

# Radical Game Design

## Notes on Political Games Rhetoric

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A spectre is haunting the net: the spectre of political games. Small and viral online games able to spread dissonant messages. They emerge and disappear in the ever-changing world of the blog, forum and mailing lists. Sometimes they are blended into the underground game-design scene, sometimes they pop in the glossy pages of popular magazines, sometimes they are disguised as works of art.

I'm talking about a spectre because political games don't exist, or better, they have always existed: every video game – as every cultural product – reflect author's ideas, visions and ideologies. Every video game is essentially political.

Why super Mario is a plunder? Has anybody ever seen him fixing a pipe? He probably fit better into the shoes of a rampant Wall Street broker, a social climber who attack every being that comes across his path. His eternal dissatisfaction, his continuous run, his orderliness in killing enemies sounds suspicious.

In the typical level-based structure of arcade games we can recognize some qualities of the yuppie ideology: success is like a ladder that gets harder and harder to climb. There are many partial achievements but the whole plan is often difficult to understand.

Individualism, competition an accumulation of useless points are constant. It's the neo-liberal short-sightedness, the means that becomes the end, the carreer, the 80's dream.



*Year 2010. The need of mobility has grown to excess since the first years of the millenium. That's why Tuboflex inc., the world's leading Human Resources Services organisation, created a complex tube system that make it possible to dislocate employees in real time, depending on demand.*

In the middle of the screen we can see a call-center employee. Telephones rings perpetually. The player has to click quickly to shut them. After several seconds a Big pipe appear on the upper side of the screen and suck in the main character. The poor thing is shooted into take-away restaurant and he has serve food to the hungry customers. One sandwich, three sandwiches, two sandwiches. He inevitably make mistakes and his chances in the lower bar decrease. In the subsequent allocation the caracter is working dressed as Santa Claus, his duty is to entertain the children outside a shopping mall. The pipe comes again and takes him to another place, and

so on. The rate is more and more frenetic the and the chances go down until the end. The worker is now begging on a road, definitively expelled from the labour market.

In the precarious worker's eternal reincarnations there's no career or social climbing opportunity. We thought we could describe the intolerability of these labour conditions using a frustrating random level structure instead of the classic arcade linearity.

We believe that a labour market driven by the principle of social darwinism will marginalize the weaker subjects. To highlight this trend we decided there wouldn't be any happy end in the game. In Tuboflex the failure is inescapable and irreversible. This disturbing you-never-win formula is the video-ludic equivalent of the tragedy in the narrative.



*Dear girls, simulating orgasms is an useful practice to keep a good sentimental understanding with our partners. Every man dreams of a woman who yells and get crazy during sexual intercourses. Unfortunately most of the women are uneasy about these little performances. The Orgasm Simulator is a simple game that will help you feeling confident with this mistreated art.*

The game has a first person view. The player take the part of a woman having an intercourse with his macho partner. The man's movements are mechanic, his moans are more and more intense. The player pushes the only button in order to control the his (her) yells intensity. He immediately scream of pleasure and simulate multiple orgasm but is too fast and excessive and the boyfriend realizes he (she) was faking. Game over. New game. Now the player take advantages of his errors, he adjust his (her) moans with the parnters' ones. He accompany him along the climax to ejaculation and finally fake a powerful orgasm. Well done! The man didn't recognize anything and is very proud.

Game designers are usually too accomodating, they give the players the possibility to play the part of valiant heroes, powerful generals or frightful criminals to go along with their wish to escape from a boring and frustrating life. It's too easy! We can instead establish an healthier sado-masochistic relationship with our users. We can force them in unpleasant roles to make them reason using a different point of view.

Even if girl gamers are growing day by day, videogame production is stuck into an androcentric vision. Female roles are always stereotyped: kidnapped princesses, inflatable poligonal dolls, prizes or prey. Or, in some cases, phallic females, digital incarnations of Russ Meyer's obsessions.

Despite of the ironic introduction text, the Orgasm Simulator, is addressed to male players and tries to create a uncommon reverse shot to enlighten one of the many subtle forms of gender oppression.

From the gender to the genre. In Queer Power we pushed to extremes the ambiguous relation between player and avatar reversing the most testosteronic game genre: the beat 'em up.



*Queerland inhabitants don't have fixed sexual orientations and roles. They fornicate following their highly changeable desires. The two players continuously switch the characters' sexual identity and stage a weird intercourse. The game ends when one of them reach the orgasm or both at the same time.*

The gameplay and the side view looks like the one of a typical Street Fighter's styled game but everything is ironically reversed. Instead of beating the enemy and drain his energy you have sex with him in order to give and get pleasure. There isn't a clear binary result – win and lose – the goal is arbitrarily decided by players game by game. Queer Power aim to be a ludic popularization of the Queer Theory. It's based on the on the overcoming of the cultural norms that discipline pleasure, desire and sexual identity. In this case criticize a game genre is equivalent to criticize a system of values.

*Take a step outside yourself  
And turn around  
Take a look at who you are  
It's pretty scary  
So silly  
It is revolting  
You're not much*

These are the opening verses of *Tournaround*, one of the sharpest songs by the electro-punk group Devo. Looking ourselves from the outside, in our mediocrity and misery, small gears in a big and frightening machine. A step outside ourselves could be a step toward the emancipation.



Tamatipico is a parody of the virtual pet Tamagotchi: instead of the well known chick there is a precarious worker. The player can send him to work or to have a rest or to have some good time in front of a television. He's his boss so he must raise the worker's productivity and pay attention to his energy and his happiness because he could get injured or strike.

Tamatipico is a fairly close description of the so-called "Job-on-call" a job contract

that makes the worker always available for a call to the workplace. Just-in-time production has to optimize human resources in a highly changeable market and the rigid Fordist working hours are abolished. Such a new labour paradigm makes the workers unable to manage autonomously their lives.

The Tamatipico player enjoys the thrill of exploiting to the limit his virtual employee setting arbitrarily his life rhythm as his boss probably does in his real life.

The change of perspective, the reversed controller-controlled relationship could hit some aspects of the new forms of subjection to Capital.

*Take a step outside the planet  
Turn around and around  
Take a look at what you are  
It's pretty scary*

In Seventeenth-century London, chimney darkened the sky, workers coming from the country were forced to live in inhuman conditions and the children to work precociously. The price to pay for the progress was clear.

Today, the globalization of capitals and production facilities made everything fleeting. Industrial production's impact on environment and society is spread on a global scale. The processes at the base of our goods are difficult to trace and the so-called negative externalities as the pollutions, the terrain and workforce indiscriminate exploitation are concentrated in the less advanced countries.

Too often, the short-sighted liberal elites don't understand that in the long-term the consequences of these devastations will affect the whole world. The end of the world is not an event but a process in progress.

We need a new critique approach and new tools that can make the people understand

the capitalism's contradictions in a broader view. To say it with Devo's world, we have to take a step outside our planet to understand how scary is our situation.



The McDonald's video game requires the player to master all the complex techniques of the big international corporation: from the creation of pastures to the slaughter, from the restaurant management to the branding. He has to control four sections, four geographically displaced parts of the sandwich industry. The new manager realizes quickly that in order to survive he has to destroy rainforests and occupy fertile lands to grow soy and cattle; to increase the meat production he has to plump up the cattle with hormones and animal flours; to make the fast-food more efficient he has to maltreat and fire his employees frequently; to increase the customers base he has to launch subtle advertising campaigns.

Every unfair strategy can dislike various public opinion groups. Labour organizations could set a picket line in front of the restaurant, environmentalist could boycott the company, customers associations could start a lawsuit for the food poisoning and so on. The player feels squashed in the capital's grip, between the board of directors' greed and a hostile customer public opinion.



We think that non-linear texts - and simulations in particular - have big potentials as a complexity reducer. With a simulation we can describe complex systems in a clear comprehensible way. It's easier to understand a complicate feedback net as a social or economic system by manipulating his ludic model instead of reading his linear text description.

Playing a video game is mostly the same as understanding its mechanism of action. It's an heuristic activity radically different to the reductionist and analytical one based on decomposition and evaluation of single parts. Simulation pushes the user to consider the modeled object as a whole organism in which every part is interrelated with the others. It's actually the same holistic and universalistic approach proposed by ecologist thinkers.



Clearly such as modelization is not a neutral or a scientific procedure, it's always a simplification of the reality, an interpretation based on subjective evaluations and data that could be untrue. Simulations are interactive theories, personal world views even if

the player/reader have an high degree of freedom.

The problem is that many people are not so familiar with non-linear texts to understand this passage. There's the risk that many people would be misled by modern video games' verosimilarity and abundance of particulars to consider them "objective".

Past generations considered television neutral as a window on the world. Now we know that is untrue and we believe democracy is founded on the existence of many different windows on the world.

Providing alternative visions and criticize the conventional ones is exactly the critical game designer mission.

Coming back to the initial point: political games are not spectre. They are simply games that clearly declare their factiousness proving that all the video games are factious.