStation Network service.

Online services such as PlayStation Network became inaccessible without the new firmware. Firmware 3.21 removed features and services without giving any real advantage back to the users. In fact, the new firmware curtailed many of the previous functions of the PlayStation3 console, which were probably not initially predicted by Sony but were definitely possible when the console was first released in 2006. As the protesters argued, installing Linux and connecting several PlayStation3s in a grid was an economical and effective alternative to buying expensive mainframes. The presence of OtherOS made it possible to use a PlayStation3 as a computer and therefore extended its potential uses far beyond those strictly related to digital gaming. The new firmware was therefore received by the consumers as a limitation rather than an advancement.

The decision was described by the gaming community as an act of tyranny, an authoritarian decision that threatened their freedom. The reactions showed feelings of both disillusionment, as Sony was often considered one of the most successful companies in the video game market in terms of receiving and satisfying its customers,[10] and violation of the privacy and rights of the players, who had their data changed or deleted at short notice. Furthermore, the definition that Sony was providing of its own product was seen as arbitrary and old-fashioned. New video games and online gaming, as well as uses of the game console that were not strictly related to gaming (such as using the console to watch movies from Blu-Ray discs or connecting PlayStation3 consoles in Linux-based grids), were all considered by Sony as features or extras. As such, they could be activated as well as removed. Consumers on the other hand held the view that PlayStation3 should be considered as a piece of hardware whose functions could be determined and implemented by its users. According to most consumers, nobody has the authority to determine what a legitimate or illegitimate use of the hardware is.

From this description of the events we can already draw a more nuanced analysis of the opposition between Sony and the consumers of its product. It appears in fact that the dispute is much more problematic and difficult to define than has been suggested by the news media. Actually, I would like to argue that the dispute between consumers and producers in the hacking of PlayStation3 has been fought precisely to determine the boundaries between consumer and producer in the first place. At stake, in defining the very terrain of the battle,

[10] Sony Computer Entertainment has been the first video game publisher to release and fully support a game development kit for its own console. Net Yaroze, released in 1997, allowed consumers to produce their own games for the PSOne console. While there are previous examples of development kits addressed to indie programmers and hobbyists being released by video game publishers, Net Yaroze was supported by Sony through official competitions and on the Official PlayStation Magazine. Net Yaroze was welcomed by many consumers, at the time, as an unprecedented opening towards user-produced content.

was the definition of both the contenders. The contenders were mostly defining their own possibilities for intervention over PlayStation3, although posing primarily the question of what PlayStation3 is.

News media gathered their attention towards this story immediately after the hacking of the PlayStation Network in April 2011, during which the sensitive data of 77 million accounts (including credit card information) were illegitimately accessed and saved on a private database. Indeed, the sensationalist terms that have been used by news media in introducing the developments of the case are justified by the numbers of users involved and the significance of a product such as Sony's, which was sold on a global market. The hacking of the PlayStation Network has been described as a breach of an allegedly closed system (Baker and Fink 2011; Morris 2011; Carnns 2011), which tested consumers' patience and trust (Schiesel 2011). However, I believe that the grounds for interest in this case are quite different from those presented by newspapers and online magazines. The hacking has been narrated as a massive break-in to an allegedly super-protected environment that has been responsible for enormous damage, in economic terms and in terms of public image, to one of the biggest companies in the hi-tech industry. The hacking has indeed had massive consequences, and the reasons are undoubtedly relevant to discourses relating to the ownership of technological products and user privacy. However, the implications of this case, as I will argue, are much deeper and possibly much more sensational, as these involve the boundaries of video game product and our freedom to reshape those boundaries.

Conflicting freedoms

The concept of freedom so often invoked by the hackers, as reported in press releases and public announcements, appears to be inspired by a libertarian ideology, which stresses the role of the individual and his/her potential. According to the hackers of PlayStation Network, consumers should be free to tinker with technology.[11] Also, similarly to what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron pointed out in "The Californian Ideology" (1996), technology appears in these discourses as a determining force for social change. Barbrook and Cameron note that this approach to technology started in the 1960s in California and was inspired by (although through several processes of simplification) Marshall McLuhan's ideas on media. According to Barbrook and Cameron, such a view oversimplifies the social and economic complexities of technology, as it puts the individual at the centre of technological development overshadowing more complex relations of power and the ideological backgrounds to the notion of innovation.

Barbrook and Cameron see in Thomas Jefferson the precursor to the Californian ideology. A slave owner and latifundist himself, Jefferson's claims regarding freedom appeared to ignore the extent to which this notion of freedom often comes at the cost of restricting the possibilities of others. Similarly, in hacking of Sony's console the freedom to manipulate PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network, according to the statements produced by the hackers and their supporters, comes at the cost of limiting Sony's freedom to change its own product. The ideology espoused by the hackers conceives of freedom as a right of the individual and describes its own proposal as purely positive, while it also implies that the

[11] Ben Kuchera reports George Hotz's words in the article "Donations pour in for PS3 hacker": 'Once it's paid for and mine, I have the right to unlock it, smash it, jailbreak it, look at it and hack on it' (quoted in *Wired.com*, February 22, 2011). George Hotz also sang a rap song related to his personal story and released it on YouTube. Through the lyrics, reported in the same article, Hotz claims to be 'a personification of freedom for all' (http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/02/hotz-donations/, Accessed July 18, 2016).

original publisher should not control or own developments resulting from their initial product. This is particularly evident in the rap song released on YouTube by hacker George Hotz, where he accuses Sony of 'crying to Uncle Sam to settle disputes', and describes himself as a 'personification of freedom for all' (geohot 2011). Moreover, freedom to manipulate does not necessarily involve the extension of the know-how to include further potential hackers. It is rather oriented to individual freedom to tinker and manipulate. Sony, on the other hand, claimed freedom to decide what can be included or excluded in the definition of PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network, thus limiting the intervention on the technologies by other parties.

The actors involved in the hacking of PlayStation Network were claiming a specific kind of freedom for themselves, a classical liberal freedom which aims at granting to the individual the liberty *to do* something. Andersson points out that this seems to be a common understanding of the term in the debates in favour of digital piracy:

> Along with its countercultural connotations and romantic aura of dissent, 'piracy' here invokes positive liberty: freedom *to* rather than the negative freedom *from*. It is a means to assert one's autonomy, a way of becoming proactive (strategic) rather than reactive (tactical). Piracy here defines the ability to make one's own destiny, to open the black box of technology and utilize it for one's own ends – while doing this in the open, even forming part of the 'mainstream' (Andersson 2009, 73-74)

The proactive strategies enumerated by Andersson seem to be absent in the hacking of PlayStation Network. As Laura Murray writes while reviewing the movie Rip! A Remix Manifesto, claims for a wider freedom are often continuous with 'the base concept of market capitalism, with all its contradictions, rather than a challenge to it' (2009, 5). Gary Hall has

expressed his scepticism about many of the statements produced in favour of digital piracy, stating that 'for all the romantic, counter-cultural associations of its apparent challenge to the commodity culture and property relations of late capitalist society, there is nothing *inherently* emancipatory, oppositional, Leftist, or even politically or cultural progressive about digital piracy' (2009, 2). After all, the scenario that the hacker George Hotz has been delineating with his proposition is even more conservative than Sony's. In his attempt to bring back OtherOS and access to those services that were accessible before firmware 3.21 was released, he is not attempting to institute a further system different from the preceding one, but is attempting to re-establish what already existed.

Freedom in this context means freedom to tinker, and as such it also appears as a strongly gendered claim that involves a very limited category of consumers. We can see this in the hacking of Sony's product, where there does not appear to be a particular attempt to actively include in the protest, and its positive aims, an audience broader than the original participants. In fact, George Hotz's statements appear to be fairly conservative, as he looks at himself and the collective subject of the hackers as a group whose aim is to join Sony in a position of power rather than open up freedoms to a broader demographic.

George Hotz decided to provide a solution to circumvent the limits imposed by firmware 3.21. When Hotz succeeded, he released the anti-firmware on his website. In response to this action, Sony sued Hotz, who suddenly received support from many gamers, mostly thanks to the work of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. The foundation defended their decision to support Hotz and garnered media attention with the following statement:

> Sony is sending [a] dangerous message: that it has rights in the computer it sells you even after you buy it, and therefore can decide whether your tinkering with that

> computer is legal or not. We disagree. Once you buy a computer, it's yours. It shouldn't be a crime for you to access your own computer, regardless of whether Sony or any other company likes what you're doing (Kushner 2011)

As Hotz declared during an interview on the online video programme Attack of the Show!, there is much more at stake in the legal controversy than the destiny of a single man against a corporation, as 'the case is about whether you own that device that you purchased' (Attack of the Show 2011).

Similar statements emerged a few months earlier in different media contexts. The music, movie and book publishing industries have faced similar debates concerning the ownership of digital content. The possibility to copy and share digital files undermines the business of most publishers, thus media industries have reacted by implementing forms of control over the digital content they distribute online. Digital rights management (DRM) is one of the most widely adopted anti-piracy technologies for containing the user's control of digital files. Amazon's Kindle, for example, was subject to criticism from consumers and technology reviewers when Amazon deleted a limited number of digital books from Kindle devices without notice, although the consumers were reimbursed. This was seen by many consumers as a breach of their privacy and illegitimate manipulation of an owned device, despite the fact that Amazon explicitly (although not with sufficient transparency) reserved the right to act in similar ways regarding digital copies sold through Kindle (Stone 2009).

Similarly to the hacking of PlayStation Network, the use of DRM in other industries raised debates about the effectiveness of this method in preventing digital piracy and about the limits to the privacy and rights of the consumers. The fact that the release of digital content through Kindle had explicit references to the limitations to the ownership of files did not

prevent criticism from consumer organisations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who were also very active in defending the hackers of PlayStation Network (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2016). The Kindle case appears very similar to the hacking of Sony's entertainment products as it concerns the ownership of both software and hardware. Interestingly, both cases were discussed, in online forums and news media, in terms of freedom. Questions concerned the meaning of buying a technology and to what extent this makes the consumer free to have complete access and control over it. Jack Schofield, writing in The Guardian, describes the Kindle thus:

> Although we are used to PCs that offer a wide range of choices at every level, the Kindle is a typical vertically-integrated consumer platform. In these, a single company owns or controls everything (or as much of it as it can) from top to bottom: hardware and software design, content distribution, retailing and sometimes pricing. Apple's iPad and Nintendo's Wii are also examples. Vertically-integrated businesses can develop more integrated products with greater ease of use, while freeing consumers from all the burdens of choice. Basically, you give up your freedom in exchange for a simpler and perhaps more satisfying life. (Schofield 2011)

What are the implications of 'giving up your freedom', and what does it mean to claim it back or demand a more radical scenario of complete choice? The notion of a vertically integrated business not only has consequences in the number of options and the respective ease of use that a technology can offer. It also reinforces a hierarchical separation between those at the top of such a vertical process and those at the bottom. The story of the hacking of PlayStation Network did not do much to rethink this metaphor of a top-down concession (or privation) of freedom.

In fact, a few weeks after the Sony vs. Hotz case became public, a class action against Sony followed, issued by a group of PlayStation3 consumers. The United States District Court for the Northern District of California in San Francisco followed both the cases. In February 2011, the result of the class action declared Sony guilty of having violated the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. Sony's fault was to have advertised OtherOS and then stopped supporting the service. The Sony vs. Hotz trial, however, was ended by an agreement between the two parties. Sony accused Hotz of helping the piracy industry, while Hotz claimed that his hack was intended to let consumers run their homebrew software and emulators, thus bringing back a greater level of openness into the PlayStation3 system. As part of the settlement of the lawsuit, Hotz agreed not to commit any further hacking offences against Sony. In his official statement he declared, 'it was never my intention to cause any users trouble or to make piracy easier. I'm happy to have the litigation behind me' (Gilbert 2011).

In the meantime, the lawsuits received intensive media coverage. The group known as Anonymous decided to take revenge on Sony, which was accused of not respecting its consumers and their freedom to use technologies to their full potential. Anonymous started what is known as Operation Sony, also called OpSony. On April 19, 2011, a few days after Sony and Hotz settled their lawsuits, Sony's servers in San Diego, California, which backed the online service PlayStation Network, reported an anomalous overload. The hacking into the servers forced Sony to suspend PlayStation Network. Officially, Anonymous denied responsibility for this hack. However, the hacking of PlayStation Network took place at around the same time as Anonymous announced OpSony. The link between the group and the hack seemed evident to most of the news media that covered this story in the following days. Therefore, in the reconstructions that were publicly released, OpSony and the hacking of

PlayStation Network, including the hacking by George Hotz and the following legal debates, all come to constitute a unique story.[12] The hacking of online databases and services of other video game publishers in the following days (Codemasters on June 10, SEGA on June 19 and Bioware on June 24) seems to confirm that the events surrounding Sony's PlayStation Network were not necessarily related to the release of firmware 3.21 and the deterioration in their relationship with their consumers. More likely, the hacking of PlayStation Network was oriented to steal sensitive data from the users' online transactions. Fairly significantly, the hacking into other publishers' databases received minor media coverage compared to the larger PlayStation3 case.

The hacking of PlayStaton Network became part of a complex narrative that started with the release of firmware 3.21 in April 2010 and culminated with the break-in and the data of 77 million users being stolen. After this rapid series of events, more hacking operations occurred against PlayStation Network, occasionally reclaimed as acts of bravado, in other cases more likely to be attempts at stealing sensitive data. The latest event has been in January 2016, when hacker group Fail0verflow, who also took part in the original hacking of PlayStation Network, claimed to have manipulated PlayStation4 to let it run games that were not licensed by Sony (in the demonstration of their hack, they showed how a copy of Nintendo's Pokemon could run on the console). Sony reacted by shutting down the network

[12] In an article published by Keith Stuart in *The Guardian* (April 29 2011), George Hotz's hacking, Anonymous's OpSony and the hacking of PlayStation Network are distinguished from one other, however, they are analysed as possibly connected events. In the words of Peter Wood of First Base Technologies, the encryption of Sony's firmware is seen as a possible starting point for the more damaging hacking of PlayStation Network. In this version, the events appear separated but also the cause of one other. However, I note, this does not explain the hacking in the following days of different video game publishers' databases, which were not attacked prior to Spring 2011: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2011/apr/29/psn-hack-industry-reactions?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487 Accessed July 18, 2016)

until the breach could be fixed, causing anger among their consumers who could not access a service they had paid for (Martin 2016).

The stories that have been narrated, the different versions and perspectives and contexts in which these have been enunciated, each contribute to frame the roles and definitions of the subjects and objects involved, including what is or could be expected from them. In particular, I think it is important to focus on the *hacker*: a figure which has no clear identity, often remains anonymous, and yet produces statements which modify the reality surrounding itself. This act of redefinition is a reframing of which nodes, both material and cultural, human (producers and consumers) and non-human (software and hardware) might be included or excluded in PlayStation *as a* Network. I will now further explore this notion of the network, and look at how hackers become part of it, involving themselves deeply in the technologies they modify and discuss about. I believe there is something to be learnt from this practice of involvement, one which incites the hacker to be hospitable towards the other hackers and players.

Hybrid mediators: becoming part of the network

The prolonged controversy between Sony, its consumers and the hackers brought forward opposing notions of what PlayStation3 (and later PlayStation4) and the PlayStation Network are and should be. Sony, in this process of pushing the boundaries and limits of the PlayStation console, ultimately confirmed its position as the producer and owner of its video game products. Through the statements pronounced in the legal dispute in front of the Californian State Court, and the press releases that were produced after the trial, Sony *became* the producer: hierarchically superior, authoritative and therefore distinct from its

consumers, Sony received the authorisation of defining what PlayStation is while being asked to do so in institutionalised contexts. The statements pronounced in the court performatively defined Sony and assigned to the corporation the role of the producer of PlayStation3 and PlayStation Network. What I am proposing is therefore to reverse the order of causation as it is usually presented in the narratives surrounding the hacking of PlayStation Network. The definition of what Sony, the hackers, and even the entertainment system are is not the basis of the debate. It is rather its final outcome.

Is it possible to change that outcome, by reopening the debate on what these characters can be? I will attempt to answer this question by reinterpreting the notion of network, and understanding how it could be useful in delineating a further mediation of the hacking of PlayStation Network.

Edge magazine reported a statement by Sony's executive Shinji Hasejima regarding the hacking of PlayStation Network: 'the network vulnerability was a known vulnerability. But Sony was not aware of it … was not convinced of it' (Edge 2011, 19). Such a statement fits quite perfectly all the meanings of network that are presented in this chapter. The Sony executive chooses the word to refer to a database of users' data, and possibly also evokes the name of Sony's online service, PlayStation Network. By stating that what is at stake in these events is actually the hacking of PlayStation *as a* network, I am indeed suggesting a reversal of the meaning of the word. I intend to use it instead as it has been adopted by actor-network theory (ANT), and in particular Bruno Latour (1999, 2005). Considering the involvement of very different elements (social, technological, legal and economic) in the enactment of the definitions of PlayStation Network, I believe Latour's ANT can provide a different perspective on the implications of this case. The vulnerability of the network, evoked by

Shinji Hasejima, might actually be the defining feature of any network. Networks might in fact be seen as necessarily porous, always leaking and in need of temporary patches.

The dissimilarities between the different uses of the word network suggest significant considerations. Sony's network, the database of information about the users, is allegedly a fixed one. It works by accumulation (the number of registered users is supposed to increase in time) but is mostly a record of information, an archive. Network can also be understood as a point of access to online services (PlayStation Network) but in any case it does not entail transformations of any sort along its nodes. Latour reminded us, instead, to be aware of this new use of the word, as it might evoke 'the Internet', and be associated with the idea of information exchange and 'transport without deformation' (1999, 14). The concept of network he proposed instead, and the one I am considering when debating PlayStation *as a* network, is composed of plural relations – associations that ceaselessly transform themselves.

As Latour points out when describing ANT, we can understand the study of society both as a study of a state of affairs and as a study of associations. Latour is in favour of the latter, and notices how this type of sociology works particularly well when the participants in the social phenomenon are not 'assembled' yet and are still in a very open process of defining themselves (2005, 12). This sociology of associations is based on the understanding of the connections as they occur, as they frame themselves, and it is in this sense that I read the events of the hacking of PlayStation Network – not as a social event, structured and ready to be deciphered, but more as an intricate network whose threads can be untangled in innumerable ways and yet reassemble themselves in a new shape every time they are unfolded.

As argued by Law (1999), entities within a network acquire their attributes as a result of relations with other entities. ANT has to do with the displacement, dissolution and fractionality of those relations. Moreover, ANT includes all materials, not only the linguistic side of social phenomena. Networks, Law explains, are composed of linguistic and non-linguistic, human and non-human materials (1999, 3-4). These continuous transformations have some forms of rigidity, which is reached through discursive performativity. For instance, when the Californian State court lets the attorney Luanne Sacks decide the limits of PlayStation Network she freezes, although temporarily and within the context of the trial, the fluidity of all possible associations.

Crucial in this process of change is the role played by what Latour calls *mediators*. In the 'sociology of associations' that Latour proposes, mediators can be looked at for the modifications they introduce in a network: 'mediators […] cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity. Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry' (2005, 39). ANT is about understanding mediators, identifying them and evaluating the changes they introduce. Examples of mediators are, according to Latour, two interlocutors in a conversation, or even a computer that breaks down and generates unpredictable outputs, becoming an agent to understand and decipher.

As Mike Michael argues, ANT has been concerned since its inception with social phenomena in their complex constitution of relations and entities. ANT, however, left us with the question of where the list of entities and relations ends in the constitution of such networks. The list is potentially infinite, and there is some degree of arbitrariness involved in their constitution that allows networks to be understandable as partially closed entities

(Michael 2000, 41). What comes to be included and excluded in those networks is the point Michael intends to discuss and present in a different light. He argues: 'a particular human or a human collectivity, a specific technology or a technological system, is the upshot of ongoing configurations of heterogeneous associations' (22). The process of the establishment of a network transforms heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human entities into collective subjects. To take account of heterogeneity of a collective subject, as it loses its diverseness, Michael proposes to look at the hybridity of networks and nodes, their co-constitution and the temporary new assemblages that these might constitute.

In fact, Michael seeks to invent hybrids, 'that is to say […] characters made up of a few humans and non-humans (including mundane technologies and aspects of "nature") by which to narrate the processes of ordering and disordering' (42). Michael then seeks to consider himself as a hybrid, mutually influenced by his own writing, and emerging as a linking entity of 'familiar and novel co(a)gents' (17). It is from these co(a)gents that the writer itself emerges. Mediators can be seen as being essentially and necessarily hybrid, and the author of a text, as a source of transformation, can also be looked at as a *hybrid mediator*.

From such a perspective, there are crucial similarities between the hackers and the hybrid mediators that I have introduced through Latour and Michael. Both figures are agents that introduce change within a system by becoming part of it, and constitutive of it. The hacker as hybrid mediator is involved within the network, rather than outside of it. Thus, this perspective introduces an intuitive understanding of the act of hacking, as it frames the network where it intervenes and, as I will now argue, as it happens *in time*.

Conclusion: the temporality of networks

While narrating the story of the hacking of PlayStation Network, I could consider myself to be one more mediator, one more hacker that has disassembled and re-assembled a network of nodes. I was, and I have always been, an hybrid in the telling of the story of the hacking of PlayStation Network, part of the network I was writing about as much as any other character who has been or decides to become a subject in this process of connections and transformations. While the author of the network stays, in Latour's ANT, invisible and detached in the constitution of the network itself, I want to enlarge the network to the point of including its own author. Acknowledging my own presence in this story as hybrid mediator, partly involved in it and partly responsible for its own existence, I offer one further hacking of PlayStation Network in these conclusions.

Who are the consumers and producers of a video game console? Who has the right to decide what can be done with it? Are consumers free to become producers? These questions involve a definition of what a video game console is: what are its boundaries? What can be legitimately be done with it? The debate could go on endlessly. Answers to these questions cut, as intended by Kember and Zylinska (2012), the ongoing series of mediations by including or excluding material and immaterial nodes. However, these cuts can only be *temporary*, and it is within the question of time that, ultimately, I believe we could look at the hacking of PlayStation Network and our role within it.

Definitions of a video game console can be seen as *temporary* as they are *strategic*: they outline the uses and limits of a technology and the position to be expected by the actor enunciating such definition. The hackers of PlayStation Network, and Sony itself, have been alternating different strategic definitions which involved themselves, and which gave themselves a certain degree of freedom over what they could do with PlayStation3. Moreover, the temporality of networks can also be understood in a further sense: networks

have their own *timing*, as it matters when they are enunciated, and networks are given legitimacy through the position of authority of their mediators. Also, the cuts that constitute networks re-inscribe these *in time*, in a timely progression, delineating what these are before and after the act of mediation. We can see how this happened in the case of the hacking of PlayStation Network.

The definition of what PlayStation3, or the PlayStation Network, or any other video game console *is*, it is a matter of time: it depends on the timing of the definition itself and its enunciation, which brings about the object of its definition as it is pronounced. In order to explain this concept we could look at how the controversy of the hacking of PlayStation Network was (temporarily) resolved by Sony. Attorney Luanne Sacks defended Sony by fixing PlayStation (as a) Network by strategically inscribing it within a temporality of her invention: she froze the network in the past (the warranty 'said one year') in order to allow Sony to hack the console in the future, and continue to play with it, in its own way. The temporality of this definition was threefold: it was *strategic*, as it succeeded in defending Sony; it had its own specific *timing*, as it was pronounced during the trial where the boundaries of the console and the roles of the actors involved was decided institutionally and with legal consequences; finally, it fixed PlayStation Network in *time*, not just providing an abstract definition but one which changes through time, and which understands PlayStation Network in its *becoming something else* (before and after the one year warranty). In this hack, Luanne Sacks is saying that PlayStation Network is one thing up until one year from its release, and then it can become anything else – indeed, here she also implied that Sony had the freedom to decide what else it could then become. Luanne Sacks momentarily and intuitively involved herself within the network, only to close it immediately by re-affirming that PlayStation Network only transforms once, at the expiration of the warranty. However,

by introducing the notion of time within the definition of a video game console, she also exposed the problem that, maybe, we cannot possibly know what a video game console is any longer, once we are involved in its time and space, by becoming hybrid with it, and transforming ourselves as we play with it.

The resolution of the Californian State court has been only one out of the many events in the hacking of Sony's products. A multitude of hackers has been introducing the notion that video game consoles can be breached: consoles leak, and their drops evaporate, occupying as much space as the environment allows them to; video game consoles are porous, malleable, liquid or even gaseous things. What is sold in the packaging box is unpredictable and changes in time. The box in which the console is packed is one more mediator in the network, which poses a temporary physical boundary to the console, before its solidity sublimates. Once opened, the console is unboxed, flexible and plastic. The components of a video game console are altered, consumed and used in diverse ways. Consoles are altered by their manufacturers through updates and patches, and the roles of those who decide these alterations, those who make the console and then play with it (or make it *as* they play with it), change accordingly and in ways that are sometimes conflicting and oppositional to the other players, at other times hospitable and welcoming.

The temporality of the network can be disturbed. The hacker, as a hybrid mediator, can establish different networks. Reconfiguring existing games in both software and hardware, opening the black boxes of technologies, could be methods for exploring channels of communication between a multitude of nodes and escaping the binaries underpinning oppositional discourses between producers and consumers. Becoming hybrid mediators also requires acknowledging that we are inevitably implied in the technologies we discuss, and that we participate in their definition - as I am doing *now*, as I write. Being involved to such

an extent also entails, in my opinion, agreement to take care of all the others implied in the same network, thus avoiding libertarian, individualistic and oppressive perspectives. We can hack video game consoles as we play with them, but how we understand our freedom within the network makes the difference between being a good or a bad hacker.

The stories of the hacking of PlayStation Network tell us that video games, in both software and hardware, are malleable entities that can only temporarily be defined and strategically enframed as part of a network. These networks and definitions involve the speaker, the actor who puts the video game *back in a box*. Not all definitions are the same, though, and those provided by Sony's attorney matter more than the others because they are granted legitimacy and authority by the place in which they are enunciated. Defining video games is a matter of power: the technical aspects, the uses and audiences, the rights and duties of producers and consumers and even their own definition can only be defined as the result of institutionalised speech acts - such as those produced in academic publications, for instance. These acts invent the time of the process of mediation, deciding when and how technologies transform and translate.

In the next chapter I will look at another example of a video game that has been transforming itself over a large period of time, and where the reconstruction of the temporality of its transformations is even more problematic. This is a video game that was buried in a desert in New Mexico and which, from that moment, became uncontainable to an extent that could have not been predicted in advance. Its invisibility under the ground had the opposite effect of putting it under the spotlight of the histories of the medium, and for many more decades than what the game itself could ever have deserved. I am referring to the story of the video game *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, a commercially unsuccessful product which Atari, its producer, decided to get rid of by trashing its cartridges away. *E.T.* can tell us

something about the ways in which we tell the history of the medium, and how this again implies the time and timing of its enunciation in deeply destabilising ways, to the point that the present itself becomes unstable. To know more about this story we do not have to dig too deep, neither we have to get our hands dirty with mud. We only need to move to the next chapter and get ready to challenge an oxymoron: that an extra-terrestrial could be buried under the ground.

Chapter 4

A History of Boxes: Game Archaeology and the burial of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

Introduction: the first video game ever

In the previous chapter I have discussed how the boxing of video games, transformed into products with defined boundaries, raises questions on the authority of the voices that produce the definitions of digital games and decide their material and immaterial limits. Definitions are often contested through debates that claim how alternative boxes could be imagined and produced: for example, by proposing other understandings of what video game software and consoles should be used for; who their owners are; for how long these boxes should hold; and whether these should be kept always open and malleable.

While the case of the hacking of PlayStation3 and the PlayStation Network raises these issues explicitly, there are other circumstances where similar authoritarian acts regulate the limits and possibilities of the medium of the video game in less explicit terms. The historiographies of the medium are another occasion where video games are defined in relation to their uses, influences and cultural relevance, while being seen in their historical progression. The problem of deciding which is the very first video game ever made is a perfect example of the ontological controversy underlying the historical projects: how can anyone decide which one is the first playful experiment ever made with a digital technology that truly qualifies as a video game? What is the key property that makes a digital text become a video game?

The stories of Tennis for Two (1958) and Spacewar (1962) are excellent examples. Reconstructions of the history of video games generally agree on designating 1958 as year one of digital gaming, when William Higinbotham, while working at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York, used an oscilloscope to design a game called Tennis for Two with a view to entertaining students who were visiting the research centre. A few years later, in 1962, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Stephen Russell designed Spacewar. The game required two players and was a simulation of a fight between two spaceships. Higinbotham's Tennis for Two was addressed directly to students and visitors, and was not advertised anywhere other than the Brookhaven National Laboratory. Spacewar was conceived explicitly as software to be shared among researchers with access to one of the first computer models, the PDP-1 (Programmed Data Processor-1).

Steven Poole acknowledges Spacewar to be the first video game ever made (2000, 15), as does John Anderson in an article published in *Creative Computing Video and Arcade Games* in spring 1983. J.C. Herz (1997), in one of the first texts to present video game culture to a wider audience, ignores Tennis for Two and places the beginning of the medium of the video game with the invention of Spacewar. Steven L. Kent (2001), while acknowledging Tennis for Two as the first video game, claims that it was an isolated case that did not influence Stephen Russell, who should be regarded, according to Kent, as one of the real inventors of digital gaming (18).

The difficulty of deciding which one is the first lies in the conditions in which these experiments were produced and played at the time. In both cases there was no sense of a finished product. Spacewar in particular has been narrated by many accounts on the history of computer hacking as one of the first examples of an always open piece of coding, continuously modified by different engineers across the (few) research laboratories in the

United States that had access to a PDP-1 (Levy 2010, 39-60). Instead, Tennis for Two could be played in only one specific place, and did not have the characteristic of a sharable or mass-produced digital product as we intend video games to be today. In both cases it is impossible to decide the final configuration of the software that made the games. In fact, even the word software still had to be invented, as coding was not seen as something that could possibly be framed as a finished text.

What were Tennis for Two and Spacewar, then? If not clearly identifiable entities but a series of operations and attempts to play with the earliest computers, how did they come to be defined as the first video games ever, or two among the very firsts? In Jeffrey Fleming's "Down the Hyper-Spatial Tube: *Spacewar* and the Birth of Digital Game Culture" (2007), one of the co-authors of Spacewar, J.G. Graetz, remembers the days when the game was in (permanent) development. When asked about his feelings when a similar game was released, fifteen years later, as a coin-operated machine by a video game company (Space Wars by Larry Rosenthal in 1977), he acknowledges that the idea of copyrighting Spacewar crossed their minds, but they did not consider the full implications:

> Nobody knew what programming was. It was something you did to make a computer do things but it had no existence apart from the computer. […] The word 'software' didn't come into existence until just about the time that we got Spacewar done. In fact, the first use of the word in a DEC catalog spelled it wrong. Even after it had a name, nobody knew what it was. (Fleming 2007, 4)

As also argued by Nathan Ensmenger in *The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise* (2010), in the history of computing the

separation between software and hardware, as well as the emergence of the figure of the programmer, appears separately and later in respect to computers as a technology.

How could these ineffable things that were made across the late 1950s and 1960s come to be identified, more than thirty years later, as the first representatives of a new medium? I believe this has happened mostly because the history of the medium of the video game has appeared as the history of an industry, and of its progressive (and often unquestioned) economic success. As such, the history of video games has been seen so far as the history of a series of commercial products and of their consumers. The lack of an identifiable unity, a packaged and closed product, has been a problematic notion for the stories surrounding the emergence of Tennis for Two and Spacewar. The multiple and uncountable forms of these two games could not be taken into account by a historical endeavour about the origins of the video game which took the existence of an industry as paramount for the formulation of a historical project.

By framing the history of video games as an industry, retrospective studies have tended to look for those unities and products that the industry itself was producing. In so doing, the history of video games has often been a history of boxes, and boxes have been seen, and found, even when these could not possibly exist, as in the case of Tennis for Two and Spacewar.

I insist with this metaphor of the box to problematise the reassuring visions that histories of gaming have replicated so far. As Van Loon argues in *Media Technology: Critical Perspectives*, media cannot be understood without taking into consideration their historicity, the historical context in which they come into being. This not only works ‘as an antidote to modes of thinking that attempt to read the “essence” of a medium purely from its

internal, technological properties' (Van Loon 2008, 12) but is also a methodological prerequisite to understanding media and their evolution through the cultural context in which they have been developed and used. This is what Van Loon calls the cultural embedding of a technology: 'culture highlights that meaning and significance emerge from practices and do not exist in themselves' (13). The telling of the history of video games has been so far, mostly, *disembedded* from the contexts in which the events of those histories occurred. Video games are seen as things that just happened, that appeared in the timeline of technological progress of our culture, rarely taking into account the processes of connection and transformation (or remediations, as Bolter and Grusin, 1999, put it) between diverse experiences and understandings of digital technologies. Moreover, such approach to the history of the medium is disembedded from the present, from the time and place of its enunciation, which implicitly appears as homogenous and fixed.

However, in these historical accounts which look at the appearance of boxes in their chronological order, there must surely be some false steps, discrepancies or inconsistent trajectories that do not make immediate sense, or that just represent plain failures in the otherwise splendid growth the video game industry. In this chapter I am going to look at one specific example of a failure in the history of the video game industry. It is the story of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, a video game developed and published by Atari in 1982, and whose copies have been trashed soon after by the company in an attempt to save the costs of storage of the unsold cartridges. The game was in fact one of the largest disasters in economic terms, as it sold much less than what it was originally expected.

The story of E.T. is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it is literally the story of a collection of boxes: accounts, official and unofficial, talk of thousands of cartridges of the video game being buried in the desert of New Mexico, in the United States. As it happened

with Tennis for Two and SpaceWar, game historians have been trying to find those boxes, reconstructing their presence through documents and, in the case of E.T., digging in the desert to find evidence of their existence. Such an obsession for the boxes of video games has also been justified through the coinage of a new term and profession, that of the *video game archaeologist*. As it will be discussed, media archaeology is also the name given to the academic study of the history of media, and the relation between such theoretical project and the physical burial of E.T. will be explored in the rest of this chapter.

Secondly, the story of the video game E.T. is a fitting example to discuss about the excess of confidence that permeates the historical reconstructions of the medium of the video game, particularly when these are brought to reflect on the present time and context when they are written. Allegedly, the story of E.T. is regarded as a curiosity and an example of how digital gaming has gone through major economic breaks before becoming the most important sector in the globalised entertainment industry. The crisis of 1982-85 is considered one of the most significant interruptions in the otherwise continuous development of the video game industry, mostly caused by a saturated market of clone products (Wolf 2012). Eventually, after 1985 the video game industry moved to Japan and Nintendo became at that time the most important producer of consoles and games. Atari played a major role in this market crash, as the leader of the industry in the early 1980s. Atari's consoles were saturated with video game products made by Atari and third party companies, but very few of these products were of a reasonably good quality. The story of E.T. is the epitome of this abundance of unwanted products that led to a significant pause in the economic growth of the sector, and a passage towards Japan as the leading market.

The crash of 82—85, of which the burial of E.T. is symbolic, sheds light on the a-problematic relationship that most of the written histories of the video game have with their

own past and with the present. The past is often seen as a series of events to be looked at while unfolding, and which lead to the present, seen an allegedly stable, fixed and safe point of destination. But what is the significance of the interruptions and crashes in the historical progression of the medium? According to which criteria are exceptions identified and understood as such? In whose history is E.T. appearing as a collection of unsold and unwanted boxes? These questions are not usually considered in the historical and archaeological approaches to video games, and I believe this is because of an excess of confidence in the stability of the present, seen as a fixed state of practices of production and consumption which can be analysed and understood transparently. The un-burial of E.T. is in fact quite controversial in this sense, and I will now discuss its implications.

The afterlife of E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

On April 26, 2014, Microsoft spokesman Larry Hryb announced via Twitter that the expedition to find the buried cartridges of the 1982 video game E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial had been successful. The story of the game attained the status of urban legend in video game culture. As reported in many texts about the history of the medium, the video game E.T. was developed by Atari after a highly anticipated deal with film producer Universal Pictures, which gave Atari the rights to release video games based on the successful film directed by Steven Spielberg. However, the game turned out to be very disappointing, and it was released in a period, the early 1980s, when the video game industry was struggling to sell sufficiently to maintain itself. As the legend goes, Atari decided to eliminate the unsold cartridges by burying them in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. In 2014, Microsoft and the film

company Fuel Industries obtained the rights to excavate the area to try to find proof of this legend and as part of a documentary project on video games.

One of the cartridges found in the desert has been donated to the Smithsonian museum of American History. On their website, museum specialist Drew Robarge announces the addition to the collection in grandiloquent tone:

> The cartridge is one of the defining artifacts of the crash and of the era. In addition to the crash, the cartridge can tell many stories: the ongoing challenge of making a good film to a video game adaptation, the decline of Atari, the end of an era for video game manufacturing, and the video game cartridge life cycle. The cartridge also serves as closure for many things: the urban legend of the burial, the golden years of Atari, an era where American companies dominated the console scene. All of these possible interpretations make for a rich and complicated object. As they say, one man's trash is another man's treasure. (Robarge 2014)

The story of the discovery of Atari's dumped cartridges, as it has been told by Microsoft and other press sources, can be taken as an example of the ways in which histories of the medium of the video game often tend to operate. In fact, the excavation was attempting to discover evidence of a story already written and repeated in several contexts, more or less official, where the events around game company Atari were analysed. The archaeological endeavour was aimed at providing proof of something that was already expected to be true – that copies of the game E.T. had been buried in the desert. The contemporary knowledge about the story of the game company Atari was seen as the point of destination, as the safe arrival of the archaeological research.

In *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*, Raiford Guins (2014) approaches the story of E.T. from what he defines as an archaeological perspective. In his text, this means looking at the documents and remains of E.T. in a very detailed analysis of the first-hand accounts of residents of Alamagordo, searching the co-ordinates of where the game boxes were buried and the articles and interviews about the story of Atari and the development of the game. In Guins' work there is a strong focus on experiencing, in the first person, the stories that make video game culture, by witnessing, seeing and hearing what video game collectors, designers and hobbyists have to say and getting in touch with what is left of old coin-operated machines and video game consoles. Objects and things, Guins argues, have an afterlife: after their disposal they continue to exist as collectables or in museum archives, and in some cases, as happened with E.T., as trash. Yet this is trash that continues to inspire stories and events, such as the excavation that recently took place in New Mexico.

Drawing on the work of Don Ihde, Guins argues that objects are 'multistable', as they can be 'many things at once' (Guins 2014, 12). From this, Guins proposes that in the analysis of video games, and artefacts in general, we should ask not only what something is but also when and where it is, how it emerges and how it is used. This would amount to taking into consideration its afterlife. In Guins' analysis of E.T. there is great consideration of how the game was originally perceived by journalists and critics and how it is now perceived in gamers' communities, how the packaging was done and what the economic conditions were that caused Atari to suffer from such a commercial disaster.

Raiford Guins effectively illustrates the stories surrounding the video game E.T., however, his approach to what this game *is* evades too easily the problems deriving from the ontological questions he formulates. The solution Guins finds, as in many other media

archaeological accounts, is in the *context*: E.T. needs to be explained through the context in which it was conceived, produced, played, trashed and excavated. His definition of archaeology is to 'look around things' in order to understand them (2014, 7). Archaeology therefore remains a form of truth seeking (234), and the problem of defining the conditions for seeking and saying the truth about video games ultimately relies in the context in which these truths allegedly appear to the archaeologist.

Thus, the context is presented as a larger and safer container for a rather unstable and *leaking* reality (as I already argued in relation to the hacking of PlayStation Network). However, as Jaakoo Suominen effectively argues, there are 'many ways to contextualize' the history of gaming (2016, 6). Suominen classifies four different methods of contextualising history across hundreds of publications on the medium of the video game published since 2002. The 'enthusiastic' accounts, written for gamers and people who are passionate about the medium, tend to present a rather linear narrative of progress. The 'emancipatory' studies seek instead to establish alternative histories and look for marginal characters and events in video game culture. The 'genealogical' approaches, that include the work of Raiford Guins (2014), work more like scientifically rigorous antiquaries and often discuss the medium through metaphors from the field of biology (using expression such as 'the evolution of the medium'), Suominen argues. Finally, the 'pathological' studies of the history of video games refer directly to Foucault's notion of archaeology and are 'most generally focused on the pre- and protohistories of games, [and tend] to underline ruptures, anomalies, material, embodied, and experiential as well as experimental aspects of contemporary game cultures' (Suominen 2016, 12). These studies present themselves as 'deep excavations', often focussed on early and dismissed technologies. The pathological accounts have often looked at specific consoles, defining the study known as 'platform studies' (Montfort and Bogost 2009). While

many have contested the arbitrariness of studies on specific game platforms (Apperley and Parikka 2015), Suominen argues that at the foundation of pathological approaches there is the same kind of research for a revelation, a hidden truth: '(most of) the media archaeology and platform studies share a distinct pathological view: both are interested in an artifact's ''inner life,'' opening the black box—or a postmortem of a corpse—with divergent tools' (2016, 13).

My argument is that, with the exception of some of the studies that Suominen labels as emancipatory, these different forms of study and contextualization of the past have a problem with how they relate to the present. The image of the archaeological digging, so often evoked by studies on the history of gaming, is particularly emblematic of this problem, as it hides the ground from where the excavation is carried. In the case of E.T., its afterlife has not been seen so far as a new form of life that could haunt our present, but as a rather congealed life, put on display and discussed from safety distance: the extra-terrestrial found by the archaeological expedition has been described as if it was a mummy: rigid and perfectly preserved. However, as I will now argue, it could also be seen as a ghost: floating and ineffable.

Media archaeology and the problem of the present

As argued by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications* (2011), the field of media archaeology has been based on two different readings of Foucault's understanding of the term archaeology. On the one hand, one reading has been inspired by Marshall McLuhan and has moved in the direction applied by Friedrich Kittler. This perspective emphasises the role of technology in the production of knowledge. On the other hand, the Anglo-American tradition tends to assume that

technologies are introduced in a pre-existing discursive context, which frames the uses and interpretations of the technology (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, 8-15). In many cases, as in those presented in the collection of essays edited by Huhtamo and Parikka, it is the interplay between technologies and discourses that is put at the centre of the analysis.

I argue that what consistently appears in those archaeological accounts, whichever reading of Foucault is applied, is the possibility of explaining how certain phenomena happened, how they transformed themselves, and under which rules these changes occurred. Technologies and discourses are seen as mutating through a series of conditions that have to be discovered. Media archaeology abounds with metaphors that evoke a physical excavation, a process of revelation that is made possible by digging, vertically, deep in the historical documents. Erkki Huhtamo, one of the most prolific media archaeologists to also look at the medium of the video game, describes this approach towards the past in quite explicit terms. In "Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble: An Archaeology of Arcade Gaming", Huhtamo argues that 'electronic games did not appear out of nowhere; they have a cultural background that needs to be excavated' (2005, 4). In the same text, the appearance of early video games in public spaces (arcade gaming) is described in relation to similar interfaces where touching and the motion of fingers were also used for entertainment purposes. Huhtamo affirms that these 'devices provided the ground for future applications such as electronic arcade games', however, 'how, why, when and where this happened is a challenge for scholars', therefore 'what is needed is an "archaeology of gaming"' (4).

However, there is no further argument for the need for such archaeology. I propose that the need is mostly motivated by the wish to explain how, why, when and where something happened. It is an explanatory endeavour, one that believes in observation and analysis as objective approaches (although these are named excavations). In the conclusions

to the same paper, Huhtamo maintains that 'excavating the past makes sense when trying to explain phenomena like arcade video gaming with seemingly very short histories' (15). According to Huhtamo the list of technologies to connect in order to explain the current scenario includes kinetoscopes and mutoscopes, slot machines and flippers, and all machines that require physical actions to be activated and to play with. The excavation appears to be a detailed narrative of historical progression, which has 'continuity and rupture, similarity and difference, tradition and innovation' (5) but still allows us to trace one evident and single narrative out of the many marginal ones.

Jussi Parikka and Jaakko Suominen, in "Victorian Snakes? Towards a Cultural History of Mobile Games and the Experience of Movement" (2006), debate the origins of mobile gaming through a similarly defined archaeological approach. The aim of the paper is to draw on media archaeology and history to explain the emergence of the use of mobile devices for digital play. The authors argue that while historiographies of video games have been looking too closely and exclusively at the events surrounding the game industry, their paper attempts instead to broaden the perspective to include documents, events, and technologies from other areas that could have contributed to contemporary mobile gaming. The history of the forms of entertainment used while travelling and commuting, from printed books to Sony's Walkman, puts mobile gaming next to a more varied series of commodities and considers it dependent on changes of social habits and work conditions in which frequent use of means of transportation is involved.

The title of the paper (Victorian Snakes) refers to the main question posed by the author. Inspired by the work of Tom Standage who, in *The Victorian Internet* (1999), compares the telegraph to a contemporary Internet of the Victorian age, the authors aim to find a Victorian *Snake* (a hugely popular mobile video game by Nokia first introduced in the

company's mobile phones in 1997). Parikka and Suominen propose to 'steer clear of such easily anachronistic comparisons between times and technologies' but still ask 'in which sense can we claim the existence of a Victorian equivalent of Snake or of other mobile games? That is, in what sense are mobile games part of a longer duration of modern experience and media consumption?' (2006, 7).

In the introduction to this book I referred to the work of Derrida and his re-evaluation of the anxiety that results from being 'implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game' (1980, 248). What Huhtamo, Parikka and Suominen are instead offering appears to be a very confident approach to the study of digital games, and media in general. Even if each of them acknowledges the possibility of different historical narratives to be narrated and the partiality of their own views, they maintain that looking at the past in a linear, teleological progression could contribute to the understanding of the present. However, what results from these narratives is the exclusion of the present as the moment in which the past is looked at, narrated, and in fact constructed. The present, from where the authors analyse and excavate the past, appears as a safe point of destination.

From Archaeology to Genealogy

Game archaeology shares with media archaeology the confidence, as I have defined it earlier on, which results from accepting that the present can be explained through the past, even if explanations are to remain temporary and provisional. The explanation of the present through the past is also the main and only rationale for such archaeological studies. In *What is Media Archaeology?* (2012), Jussi Parikka explains that:

> […] a lot of media-archaeologically tuned research has been in writing counter-histories to the mainstream media history, and looking for an alternative way to understand how we came to the media cultural situation of our current digital world. It is for media archaeologists as it was for Foucault: all archaeological excavations into the past are meant to elaborate our current situation. (Parikka 2012, 6)

What the role played by 'our current situation' is constitutes the very problem I intend to bring into the discussions on media and game archaeology. Rephrasing Michel Foucault (1970), Parikka and Suominen propose that '(cultural) archaeology can be defined as the unconscious level of a culture that enables the actual perceived forms of everyday life. The archaeological level enables the objects, ideas, thoughts, experiences, etc. of a certain historical situation' (2006, 9).

My critique of game archaeology does not intend to question the accuracy of those descriptions but is mostly concerned with the stabilising effect that these have on the perception of the contemporary situation. Michel Foucault's original project of archaeology of knowledge was not necessarily intended as an elaboration of the present through the past but as an inquiry on the fragility of any system of thought, including our own, when confronted with its genealogy. The turn to genealogy in Foucault's work is quickly dismissed by Parikka in *What is Media Archaeology?*, where he acknowledges that in genealogy 'the emphasis was more on questions of "descent" and critique of origins as found in historical analysis of his time' (2012, 6) and was the foundation for Foucault's counter-histories. But genealogy was not, as Foucault puts it, about finding the origins of an event in order to restore its apparent unity. Genealogy aims instead to:

> […] maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations-or conversely, the complete reversals-the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault 1991, 81)

In Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, the main problem is not simply tracing how differences and truths were said, in different periods of history, about sexuality. It is not about finding out the equivalent of sexuality in the Victorian age, as in Standage's search for a Victorian Internet or Parikka and Suominen's Victorian Snake. Foucault's question is about the present. It is about how, under which conditions, we can nowadays say the truth about sexuality in the Victorian age, or any other. That is, what are the conditions for differentiating between truth and falsehood in regards to a specific notion (of which sexuality could be an example)? And how does truth come to be constructed as such, and could it not be otherwise? Foucault does not attempt to colonise the past with the questions of the present but to challenge our own notion of the present time by tracing its genealogy. In the work of Foucault, 'the history of the present designates precisely the point where historical reflection and a critical attitude from within and towards the present articulate the production of a difference within history' (Tazzioli, Fuggle and Lanci 2015, 2).

Conclusions: I want to believe

As soon as the first pictures of the retrieval of E.T. appeared online, gamers and video game collectors started speculating about the evidence that was provided. As reported on Ars

Technica, a website that extensively covered the event, many interruptions had slowed down and postponed the moment when the cartridges were revealed. The website argues that the first two excavations, to which selected journalists and a number of interested fans had been invited, were unsuccessful. Initially, some of the pits were inaccessible. Later on, other excavations produced no results. It was only after the first two attempts that press and fans were invited to a third excavation. This last attempt revealed almost immediately a copy of E.T., buried quite superficially in the desert. Moreover, only one copy of the game was shown, and a few other Atari products appeared in the photos of the excavated area. Speculation was that the mission produced no results, but because the production of the documentary needed footage of that part of the story some sort of evidence had been thrown in the pits overnight, enough to collect photos and video and document the apparent find. Kyle Orland from Ars Technica comments:

> The simple fact that the film crew found some cartridges seems unlikely to fully kill the legend. Even today, new conspiracy theories are popping up to replace the old. Some Internet trolls are already suggesting that the Microsoft-affiliated film crew planted the cartridges for the benefit of the cameras and that the media has either been snookered or is in on it. Yesterday's dig did debunk some of those 'I heard...' myths (there were some games down there besides E.T., for instance), but it left others frustratingly unaddressed (archaeologist Andrew Reinhard told Ars 'there's no way' to estimate how many games were buried). (Orland 2014)

Through the speculation and rumour that circulated in online communities and video game magazines, the materiality of the cartridges of E.T. lost its apparent solidity. When confronted with the multiple narratives that make sense of their presence, solid objects tend to sublimate. Materiality had been used as evidence in the story of E.T., but what made the

cartridges and their photos relevant *as evidence* was mostly a discursive construction, a series of narratives told and repeated in books, online forums and the press releases from the documentary filmmakers. The evidence was revealed to be relevant because of and for the words and the meanings associated with it in a specific community. Those same words can be said to be the very event that constituted the re-discovery of E.T.: the discourses generated by the archaeologists and the gamers communities were the reason for the generation of further discourses about the discovery of E.T. and its later refusal. Those words had always been material, tangible and productive of visible effects.

As long as the question we pose is concerned only with finding out the truthfulness of the story of Atari's E.T., there can always be alternative stories to tell. Thus, because E.T. is important essentially as a story, it is probably more interesting to inquire into these stories and ask instead what the conditions for telling the truth about Atari's E.T. are, and what is at stake in inventing other stories (and even not necessarily true ones).

It is through discourse that narratives are replicated, and the material evidences, the excavations and mud, the boxes that make and contain video games are framed and remediated through discourse. The archaeologists, the film makers, the fans and the gamers have been involved in shaping multiple narratives of E.T., and finding the cartridges is a part of those narratives. In exactly the same way, we are involved (myself included, as gamer, academic and author of this chapter) and are responsible for determining what constitutes the objectivity of the history of games. We are involved, and we always have been, in deciding why, how and to whom the history of E.T. is relevant.

The problem has never been what E.T. is and where it is, but how it becomes what it is, and what else it could be. The articles in Ars Technica, an online magazine about

technology and culture, phrase this problem well by asking: 'Why are we so interested in some buried hunks of plastic and silicon?' Taken as a non-rhetorical question, it exposes the problem of understanding the reason these stories are told. The question introduces the problem of the present, seen as an unstable position from which to look at the past.

Michel Foucault maintained exactly this in his consideration of the unities of history: 'I shall accept the groupings that history suggests only to subject them at once to interrogation; to break them up and then to see whether they can be legitimately reformed; or whether other groupings should be made' (1972, 29). The responsibility of searching for other unities is what makes telling history a form of intervention, what makes it responsibly and ethically performative. The instability that results from this other archaeology is something that we need to take care of. Video game histories, or archaeologies, could be less about facts and more about the telling of those facts, about what keeps a series of statements together so as to constitute a fact, and how we can intervene in and by telling those facts.

Michel Serres proposed that historical eras, as well as objects, can be seen as multifaceted and as continuously folding into different unities: 'every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychromic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats' (Serres and Latour 1995, 60). From this perspective an archaeological look cannot take the present for granted as this becomes the result of a discursive, temporary and strategic folding. The present time in the archaeological perspective is a unity caught through discourse while in its undoing.

What is at stake, then, when considering our own involvement in the construction of a history of gaming? What are the consequences of being part of the game? In the next chapter

I will discuss some recent events where the description of a historical change in the consumer base of video game products has been used to justify a series of misogynist attacks against the presence of women in video game culture. The series of events, known as GamerGate, involved the telling of a history of the medium, one where the male gamers formed the original producers and consumers to be replaced, only recently, by more varied categories of consumers, most notably women. GamerGate has generated several different narratives of how women (and, as I will discuss, academia and the game industry) were attempting to take control of the medium and shape its present and future. Many of the aggressive and conspiratorial stories that circulated under the umbrella of the GamerGate campaign were questioning, and claiming for themselves, the authority to decide the history of the medium: to whom do video games belong? And who has the authority to answer this question? As I will argue, the events surrounding GamerGate bring us to reconsider our own presence in the formulation of these (unresolvable) questions.

Chapter 5

GamerGate: Becoming Parasites to Gaming

Linus: 'Remember, it rains on the just and the unjust'

Snoopy: 'But why us in-betweens?'

(*Peanuts*, by Charles M. Schulz. April 13, 2004)

Since August 2014, the representation of women in games and their inclusivity in the game industry have been at the centre of hatred debates within video game culture. The debates were the outcome of a series of verbal and written accusations addressed against women, seen by a large group of male gamers as a threatening force, coming from the outside of the traditional gaming audience to disrupt the medium and influence the production of video games by imposing gender equality and fair representation. The attacks on women have been taking place mostly online, but also occasionally offline with real life threats against those women who became publicly notorious for raising the question of how gender is represented in video games and within game culture. The harassment campaign against women took the name of *GamerGate*. GamerGate is in fact a word, or Twitter hashtag, used to identify a much broader series of attacks perpetuated by groups of gamers against various subjects, including academics who study the medium of the video game. These were accused of

promoting an allegedly feminist agenda, and therefore constituting a threat to the freedom of expression in the production of video games.

At the time of writing, the hashtag GamerGate is still active and largely used on Twitter and other social networks, although the story surrounding it seems to be vanishing as one of the darkest and most depressing moments in the recent history of video game culture. GamerGate had many traits of novelty, but also many other characteristics that are banal and repetitive in comparison to other similar attacks against women. For instance, it is well-known that the video game industry has evident traits of misogyny, being traditionally male-oriented in the marketing of its products and in the composition of the workforce. It has been estimated that the video game industry is composed by 22% of women, while the consumers are now more or less evenly split (Makuch 2014a; Makuch 2014b; Jayanth 2014). Gamergate resembles other similar misogynist campaigns against inclusivity and representation, seen as false myths of anti-libertarian ideologies. On the other hand, GamerGate certainly also has its unique elements, for example in the use of Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and 4chan simultaneously by a large number of users organised around the same campaign, and for such a long time, and because it is the first time that such an extended anti-feminist movement happens in video game culture. But of course we did not need GamerGate to learn that aggressive behaviours are often targeted against women, and against those who are disempowered. We also did not need GamerGate to discuss how academia is often seen as an elitist ivory tower of conspirators.

GamerGate started appearing as a Twitter hashtag when game designer Zoe Quinn was accused of having a conflict of interest with a game journalist for the online gaming magazine Kotaku, which is considered by the gaming community as a respectful source of news and reviews related to the game industry. The conflict of interest involved a sentimental

relationship with one of the journalists working at Kotaku, an affair that many thought could have biased the reviews of Quinn's games written by the same journalist. It did not matter to the attackers, at the time, that the journalist had never reviewed or commented any of Quinn's video games on Kotaku. The supposed controversy escalated in a series of personal attacks against Quinn, seen as a cheater who had seduced a journalist with the intention of receiving positive reviews for her games. Quinn was in her own turn supported by several scholars and journalists who defended her position, as the attacks were aimed at her as a woman in the game industry, rather than for any evident misdoing.

One defender in particular, Anita Sarkeesian, released in the same period a series of YouTube videos exposing the objectification of women in games and in work placements, and took a stand in favour of Quinn. The series, titled Tropes vs. Women, analysed the repetition of the same stereotypical representations of women across a large variety of video games, for instance as damsels in distress to be saved by the male hero, or as rewards for the male character at the end of the quest (feministfrequency 2016). Sarkeesian became another character to be put under the spotlight by the GamerGate campaign, because her series was seen by many as an attempt to influence the representation of women in games and limit the freedom of expression of the (male) video game programmers. GamerGate soon became a campaign against both Quinn and Sarkeesian, and then escalated in a broader campaign against women and feminists, seen as threatening the status-quo of the industry. The threat posed by women, according to the perpetuators of GamerGate, was mostly defined as a limitation to freedom of expression by imposing standards for the representation of women in video games.

As the campaign escalated, the series of attacks also included DiGRA, the Digital Games Research association, an academic organisation that gathers scholars who investigate

topics surrounding the medium of the video game. DiGRA was seen as joining in this feminist conspiracy, and receiving funds from lobbies and pressure groups in order to justify and promote the inclusion (or intrusion) of women in game culture. Chess and Shaw report how the minutes collected during a session on GamerGate at the DiGRA 2014 conference and uploaded on an open Google Document were found and misused by those who supported the conspiracy theories. Many understood the references to identity and diversity contained in the document as evidence of an organised agenda to influence the video game industry, and attacked the two organisers of the session of being involved in such a conspiracy (Chess and Shaw 2015). The two scholars started receiving personal attacks, and saw their document being quoted by gamers to demonstrate the presence of a link between DiGRA, the American government and the major video game publishers, accused of organising 'Communist meetings [in the] halls of academia' (Sargon of Akkad 2014).

Like a parasite to gaming

In the last two years I have been following many online discussions grouped under the GamerGate hashtag. There have been countless threads on Reddit, thousands of tweets being sent every hour, 4chan posts and so on. The most common denominator to these discussions was the presence of conspiracy tones, often accompanied by detailed explanations of how women, journalists, politicians and industry experts (often seen as unified actors with exact agendas) were allegedly plotting to destroy the medium of the video game for the sake of gender equality.

While I was lazily scrolling a long thread on Reddit, titled "People are now claiming that GamerGate is killing gaming archiving" (azsuranil 2016), I found a comment that broke

the wall separating myself, from the other side of the screen, and the story being narrated. While I was reading these comments as an external observer, I became part of the story because of a post, by a user named koyima, who was directly accusing people like me of shaping the debate surrounding GamerGate while pretending to be outsiders. The comment put academia under the spotlight for having interests in influencing the perception of the general public against the category of gamers. In a purely conspiratorial fashion, most of the respondents to that comment had something to say about how academics are trying to change the game industry and gaining personal profits from this.

The comment is worth being quoted:

> Academia is like a parasite to gaming at the moment. They produce nothing, they just try to make money and papers (prestige) off other people's work. Usually by trying to shred it through a biased perspective that has no real application IRL. (koyima 2015)

Being part of academia myself, I found this comment to be something I should respond to. In fact, and as I will discuss through this chapter, I found the comment to be appropriate in the description of what I do, although I disagree with the negative tone of the post. As I will argue, being a parasite is not a bad position at all, and it can be useful to think ourselves as parasites when deciding how differently the stories of GamerGate could also be read: by breaking the dualisms and oppositions that have defined the debate so far, and introducing the problem of being always and necessarily in-between factions, never fully inside but neither completely detached, like parasites with the organisms they exploit.

In my job I do not produce anything tangible (if not in the form of printed books). The words I write, and the presentations and lectures I give, have no material presence. In that

sense, the user koyima is right in saying that 'I produce nothing'. However, such production of nothing would be certainly much more laudable than the production of something, if that something is violent, oppressive or racist. Moreover, being a producer of nothing puts myself in good company. Those who work in finance, for example, are notoriously accused of gathering every morning in the financial centers of the world (Wall Street, Canary Wharf and so on), mostly to produce nothing. Yet, their nothing has dramatic consequences on the lives of many. As with finance, academia has the peculiar ability of producing a kind of nothing which can be extremely influential, persuasive and effective. Also, in both cases producing nothing must not be misunderstood as the result of a sort of intellectual laziness: usually both academics and brokers are extremely busy and tend to work outside the typical 9 to 5 schedule. What keeps us busy is not the production of tangible outcomes but the continuous re-assemblage and reshaping of already existing things (ideas and money, respectively). In the case of academics, our job often involves the retelling of stories, facts and ideas through a different framework. In this sense, koyima is right in saying that we look at 'other people's work', and that we produce nothing by ourselves. Although we are not the exception, we are not necessarily always looking for 'money' and 'prestige', and we might occasionally have an impact 'IRL' (in real life).

But we certainly are parasites. Although this needs to be unpacked, too, because parasites can be of many different kinds and some of them are necessary or even beneficial to the hosting organism. Although in biology parasites are only intended as living at the expense of other beings, the definition can be broadened to include forms of symbiotic relation where both the parasite and the host affect each other. Michel Serres identified in the parasite a key figure to understand the processes of communication exchange, to the point that he spent an entire work on the topic (*The Parasite*, 1982). Serres argues that the figure of the parasite, as

well as the *hôte* (which means, in French, both host and guest), has both a social and a biological function that cannot be reduced to mere passivity. According to Serres, the parasite makes communication possible, being an element of interruption which is both external to the system and part of it. Any system, Serres argues, tends to be corrupted or interrupted by external factors. There is no chance that in the long term it can be kept closed and preserved as it is.

According to Serres, parasites are not only the louse or the rat, but anything that is at the same time internal and external to a system. In the words of Lawrence Schehr, translator of *The Parasite*:

> The parasite is a microbe, an insidious infection that takes without giving and weakens without killing. The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food. The parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or the interference in a channel. These seemingly dissimilar activities are, according to Michel Serres, not merely coincidentally expressed by the same word (in French). Rather, they are intrinsically related and, in fact, they have the same basic function in a system. Whether it produces a fever or just hot air, the parasite is a thermal exciter. And as such, it is both the atom of a relation and the production of a change in this relation' (Schehr 1982, x)

Serres explains the role played by the parasite by turning to the image of the *hôte*, at the same time guest and host. A *hôte* receives and consumes, 'gives and receives, offers and accepts, invites and is invited, master and passer-by' (1982, 15). This relation is always going to be unsettled by noise and interruptions, by the arrival of a further parasite. The parasite is that which introduces complexity and expels the present *hôte*, introducing a new relation and

becoming a new *hôte*. According to Serres, the alleged linearity of the communication process is not only inadequate but also subverts the more correct hierarchy where noise and parasites are the defining factors of communication. Parasites are not just others, not just external exploiters, but also those entities that define the system by giving it a new structure.

Academics are in fact parasites, as many denigrators of the ivory tower of academia often say, but possibly of the good kind. We are not completely part of what we study, neither external, but dependent and at the same time influencing what we look at, as the *hôte* presented by Serres.

I believe that the role and presence of parasites have been largely undervalued, if not ignored, in the accounts surrounding GamerGate. In fact, GamerGate has been mostly narrated as the story of a change in the gaming landscape where a new category of consumers (women, but also other groups that were previously considered to be marginal) is now replacing the old one (the male teenage gamers). As I will argue, this view has a problem with evaluating the presence of parasites. First, it underestimates the necessity of being somehow always in-between, rather than fully part of an identifiable faction. Also, it undervalues the role played by the voices, neither internal nor external to game culture, which actively reframe and give new shape to the system by explaining how this change is allegedly happening. In these stories about new categories of consumers replacing others, what is missing is an account of how these categories co-exist, and who is responsible for deciding who or what they are.

Gamers are dead

As GamerGate reached its lowest point in the denigration of women, many commentators argued that this might have been caused by the progressive disappearance of the traditional gamer as a consumer of video games. GamerGate was described as the final violent reaction of gamers before their complete disappearance. Leigh Alexander on Gamasutra (August 28, 2014) titled an article "Gamers Don't Have to Be Your Audience. Gamers Are Over". In this article, rapidly commented and linked by many other sources, Alexander argued that a much more varied group of consumers is now emerging, to the point that game developers should stop worrying about addressing their products to the male teenagers that were once responsible for the great majority of sales.

Dan Golding, academic and blogger, wrote a post on the same day about the end of gamers. As Golding puts it: '[gamers] have astutely, and correctly identified what is going on here. Their toys *are* being taken away […]. Videogames now live in the world and there is no going back. I am convinced that this marks the end. We are finished here. From now on, there are no more gamers – only players' (Golding 2014). Golding was writing from the first person view of a gamer accepting his own end, and welcoming a new scenario where people like him were no longer the majority. His appeal was also directed to those who perpetuated the GamerGate campaign, asking them to stop and move on, accepting their own defeat.

Both articles, influential in the following days on social networks, depicted a sad representation of gamers: a minority that seeks confirmation for its aggressive and oppressive behaviour against a new emerging and wide audience of players, which is apparently making gamers disappear to the point that they are no longer relevant.

However, claiming that gamers are over can hardly represent an inclusive approach towards those who, for example, currently identify with the hard-core community but equally

disagree with the aggressive stance of the so-called social justice warriors who fight against the imaginary feminist threat. The GamerGate controversy ended up denouncing an aggressive behaviour that might equally be re-appropriated by the new audiences (or whoever speaks for them), particularly if it is seen as a winner-takes-all scenario where a new majority is supplanting the previous one. Not coincidentally, I believe, many of the claims of the end of gamers have been supported by market research statistics from various organisations and institutions, all equally showing that female gamers were officially the majority, or very close to becoming so. The use of sales figures and pie charts was used to demonstrate and reveal the supposed reality of such defeat for male gamers, as if it was a fact to be supported by numbers. The rhetoric of the death of gamers and the victory of the new challenger prepared the narrative of us-against-them which was equally adopted by the discourses of GamerGate supporters.

Moreover, Microsoft and Sony have been attempting to appeal to a wider and more profitable market in recent years by addressing a more solid base of consumers with varied tastes (a similar direction to that taken by Nintendo with its Wii console in 2006). However, hard-core gamers have usually been denigrating this choice. From this point of view, the conspiracies around GamerGate could receive further support and reinforce the narrative of opposition between the gamers and the establishment, represented by industry experts, scholars and commentators. Finally, and most importantly, the defence of the rights of women to be represented in video games in a respectful way, and to take part in the industry with fair salaries and the same rights as men, cannot be justified by the emergence of a market sector: it should be achieved regardless of the number of women involved, and not because of them supposedly becoming a majority.

There are many reasons to disagree or look with scepticism at these claims about the death of gamers. First, because they do not work well in persuading those who feel betrayed and attacked by the alleged global feminist-academic-industrial conspiracy to look elsewhere for understanding their anxieties and discomforts. Also, these arguments replicate the same structure of discourse of those produced by gamers who now feel marginalised. The problem is not that these might represent untruthful analyses of the reality of video game culture; the problem is instead the aggressive (and masculine) gesture that underlies the very idea that video game culture could be truthfully analysed. After all, how are these stories about the presence of women in games appearing to us? How does the truth about the alleged change in the gaming landscape come to be constructed as such?

Roberta Williams, a woman in game history

Laine Nooney (2013) poses similar questions in a paper on the reception of the story and personal life of game designer Roberta Williams, and re-enables a more destabilising, anxious account of the emergence and presence of women in the game industry. Nooney looks at the historiographies of the medium and questions the 'practice of "adding women on"' (1) to the history of video games: reconstructions of the key figures of the industry tend to shape the image of a male-dominated context in which women appear only occasionally, as extra characters. The narratives around Roberta Williams are seen by Nooney as an excellent example of this apparent opening towards women in games. Roberta Williams was the co-founder, with her husband Ken Williams, of Sierra On-Line, and one of the most celebrated game designers across the 1980s and 1990s. However, she was neither a programmer nor a gamer. In an interview to Williams, reported by Nooney, the game

designer confesses: 'I don't program, and I'm not technical, and I'm not even a game player. So you know, everybody says, "Well what are you doing in this industry?" [*Laughter*]' (14).

Acknowledging that 'history is not in what we talk about, but in *how we organize its meaning'* (3), Nooney asks the following questions: '"*why* is Roberta Williams [in game history] in the ways that she is?" What can Roberta Williams tell us *about* game history? How is it that she became an object *of* game history?' (4). Nooney's focus is on how historiographies of video games have been written. Her questions regard the modalities for talking about the history of games and gamers. Roberta Williams is presented as a non-gamer in the historical reconstructions, a strange character who is, at the same time, influential and well-known and yet difficult to categorise. Williams defines herself as a strange case, recognising the impossibility of fitting herself into the typical figure of the male, computer-savvy game designer. However, her discomfort (a feeling Nooney describes through documents of different kinds, including photos with other famous game designers in which Williams clearly stages excitement and appears out of context) does not simply derive from being a female character in a male-dominated context. In fact, Williams had been included as a female game designer even in the accounts of the game industry of her age. Williams fits into game histories only as an extra, a token for women and games. Yet Williams apparently did not know how to use a computer, had no experience of software tools and worked by herself, from home, while taking care of her children. Nooney imagines the kitchen table to be the space where Williams designed, with pen and paper, most of the games to be converted into digital format later by her assistants. The space of the kitchen is seen by Nooney not just as a collection of furniture, objects and allowances. The kitchen is not simply a different workstation. It is a gendered space from where Williams used to work in a manner that could not be understood by the histories of the video game industry. The presumption of

these historical reconstructions was that game designers have to be gamers, that is, perfectly capable of using computers and even pushing the limits of those technologies. However, those discourses shaped the figure of the gamer as a subject to which Williams could not conform. As Nooney puts it:

> When we inquire into 'what counts' in game history, that question is beyond the immediately apparent: it is also about how history arrives. How do spaces, bodies and objects entangle to produce a historical subject – and why do we presume that this subject is a 'gamer'? (Nooney 2013, 10)

If GamerGate is an event in the history of the medium, then it appears to be an event that changes the role of women as characters in the narratives of the medium, by giving them legitimacy to speak. We are told that women *are happening* in the medium of the video game. But then the question is: who is making them happen? How are women entering the history of the medium? Or to refashion the same methodological question posed by Claire Nooney, 'why are women in the history of gaming in the way they are?'

Nooney hints that such emergence of women in games is not just due to a change in market audience of the game industry, as Alexander and Golding argued later on in regards to GamerGate. It also has to do with issues of power and legitimacy to speak. Stories about the medium of the video game are *not all equally here*.

The comment left on Reddit, which suggested that we academics are all parasites, should now be taken seriously and to its full consequences. We can exercise our role of parasites to gaming by looking at the spaces in-between, the co-existence of various voices that exploit each other and live in symbiotic dependence. There are stories about the medium, and about the role of women in games, which are granted a position of legitimacy, and others

that are not. However these co-exist, although differently, and if we want to try to be good *hôte* we need to find ways of becoming hospitable, and good guests. How can we become parasites of the good kind, and question the processes of mutual interaction that make collectivities, identities and conflicts come into being?

The voices reported so far, that have discussed and analysed the presence of women in games, act as parasites in their own turn: they transform without producing, they exploit by living at the boundaries of the systems they look at. Yet, these actors of transformation, which I have in previous chapters referred to with other names (hackers, mediators and hybrids) are also there as ethical subjects: the *hôte* can be good and bad, they can be welcoming and exclusionary, beneficial or lethal to the organism. Voices about the medium of the video games and its participants can easily adopt the tone of the patriarchal narrators critiqued by Nooney, and accept the irregularities to their allegedly transparent and linear stories of the medium only as long as these are exceptions, as it happened with the case of Roberta Williams. However, to take the suggestion given to us from the commentator on Reddit, we need to find our own way of becoming a different kind of parasite, a good *hôte*.

Women in games, women and games

In recent years we have seen the emergence of initiatives about the inclusion of women in the production of video games. In the United Kingdom, the Women in Games initiative organises game jam sessions where women can gather, learn how to make a game and have a final product by the end of the session, which usually lasts one or two days. These events allow only women to take part in order to provide them with a welcoming space for learning, without feeling the pressure of supposed hierarchies of skill and competency conventionally

attributed to gender. The Women in Games initiative also responds to other similar programmes that occurred elsewhere, which could not eliminate the social barriers that emerge whenever skills are thought to be differently distributed. Stephanie Fisher and Alison Harvey (2013) have noticed how the Difference Engine Initiative (DEI), taking place in Toronto, Canada, had similarly good intentions in regards to the inclusion of women in the production of independent video games, but failed in its purpose. Toronto has become in recent years one of the most prolific cities in terms of game production, but the industry is still largely dominated by male programmers and initiatives oriented to women have been welcomed as inclusive and progressive. However, Fisher and Harvey argue that leaving the organisation of the event in the hands of those same male figures who currently dominate in the industry effectively put the guests in a position of difficulty: the learning activity was no more taking place between peers, but from a higher authority towards a certain number of guests.

Fisher and Harvey's analysis is relevant to the case of GamerGate, because it sheds light on how inclusivity and representation become political issues:

> Undertaking interventionist work to break down barriers is imperative to opening up a culture to the disenfranchised, but can also be potentially problematic when the existing and largely *invisible* power relations and structures that organize these relations are not explicitly recognized in the planning, implementation, or analysis of these interventions. Even the best-intentioned programs, practices, and people operate within the racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, and capitalist hegemonic orders they seek to topple. (2013, 29)

As the authors suggest, DEI was organised in a way that made it almost impossible to tell different stories about the meanings and values of game design. Telling different stories, and letting others tell their own story, is precisely the alternative practice that can destabilise the existing relations of power, while offering a context where to be good parasites. I propose in this respect that we should think about the presence of women less as a process of inclusion of diversities, and more radically as a rewriting of the histories of gaming.

There is a difference between thinking about women *in* games, and about women *and* games. Thinking in terms of women *in* games still assumes an abstract unified character of women, which is now allegedly stepping into the history of gaming, thus assuming also a source of power that grants legitimacy to enter such history. After all, letting someone *in* is a patriarchal gesture, as it assumes the presence of a gatekeeper who decides who or what is allowed to come in.[13] Roberta Williams's story is an example of the same problem, as she was allowed to enter but only as a token for those excluded and left outside by the dominant politics of video game historiographies.

Telling different stories is also a way for re-evaluating the parasites. Parasites are neither in nor out, but in-between and next-to. Parasites are not gatekeepers, but might live at the door, or at the window: at the margins and boundaries. Organisms *live with* parasites, and are parasites in their own turn. As I discussed in previous chapters in relation to my engagement with NikeFuel, and when looking at the stories of the independent developers and the hackers of PlayStation Network, once again I believe that the problem lies in the ethical question of finding good and better ways for gamers and games of living together.

[13] The observation does not mean to be a critique to the Women in Games initiative, discussed earlier on, which is instead very aware of the power relations at stake in issues of inclusivity. However, I suggest that the initiative could be more appropriately named with a conjunction, rather than a preposition.

Thus, thinking in terms of women *and* games, instead, means looking at the many different characters that are currently approaching games as players, designers, commentators and scholars (often, in fact, mixing and confusing these different roles). Women *and* video games can do very different things, contribute in a variety of ways that do not necessarily conform to the expected behaviours and interests of the official history of the medium. Roberta Williams, as much as Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian, cannot make much sense as women *in* the official history of the medium unless by confirming its patriarchal ideology that sees men as preceding and authorising the arrival of other characters. However, they make sense as women who approach digital games with their own perspectives and interests. While *being with* video games, they are effectively rewriting the history (and future) of gaming.

There are in fact many examples of women *and* games. I am thinking of the work of Anna Anthropy, who is at the same time a game designer, author and commentator of contemporary events of game culture. Anthropy also tries to present personal and intimate stories through her games, mostly made using open source production tools such as Twine, and released for free on her own website. In one of her most famous games, *Dis4ria*, she provocatively presents a playable account of her own life experience when she decided to pursue hormone replacement therapy. This is only one of the many examples where Anthropy uses game design to tell personal stories, stories that have no resolution, no morale, but that certainly share a sense of being in trouble.

What is most relevant in the production of Anna Anthropy is that she is not asking to be part of the official histories of gaming. In fact, she is writing her own history. Quite literally, as she also started her own archive of digital preservation of video games that she believes to be interesting for herself and worth saving – of course many of these games are rarely under the radar of the most widespread knowledge of gaming history. On Anna

Archive, she collects various sorts of video games: from abandoned software to pre-internet online gaming, and scanned copies of magazines, booklets, posters and role-playing books. Each element of the archive offers a glimpse of an alternative perspective on the history of game culture, one that defies the tales of technological progress and the fossilised representations of gender.

Anna Anthropy is not a woman *in* game culture, she is a woman rewriting her own personal history of the medium by doing, thinking, talking about games, and making them too. Anthropy's history of gaming is a history with no fathers, no mothers and no parents. She asks herself and takes responsibility for what to make and which games to preserve. Her history has no teleology, it has unknown solutions and takes multiple personal directions, as it involves her curator in the process of its own writing.

If there is one thing that we (gamers, players, scholars, authors and so on) could learn from GamerGate is that we need to take responsibility for what we necessarily are: parasites to gaming. And since we are, as we have always been, implicated in this game, as exploiters and exploited, we better find the most hospitable manner to play our role.

Chess and Shaw (2015) reach relevant conclusions in their account of how their research on GamerGate was misinterpreted by GamerGaters, generating a further wave of hate and conspiracy theories. They argue that the misunderstanding was caused by a blog post by Andrew Grant Wilson (2014), where the phrase 'we talked a big game at DiGRA about dismantling hegemonic masculinity'. The sentence was taken as evidence of a plan to influence video game culture from the ivory tower of academia. However, conspiracy theories say something about those who feel disempowered, as Chess and Shaw argue. Therefore, they conclude that the problem is certainly not just about dismantling masculinity,

but to embrace it too, as part of the same gesture: ‘we chose to both dismantle and embrace the hegemonic masculinity that has both given us an important cultural medium that we love, while simultaneously pushing us away from it’ (2015, 218). Once again, the ethical question emerges from acknowledging our marginal position, asking ourselves not just who we are, but how we are related to others.

To become parasites to gaming means rewriting its history, telling different stories and making *different differences* between the stories we already know. In the end we might ‘produce nothing’, but we might become better hosts and guests for whoever comes next.

Conclusion

At the Time of Writing

Writing the conclusions to a book brings to a certain amount of anxiety. While looking backwards at what I have been writing so far, I cannot help but thinking at what lies ahead. By the time I will submit this manuscript, the process of reviewing, editing and publication will take at least one year. By that time, all the examples and references that I have discussed in this book will be one year older, if not more, and might have been surpassed by more recent examples and events that might make my argument look obsolete. Writing takes time, and publishing takes even more.

On the other side there is a fast mutating gaming industry, which produces and consumes products at high speed. A video game can be considered old after a few months from its release. Games are replaced by sequels almost on a yearly basis, or get updated every few weeks. This is particularly evident in the market of smartphones games, which are typically modified by their original producers through frequent software updates. New production tools such as Twine make it possible to design a game and release it in a few hours. How can anyone write about gamers and games in such a rapidly changing scenario, while the time needed to write inevitably makes the text out of date by the time it is finished and published?

At the time of writing these conclusions, a new game has been released which seems to confuse once again the standards of what we consider to be a video game, and might force me to reconsider some of the arguments of my work. Pokemon Go, developed by Niantic, is presented by many sources as a new successful mobile app, already downloaded millions of

times across the globe, and which is expected to set new standards for the genre of Alternate Reality Games.

Pokemon Go develops the popular franchise of the Pokemon series, originally developed by Nintendo. Niantic was previously affiliated to Google, and worked with them at the game Ingress, which largely inspired the production of Pokemon Go. Pokemon Go builds on the game Ingress in its concept and design, and re-uses some of the graphical elements of the previous game. Both games are based on the same idea: players are supposed to play the game on their smartphones while having an internet connection and GPS enabled, move around the streets of their city in the real world, check at specific spots to collect elements of the game and challenge other players in designated areas. Pokemon Go represents a more recent example of the (not very successful, so far) genre of the Alternate Reality Games, games where the ludic environment blurs with the urban context where the players live. Pokemon Go re-adapts the pre-existing large number of fictional monsters (the Pokemon, short for pocket monsters) that players are supposed to catch, train, evolve and bring to battle with the Pokemon of the other players. The use of an already famous brand, which immediately attracted fans of the series from all over the world, has proven to be a particularly successful decision for Niantic. Thus, the immediate popularity of Pokemon Go is to be attributed to the combination of an old franchise with original elements of design.

The rapid success of the game has brought many to comment on the reasons behind its popularity, its possible future developments and the implications of the rise of Alternate Reality Games. The first reactions seemed concerned with the risks associated with walking around while keeping eyes on a screen. Initial articles released after the release of the game reported stories of players falling in pits, risking their lives walking near cliffs to catch a rare Pokemon, or getting robbed while adventuring alone at night (Serhan 2016; Bastow 2016;

Romano 2016). Omari Akil commented on Medium magazine about the risks for black people to play Pokemon Go in the United States, where police is easily called whenever a black person is seen walking around in circles around the same area (Akil 2016). Others commented on the supposed health benefits of playing Pokemon Go (Armanet 2016). The game brings video game players – stereotypically thought of as people with sedentary behaviours – to walk outside for long distances, in what could possibly become a game that makes them lose weight and increase their levels of vitamin D by exposing them to sunlight (Ryder 2016). Last but not least, we have been quickly warned (by no less than film director Oliver Stone) that the game collects private data about the user, potentially to resell them to private companies (Press Association 2016). Shops and cafes, in their own turn, are offered the opportunity to pay Niantic for having a rare Pokemon in their stores, thus attracting the desired kind of players/consumers towards their businesses.

In these not-always exciting stories on the novelty of Pokemon Go we are presented with scenarios in which the newness itself of the game is presented through narratives that are fairly familiar to whoever is already interested in digital gaming, and digital media in general. Questions around the benefits or damages of video games on our health have been around since the medium became popular. Atari products were told, in the late 1970s, to be causing damages to skin, muscles and brains of their players, and likely to raise an entire generation of teenagers with physical deformations caused by prolonged gaming sessions.[14] Conversely, the gamification trend has promoted the idea that video games might be beneficial for us, as they make us move – bodily and intellectually. Moreover, we are now getting accustomed

[14] Narratives around the effects of video games on our health have been explored by the Game Arthritis series, by artists Matteo Bittanti and IOCOSE (2011). In the series, the medical studies on the imagined effects of video games have been represented in a fictional and uncanny photographic documentation. Ultimately, the series poses the question of what are the conditions for saying the truth about the effects of video games on our bodies and minds. The project is available at htttp://gamearthritis.org (last access July 28, 2016).

with the idea that digital technologies invade our privacy, collect and resell our personal data, and ultimately with the idea that video games are business products, made to be either commercially released or to make profits from the users' behaviour as they play.[15]

There is a strange dissonance between the timing of my own writing and that of the narratives around new video game products. The rapid succession of releases and updates, and the many voices that tell us about what these changes are and what they mean, seem to imply their own failure while presenting themselves as new. These stories suggest that whatever is presented as new is not new at all, and that the same economic, cultural, social conditions for making and playing games are preserved in the apparently new scenario (Orland 2016). The future of gaming is narrated as being so similar to the present to be already *boring*: already experienced, always so-last-year.

It is significant that as soon as Pokemon Go has been released, articles have spread in the gaming community about what could be included in the first update of the game. Some argued that the possibility of exchanging Pokemon between users might become a feature, or maybe we could see rankings of players divided by geographical regions (Pope 2016; Frank 2016). As noted by Wendy Chun, the update is the necessary result of the accelerating cycles of use and production of digital products that imply that users' habits must face their own periodic crisis. Thus, everything must always 'update to stay the same', to be immediately re-written and transformed into another cycle of 'habit + crisis' (Chun 2016). Pokemon Go makes no exception, and the imagined crisis of the game has been narrated (one might say 'premediated', Grusin 2010) as soon as the game was released, expecting it to disappoint

[15] As I am writing, a digital company is already combining all these stories about health and privacy into a new business opportunity. PokeFit is a new app which connects the data collected by Pokemon Go and visualises information for the user who wants to get fitter and healthier. Indeed, the same data is then re-sold to other companies for marketing purposes (Chang 2016).

even before it could exist. Or, more radically and tragically, the failure of Pokemon Go has been seen as necessary for its own existence.

At the time of writing, there seems to be already nothing that we have not heard, about a video game released only a few days ago. How can writing cope with these rapid and repetitive cycles of excitement and boredom, which are so common and possibly intrinsic in video game and digital culture? The tales of technological innovation appear to be out of time: these repeat the same questions and answers, offering us very similar narratives that become quickly predictable, to the point that it takes only one or two days to exhaust any possibility of what Pokemon Go can mean for us - or any other product which irrupts in the market and is welcomed as having elements of originality. The medium of the video game is presented by these stories as orbiting in a vacuum, a space where nothing matters and everything has already been seen.

In the project outlined in the introduction, I offered an approach to the study of video games which I named Creative Game Studies. Ultimately, I believe that Creative Game Studies can be a method for thinking of interventions within game culture as organised around the timing of writing. Creative Game Studies is made of interventions that use to their own advantage the dissonant pace and rhythm that differentiates the practice of writing from the cadence of the stories of progression and crisis of the medium of the video game. Indeed, these cyclical stories of the medium are written, too, but the timing of their writing is made to disappear by presenting these stories as if they belonged to nowhere, and had no time in particular.

In the introduction I presented Creative Game Studies as *intuitive*, *timely*, *performative*, *ethical*, *anti-authoritarian* and *anxious*. Ultimately, the notion of *being creative* sums them all. Being creative appears to be an imperative nowadays for anyone who lives

within a neo-liberal economy (and some may argue that anyone really means everyone, as there seems to be no outside to neo-liberalism). However, creativity also implies involvement and participation – two aspects which are instead brought to disappear in the understanding given in the context of neo-liberal economies, where being creative mostly means becoming a productive individual capable of adapting at the expense of other (thus, it mostly means being alone). Creativity as participation and involvement leads to a mode of writing which pays attention to the where-and-when of the act of enunciation. It also means being ethically responsible for those people and things we write about, and with. It inscribes writing in the environment, thus making it performative and constitutive of the reality surrounding the text. It questions the dualisms and categories of the common-sense discourses around technologies, and the sources of power that grant them legitimacy and authority. Finally, it means being anxiously at stake in the process of writing.

I have evoked the notion of creativity in this book when looking at the narratives of engagement (chapter 1) and independence (chapter 2), at the notion of network (chapter 3), archaeology (chapter 4) and at the parasite (chapter 5). These notions have been brought about to problematise my own presence in the text, to discuss in terms of relationships rather than objects and responsibilities rather than agencies. Through Creative Game Studies we can start playing again *with* video games: in their company, while making them and transforming ourselves.

Re-evaluating the act of writing is not just a way of praising my own work, as writer rather than developer, programmer, or gamer. At the time of writing, more and more students decide to take academic courses on game design and development. Creative Game Studies is also a method to remind them that the false opposition between producing and studying, doing and thinking, is harmful and stupid, as it underestimates thoughts and words in their

performative potential, and ultimately frustrates and denies the process of self-transformation that is involved in the act of making a game.

In Pokemon Go, while the game is loading, we are warned by a message that asks us, essentially, not to kill ourselves while playing the game: 'Remember to be alert at all times. Stay aware of your surroundings.' With a gentle paraphrasing, I have been trying in this book to be alert *of* all times: the different times and timings of the narratives of the industry, of the act of playing, and the time of thinking and writing about video game culture. In order to do this, it is crucial to be alert of one's surroundings, and to be present in the environment rather than looking at it from distance. Being creative means being involved, and to be aware that we are and have always been 'implicated in the game, […] caught by the game, […] from the very beginning at stake in the game' (Derrida 1980, 248).

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