

THE QUESTION OF VIDEO GAMING AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY

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Resumen: El videojuego es considerado como una actividad de ocio, sin otro propósito que generar goce en los videojugadores. Sin embargo, diseñadores como Molleindustria o Gonzalo Frasca entienden que el videojuego puede emplearse como una herramienta política de carácter formativo. El contenido de el videojuego político debería ser crítico a las condiciones socioeconómicas que atraviesan la vida ordinaria de los jugadores, e instigarlos a transformar políticamente sus circunstancias. A este tipo de videojuegos se les denomina videojuegos críticos. Por otra parte, acciones lúdicas como el “sequence breaking”, transgreden la idea en la cual los videojugadores se encuentran subordinados a accionar según las reglas y expectativas de los diseñadores de videojuegos. El ludólogo Espen Aarseth define este tipo de acciones como transgresivas y pueden considerarse como acciones políticas en tanto quiebran un orden que asume de antemano que los jugadores se encuentran subordinados a jugar de acuerdo a la voluntad de los diseñadores.

Palabras clave: Videojuego crítico, Juego transgresivo, Reparto de lo sensible

Abstract: Video gaming is usually considered a leisure activity with no other purpose than that of the players’ enjoyment. However, some game designers consider that video gaming can be a formative political activity that instigates players to transform their social circumstances. Game designers such as Molleindustria or Gonzalo Frasca consider that video games should contain critical messages to the socioeconomic circumstances that traverse players’ ordinary lives. This critical content is supposed to promote players’ political activism and transform them into social change agents; these kinds of games

should be considered as “critical video games.” On the other hand, gaming actions such as “sequence breaking,” transgress the assumptions that game designers rule and direct the players’ gaming experiences. Actions like these are what ludologist Espen Aarseth conceives as “transgressive play.” These kinds of gaming actions can be regarded as political in the sense that they transgress a distributive order, which assumes that gamers are constrained by the will and expectations of designers.

Keywords: Critical Video Games, Transgressive Play, Distribution of the Sensible

I. Video Games as a Critical Vehicle

Some game developers consider that video gaming can be a political activity. The condition is that they must contain messages that allow players to make sense of the political conditions that oppress them in their ordinary lives. Designers such as Molleindustria (2003) or Gonzalo Frasca (2001) have stated that video games should aim to provoke critical thinking that helps players comprehend and transform the social conditions that surround them. However, video gaming can be a political activity in a completely different and more profound way. There are players that, through actions like *sequence breaking*, break the designers’ rules and expectations. Actions like these are considered a kind of *transgressive play* (Aarseth, 2007). They can be regarded as political, not because of the messages that they put forth, but because they break with the logic that assumes that gaming experiences are constituted by and must remain within the boundaries established by game designers.

Video games that rely on political critique as a means for developing social activism should be regarded as *critical games*, that is, video games that aim to produce political transformation through showing the gamers the signs and conditions of sociopolitical oppression. Designers of critical games assume a causal link between showing gamers the hidden mechanisms of

social oppression and provoking in them the resolution to go out there and change their social circumstances. Thus, critical game designers aim to transform the gaming activity, traditionally considered as “unproductive” (Bataille, 1987, p.28), into a means for political discussion, formation, and social change instigator.

The definitions provided for critical games echo what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière defines as *critical art*. For Rancière, critical art refers to those art expressions that intend to create “awareness of political situations leading to political mobilization” (Rancière, 2006a, para.24). Underlying critical art “[...] is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes [...] us to oppose the system of domination” (Rancière, 2010a, p.135). Critical art operates under the assumption that spectators are predisposed to be affected in the ways the artists intended. This assumption compels artists to instrumentalize works of art for a “higher purpose,” transforming spectators into agents of political change. Critical games also operate under the same assumptions.

For the Italian critical game designer, Paolo Pedercini, leader of the video game designers collective, Molleindustria, video games content are a manifestation of the dominant social narratives in which designers are immersed. While playing video games, gamers (or players) reinforce those dominant narratives without questioning them. On the contrary, for Molleindustria, video games should aim to be “...media objects able to criticize the status quo” (Molleindustria Manifesto, 2003, para.4), with messages that are “radically” other than those belonging to the ruling class (para.15). In Molleindustria’s own words, videogames should encourage the *emancipatory potential of play* (para.15). Through ludic projects such as *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), Molleindustria encourages gamers to emancipate themselves from their ordinary approach to consumer products, to one that recognizes the suffering and the labor exploitation concretized in products like an iPhone.

Phone Story was launched in 2011 for the iOS App Store. It proposed to gamify the “dark side of your favorite phone” (Molleindustria, 2011, para.1). That is, to make a game of the hidden exploitation process behind the production of iPhones. The game is a ludic reaction to labor exploitation reports and

high suicide rates among Foxconn's employees (Shenzhen, China), leading manufacturers and assemblers of iPhone components. The game consists of four interactive scenes. The first introduces us to the coltan mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo, coltan being a mineral necessary for iPhone production. In those mines players must whip the flesh out of children to increase their mineral extraction rate or so called productivity. Then we proceed to the rescue of suicidal employees who jumps from the rooftops of Foxconn City facilities, where iPhones are assembled. In the third interactive scene we impersonate an Apple Store employee. Manipulating the character we must supply the iPhone demand to consumers who come running to satisfy their Apple brand cravings. In the final scene we participate in the process of waste processing and electronic recycling in some unknown place in Pakistan. *Phone Story* recounts the birth, life, and death of iPhones and the socioeconomic exploitation that accompanies production of its components. The game was designed exclusively for iOS format, so it was only playable on iPhones. Molleindustria's intentions through *Phone Story* were to transform the iPhone in our hands into an object of political reflection.

At an approximate cost of two dollars in the App Store, Molleindustria intended to educate about the hidden exploitation behind consumer products and raise funds for SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior) (Ricking, 2012, para.7). SACOM is a non-profit Hong Kong-based organization that monitors and denounces labor exploitation conditions faced by Southern China's manufacturing belt workers. The game was taken out of distribution after four days because Apple understood that it violated certain regulations for its apps. The explicit representation of child abuse and the promise that the profits generated from its sale would be donated to a non-profit entity are inadmissible according to App Store regulations. The game would end up being distributed in Android format and can currently be played online for free at: <http://www.phonestory.org/game.html>.

Phone Story is a sample of the work and goals of Molleindustria. Molleindustria proclaims to exercise *cultural sabotage* (cultural jamming), which refers to "[...] any form of

jamming in which tales told for mass consumption are perversely reworked” (Dery, n.d, para. 44). Molleindustria’s projects coincide with this definition since they conceive their activity as one that “[...] re-combines symbols, media and culture [...] for the subversion of advertising and brand culture.” (Molleindustria, n.d.-a, para. 15). The groups or individuals who exercise cultural sabotage or jamming are named *cultural guerrillas*. One of the objectives that Molleindustria has as a cultural guerrilla is to make the exploitation of late capitalist society visible through irony, instigating the reflection of other possible approaches to consumer products. That is to say, making the consumer capable of recognizing the implicit exploitation behind the products they consume. Irony as a weapon takes preponderance because cultural guerrillas do not condemn technological development by proclaiming an atavistic pre-industrialized past; rather, irony makes visible the possibilities of technological products as a tool for awareness. Molleindustria understands that: “We have to be aware that we are inside the market and there is no outside.” (Molleindustria, n.d.-a, para.15). They ironically insert themselves into market dynamics through games like *Phone Story*, denouncing late capitalist dynamics that can be understood as exploitative of human life. Pedercini emphasizes that he does not want the games he makes under Molleindustria to be considered part of an underground movement; instead, he inserts them into mass distribution platforms to show a point of view contrary to the dominant ones (Molleindustria, n.d.-a, para. 2). Therefore, Molleindustria sees video games as an opportunity for political reflection, subverting the notion that gaming is a mere leisure activity (Molleindustria, 2003).

Phone Story is an example of what we should consider as a critical video game. Critical video games are those that aim to mobilize the players to transform their social circumstances. Critical video game designers utilize the video gaming activity, one usually considered an activity of leisure and enjoyment, as a means to make the players aware of the sociopolitical conditions that surrounds them outside the ludic sphere (that space generated between the player and the game software). These kinds of games intend to mobilize gamers outside the limits of the ludic sphere and provoke changes in the social sphere.

Gamers are instigated to move from the “passivity” of gaming through messages that allow them to become “active”, questioning and transforming their sociopolitical circumstances.

Similar to critical video games, for Jacques Rancière critical art is defined as those expressions that seek to raise awareness about the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the viewer into an actor aware of the transformation of the world (Rancière, 2011, p.59). For Rancière, critical art has as its purpose to show the stigmas of domination, aiming to transform the viewer into an opponent of the dominant system. Critical art maintains as evident the passage from cause to effect, from intention to result (Rancière, 2010b, p.56). In the same way, critical video games maintain as evident the “passage from cause to effect”. Critical game designers assume beforehand that players will transform their social conditions owing to the content of their videogames.

For critical game designers and critical artists as well, there is a supposed “natural” order (Rancière, 2010a, p.139) where video games and arts are understood as an expression of the feelings and thoughts of its creators; on the other hand, spectators and gamers are supposed to be affected as artists and designers intended. A “natural” order is supported by so-called evidences, like these ones: designers create game rules, and gamers are those that play by the rules, so gamers are directed and will be affected as the designer intended. Gamers are supposed to realize the will and intention of designers, that is: playing and absorbing the messages and critiques to later apply them in the social sphere. For Molleindustria video gamers should be considered as “video gamed” (2003, para.15), meaning that gamers only play between the possibilities that game rules enable. While the rules hold them, the “video gamed” subjects are supposed to absorb through the screen the values and narratives present in video games without questioning them.

Beneath the political intentions of critical video games lies a consensus that assumes that designers are in a privileged position compared to gamers. While designers make the rules that constitute a game, gamers only execute beneath the possibilities of such rules. For Molleindustria gamers should transcend that condition of being “video gamed,” in favor of one that recognizes that no game is ideologically neutral, and that

every game is an expression of the dominant social narratives in which designers are immersed. Then, thanks to the content of critical games such as *Phone Story*, gamers should transcend from the “passivity” and alienating experience of gaming to the “activity” involved in being an agent of social transformation.

That idea that considers video gamers as “video gamed” allows designers such as Molleindustria to think that game designers are those properly able to communicate them politically subversive messages. While the gaming screen captures gamers, designers should instigate gamers with subversive messages. This “game ruled” condition of gamers appears to be sufficient to establish guarantees of the effects the critical games should produce. Designers seem to “know” beforehand the qualities and capacities of gamers: gamers are those that play by the designers’ rules, so video games are supposed to affect them in the way the designer intended. This constricted identity of gamers is properly called by ludologist Espen Aarseth (2007) as the *implied player*. The implied player refers to “a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to exercise its effect” (p.132). Similar to the “video gamed” notion employed by Molleindustria, the implied player refers to the dominance of designers’ rules over the gaming experience of players.

All critical video games work inside a *critical logic*: if gamers are those constrained by the rules and expectations established by designers, only designers are responsible for the political emancipation of gamers. Critical art operates under a similar critical logic. For book reviewer Hal Foster (2013), critical art “[...] depends on its own projection of a passive audience that it then presumes to activate” (para.9). In the logic where critical art operates, the spectators’ capacities are “passive” and of less value respective to those of the artist. Critical artists feel the responsibility of “activating” spectators, making them agents of social change. For critical artists art should not be mere entertainment, but a medium for political discussion and social change. Critical game designers as well, considered themselves as those who have the capacity to “activate” gamers and transform the energy they waste in gaming in to means for political change. For Puerto Rican technology philosopher Héctor Huyke, there is an implicit contradiction in the

statements and purposes of critical games, “[...] *el videojuego crítico lleva en sí una contradicción. Trata de liberar al jugador haciendo uso de su docilidad y promovéndola*” (“Critical video games are in themselves contradictory. They intend to liberate the player through its critical stance and they do so by making use and even promoting the player’s docility”). Critical game designers try to emancipate the gamers while assuming their dominance over the gamers’ activity. What a contradiction!

For Jacques Rancière (2010a), this critical logic manifests an a priori distribution of capacities and incapacities (p.18). Designing activity is supposed to have the power to influence the players, while gaming is just a waste of time. Designers seem as those capable, and gamers as those incapable. These capacities and incapacities are attached to each identity beforehand, and we should refer to this as a *distribution of the sensible*. For Rancière a distribution of the sensible, should be understood as an “[...] order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or being ruled” (p.139). In the distribution of the sensible where video games operate, designing has more value than gaming, and designers have power over the gaming experience of the players.

2. Becoming Designers

Another proposal of video games as a means for political critique and social transformation belongs to Uruguayan game designer Gonzalo Frasca. In his thesis, *Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means for Critical Thinking and Debate* (2001), Frasca states that political video games should not provide gamers critical content, but allow gamers to express properly what they consider to be the conditions that affect them in their ordinary lives. For this to happen, gamers should be allowed to manipulate the elements present in the game to narrate the problems that affect their communities. Moreover, Frasca contemplates that designers should allow gamers to modify the game codes, allowing them to generate new gaming elements for an accurate representation of the conflicts that traverse their social lives. Instead of designers giving gamers a set of prearranged political discourses and solutions, players should be the ones that elaborate, discuss, and search for

possible solutions to the problems that traverse their respective communities. Gamers may modify and generate their own narratives, sharing them later with other gamers. While playing these modified games, other players are expected to comprehend and feel the social problems that affect others and eventually propose possible political solutions. Designers should designate and moderate virtual forums where gamers can share and discuss their creations.

Frasca favors the simulation game genre as one that has the necessary characteristics to create his political media project. In simulation games as *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) gamers generate their own stories by creating and manipulating characters and scenarios. However, Frasca does not consider this as sufficient. Players should be able to create elements not previously supplied by the designer, or modify those present in the game. Basic principles of coding also appear as a necessary skill.

Frasca considers problematic the classic structure of videogames where gamers play by the rules and scenarios as planned by the designer. It seems as if gamers are only there to actualize the designer's expectations by following their rules. Frasca considers that the classic structure of video games resembles what German dramaturge Bertolt Brecht defines as *Aristotelian Theater*. For Brecht, traditional drama narcotizes the masses submerging them in representation, without allowing spectators to generate a critical attitude to what is represented on stage. Aristotelian theater or traditional drama as defined by Brecht, promotes the alienation of spectators: spectators seem to be only witnesses of what is happening, passively absorbing the content present in the theater scene, and being affected in accordance with the will and desires of dramaturges and actors.

On the contrary, Frasca's political ludic project intends to employ techniques present in the so-called *Theater of the Oppressed* created by Brazilian dramaturge Augusto Boal. The Theater of the Oppressed "...combines theater with games in order to encourage critical debate over social, political and personal issues"(Frasca, 2003, p.228). Of all the techniques the Theater of the Oppressed employs, Frasca emphasizes the *Forum Theater* technique. Forum Theater affords spectator the

role of actors. Spectators suggest and interfere in the theatrical scene searching for plausible solutions to the problems presented on stage. The execution of this technique is supposed to generate ontological changes in spectators' qualities and capacities, so that through proposing solutions and acting they become "spect-actors." Every Forum Theater presentation finishes with a discussion about the suggested solutions to what was shown in the scene.

As in Forum Theater, Frasca understands that gamers should be allowed to modify and intervene with what is showing in the game screen, to narrate their own problems in search for political solutions. For Frasca, gamers should transcend a supposed "video gamed" condition where they only play and absorb the content as stated by designers. By designing and modifying actions, there should be ontological changes in the qualities and capacities of the gamers, given that they become designers.

The insistence that gamers should become designers is problematic in the sense that Frasca's logic devalues the qualities and capacities of gamers and instead recognizes as valuable only those capacities assumed of the designers. The activity of designing is deemed a priori to be more valuable than traditional gaming. Frasca considers that gamers should transcend that "passive" condition of being a mere video gamer and become empowered by the gaming experience through designing. Designers should promote that gamers become designers, generating some kind of equality between both.

The *Videogame of the Oppressed* should be considered a critical video game media project: it starts from a set of a priori assumptions that consider that gamers perform a "passive" role contrary to the designers who are "active," and who should try to "activate" the others. The *Videogame of the Oppressed* has a clear purpose: provoking gamers to transcend the ludic sphere, to get up from their couches and generate political changes in the social sphere. Gonzalo Frasca seems to know beforehand his capacities and qualities as a designer and those belonging to the players. That is why he seems capable of anticipating the effects that his video game project could provoke in the gamers' psyche, and hence, the socio-political changes that he could generate through his game. The process for gamers' political

emancipation seems to be double: first, players should be able to design their own narratives and then, with the knowledge generated by the game's discussion, intervene and modify their social circumstances.

Regardless of their differences, the ludic projects of Gonzalo Frasca and Molleindustria operate under a same distributive order that depreciates gamers and their leisure activity and recognizes designers and their work as valuable. For Molleindustria, game design is a power tool that can affect players and their appreciation of social circumstances. For Frasca it is only through becoming designers that gamers can break the alienated circuit involved in the gaming activity. Both pretend to utilize gaming activity as a means for social change. They understand that the content of their video games should aim to transcend the ludic sphere and provoke, through gamers, changes in the social sphere.

Critical video games work under assumptions similar to those Jacques Rancière (2010a) termed the *pedagogical model of the efficacy of art*. This artistic model assumes an a priori link between intention and consequences (p.135). Many artists suppose that they can know beforehand the effect their works will produce in spectators because they assume an a priori capacity to affect and a predisposition of spectators to be affected by their will. Similarly, critical video game designers anticipate the political effects their games should produce because they assume a capacity to affect and a predisposition of gamers to be affected by their will. If gamers are those constrained to the screen and "passively" affected by the designers' will, critical video games should provoke the desired effect on them. Under this critical logic, gamers are considered incapable of establishing a critical distance with what is shown on the screen. This distributive order of qualities and capacities is given the name of "distribution of the sensible." A distribution of the sensible is an "[...] order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or being ruled" (Rancière, 2010a, p.139). This distributive order determines who is capable and who is not. The critical narratives of Molleindustria and Gonzalo Frasca exercise a sort of police order that divides between who is who, and who is capable of what. Designers and gamers participate in the gaming activity according to their

supposed capacities. Designers and gamers are “...tied to specific modes of doing, to places where these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations” (p.36). As it follows, designers work, and gamers play. Designers can provoke gamers to change their social circumstances, while players are affected as expected by designers.

The characteristics that define a critical video game enter in conflict with those that define properly what a “game” is. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, as for the Dutch ludic thinker Johan Huizinga, gaming activity occurs in a sphere apart from the course of ordinary life (Gadamer, 1991, p. 67; Huizinga, 1943, p. 24). When a subject assumes the role that game rules expect of him, a space of its own that we should call the “ludic sphere” is generated. In this proper space or sphere, gamers move and react according to the possibilities that game rules allow. A game is also understood as a movement not linked to any end (Gadamer, 1991, p.67; Huizinga, 1943, p. 53). Gaming actions do not have any correlation with an end because they are carried out for the pleasure that the activity itself generates (Huizinga, 1943, p.23). Gaming is also considered an activity outside the enclosure of need and utility (Huizinga, 1943, p.41). Both Molleindustria’s and Gonzalo Frasca’s ludic proposals pretend to instrumentalize video games as a kind of pedagogical tool with a clear objective: to transcend the ludic sphere and provoke political changes in the social sphere. Both of them seem to consider that gaming’s traditional qualities as an activity with no end or utility are alienating.

3. Breaking the Rules

Some gaming actions can be considered political without them having critical messages about gamers’ socio-political circumstances. These gaming actions do not intend to transcend and provoke changes in the social sphere; instead, their main purpose is to generate new ways of ludic enjoyment. These political gaming actions are carried out by the pleasure they properly generate. Gaming modalities as those of *sequence breaking* or *blindfolded gaming* can be considered as political because they break a distribution of the sensible that assumes

that gamers are “passive” agents that play and fulfill the designers’ expectations as stated by their game rules.

In actions like *sequence breaking*, gamers manifest their capacity to generate gaming modalities that transgress the designers’ rules and expectations. Sequence breaking refers to a modality where gamers find virtual glitches that allow them to break the order of events established to make progress in a particular video game. Most video games have stipulated a sequence of events, that is, certain actions and scenarios precede and follow others. For example, gamers must first finish level 1-1 to proceed to level 1-2. Certainly, Takashi Tezuka and Shigeru Miyamoto, design directors of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo EAD, 1991), assumed that gamers would play in the sequential order established in their rules. In this game, the player must first collect a series of items that eventually allow him to access new sections. This sequential order commits the player for about thirty hours or several days. However, gamers and collectives as Glitch Buster (2014) manage to reach the game’s end in around three minutes. The members of Glitch Buster use specific errors or glitches in the virtual code of the video game that allow them to break the sequential order of the game.

Sequence breaking is a game modality that breaks the game sequence, often to finish it in the shortest time possible. For this purpose, sequence breakers use glitches in the game code. This transgressive action manifests a new game modality not previously prescribed by designers, and it enunciates a new gaming subject: the *sequence breaker*. From sequence breaking emerge new competitive modalities: gamers begin to challenge each other to finish certain video games in the shortest time possible by finding new glitches, which is appropriately called *speed gaming*. Players like sequence breakers usually meet in forums like GlitchCity, exchanging information about newly found glitches and publishing their achievements (new records). Sequence breakers manifest their gaming achievements on the Internet and invite others to explore their own gaming capacities.

While playing through glitches, gamers make visible other ways of gaming that are not stated by the game designer’s rules and expectations. These actions break a distribution of the

sensible in which gamers are understood to be at the whims of the designers. Of those actions emerge other gaming identities like that of the sequence breaker. Sequence breakers question a submissive identity adjudged beforehand, showing that they can properly generate new gaming ways without being told so. This gaming modality is political not because of the messages the game puts forth, but because they show that gamers' qualities and capacities cannot be adjudged beforehand. For Jacques Rancière (2010), politics invents new subjects and forms of collective enunciation (p.139) that break or enter in conflict with a previous order of things. Sequence breakers breaks' a previous order that understood them as constrained to game rules. These kinds of actions generate a rupture with the previously assumed competences of the subjects (p.63). Sequence breakers manifest their own capacity to determine how they will play: by the rules or by breaking them. We must assume that at the moment of turning on a console and grabbing the controller, players are the ones who decide the game modality or objectives of their gaming session.

Sequence breaking is an action that can be understood as a form of *transgressive play*. Danish ludologist Espen Aarseth (2007) conceives the notion of "transgressive play" to make sense of those actions that are not part of a video game's intended repertoire (p.132). Transgressive modalities such as sequence breaking are possible through game glitches (code errors) that plague complex softwares like video games. For gamers, those glitches seem to have an intrinsic potential for their creativity (p.132). For Espen Aarseth, transgressive play can be understood as a "gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game," a "...way for the played subjects to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself." (p.132). For Aarseth, gamers are played by the game, and while doing transgressive actions, they break from this subjugation. However, that subjugated identity must be questioned because there is never a guarantee, as critical game assumes, that players will play as stated by the designer. What transgressive play should properly express is the players' creativity and freedom to generate new gaming modalities.

Another gaming modality that we should consider as transgressive is that of blindfolded gaming. In this modality

gamers renounce to their visual sense; instead, they approach gaming through other senses like hearing, and exercise their memories about the configuration of a particular game stage. This modality does not break the game rules, but it certainly breaks with the designer's visual expectations while transforming a video game into a kind of "audio game."

The first documentation of this modality dates back to January 2010 when Andrew G. (a member of the gaming collective: Classic Games Done Quick) decides to play *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) blindfolded. This moment can be viewed at the following link: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpCErh7Qkw4>). Despite not surpassing the first level, Andrew G. manifested a new game modality, and his actions enunciated a new kind of gamer: the *blindfolded gamer*. Andrew G. is not necessarily the first to do such actions, but he was the first to document such a gaming approach. Andrew G.'s actions transformed the notion we had about video gaming partly as a visual activity, transforming it into an auditory one. Incidentally, these actions also enunciated the blindfolded gamer as a ludic subject. Currently, blindfolded gaming modality is considered to be of a competitive nature, in which players or collectives challenge each other to finish certain video games in the shortest time possible while blindfolded. This modality acquires "epic dimensions" in the world of video games as shown in the documentary *A History of Blindfolded Punch-Out!* (Summoning Salt, 2019).

Punch-Out! (Nintendo) is a game created in 1987 where the player must defeat a series of enemies using boxing movements. The game, which was already more than two decades old, seemed to have exhausted all its recreational modalities, until gamer Sinister1, inspired by the actions of Andrew G, decided in 2014 to play *Punch-Out!* blindfolded. Sinister1 was defeated before the final boss with a record of 21 minutes and 38 seconds. In 2018 mPAP, member of the gaming collective "Awesome Games Done Quick," broke this previous record finishing the game in 21 minutes 26 seconds.

Another gaming activity of a transgressive nature is that of the "two players/one controller." In this competitive modality players share a single game controller at the same time, which requires coordination between both players. While the player on

the left is in charge of moving the game avatar, the player on the right must perform the actions corresponding to each of the buttons on his side of the controller. This modality can be combined with other modalities to generate new ways of playing; such was the case when gamers, Sinisteri and Zallardi, decided to get together in January 2020 to play *Punch-Out!* blindfolded and share a single controller. Both managed to finish the game setting a record of 23 minutes and 39 seconds, a record that several players are currently trying to beat.

These modalities: sequence breaking, blindfolded gaming, and that one when two players share at the same time a single controller, subvert our assumptions about how gamers approach and play video games. These actions, in turn, enunciate a multiplicity of players' subjectivities that contradict the expectations and rules of the designers. Gamers seem capable of generating gaming modalities that break the game rules and transgress that identity imposed on them which assume that they are passive agents subject to the will of the designers.

Conclusion

Transgressive gaming can be properly considered as political gaming actions. These actions do not intend to change the social sphere, instead, they preserve the ludic sphere. While gamers are having fun with these modalities, they break a distribution of the sensible which designates beforehand that gamers always follow the game rules. In these transgressions, multiple identities are enunciated, questioning a priori qualities and capacities assigned to gamers.

What differentiates the notion of critical games from transgressive play, is that critical games operate upon a prearranged distribution of identities and their respective capacities and qualities. Critical games are based on the idea that players are constrained by game rules, so the responsibility of critical designers is to contribute to players' emancipation through political messages that allow them to change their social circumstances. On the other hand, transgressive actions like sequence breaking show that gamers can make their own gaming experiences beyond those intended by the designer.

These transgressive actions put into question the a priori idea that gamers are constrained by the designer's will.

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