



VIRTUAL SOCIETIES. GAMER'S EDITION

27 JANUARY - 11 APRIL 2010

Press Release

PRODUCED BY:
ARTS SANTA MÒNICA - DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND MEDIA

Arts Santa Mònica 2009/2010

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27 JANUARY - 11 APRIL 2010 EXHIBITION

ARTS SANTA MÒNICA – RING SPACE (FLOOR 01)

The exhibition **Virtual Societies** sets out to present a phenomenon, a language rich in complex codes, which exists at the global scale and acts as the mirror for a series of social narratives and phenomena that explain and are part of what Eugeni d'Ors called 'the palpitations of our time'.

Virtual Societies/Gamer's Edition is a reflexive journey on the borders between reality and virtuality, play and social interaction, creativity and communication. It has its roots in the wargaming invented in Prussia in the first third of the nineteenth century, and recreates the evolution of its mechanisms to the point of the establishment of the online role-playing game, by way of the conception of the video game as a demiurgic tool, the role of the avatar as a divine incarnation and/or narrative intrusion, the part played by multiverses and the return to the physical world from virtual creations.

The exhibition is a kind of traversable film archive, with a series of points of light projecting scenes from video games such as SimCity, The Sims, Spore, Populous, Black & White, Fable and World of Warcraft, as well as cinematic worlds such as Second Life or Habbo Hotel, testimonial documentaries and tactile and olfactory objects. The balconies on the first floor have been screened over, and from outside we can see the players' faces in real-time video.

The subject is the simulacrum, the mirage, of games whose object – like that of aesthetics, communication and science – is knowledge and not rules and limitations in themselves. These are no longer screens, but faces lit up with frenzy.

CURATED BY: RICARD MAS

PRODUCED BY: ARTS SANTA MÒNICA - DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND MEDIA

EXHIBITION

Curated by: Ricard Mas

Space design: Garcia-Duran + Echeverria

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FROM LEAD TO THE PIXEL

The maximum expression of human conflict as materialised in the art of war is the origin of a good number of games.

In 1824, lieutenant George Heinrich Rudolph Johann von Reisswitz, a first lieutenant of artillery in the Prussian Guard, published *Instructions for the Representation of Tactical Manoeuvres under the Guise of a Wargame*, the first wargame of the modern era. The publication was adopted by the Prussian army and became fundamental in the conduct of the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War, being subsequently employed by several Western nations, aware of the effectiveness of wargaming.

In 1913, the science fiction writer and recognised pacifist H. G. Wells published the first wargame for the wider public: *Little Wars*. And in 1953, the American Charles Roberts published *Tactics*, the first board game with cardboard counters. The board wargame evidently proved highly popular, as during the nineteen-sixties various examples of the genre reached editions of hundreds of thousands.

In 1974, two American specialists in wargames, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, published the instructions for a new game: *Dungeons and Dragons*. In an adaptation of the universe created by the English writer John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, they transported the logic of confrontation between armies to a specific scenario where a group of individuals belonging to fantasy races with supernatural powers set out to attain a series of objectives. Thus was born the role-playing game.

Role-playing was then adapted to the world of videogames and computer networks. The maximum expression of this was the MMORPG – massively multiplayer online role-playing game – in which millions of users worldwide play and collaborate in real time.

Currently, the MMORPG with most players is *World of Warcraft*, created in 2004 by the company Blizzard Entertainment.

Memoir '44, 2004

Board game. Strategy
Designer: Richard Borg
Publisher: Days of Wonder
Courtesy of Kaburi. Rol & Games, Barcelona

Wings of War, 2004

Board game. Strategy and aerial combat
Designers: Andrea Angiolino, Pier Giorgio
Publisher: Nexus
Courtesy of Kaburi. Rol & Games, Barcelona

Warhammer Fantasy Battle, 1983

Turn-based war strategy game
Designers: Richard Halliwell, Rick Priestley, Graeme Davis, Jim Bambra, Phil Gallaher
Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games
Courtesy of Kaburi. Rol & Games, Barcelona

Dungeons & Dragons, 1974

Table-top role-playing
Designers: Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson
Publisher: TSR, Wizards of the Coast

World of Warcraft, 2004

Video game. Cinematic world
Designers: Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, Tom Chilton
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment

Playing Columbine: A true story of Videogame controversy, 2007

Documentary
Director: Danny Ledonne

Publisher: Emberwilde

DEUS EX AVATAR

The Sanskrit word *avatar* means “he who descends” and is used for descents to Earth of the Hindu god Vishnu, who takes on the appearance that most interests him while maintaining his powers from the spiritual world.

The word was first employed in the West in 1859 in a poem by the English writer David Masson. It reappeared in the title of a role-playing video game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* in 1985, and a year later in the multi-participant online video game *Habitat*, where it acquired its current meaning. The avatar is the incarnation of the god-player, moved like a puppet through the telephone line.

There also exists a genre of video games, the *God Game*, in which the player acts as a god who manipulates beings and civilisations. Will Wright and Peter Molyneux are two of the most interesting designers of *God Games*.

In 1989, Wright designed *SimCity*, an urban simulator through which the player builds a city, being able to behave in a reasonable manner or, to the contrary, construct an absurd metropolis emerged in chaos. Wright went on to create numerous simulation video games, such as *SimAnt* – the anthill simulator – and the series entitled *The Sims*, which recreates everyday life in the suburbs. Wright’s latest game is called *Spore*, and is a life simulator whose scope ranges from primordial life form to the most sophisticated civilisations.

Molyneux, on the other hand, is more moralistic. His first games, *Populous* and *Black & White*, involve caring for a civilisation. The player’s divine role benefits the life of the inhabitants of that rather peculiar universe, or makes it more difficult. With the *Fable* series, Molyneux uses role-playing to address the question of good and evil. Our actions have consequences and, depending on whether we are good or evil, our surroundings and history evolve in different ways.

The 10 Avatars of Vishnu, 2010

Mural

SimCity, 1989

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Will Wright

Publisher: Maxis

SimAnt, 1991

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Will Wright, Justin McCormick

Publisher: Maxis

The Sims 3, 2009

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Will Wright

Publisher: Maxis/Electronic Arts

Spore, 2008

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Will Wright

Publisher: Maxis/Electronic Arts

Populous 2, 1991

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Peter Molyneux

Publisher: Bullfrog/Electronic Arts

Black & White 2, 2006

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Peter Molyneux

Publisher: Lionhead Studios/EA Games

Fable 2, 2008

Video game. Cinematic world

Designer: Peter Molyneux

Publisher: Lionhead Studios/Microsoft Game Studios

Talks. Will Wright makes toys that make worlds, 2007

Video

Publisher: TED

PERSISTENT UNIVERSES

Science fiction has had a great deal to do with the creation of the huge communications networks. In 1863, Jules Gabriel Verne wrote *Paris in the 20th Century*, a novel which anticipated such 20th century inventions as the high-speed train, television and air conditioning, as well as a worldwide communications network based on the telegraph.

Popular culture of the 20th century has conditioned the imaginary we share today on the Internet. Hugo Gernsback, who coined the term “science fiction”, was the founder of a magazine for radio enthusiasts, the predecessor of the Internet, in the first decades of the last century. And in 1926 in his magazine *Amazing Stories* he began publishing the postal addresses of science fiction enthusiasts who sent letters to the magazine’s editor, thus creating a network of fans who could communicate with each other. Over time, this phenomenon would develop from fans simply expressing their admiration to their actually contributing new content.

In 1991, Tim Berners-Lee, an employee at the CERN particle accelerator (Geneva), developed the first version of the html language. He was, in fact, the programmer of the first website in history.

Thanks to Berners-Lee’s inventions, the role-playing game for computers extended throughout the network of networks, enabling games to be conducted in multiplayer mode. Before long, massive multiplayer online role-playing games began appearing, including *Meridian 59* (1996), *Ultima Online* (1997) and *Lineage* (1998). Later and building on the experience of these games, a series of virtual universes oriented towards social communication would burst onto the scene, among them *Habbo Hotel* and *Second Life*.

Second Life, 2003

Virtual world. Cinematic world
Publisher: Linden Research, Inc.

Habbo Hotel, 2000

Virtual world. Cinematic world
Publisher: Sulake Corporation OY

Entropia Universe, 2003

Virtual world. Cinematic world
Publisher: MindArk FPC

HiPiHi, 2009

Virtual world. Cinematic world
Publisher: HiPiHi Co.

Akalabeth: World of Doom, 1980

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: California Pacific Computer Co.

Habitat, 1980

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Lucasfilm Games

Meridian 59, 1996

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: The 3DO Company/Near Death Studios

Ultima Online, 1997

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Origin Systems/Electronic Arts

Lineage, 1998

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Ncsoft

Aion, 2008

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Ncsoft

Everquest, 1999

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment

Final Fantasy XI, 2002

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Square Enix

Animal Crossing: Let's go to the city, 2008

Video role-playing game. Cinematic world
Publisher: Nintendo

Geosimphilly, 2008

Virtual world. Online multi-user
Publisher: GeoSim Systems

SINISTER SYNTHETICS

Fiction and reality coexist, they interweave and they dialogue. In 1919, Sigmund Freud defined that which is sinister as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar. Something” he continued, “has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it sinister”.

Synthetic realities, offspring of the new technologies, incorporate new meanings to the Freudian definition. For instance, computer programs or video games involving extended reality, such as the virtual animal in Sony Eye Pet, contain poetics and aesthetics that readdress our relationship with our surroundings.

What lies behind the MMORPGs? A globalised society eager to live adventures in parallel universes. And on occasions the impatience of the avatar’s owner who is reluctant to accumulate the hours of experience necessary to reach higher levels in the game leads him or her to contract players from third world countries who will play in his or her place for a pittance. China is the main exporter of *gold farmers*, or substitute professionals. As in real life, in the world of players there is a regulated economy and a submerged economy. Behind each monitor however, there lies a human face.

Wheelman (2009) is a video game which deconstructs the city of Barcelona and adapts its urban development – the result of a series of historical processes – to the narrative possibilities of the medium. Players must carry out more than a hundred missions and drive around the city avoiding the police. A good deal of the objects that appear in the video game are destructible.

As we have seen at the beginning of the exhibition, the game’s military culture and symbolic language have always enjoyed privileged relations. Today, video game consoles are employed for military purposes; the American army conducts exercises and recruitment drives with video games, and many games intended for the “civilian” world still faithfully recreate the most modern of combat tactics. A number of video games, such as *CoD. Modern Warfare 2*, offer collectors’ editions which include real objects from the world of the military. In this case the pack contains night-vision goggles, ideal for going to war, or even visiting this exhibition.

Gold Farmers, 2006

Documentary

Director: Ge Jin, aka Jingle

Eye Pet, 2009

Video game

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

What do Video games smell of?, 2009

Olfactory installation

Smells from: World of Warcraft, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Grand Theft Auto IV, Resident Evil, FIFA 10

Publisher: Col·lecció olorVisual (VISUALodour collection)

Wheelman, 2009

Video game

Publisher: Midway Games

Night vision goggles, Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2, 2009

Publisher: Activision

Natural hallucinogen, 2006

Video

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