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Game dynamics and storytelling

Abstract **EU**

(...) Zein da munduko egoera tragikoenekin (gerrak, sarraskiak, giza eskubideen urraketak, probrezia, immigrazioa...) lotutako gaietan jokoak eta joko dinamikak erabiltzeak izan dezakeen dimentsio etikoa? (...)

(...) Galdera hori erantzuteko aintzat hartu behar dugu jokatzea ez dela jarduera «arina» beti. Jokoak oso serioak izan daitezke (joko serioek industria oso bat sortu dute, gainera). Jokatzea ez da beti entretenimendu arin eta arduragabea. (...) Jokoetan jokatzeko gaitasunak gizakiak animalietatik bereizten gaitu, jokak errealitatea kontrolatzeko eta berregokitzeko eskaera sinbolikoa direlako.

(...) Joko dinamikak orain arintsaun, enpatia, partaidetza-narrazio, gertutasun, esperientzia, diseinu eta bestelako kontzeptuetatik hurbilago daude. Munduak beldurra dio asperzeari. Zerbait erabat partekatzeko erakargarria izan behar du. (...) Jende askorentzat fikziozko errealitateak dibertigarriagoak dira, arazoz eta gatazkaz betetako beren eguneroko bizitza etsigarria baino. (...) Horrenbestez, transmedia istorio baten idazle taldearentzat oso tentagarria da fikzioa errealitate gisa irudikatzea, fikzioa egia bezala irudikatzea. (...) Baina alor honetan badira kontuan hartu beharreko zenbait muga

Abstract **ES**

(...) ¿Cuál es la dimensión ética que implica el uso del juego y de las dinámicas de juego para temáticas relacionadas con algunas de las situaciones más trágicas del mundo: guerras, masacres, violaciones de derechos humanos, pobreza, migraciones...?

(...) Responder a estas cuestiones implica considerar que el juego no es necesariamente una actividad liviana. Los juegos pueden ser muy serios (los «juegos serios» ya se han convertido en un industria propiamente dicha). Jugar no siempre es un entretenimiento despreocupado y de mera distracción. (...) Jugar a juegos es una parte esencial de lo que nos convierte en humanos y no animales, ya que los juegos son una reivindicación simbólica del deseo de control y reapropiación de la realidad.

(...) Las dinámicas de juego son ahora más cercanas a conceptos tales como la fluidez, la empatía, las narrativas envolventes, la proximidad, el diseño de la experiencia... Nuestro mundo teme el aburrimiento. Es necesario que todo sea atractivo para que sea realmente compartido. (...) Cada vez más gente encuentra vivir en estas realidades ficticias mucho más atractivo y gratificante que enfrentarse a la sombría realidad del día a día. (...) Por todo ello, es muy tentador para los equipos de guionistas de historias transmedia crear ficciones que se mezclen con la realidad, hacer que la ficción parezca real.(...) Pero siempre hay unos límites que deben ser tenidos en cuenta.

Abstract **FR**

(...) Quel est le poids de la dimension éthique lors de l'utilisation de jeux vidéo ou de dynamiques de jeu sur des thématiques liées à certaines des situations les plus tragiques du monde : guerres, massacres, violations des droits de l'homme, pauvreté, immigration… ?

(...) En répondant à cette question, on sous-entend que le jeu n'est pas nécessairement une activité « light ». Les jeux peuvent s'avérer très sérieux (les jeux vidéo dits sérieux représentent aujourd'hui toute une industrie). Le jeu n'est pas toujours synonyme de distraction et de divertissement insouciant. (...) Le jeu est une des attitudes essentielles qui nous permettent de nous différencier des animaux, car les jeux sont une affirmation symbolique du contrôle et du retour à la réalité.

(...) Les dynamiques du jeu se rapprochent des concepts de fluidité, empathie, participation narrative, proximité, design d'expérience... Le monde craint la monotonie. Tout doit être attachant pour être vraiment partagé. (...) De plus en plus de personnes trouvent beaucoup plus intéressant de vivre ces réalités fictives que de supporter l'âpre réalité de leur vie quotidienne. (...) Par conséquent, il est très tentant pour les narrateurs transmédia de faire de la fiction une réalité, une vérité. (...) Cependant, certaines limites sont à respecter.

Abstract **EN**

(...) What is the ethical dimension implied in using gameplay and game dynamics for thematics connected with some of the most tragic situations in the world: wars, massacres, violations of human rights, poverty, migrants...?

(...) Answering this questios implies considering that playing is not necessarily a "light" activity. Games can be very serious ("serious games" have now become a whole industry in itself). Playing is not always distracting and carefree entertainment. (...) Playing games is an essential part of what makes us humans and not animals, because games are a symbolic claim to control and reappropriate reality.

(...) Game dynamics are closer to the concepts of fluidity, empathy, narrative involvement, proximity, experience desing... Our world fears boredom. Everything has to be engaging to be truly shared. (...) More and more people find living in these fictitious reailties a lot more engaging and rewarding than dealing with grim reality of their daily life. (...) Therefore, it is very tempting for the writer team of a transmedia story to make fiction pass as reailty itself, to make fiction pass as truth. (...) But there are some limits that should be taken into account.

↑ *L.A. Noire.* Rockstar Games, 2011.

I was recently involved in a public talk about transmedia during which an independant tv producer asked a very interesting question.

He asked: «Is it ok to have a game like approach for a serious documentary? Can a film that deals with very important, even tragic issues and that has nothing to do with a light and playful subject consider using game dynamics to make it more engaging for an audience?»

When he asked this, we were discussing the fact that many transmedia projects include gameplay and game dynamics to make their storytelling more fun, more accessible and engaging.

Before we tried to answer his question directly, I felt we had to consider why are we now turning everything into play and game?

A recent study showed this in the United States (from *Raph's Shakeout* blog quoting Jane Mc Gonigal during her famous TED talk):

«The average young person today in a country with a strong gamer culture will have spent 10,000 hours playing online games, by the age of 21. For children in the United States 10,080 hours is the exact amount of time you will spend in school from fifth grade to high school graduation if you have perfect attendance».

«So, we have an entire parallel track of education going on where young people are learning as much about what it takes to be a good gamer as they are learning about everything else in school. And some of you have probably read Malcom Gladwell's new book *Outliers*. So, you would have heard of his theory of success, the 10,000 hour theory of success. It's based on this great cognitive science research that if we can master 10,000 hours at effortful study, at anything by the age of 21, we will be virtuosos at it. We will be as good at whatever we do as the greatest people in the world. And so, now what we're looking at is an entire generation of young people who are virtuoso gamers».

What are they getting good at?

1. Urgent optimism. They believe that they are capable of changing the world –and ready to take action at a moment's notice.

2. Weaving a tight social fabric. Gamers are masters at rapidly creating strong social bonds. Also, it's interesting to note that we like people more after we've played with them.

3. Blissful productivity. Gaming exemplifies that we are happier working hard than relaxing if the work is structured right.

4. Epic meaning. Gamers love (and are used to) being attached to world changing stories.

Right now, we are using games to escape into virtual worlds, but it doesn't have to be that way. These skills could apply to the real world if the real world was redesigned to work more like a game.

So, what we are seeing, is a whole new generation of gamers entering adulthood and active life in society, who are infusing every single aspect of social activities with the game culture that they have been brought up in and that they have helped design. Massive social networking has been accelerating this «contamination» process through which everything becomes gamified.

Storytelling in all its forms and platforms is in the process of being questioned by the process. As a result, playing is no longer perceived as a thing only kids do. It is becoming acceptable for adults to spend time playing, to use games for everything (learning, teaching, health, financing...).

Play is becoming an acceptable behaviour throughout all aspects, all activities and all layers of our societies which are pursuing more

and more a hedonistic vision of what it means to be happy and fulfilled.

While the film and media world is only just about starting to consider changing their mind about game culture (a very powerful industry that they have been despising up until now as a lower form of entertainment), the game designers are appropriating the codes and esthetics of cinema to design their games and make them more and more like truly interactive and engaging films .

Just take a look at the new games such as *Heavy Rain*, *Assassin Creed* or *LA Noire* (this last game was invited alongside traditional films at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival in New York).

As much as the love of films in theatres will remain strong, we need to embrace the fact that passive audiences are also becoming active and willing participants, one same individual switching from one behaviour to the other all the time…

So, back to the documentary producer question: what he was concerned with was the ethical dimension implied in using gameplay and game dynamics for thematics connected with some of the most tragic situations in the world: wars, massacres, violations of human rights, poverty, migrants...

What he meant was: «Can one have fun while learning about other people's tragedy ? Is light behaviour suitable for heavy subjects? Is gameplay alright to teach and inform in a more engaging way about tragic and complex issues? What is the ethical challenge involved in applying a game like approach to a naturally interactive, participative and immersive transmedia way of telling very serious stories?»

Answering this question implies considering that playing is not necessarily a «light» activity. Games can be very serious (serious games have now become a whole industry in itself). Playing is not always distracting and carefree entertainment.

Books and studies have been written about the nature of play, I will not try to address the topic here. But all of these essays reach the same statement: playing games is an essential part of what makes us humans and not animals, because games are a symbolic claim to control and re-appropriate reality. Games are the manifestation of human aspiration to rise over our physical determinism.

And so is storytelling which in a way can be considered as a mind game, the purpose of which is to transform reality into an abstract entity that can be shared, a tale.

Look at the 4 things that gamer young adults are good at above in Jane Mc Gonigal's quote. They are all very positive values and they are at the heart of game dynamics. Gamified storytelling can activate the same positive values if consciously built into the tale by the authors.

In this sense, playing and game play are becoming an engaging storytelling engine which helps triggering active interaction with the story, appropriation by the participating spectator/player and empathy. And there is no serious moral challenge in this approach.

Because play mechanics are no longer just about being childish, foolish, forgetful, and carefree (role play for example has become a healing technique as well as a strategic approach to forecasting conflict situations).

Take this transmedia documentary I have recently discussed with their story architect on refugees for example: 250 million people are refugees in the world today; the project aims at making us understand what they go through and empathize with them. To do this, a sort of a game will be part of the story universe they are building in which I will be able to live in a virtual refugee camp; I will have to gain points through each of the daily tasks that a refugee has to undertake to survive. This role playing dynamic will create a very pragmatic and realistic experience for the player of what it is like to be a refugee.

Game dynamics are now closer to the concepts of fluidity, empathy, narrative involvement, proximity, experience design... Our world fears boredom. Everything has to be engaging to be truly shared.

Clearly the risk in this process is to over simplify the complexities involved in any real situation, by turning multiple view points for instance into game angles… It then becomes the story architect responsibility to tailor the gameplay of his or her story to be coherent with the seriousness of the tale subject matter.

Now, if we follow the logic a step further, we can see how game culture spreads the building of imaginary worlds with more and more sophisticated rendering devices everyday thanks to our ever improving image technologies. These virtual realities become alternate worlds in which we are spending more and more time. More and more people find living in these fictitious realities a lot more fun, engaging and rewarding than dealing with the grim reality of their daily problems and struggles.

How much then can we play, in our transmedia stories, with blurring the lines between «objective» physical reality and these «subjective» invented realities?

If everything becomes progressively playable and gamified, allowing me to become who ever I choose through reinvented identities and avatars, physical reality will start loosing its objective reference value.

Therefore, it is very tempting for the writer team of a transmedia story to make fiction pass as reality itself, to make fiction pass as truth.

Orson Welles was a pioneer in this confusing perception between tale and objective truth when he aired his show *War of the Worlds* in 1938, creating panic for thousands of people actually trying to escape the invented martian creatures that had landed on earth to destroy us.

More recently, *The Truth about Marika*, a complex transmedia story, unfolded in Stockholm in 2009 over a period of 4 to 5 weeks. SVT, the Swedish public broadcaster, launched a serie on a kidnapped girl in Stockholm. They were challenged by a woman who claimed they were using the true story of her friend who had actually disappeared under the exact same circumstances. That started a complex quest for the disappeared Marika in real life throughout Stockholm, involving thousand of individuals teaming up around the discovery of Ordo Serpentis, the underground secret organization who apparently could be responsible for the hundreds of people disappearing every year in Sweden.

When at the end it was announced that the whole thing was a fiction, a significant part of the audience who involved themselves in looking for Marika and had trusted that it was all for real, were very upset, feeling that they had been lead to make fools of themselves. A sociologist studied audience reactions and found that about 30% of the audience truly resented SVT and the story architects for leading them into believing a lie.

This should be a lesson for all of us tempted to spice up our stories by creating confusion between reality and fiction.

Two rules should be observed in mixing reality and fiction in our stories:

— the no abuse rule: if no negative values are activated in the story universe (crime, kidnapping, murder, theft, violence, financial scam...) it can be ok to play at blurring the lines as long as no one gets actually cheated nor abused

— the as if rule: when I buy a ticket for a movie I know I am about to enter an imaginary reality in which I will cry and laugh *as if* it was real while I know it is fake; when I buy or join a video game or an online game I know and I accept that I will be now immersed in a fantasy world *as if* it was

totally real and engaging for me (a young boy of 11 recently died after spending 57 hours playing online without feeding himself, drinking, nor sleeping…). The same rule should apply to story worlds that invite the viewer/participant to perceive it as real.

The *as if* rule is crucial because it is the very foundation of game and play, the essence of the ritual that game truly is: creating a magic circle within which new rules are set, true emotions can be activated and reality can be transcended.

Storytelling as an artform, whether through books, live arts, films, experience design, transmedia story worlds, is a quintessential game. Stories build closed havens in which I can immerse myself, feel different emotions, be someone else either through characters who become emotional vehicles for me or through my own projection into avatars… In stories I can replace the world that physically surrounds me and transform it into altered realities.

The essence of story is play and the nuclear heart of games is storytelling. And it has always been so.

The novelty is that technology now adds an incredibly rich, sophisticated and varied range of virtual ways in which we can play, engage in role play through social networking and online gaming, create our own invented stories within the bigger story world provided,…

But deep down, video games and interactive stories are nothing more than the contemporary forms of our eternal need to elevate ourselves above the dire constraints of our physical existence.