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NOTES FROM THE OTHERGROUND

4 – THE VOICES OF THE CURRENT SOMNAMBULISM

In October of 1992 *Midway Games Inc.* releases *Mortal Kombat* for the home console *Sega Genesis*. A year after *Midway's* trademark thick blood trickled from the arcade halls down to well-to-do American living rooms, a self-regulating organization named the *Entertainment Software Rating Board* (ESRB) was founded.

Originally established as a response to the social penetration of blood-drenched titles like *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* (1993), the ESRB still assigns ratings to video-games, granting a more informed access to violent, explicit or in any way sensitive content. Since then, concerned parents associations and opportunistic politicians leveraged on the belief that violent video-games increase aggressive and antisocial behaviour in order to support political agendas. With the intention of protecting their economic interests as well as their video-ludic passion from any external forms of censorship or control, the vast majority of the game-developers community and gamers disputed the existence of a definite correlation between in-game violence and actual violence (and/or our becoming less sensitive to it). According to video-game enthusiasts, demonizing video-games and blaming them for tearing the social fabric apart is a merely instrumental act. In support of their claims, developers and gamers assert that in-game violence is purely symbolic and that blood needs to be interpreted as an immediate visual clue for a successful hit and nothing else.

Despite being a game-developer myself and passionately spending a good fourth of my waking hours in video-game worlds, I believe the position held by the video-game industry to be very contradictory and poorly defensible. Let me explain what I mean: game developers are being praised and are attracting progressively larger investments for the realization of products labelled 'serious games'. Serious games rely precisely on the capability of digital behaviours to influence actual ones and are often used for training, educational or simulation purposes. In the words of designer Jane McGonigal, the essential creed at the base of serious gaming is that "they can make us better and change the world". (Jane McGonigal, '*Gaming can change the world*', TED talk, March the 24th 2010 - <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/id/799>) While game developers accept unquestioningly and take pride in the fact that games can have a positive impact on people, they do not seem quite as open minded when it comes to enhancing skills and values which are not as socially-acceptable as recognizing traffic signs, fending off a hypoglycemic attack or mastering the landing of a certain model of airplane.

Canadian media-theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) maintained that when people start debating whether the social effects of one medium are desirable or not, it is the content of the medium they are really wrestling over. What both enthusiasts and sceptics miss is that in the long run, content (which hinges on ideology and taste) matters less than the medium itself in influencing the way we think and act (Marshall McLuhan, '*Understanding Media*', 1964). In the particular case of digital entertainment, I argue that the manner in which computers

change the way we understand the world consists of offering an interactive, modular, quantifiable and non linear alternative to it. Consequently, what video-games inherently propose, what they REALLY teach us, is that the present state of the world is neither the best, the ultimate nor in any way univocal.

“In the end”, writes Nicholas Carr, “we come to pretend that technology itself does not matter. It’s how we use it that matters, we tell ourselves. The implication, comforting in its hubris, is that we’re in control.” (Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: what the Internet is doing to our brains*, 2010, P.3)