New York, 1933. An enormous gorilla falls off the top of the Empire State Building. This scene has long exerted a powerful grip on the collective imagination, to be reiterated in the sixties by Andy Warhol in a few episodes of the series Death and Disaster, and more recently in the media representation of the Twin Towers disaster.

New York, 2005. The same gorilla falls off the same skyscraper. This time however we do not see the modernist silhouette of the Empire State Building, beside which even the giant beast looked like a speck in the sky. This time we see the scene through the eyes of the lead character, who has also climbed up to the top of the building in a last-ditch attempt to save the soft-hearted monster.

You immediately start wondering why Peter Jackson, a great admirer of the original Kong, decided to leave that magnificent image out of his remake and opt instead for a powerful but decidedly less vivid subjective view. There has to be a reason for it in the story. In the first King Kong the lead character was a victim of the beast’s love, while in the remake it is more of a reciprocal thing. The psychological side plays an important role in the story, so it is therefore natural that the viewer is presented with the character’s point of view. But this is not enough to justify depriving us of the image we have been waiting for throughout the whole movie. When watching this remake the trained eye of the movie buff has to deal with the “insider’s eye view” that videogames have got us accustomed to, and his or her expectations are foiled.

The need to experience a story from the inside has taken over from our desire to identify with powerful iconography. The Passion of the Christ by Mel Gibson (2004) springs to mind: the tableaux of the passion, the definitive images of this story, are sacrificed in order to ensure that we feel the suffering of Christ in first-person.

I have chosen this example not in order to show that film, which has played such a decisive role in the development of the videogame, is now in turn being profoundly influenced by the younger medium. There is no need to. Peter Jackson’s King Kong is clearly game-like, as the Wachowski brothers’ trilogy was before it. What I want to look at is the more general picture: how videogames are conditioning the aesthetics and registers of other media.

Game Aesthetics
How videogames are transforming contemporary art
by Domenico Quaranta

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Info-Aesthetics
What comes after modernism, postmodernism, and new media?
Welcome to INFO-AESTHETICS. INFO-AESTHETICS is not only the aesthetics of data. INFO-AESTHETICS is the new culture of INFORMATION society. INFO-AESTHETICS is already here. Do you see it?

The fact that digital media are slowly but inexorably transforming aesthetics and our tastes is not a new thing. In Synopsis,
the Italian academic Fulvio Carmagnola wonders: “So is there something like a set of tastes or aesthetic sensitivities linked to the advent of the new media? And what are its main characteristics?” His response revolves around four points. Firstly, in the new media the act of aesthetic contemplation is replaced by immersion, which on the one hand disorients, and on the other creates a feeling of omnipresence, evident in the “user as demiurge” aspect of videogames. Secondly, hypertextuality does away with the distinction between the roles of author and spectator, generates confusion between various levels of experience, subjectivity and memory. Thirdly, the visual takes over expression, and destroys any sense of temporal depth. Lastly, the practice of aesthetic contemplation is replaced with figures cruising, running or hopping around as inhabitants of an electronic Flatland, thus anticipating and thus naturally arousing “the reassuring cat.

The Aesthetics of Videogames

Aesthetics pervades all media, and games are no exception.

Videogames play a decisive role in the advent of this new “aesthetics of informationalism”, as the number of games and Game Art projects included in Manovich’s as yet unfinished project shows. Moreover, I am convinced that videogames are capable of conditioning its forms and declinations and enriching it with their icons and symbols. In other words, Game Aesthetics is an important part of Info-Aesthetics. This importance is bound up in the history of the new media. It is a fact that the videogames industry, and the economy it has given rise to, plays a decisive role in the development of the new media, and has conditioned its history. As Bunter and Grusin (1999) note, «soon the arcade games became fully two-dimensional, with figures cruising, running or hopping around as inhabitants of an electronic Flatland, thus anticipating and thus naturally refashioning the desktop into a place as evolved in the eighties».

Videogames industry has stimulated research into the creation of interfaces as photorealistic as possible, and the construction of 3D, navigable spaces that gain familiarity with it and its logic. The videogames industry, and the economy it has given rise to, plays a decisive role in the development of the new media. It is a fact that the videogames industry, and the economy it has given rise to, plays a decisive role in the development of the new media. The advent of the mass media around the mid-twentieth century gave rise to new symbols, new legends and a new cultural interface. The result is that today it is perfectly natural for a game-player to think, in agreement with Aly Ray Smith, that reality is composed of eighty million polygons a second, at the same time, Manovich’s statement that “the visual culture of the computer era is cinematographic in appearance, digital in the quality of the material and mathematically (that is guided in the program) in its logic” is perfectly applicable to any videogame. To date the videogame is one of the most popular ways of approaching the new media and it is therefore natural that gain familiarity with it and its characteristics, such as modularity and variability, and forms like the database, through videogame entertainment.

Copying from Videogames, Is the Art of our Days

A videogame “artist” is not the one who creates a videogame, but someone who “copies” it. As well as a painter is not the one who “paints” it, a videogame “artist” doesn’t even play a videogame but he just extracts stuff from it. It’s easy and beautiful. The coolest thing to do is Art has long stopped being the privileged testbed for aesthetics and its evolutions: sectors like fashion, design and industrial culture often turn out to be more receptive, and at the same time more influential. This book attempts to do is look to contemporary art to test out the advent of this new aesthetic. We are staking a claim that the new media is changing art, which is once more becoming a culturally and socially influential field of experimentation. The various media revolutions throughout history have always left a profound mark on the development of artistic research. The advent of photography at the end of the nineteenth century completely changed the fate of painting; and the advent of the mass media around the mid-twentieth century gave rise to new symbols, new legends and a new...
collective imagination. But videogames are more than just another medium of expression, another way of constructing worlds or generating stories, and they are more than just a new source of material for the imagination, even though they are also both of these things. Like film and television in the days of Warhol, videogames have generated new collective legacies, new icons which have entered the iconographic repertoires of artists. In this sense the paintings of Mitos Manetas are the most evident examples of a new breed of Pop Art, with Super Mario instead of Elvis Presley, Lara Croft instead of Marilyn Monroe and the Sony Playstation in place of the tin of Campbell’s soup. Like comics in the days of Roy Lichtenstein, videogames have introduced a new style of representation, whose polygons replace printing grid lines and an isometric perspective takes over from Superman’s bird’s eye view. What’s more, videogames offer us new arenas of action, where we can spend an increasing portion of our daily lives, which makes the work of artists like the Italian Mauro Coeillion perfectly legitimate. Coeillion paints polygonal landscapes for game backgrounds with the same style he uses for real landscapes, and the same level of attention that Canaletto dedicated to the bridges, squares and gondolas of Venice. Or the work of Marco Cadoli, who enters into videogames and photo graphs events, exactly like an embedded reporter following other, no less virtual wars, such as the recent conflict in Iraq. Lastly, as a mass phenomenon, the world of videogames inevitably Launches its own fashions, like the Mediaeval look of MMORPG (which soon filtered into the real world, giving rise to a whole set of rituals and collective costume events, fertile terrain for Eddo Stern and his extraordinary sculptures. These Works transform this style to the computer itself, through a series of meetings, stories and worlds that would appear to have little in common with this cold, functional piece of “office equipment.” And it goes without saying that the world of videogames has its own regressive, nostalgic movements, like the passion for the era of the 8bit games that has given rise to a lively musical scene, or the urban invasions of the French artist Invader (who materializes the Space Invaders icon in public places, sometimes in subliminal form, but on other occasions decidedly more invasive), and many of the works in this book. The aesthetics of videogames leave the screen to infiltrate reality in many more of these (and many other) projects: in John Car mack (2004) Brody Condon pays homage to the inventor of Doom, building him a polygonal monument, the works of Russian collective AES+F use the style of fashion photography to make bold statements about how the media portrays violence, war and childhood; and the costume by the Swiss artist Shusha Nie derberger is designed to transform her body into an avatar.

Playing with Code

...game hacker artists operate as culture hackers who manipulate existing techno-semiotic structures towards different ends or, as described by artist Brent Stia Bauern, “who endeavor to get inside cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do.”

We have looked at videogames as a source for the imagination, and a new place – both in terms of a new living arena, a setting for life and action, and as a common place, cultural point of reference, a new source of trends and subcultures. This would be enough to enable us to decree that videogames have all the prerogatives for launching a new, powerful form of Pop Art, or ultrapop, as Matteo Bittanti describes the work of Mauro Coeillon. But besides all this, videogames also provide art with something infinitely more than a simple pop recording of its iconography, idiom and aesthetics: artists can actually create videogames or modify the software of existing games.

Videogame art is still an emerging sector, in view of the production costs of making a videogame able to compete with mainstream offerings. Moreover, in a day and age when many are beginning to acknowledge the artistic nature of videogames, and when some of the great game designers, such as Will Wright, are coming up with culturally complex products, with declared artistic intent, perhaps it is better to avoid using ambiguous terms like “videogame art”. There is however an interesting “alternative game design” scene, at times in the form of little games created in Flash or with other simple game design tools, and which often reveals a political intention to offer a form of counter-information, in opposition to the ruling ideology of mainstream videogames. There are also more complex, demanding objects (also in terms of production), which introduce alternative narratives or bypass gaming dynamics to focus on the creation of navigable virtual worlds and characters whose psychological development interests us more than their adventures.

Escape from Woomera (2004), for example, is a videogame developed by an independent Australian collective which uses the form of the first-person 3D adventure game to tell of the daily life of a detainee in one of the most criticized immigration reception and processing centers in Australia, that of Woomera. Meanwhile Waco Resurrection (2003), by the American collective c-level, enables the player, in the role of a “resurrected” David Koresh, to rewrite the history of the Waco massacre, which cost the lives of seventy-six members of the Branch...
Davidian sect in 1993, under fire from the FBI and American army. Acmipark (2001–03), by the Australian group Selektors, focuses on the creation of a virtual online world waiting to be explored and transformed into a stage for impromptu musical performances. And it is this field of “experimental game design” – which often involves artists but is targeted more at gamers than the art world – which has taken up the challenge to broaden the aesthetic horizons of the videogame, currently stifled by an overwhelming push towards photorealism.

One group which springs to mind is the European collective Tale of Tales, which came about from the work of two important exponents of digital art, Michael Samyn and Auriea Harvey (entropypixelper). The group, which recently produced The Endless Forest (2005), a virtual world where action is limited to a minimum and the pleasure of playing consists in exploring a dream-like universe, has been working on a project called 8 if for some years. It is a game designed to commercial distribution, innovative both from the point of view of the narrative – it is based on the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty – and gameplay, and from the aesthetic point of view. It takes 8D to a new level in terms of artistic sophistication, inspired by the Orientalism genre in vogue in nineteenth century art. This stylistic choice is also an ideological one, challenging both the proliferation of violent, low quality videogames, and art and society. I think that 8, like much of our previous work, is an attempt to bring the artistic experience to a wider audience. I think that modern art has reached a cul-de-sac... [...] we are trying to bring the artistic experience to a wider audience. I think that videogames are art. In most cases, bad quality art. But most art is bad quality art [...] The idea of creating a non-violent, non-competitive game which focuses on pleasure in itself is an ideological statement. The fact that it offers a positive image of a culture inspired by Islam is also not without ideological implications in this day and age. I would go so far as to say that creating a game that attempts to be aesthetically-pleasing is an ideological choice in itself. 8

But in order to get his or her hands on a videogame, an artist does not need to create one from scratch. Videogames are an editable medium, and behind their wonderful interfaces lie digital code and software. This means that in Game Art – this is the ugly term which most of the works in this book have ended up being defined as – we find the whole legacy of the impact of the web, hacking, software and IT on the consumption of contemporary art. The aesthetic consequences are just a small part of this impact, which has meant we have had to leave out a number of works that have played a decisive role in the history of Game Art, but the strength of which is not immediately evident in a single image. Editing mainstream videogames is an extremely complex cultural phenomenon, which arose around the mid-nineties following the extraordinary intuition of the company id Software to distribute Doom (1993) online as shareware. As Tillman Baumgärtel writes, «With Doom, a medium developed out of a game, an opportunity to create one’s own worlds. With Doom, id Software put a potent piece of software for creating three-dimensional spaces into the hands of its customers». In January 1994 a New Zealand student, Brendon Wyber, put the Doom Editor Unit in circulation. From that moment on, the idea of customizable games began to take hold, and became increasingly popular not only among users but also among mainstream producers, up to the point of developing virtual online worlds such as The Sims Online or Second Life, where the user’s creative input represents an important part of the gaming experience. Artistic modifications or patches may have a range of different aims: to personalize the interface of the game, integrating it with other sense systems; to protest against its ideology, or to deconstruct its interface, revealing the structure and conventions it is based on, and so on. In all of these cases what the artist does is work with the game’s algorithms – as Manovich intends it, not the code as such, but the deep cultural structure of the software. 18

As Anne-Marie Schleier observes, videogames are cultural constructions which can be manipulated to make them do things they were never originally designed to do. And Schleier, in collaboration with the American Brody Condon and the Catalan Joan Leandre, was responsible for one of the most formidable hacks that any videogame has ever been subjected to: Velvet Strike (2002) is a collection of pacifist graffiti daubed on the walls of the violent multiplayer game Counter-Strike. Aside from its undoubted political and ideological value – videogames are public places and as such subject to the same forms of social use and revitalization – the project also juxtaposes the videogame’s polygonal aesthetics with those of the graffiti, its symbols and icons.

Photorealism versus Abstraction

The photo-real push is almost as established a part of game culture as shooting or driving, and for some it is becoming just as tired. Maybe though, games have to push all the way to photo-realism before intentionally pushing away from it becomes more than a marginal pursuit. 20

However, with regards to aesthetics, I think that the “photorealism versus abstraction” dichotomy is the most comprehensible, enlightening key in which to interpret patches on videogames. As we have seen, videogames represent one of the most significant factors, together with film, in the wide-scale development of digital media towards photo-realism. This has not always been the case: the white rectangles of Peng, like the 8x8 pixel boxes in Super Mario Bros testify to that; and we can only hope that it will not last forever.

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The push for photorealism aims to make the sense of immersion in a story increasingly effective, whether it be in- teractive or not, and to render the gap between fantasy and reality harder to perceive. However, photorealism is a concept entirely alien to the deep-seated nature of the medium in which it is generated, which works with digital data and mathematical equations, and visualizes the images obtained by means of pixels. In this way, while the mainstream media embrace the long tradition of photorealism, it is no coincidence that almost all experimentation with software that aims to produce a visual output, like Generative Art, looks to the abstract tradition of the modernist period. In other words we appear to be looking at the usual conflict between a popular culture which from a classic car racing game (e.g. Gran Turismo) to a flight simulator (which works on Wolfenstein 3D) to Untitled Game 2003 (using Quake) and Joan Leandre, who worked first with a classical car racing game (retroyou R/c 2003) and then on a flight simulator (nuit de la mésange) 2003 to it. It is by Brody Condon, which with its six hundred and fifty polygons demonstrates how a technical limit can be transformed with the greatest degree of realism and is means of expression. In this sense it is symbolized by the monument to John Car- max by Brody Condon, which with its six hundred and fifty polygons demonstrates how a technical limit can be transformed into an artistic feature.

The artists who modify videogames would identify with this dichotomy. They are all inveterate gamers who entirely embrace the pop culture they work with, and their references to modern abstract art often contain a vein of typically postmodern irony. And this underlying ambiguity is what makes the art of the game patch so much more intriguing than much Software Art, which tends to barricade itself inside the usual unassail able ivory tower.

Game Art brings us many examples of projects which aim to use the powerful engines present in videogames in different ways, to create abstract images. The series of variations on the theme of JODI (from JODI) (which works on Wolfenstein 3D) to Untitled Game 2003 (using Quake) and Joan Leandre, who worked first with a classic car racing game (retroyou R/c 2003) and then on a flight simulator (nuit de la mésange) 2003, with results which range from the abstract to the surreal, are undisputed classics in the genre. The works in this book include one seminal project: q3apaint by the Australian artist Delire (Julian Oliver), where the bots of Quake III are used to paint informal pictures. As Lev Manov- icht comments: “Post-media aesthetics should adopt the new concepts, meta phors and operations of a computer and network era, such as information, data, interface, bandwidth, storage, stream, rip, compress etc.” Following this paradigm we could say that q3apaint is the visualization of a flow of purposefully altered data, just as Unreal Art by Alison Mealey is the visualization of a process, that process being a thirty minute ses sion of Unreal Tournament; and Rom Celor by Brent Gustafson is the mapping of all the data stored in a NES cartridge.

In opposition to this, some artists happily accept the challenge of photorealism and the cultural contaminations that this generates. So we get Palle Torsson, for example, who had already observed the analogies between the virtual environment of videogames and certain patterns of Tetris, or the isometric vision of the polygonal, isometric aesthetic of the gaming experi ence. Polygons, the limit to this form of realism held in check by processor capac ity and band width, become a stylistic ele ment, and isometry, a technique which makes real proportions in the very moment it attempts to reproduce them with the greatest degree of realism is means of expression. In this sense it is symbolized by the monument to John Car max by Brody Condon, which with its six hundred and fifty polygons demonstrates how a technical limit can be transformed into an artistic feature.

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Here and there we have seen the illus- 

trious ghosts of a pixellated, 2D past – 

Retro-Aesthetics

Hacking into Nintendo cartridges, and

But Cory Arcangel and Brent Gustafson

and unconscious.

the unruly force of instinct, the irrational

metrical abstractions – by unleashing

Western figurative art to the academic

ers – emerge. This should come as no

trasgressive reaction to the origins of the

It would be difficult to provide a better

definition of a new aesthetic paradigm.

(English translation by Anna Carruthers)

Notes


2 In L. Manovich, id.

3 In L. Manovich, Info-Aesthetics Sammly, Octo-


5 J. D. Boltier, and R. Grusin, Remediation: Under-


6 L. Manovich, The Language of New Media, The


8 In L. Manovich, “The Language of New Media”, quoted, p. 299.

9 In M. Manetas, Copying Is Videogame, is the art of our day, 2002-04, available online at

www.manetas.com/eti/videogames.html. See also E. Stern, “A Touch of Medievalism: Nar-

native, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing

Games”, 2000-02, In H. May, (ed.), Computer Games and Digital Culture Conference Proc-


10 See also E. Stern, “Game Plug-ins and Patch-es as Hacker Art”, in Crashing the Maze, curator’s

note, 10 July 1999, available online at www. spamspace.net/note.html.

11 M. Bittanti, “The after-pop gamescapes of Mauro Cenci”, February 2004, in metarview, www.metarview.net/week/Features CEO-

t/2001/02.html.

12 M. Bittanti, “cover Story”, in M. Bittanti, (ed.), The


13 www.escapefromwoomera.org/.

14 www.waco.o-level.co.uk/.

15 www.selectparks.net/acm/park.htm.

16 See D. Hayward, quoted.

17 D. Quaranta, “Il piacere del gioco vi salverà. Intervista a Tale of Tales”, in

Miss Marple, Janu-


www.missmarple.itenga/.

18 In T. Baumgärtel, “Modification, Abstraction,

Socialization. On Some Aspects of Artistic


19 In The Language of New Media Manovich, dis-

cussing the logic of databases, observes that

video games do not follow the logic of the

database, but appear to be more algorithm-

based. He then quotes Bolt’s trick, the creator

of The Sims: “playing the game is a continuous

loop between the user (viewing the outcomes

and inputting decisions) and the computer

(calculate outcomes and displaying them to

the user). The user is trying to build a mental

model of the computer model. According to

Manovich, this is another example of “trans-

coding”, namely computer code being trans-

formed into cultural code. See L. Manovich,

The Language of New Media, quoted, pp. 277-282.
Authors’ Biographies

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Matteo Bittanti is a PostDoc Researcher at University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on the cultural, social and theoretical aspects of emerging technology, with an emphasis on the interrelations of popular culture, visual culture, and the arts. He is the editor of videoludica: game culture, a series of books that examine videogames from a broad academic and critical perspective. He received a Ph.D in New Technologies of Communications from Libera Università di Lingue & comunicazion in Milan, Italy. Previously, he received a M.S. in Mass Communications from San José State University, in San José California, and a B.A. in Philosophy and Media Studies from Università Cattolica in Milan, Italy. He is also affiliated with the Stanford Humanities Lab and the "How They Got Game" Project.

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Domenico Quaranta is curator and art critic focused on new media. He works as editor of the magazine Cluster and contributes on a regular basis to other magazines such as Exibart, Exibart onpa-per, Arte e Critica, Ts, Off, Digimag. His ar-ticles, reviews and interviews appeared on Il Corriere della Sera, Flash Art, Boiler, Noimalab, A minima, Titolo, Miska, Around Photography, Drome. He wrote the mono- graphs Magritte and Warhol for the Italian arts publisher Skira. In 2005 and 2006 he worked for Piemonte Share Festival, curating respectively the Gamescenes and the Radical Software sections of the ex-hibition. He also published Net ARt 1994-1998. La vicenda di Äda’web for the publish-ing house Vita e Pensiero and co-curated the exhibition "Connessioni leggendarie. Net Art 1995 - 2005". He teaches net.art at the Accademia di Brera of Milan. He lives and works in Brescia, Italy.

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Rebecca Cannon

Rebecca Cannon is an Australian media artist, writer and developer, working professionally in online service delivery, with an academic interest in the history of artistic computer game modification. Rebecca has written papers relating to artistic computer game modification which will be published in the books Re: Skin (MIT Press) and Anomalie: Video Games and Art (Intellect Books), both forthcoming.

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27 This term was coined by J.C. Herz. See J.C. Herz, Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts and Rewired Our Minds, Little Brown 1997.
29 F. Carmagnola, Synopsis..., quoted, p. 130.
Therefore, to fully appreciate the aesthetics of video games we must also consider the performance role of the player, which is closely aligned to that of the artist. Motion controllers are particularly useful at illustrating the player’s artistic involvement in video games. Motion controllers include Microsoft’s Kinect, Sony’s PlayStation Move, and Nintendo’s Wii, and any input that allows players to control on-screen elements using physical gestures.