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NOTES FROM THE OTHERGROUND

1 - The Lottery in Babylon

“Like all the men of Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, I have been a slave. I have known omnipotence, ignominy, imprisonment. [...] I owe that almost monstrous variety to an institution - the Lottery - which is unknown in other nations, or at work in them imperfectly or secretly. [...] Mine is a dizzying country in which the Lottery is a major element of reality.” (J. L. Borges, *The Lottery in Babylon*, 1941)

In his work, Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine author of philosophical reveries and literary criticism, often suggested imaginative alternatives to the univocal and habitual way we perceive and construct our reality. In the passage cited above, and in many other of his fictional works like *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940), the understanding of reality is gradually pervaded and eventually substituted by a logical system of a different order. In the specific case of *The Lottery of Babylon*, that logical system is a game.

“We don’t feel good about reality as game designers,” stated Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center professor Jesse Schell in his *Design Outside the Box* 2010 DICE speech. “Beyond technology,” continued Schell “there are all these ways that games are creeping into places we never thought before”. Through examples of punishment-and-reward systems in our everyday life, motivated by basic human instincts like collection and competition, Schell outlined a very serious role for games: instead of additional and leisurely parts of our reality, they will become a necessary component of it. It did not take my mind too long to recall *The Lottery in Babylon*. Much like Borges, Schell did not stop with embracing the educational and propagandistic use of video games, he went as far as identifying social control as the future of the digital entertainment industry. In other words, *Design Outside the Box* encouraged game-designers to leverage on psychological conditioning to redesign reality.

The persuasive use of digital entertainment does not take video games apart from other media. German thinker, Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940), purported the specific point that becoming political tools is the necessary development of all forms of expression. Were another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, alive today, he would probably accuse this form of thinking of transforming people from players of a game into resources for a game. This perspective is particularly painful for people like the undersigned, who understand and love video games as tools of liberation. I believe games should remain instruments of deliverance from the convention and limitation of our everyday lives as well as the social order, rather than means to reinforce and control them.

The independent game-developers community scream through the pixels of their worlds their dissent to aligning to economical and political structures of power. In a sense I am neither that quixotic nor as assured their battle is worth fighting for: the politico-economical destiny of video games seems to me to be inescapable. I am starting to wonder if this is the end of the dream-filled youth of video games and if time has come for free creative spirits to move on to other less contaminated expressive forms. Does anybody remember Eric Chahi?

LINKS:

Jesse Schell, *Design Outside the Box*:

<http://g4tv.com/videos/44277/dice-2010-design-outside-the-box-presentation>

BIO:

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