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THE DILATED FRUITION

*Video Gamers and Movie Producers*¹



*LittleBigPlanet*² is a video game based on audience content production that transforms players into authors. At first sight it seems nothing more than a classic platform³. But when the player completes the story mode, the game is far from being completed.

Any *LittleBigPlanet* gamer can download from PlayStation Network⁴ levels made by other users. He can play or modify them or create his own level with a huge editor that makes bottom-up production the core of the game [Figure 1.]. Despite not very good sales figures at the beginning, the game developed by Media Molecule sold more than three million copies in two years⁵.

In winter 2010, Sony Computer Entertainment will publish *LittleBigPlanet2*⁶, in which the powers of the players will be extended from the simple level creation to the game genre itself. In this sequel the spatial, temporal and procedural qualities of the user generated levels will be totally controlled by the player.

¹ On the same topics see also: Caruso, G., Cavaleri, A., & Salvador, M., 2010. The Dilated Fruition. Videogiocatori e spettatori cinematografici. In: Giordano, F., ed. 2010. *Filming the Game/Playing the Film. Bianco & Nero*, 564, pp. 64-69. In the image *LittleBigPlanet* Artwork, [© 2008 SCE]

² *LittleBigPlanet* (PS3 version), Media Molecule, SCE 2008.

³ A platform game is based on getting over platforms laid on different heights. The most famous title is, with no doubt, *Super Mario Bros* developed and published by Nintendo in 1985 for his NES (Nintendo Entertainment System).

⁴ PSN is the online gaming and media delivery service provided by Sony Computer Entertainment, dedicated to PlayStation3 and PlayStation Portable consoles.

⁵ VgChartz.com, 2010, *LittleBigPlanet*, [online], (updated 24 April 2010), available at: <http://www.vgchartz.com/games/game.php?id=12390> [Accessed 30 May 2010].

⁶ *LittleBigPlanet 2* (PS3 version), Media Molecule, SCE, Q4 2010.



Figure 1. *LittleBigPlanet*, skin editor from the game.

Even if this evolution is radical, the first version of the game was revolutionary enough to affect and change the idea of gameplay as it was known. With these premises it's clear that the strength of *LittleBigPlanet* is the player himself and the community where all creations are discussed, evaluated and shared.

Between Spectators and Gamers

Despite the impact of this change based on player involvement in the creative process, *LittleBigPlanet* is not a total novelty – at least from the users' point of view. In fact, this kind of bottom-up approach to audiovisual content is quite common in the context of a broader media environment.

According to Henry Jenkins: «[...] the current media environment makes visible the once invisible work of media spectatorship»⁷. It's clear that the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have deeply modified cultural consumption, allowing a different relationship with the text, and above all, the chance to physically modify it. But, as Jenkins stated, nothing has been created from the development of ICTs, these new technologies simply consented the rise of users and communities that had already been working on texts.

Thinking about cinema, it's evident that classical viewing in movie theatres is now less central in the film experience: the relationship between movie and its viewer does not end with the vision but continues through a series of productive practices that generate new texts.

⁷ Jenkins, H., 2002. Interactive audiences? In: Harries, DE., ed. 2002. *The New media book*, London: The British Film Institute.

According to Maria Grazia Fanchi, we are facing the “hyper-spectator”, a subject who «[...] applies himself to extend the pleasure [of his relationship with the film] to what is before and after the simple showing»⁸.

Looking at video games, even before the explosion of ICTs, gamers spent hours talking about their game experience with friends, expressing opinions about it, asking for hints to pass tricky passages and so on⁹. These activities demonstrated that video games are not an anti-social medium even before the recent success of online gaming and, mainly, that players have always been active and able to produce meanings from their consumption of media. What was lacking was a connector that allowed the diffusion of these talks across the boundaries of local communities. The Internet, the main tool for this new author, makes them concrete (even if digitalized) and available to a widespread audience.

This is what actually changes in both cinema and video games: if this bottom-up production was known in the past as the result of a symbolic (or semiotic) activity¹⁰, nowadays it moves from symbolic to concrete. The hyper-spectator is no more an accommodating receiver, he asks for an active role, he wants to be part of the medium and he wants to use it¹¹ in order to produce concrete contents. Finally, movie-goers and gamers have grown more and more aware of themselves in their medial experience, and act as “producers”:

Producers engage not in a traditional form of content production, but are instead involved in produsage – the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. Participants in such activities are not producers in a conventional, industrial sense, as that term implies a distinction between producers and consumers which no longer exists; the artefacts of their work are not products existing as discrete, complete packages; and their activities are not a form of production because they proceed based on a set of preconditions and principles that are markedly at odds with the conventional industrial mode¹².

As already said, this kind of evolution is common to both video games and cinema. So we have chosen to develop an analysis through a comparison between the two, rather than concentrate on textual similarities, investigating how their consumers use cinema and video games and how these audiences are related and comparable. This usage we look for is what we call “dilated fruition”: audience contribution becomes an important part of the fruition itself, literally expanding it; again, it’s not only about talking, reading or

⁸ Fanchi, M. G., 2005. *Spettatore*, Milano: Il Castoro. Translated by the author.

⁹ Consalvo, M., 2003. *Zelda 64 and Video Game Fans: A Walkthrough of Games, Intertextuality, and Narrative*, *Television New Media*, 4 (3).

¹⁰ Fiske, J., 1989a. *Reading the popular*, London: Unwin Hyman.

¹¹ Rifkin, J., 2000. *The Age of Access: how the Shift from Ownership to Access is Transforming Capitalism*, Los Angeles: Tarcher.

¹² Bruns, A., 2007. *Produsage: a Working Definition*, [online], (updated 31 December 2007), available at: <http://produsage.org/produsage> [Accessed 30 May 2010]. See also Bruns, A., 2008. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, New York: Peter Lang.

blogging. Above all we look at complex “bottom-up” production as home-made movies or the development of full contents for video games.

Producers and Products

As a comparison between the bottom-up outcomes of video game and film “producers”, in the context of the new authorship we tried to define above, online walkthroughs, game faqs, game reviews, cheat codes, and downloadable guides (even in video format) are the “bottom-up” outcomes of video game “producers”; reviews, dedicated forums, and blogs are the “bottom-up” outcomes of film “producers”. These works are part of a production that we define as aside from the main text, a part of what Gerard Genette called “paratexts”¹³.

Their purpose is to orientate the relationship or the consumption between movies or video games and their audiences (guides are made to “guide” gamers; film reviews are made to guide the choice of film lovers). But there is another kind of production that plays with texts in order to create something new.

The growth of the ICTs, as mentioned, has shown to a widespread public the existence of these audience practices. Furthermore, with the diffusion of PCs, people got used to technology and started to use it for their own interests. For movie-goers this represented the possibility to have more and more sophisticated software to edit videos and a virtual space to share them, turning themselves into movie producers and distributors. Even for video gamers, things are also changing: according to Herz¹⁴, the revolution started from “mod” activities of online gamers communities. The importance of “modding” in games is unquestionable, however there are some differences between that experience and the focus of our analysis.

Modders worked directly on game code (often released by the software houses) to modify the game or to realize a completely different version of it. In both cases the game code was only formally available to everyone: the knowledge of computer language separated those who knew programming from those who did not. Often, the new games or contents were not able to find official distribution, thus remaining confined to the Internet as amateurish products. Nonetheless “modding” and “modders” represent the will of an audience to be considered as an active part of video game productions, not solely as players but as an audience capable of doing whatever it wants with its products. Cultural industries respond to these needs trying to stay close to their customers, catching their attention not only with new products but also by offering new chances. According to Jenkins, we can call these chances “marketing operations” or “a new form of democratization”, but it’s clear that there is an opening to bottom-up production¹⁵.

¹³ Genette, G., 1989. *Soglie: i dintorni del testo*, Torino: Einaudi.

¹⁴ Herz, J. C., 2002. *Harnessing the Hive: how Online Games Drive Networked Innovation*, Release 1.0, 9.

¹⁵ Jenkins, H., 2002, *Interactive audiences?*, cit.

As Phil Harrison, former Executive Vice President of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, pointed out, we are talking about “Game 3.0”¹⁶: there are several games that ask players to move from game-play to game-design, although the emphasis is weighted differently depending on the game. There are games such as *Super Smash Bros Brawl*¹⁷ or *Animal Crossing Wild World*¹⁸ in which contribution is secondary to gameplay. There are games like *Spore*¹⁹, *LittleBigPlanet* or *Mod Nation Racer*²⁰ in which creation and sharing of content are fundamental parts of the game itself. These softwares don't require players to be aware of computer language: instead, they offer simple object editors to lowering the entry barriers to production practices.

Like Directors and Game Designers

In 2007, during his keynote speech at SXSW festival, Will Wright, one of the most famous game designers, said: «I wanna take the players out of the protagonist of Luke Skywalker, and put them in the world of George Lucas»²¹. In this statement we can recognize his idea of video gamer: Wright claims for a universe maker rather than a player. This figure would have the power to control and modify worlds, aware that these operations are an integral part of the game experience.

As we can see, in the past years Wright's games have become more open to player imagination: in *Sim City*²² the player has to administrate a virtual city deciding everything that concerns infrastructure and building areas. *The Sims*²³ is about the people of Sim City. The player has to decide what people will do in their life, their job or career, what they eat, the clothing they wear, their hair style and so on. *Spore* deals with the real creation of life forms from unit cell phase to space exploration: the player has to make his creatures and, as the evolution consents it, can also generate buildings and vehicles.

Returning to Wright statement we can now understand it better. By intervening within the text, the new consumer demonstrates a competency and ability to organize it as if George Lucas who, before being a director, is a lover of cinema, science fiction and even an expert of lighting, special effects and so on. What we have described to this point as the new gamer perfectly fits into Wright's conception.

The same thing could be said about the contemporary movie-goer. Like the player of video games, he possesses a full set of skills to produce content from the texts he loves. Michel Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind*²⁴ protagonists are perfect examples. The film is a good portrayal and also a legitimation of

¹⁶ Harrison, P., 2007, *Keynote Speech*, Game Developer Conference, San Francisco.

¹⁷ *Super Smash Bros Brawl* (Wii version), Sora Ltd., Nintendo, 2008.

¹⁸ *Animal Crossing Wild World* (Wii version), Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 2006.

¹⁹ *Spore* (PC version), Maxis, EA, 2008.

²⁰ *Mod Nation Racers* (PS3 version), United Front Games, SCE, 2010.

²¹ Wright, W., 2007. *Keynote Speech*, SXSW festival, Austin.

²² *Sim City* (PC version), Maxis, EA, 1989.

²³ *The Sims* (PC version), Maxis, EA, 2000.

²⁴ *Be Kind Rewind*, 2008. [Film] Directed by Michel Gondry, USA.

“sweded”²⁵ films as bottom-up creations. The producers of these sweded versions have good practical skills and a deep love for the original text, even if they work with no budget [Figure 2].



Figure 2. *Be Kind Rewind*, poster portraying the shooting of *Robocop* sweded version [© 2008 New Line Cinema]

A real example of these bottom-up movie productions is *MGS: Philanthropy*²⁶ “A non profit fan movie based on the games by Hideo Kojima”, as the home page of the site dedicated to the movie says²⁷. The Hive Division movie is based on the *Metal Gear* franchise, developed and published by Konami. The authors began their production shooting a low quality trailer and distributing it online for free. While doing this , they attracted new collaborators enlarging their community. By repeating this auto-promotion process several times they also got support from technical producers that gave them groundbreaking tools for free to improve at best the quality of the movie. With more or less no budget (10.000 Euros were spent in seven years of work), the very large community of Hive Division distributed, at the end of 2009, a seventy-two minutes movie, with high level audio and video, obviously downloadable for free [Figure 3].

²⁵ “Sweded” films are grassroots movies created by re-shooting part of a film replicating dialogues and situations with no budget.

²⁶ *MGS: Philanthropy*, 2009. [Film] Directed by Giacomo Talamini, Italy.

²⁷ <http://www.mgs-philanthropy.net/> [Accessed 30 May 2010]



Figure 3. *MGS Philanthropy*, frame from the movie [© 2009 Hive Division].

Authors of Self

Considering all these productions we can argue they are related to a user who wants to express himself by sharing his passions with others. It could be seen as a way by which “bottom-up” creators show their investments and involvements in media (texts).

But we can also see here some differences between video games and films: in video games, bottom-up productions have found their institutional place, at least when in agreement with the game industry (i.e., *LittleBigPlanet* levels are shared and played through PlayStation Network). In the film industry however, audience productions have traditionally never reached any official distribution. *Raiders: the Adaptation*, a “shot by shot” remake of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*²⁸, couldn’t circulate much. *The Phantom Edit*, a remake of *Star Wars Episode I: the Phantom Menace*²⁹, suffered the same destiny. Even the sweded movies in *Be Kind Rewind* were destroyed by court bailiffs due to copyright violations.

It is curious that a production like *MGS: Philanthropy*, freely available on the Internet, didn't find any resistance from Kojima or Konami. On the contrary the game designer himself, commented with great enthusiasm his viewing of the movie³⁰. Even if we are talking about great franchises that generated many

²⁸ *Raiders of the lost Ark*, 1981. [Film] Directed by Steven Spielberg, USA.

²⁹ *Star Wars Episode I: the Phantom Menace*, 1999. [Film] Directed by George Lucas, USA.

³⁰ Mgs-philanthropy.net, *Mr. Kojima on MGS: Philanthropy*, [online], (updated 17 April 2010), available at: <http://www.mgs-philanthropy.net/main/?cat=3&lang=en> [Accessed 30 May 2010].

fans and soon became cult, only if productions literally change medium, from video game to cinema in this case, they can reach a good visibility.

Besides these differences in distribution destiny, if we remain in the same medium, the specificities of cinema and video games create also different effects on bottom-up activity. In video games, computer code sets the possibilities for the player. Even if the chance to have an active part in game design is presented as an improvement in creative freedom, this is problematic because computer code limitations keep the video game industry safe from unexpected uses.

However, users can upset the code even in closed systems. Some users generate particular “Mii”³¹ using the official Nintendo editor, resembling famous film or game characters [Figure 4.]. Also the remake of famous texts in *LittleBigPlanet* custom levels or the use of an Iron Man-like sprite instead of a sprite completely invented in *Drawn to Life*³², could be read not only as form of self-expression but as a reply to code limitation in order to have games meeting the users’ needs and as a kind of declaration of love for their favourite media products.



Figure 4. Darth Vader Mii created with the official Wii editor³³.

On the other side, movies seem to be completely open to consumer intervention. The outcomes are everything but predictable and only copyright can constitute a limitation.

³¹ Mii is the Nintendo Wii avatar. Every player could use it to play games developed by Nintendo itself, like *Wii Sports* or *Wii Play*.

³² *Drawn to Life* (DS version), 5th Cell, THQ, 2007.

³³ Newlaunches.com, *Top Ten Star Wars Mii's* [online], (updated 23 November 2007), available at: http://www.newlaunches.com/archives/top_ten_star_wars_miis.php [Accessed 30 May 2010].

The Future of Gaming?

The comparison we presented underlines the similarities between contemporary video gamers and movie-goers. Both extend the fruition in a broader media environment producing contents and expressing passions. Even if the chances for consumer production remain different in the two media, both subjects are part of the larger definition of “producer”. Both immerse themselves in a broader context in which different media merge not only their formal and linguistic features but also their paths of pragmatic fruition, in response to users which ask to be more and more active.

According to Reginald Fils-Aime , CEO of Nintendo of America, this creativity is the future of video game: «The era of passive entertainment is waning, active entertainment is where the action is. Entertainment consumers are moving from react to interact»³⁴.

Rather than representing the future, this could be one of the possible outcomes for video game design, the path that software houses could choose to meet the players desire for creative expression, even if the freedom created is mainly illusory.

³⁴ Lee, J., *User-generated content future of videogames, says Fils-Aime* [online], (updated 14 November 2008), available at: <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/user-generated-content-future-of-videogames-says-fils-aime> [Accessed 30 May 2010].