

"ART-HRITIS"

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A little more than two years ago, in his fashionable 'Answer Man' column on the Chicago Sun-Times [1], Pulitzer-prize-winning movies critic Roger Ebert gave vent to an opinion on videogames which started a long and controversial dispute. Ebert affirmed that he didn't consider digital entertainment an expressive form to have the same cultural stature of cinema or, more generally, of disciplines traditionally regarded to as 'art'.

“I am ready to accept”, wrote the American critic, “that videogames are elegant, intelligent, sophisticated, enthralling and visually splendid. However I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art”.

This kind of opinions, even when authoritative and well substantiated, tend to ignite passionate reactions in those who work in the videogame industry as well as in people who have grown together with the medium and in those who simply – and openly – love it.

After the rumpus that followed Ebert’s column, Hideo Kojima, famed author of the ‘Metal Gear’ series, commented from the pages of the American version of PlayStation Magazine [2] as follows.

“I don’t think they’re art either, videogames. [...] The thing is that art is something that radiates from the artist, the person who creates that piece of art. [...] It’s something of a service. It’s not art. But I guess the way of providing service with that videogame is an artistic style, a form of art.”

Goaded on the same topic by the Japanese magazine ‘Famitsu’, Shigeru Miyamoto, game-design legend and father to Super Mario, Donkey Kong and other foundational titles to modern gaming, confessed he considered videogames a form of entertainment more than an artistic discipline.

Ludologist Matteo Bittanti suggested in different occasions, in particular in his column “Mattscape” in the Italian magazine “VIDEOGIOCHI” [3], that the foundational missing element in the videogame medium, which he believes to have the potential to aspire to the status of ‘art’, is the support of a serious and solid critical

system.

Two, in my opinion, are the causes of the fruitless recurrence of the dispute 'Are videogames art?'

1. The first reason is the relative youth of videogame and its ambiguous and still avant-gardist cultural stance. This phase, since the early modernism in the fine arts, implied the attempt of defining and affirming the specific identity of the specific expressive medium [4]. The same questions about the medium are being asked about digital entertainment now, both in the relative terms, which is to say within the category of "media studies" and "game studies", and in the general ones of the 'fight for survival' of all the forms of expression. Which use values or testimonial values make videogames desirable and necessary in the larger context of contemporary culture?

2. The second igniting cause of the conflict, I believe, is a certain anxiety (maybe a desire for conflicts instilled by the medium itself?). People working in game development, in the field of criticism or in the press as well as gamers, lovers and sympathizers all seem anxious to take and defend the respective position in what appears to be an inevitable clash between those who support the idea that videogames are a form of art and those who are sure they are not.

The diffuse belief according to which the cultural promotion of videogame must take place in the specific 'battlefield' of art is, however, quite arbitrary and certainly arguable.

Why not adopt, for example, an economic legitimization criterion instead of an "artistic" one? Not only that would be a social strategy which is already broadly re-

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sorted to in other fields of contemporary culture, but the idea itself of measuring quantitatively the diffusion and the consensus of digital entertainment through sales figures would not present either technical difficulties nor the sterile subjectivity which made Tim Schafer exclaim “Here we go again...” in his Gamasutra Feature of March the 16th 2007.

Similarly, what would impede to evaluate the presence and influence of the videogame medium on the collective conscience through statistical measurements? Similar methods have already been applied as effective analytical tools in pre-election polls, market analysis, participated urban design, and so on...

Moreover, it is highly indicative how, apart from very rare occasions, in the debate “Videogames: art or not art”, hardly any participant specifies the definition of “art” they are relying on. Are they referring to the institutional definition of

George Dickie [5]? The one illustrated by Plato in his “Republic”, by Francois Fédier in his 2000 book on Matisse or which other? [6]

A vast number of studies and definitive attempts in the course of history of culture, suggest Professor Nigel Warburton, failed in replying in a rigorous and comprehensive manner to the question “what is art?” [5] The failure of such descriptive theories led philosophers (Ludwig Wittgenstein is probably the most known example [7]) and aesthetic scholars to consider the whole project of defining the term ‘art’ badly conceived. Even more so, I cannot see any logical reason why a consistent part of the debate on games should be influenced or even entirely based on a subjective, unproductive and quite superficial ‘question of art’.

My hope is that both the field of criticism and that of Game Studies, as well as the press, will progressively abandon normative theories when analyzing cultural

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[1] Ebert, Roger, 'Answer Man' column, *Chicago Sun-Times*, Issue: November the 27th, 2005. <http://rogerbert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=ANSWERMEN&date=20051127>

[2] 'Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine', Issue: February 2006.

[3] BITTANTI, Matteo, 'Mattscape', in 'VIDEOGIOCHI', *Futuremedia Italy*, Issue: May 2006.

[4] GREENBERG, Clement. 1965. *Modernist Painting*. In FRASCINA, F., & HARRISON, C. (edited by). 1982. *Modern Art & Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. London: Open University / Harper & Row. Pp. 5-13.

[5] WARBURTON, Nigel. 2003. *The Art Question*. London: Routledge.

[6] FÉDIER, François. 2001. *L'Arte - Aristotele, Cézanne, Matisse. Il pensiero in pittura*. Milano: Christian Marinotti Edizioni S.r.L.

[7] WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*.

phenomena. I believe such hope to be especially heartfelt in a field that is not only still young and malleable, but also very distinctive. The only possible and positive conclusion for this column is nothing else but a call for more courage and pragmatism in approaching Game Studies. The risks we are running, if we insist in blindly applying traditional categories to digital entertainment, are either that of an untimely death or of a meaningless and premature old age.

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