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## NOTES FROM THE OTHERGROUND

### 3 – THE CAT IN THE AGE OF ITS DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

The North American players purchasing *Halo: Reach* on its September the 14<sup>th</sup> release date will be rewarded for their commitment to the Bungie franchise with a limited-edition in-game *Spartan recon helmet*. It is expectable that this limited-edition digital object will be deeply valued among players not solely due to its recognizably peculiar shape and its rarity, but also to the fact that similar marketing strategies have proven successful for the release of a vast number of other media products in the past. In the video-game industry, the Pokémon series is well-known for having given their fans the possibility to obtain exclusive pocket-monsters at release-events or conventions. Even today, attendees bringing their copies of *HeartGold* and *SoulSilver* to the world-wide qualifiers for the Pokémon World Championship 2010 will be able to catch a special *Shiny Eevee Pokémon*, an indisputable mark of devotion.

In 1935, German philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin first published the influential essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In that work, besides delineating the socio-political destiny of artistic production with the advent of media of mass reproduction (cfr. my April 2010 column: *The Lottery of Babylon*), Benjamin first introduced the philosophical concept of ‘aura’. Take a painting, for example: the unique way the colours were produced in the period of its making, the subject it represents, the peculiar way it developed cracks and bends in its canvas due to the humidity and the accidents it endured in the centuries are the tangible proofs of its having been produced in a specific “here and now”. The concept of the ‘aura’ specifically indicates the unique identity that a certain work derives from its existence in space and time.

Clearly, thinking of human creations in terms of ‘aura’ and genuineness becomes almost inconsequential, Benjamin noted, when such creations can be mechanically reproduced in time and space by media of mass communication. The concept of ‘aura’ appears even more obsolete in the case of digital-media, through which we can infinitely transfer and multiply an object - a text file or a digital photograph for example - without losing information or its sense of originality. Objects, characters and collectibles in video-games can be considered ‘not real’ in the sense that they do not have an identity in time and space. So why are we willing to spend money on digital furniture to beautify our in-game abode as if they were real objects? Why are we willing to invest emotionally and see humanity in empty, animated, polygonal shells? Why are we spending time in a game only to obtain a more respectable steed, a larger backpack, a more deadly magical weapon?

Certain qualities of those video-game objects have similar values as real objects, such as their being aesthetically pleasing (for example a sculpture in our sim-house) or desirable due to their functional efficiency (a sword capable of also draining magical points from an opponent). Besides looking adorable, the cats in Habbo Hotel have a peculiar quality: their identity tag declares the date of birth of that specific pixelated feline. Due to their possessing digital remains of an ‘aura’, Habbo’s cats are capable of bridging between the game’s

timelessness and the players' real lives. Old cats, veritable signs of having been in Habbo for a long time, soon became a sign of seniorship and true attachment to the franchise. As a status symbol, they are very popular items and among the most expensive in Habbo Hotel.

Digital cats, in-game helmets and exclusive Pokémons are essentially useless. Their appeal consists in a sort of nostalgia for the real world and the unique qualities of the objects it contains. The very existence of such a feeling is yet another aspect of the cultural shift that leads humanity to spend more time and resources experiencing and building shared artificial worlds rather than the one we were destined to. A shift that, at least in the northern hemisphere, has already had a profound impact on what we define as 'reality'.