New York, 1933. An enormous gorilla falls off the top of the Empire State Building. This scene has long exerted a powerful grip on the collective imagination, to be reiterated in the sixties by Andy Warhol in a few episodes of the series Death and Disaster, and more recently in the media representation of the Twin Towers disaster.

New York, 2005. The same gorilla falls off the same skyscraper. This time however we do not see the modernist silhouette of the Empire State Building, beside which even the giant beast looked like a speck in the sky. This time we see the scene through the eyes of the lead character, who has also climbed up to the top of the building in a last-ditch attempt to save the soft-hearted monster.

You immediately start wondering why Peter Jackson, a great admirer of the original Kong, decided to leave that magnificent image out of his remake and opt instead for a powerful but decidedly less vivid subjective view. There has to be a reason for it in the story. In the first King Kong the lead character was a victim of the beast’s love, while in the remake it is more of a reciprocal thing. The psychological side plays an important role in the story, so it is therefore natural that the viewer is presented with the character’s point of view. But this is not enough to justify depriving us of the image we have been waiting for throughout the whole movie. When watching this remake the trained eye of the movie buff has to deal with the “insider’s eye view” that videogames have got us accustomed to, and his or her expectations are foiled. The need to experience a story from the inside has taken over from our desire to identify with powerful iconography.

I have chosen this example not in order to show that film, which has played such a decisive role in the development of the videogame, is now in turn being profoundly influenced by the younger medium. There is no need to. Peter Jackson’s King Kong is clearly game-like, as the Wachowski brothers’ trilogy was before it. What I want to look at is the more general picture: how videogames are conditioning the aesthetics and registers of other media.

Info-Aesthetics

What comes after modernism, postmodernism, and new media? Welcome to INFO-AESTHETICS.

INFO-AESTHETICS is not only the aesthetics of data. INFO-AESTHETICS is the new culture of INFORMATION society. INFO-AESTHETICS is already here. Do you see it?

The fact that digital media are slowly but inexorably transforming aesthetics and our tastes is not a new thing. In Synopsis,
Introduzione all’educazione estetica (2005), the Italian academic Fulvio Caragno writes: «So is there something like a new form of fetishism. According to him, the transfer of film into the computer had led to the former being its main “cultural interface”. The result is that today it is perfectly applicable to any videogram. To date the videogram is one of the most popular ways of approaching the new media and it is therefore natural that gain familiarity with it and its characteristics, such as modularity and variability, and forms like the database, through videogame entertainment.

The Aesthetics of Videogames

Aesthetics pervades all media, and games are no exception. Videogames play a decisive role in the advent of this new “aesthetics of informationalism”, as the number of games and Game Art projects included in Manovich’s as yet unfinished project shows. Moreover, I am convinced that videogames are capable of conditioning its forms and declinations and enriching it with their icons and symbols. In other words, Game Aesthetics is an important part of Info-Aesthetics. This importance is bound up in the history of the new media. It is a fact that the videogames industry, and the economy it has given rise to, plays a decisive role in the development of the new media, and has conditioned its history. As Burrett and Grusin (1999) note, “...the advent of videogames became fully two-dimensional, with figures cruising, running or hopping around as inhabitants of an electronic Flatland, thus anticipating and thus later refashioning the desktop interface as it evolved in the eighties”.

The videogames industry has stimulated research into the creation of interfaces as photorealistic as possible, and the construction of 3D, navigable spaces, which evolve and change, apparently natural, in real time. It has also guided the transfer of film into the computer world, which according to Manovich, has led to the former being its main “cultural interface”. The result is that today it is perfectly natural for a game-player to think, in agreement with Alvy Ray Smith, that reality is composed of eighty million polygons a second; at the same time, Manovich’s statement that the visual culture of the computer era is cinematographic in appearance, digital in the quality of the material and mathematic (that is guided in the program) in its logic is perfectly applicable to any videogame. What this book attempts to do is look to contemporary art to test out the advent of this new aesthetics. We are staking a claim that the new media is changing art, which is once more becoming a culturally and socially influential field of experimentation. The various media revolutions throughout history have always left a profound mark on the development of artistic research. The advent of photography at the end of the nineteenth century completely changed the fate of painting; and the advent of the mass media around the mid-twentieth century gave rise to new symbols, new legends and a new
collective imagination. But videogames are more than just another medium of expression, another way of constructing worlds or generating stories, and they are more than just a new source of material for the imagination, even though they are also both of these things. Like film and television in the days of Warhol, videogames have generated new collective legacies, new icons which have entered the iconographic repertoires of artists. In this sense the paintings of Miltos Manetas are the most evident examples of a new breed of Pop Art, with the paintings of Jesus Rafael Soto instead of Marilyn Monroe and the videogame of Lara Croft instead of Elvis Presley, Super Mario instead of Russian collective AES+F a polygonal monument; the works of the American artist Jon Haddock’s shots over from Superman’s bird’s eye view.

Of this tendency to put a videogame-like spin on a reality which is already profoundly mediated, to the extent that we are unable to distinguish between the massacre of Columbine and a scene from Francis Ford Coppola’s Godfather. What’s more, videogames offer us new arenas of action, where we can spend an increasing portion of our daily lives, which makes the work of artists like the Italian Mauro Coccini perfectly legitimate. Coccini paints polygonal landscapes for game backgrounds with the same style he uses for real landscapes, and the same level of attention that Canaletto dedicated to the bridges, squares and gondolas of Venice. Or the work of Marco Cadili, who enters into videogames and photography graphs, events, exactly like an embedded reporter following other, no less virtual wars, such as the recent conflict in Iraq. Lastly, as a mass phenomenon, the world of videogames inevitably launches its own fashions, like the Mediaselav look of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play games (MMORPG’s) which soon filtered into the real world, giving rise to a whole set of rituals and collective costume events, fertile terrain for Eddo Stern and his extraordinary sculptures. These works transfer this style to the computer itself, through a series of meetings, stories and worlds that would appear to have little in common with this cold, functional piece of “office equipment.” And it goes without saying that the world of videogames has its own regressive, nostalgic movements, like the fashion for the era of the 8bit games that has given rise to a lively musical scene, or the urban invasions of the French artist Invader (who materializes the Space Invaders icon in public places, sometimes in subliminal form, but on other occasions decidedly more invasive), and many of the works in this book. The aesthetics of videogames leave the screen and infiltrate reality in many more of these (and many other) projects: in John Car- mack (2004) Brody Condon pays homage to the inventor of Doom, building him a polygonal monument, the works of Russian collective AES+F use the style of fashion photography to make bold statements about how the media portrays violence, war and childhood, and the costume by the Swiss artist Shusha Nie- derberger is designed to transform her body into an avatar.

Playing with Code

...game hacker artists operate as culture hackers who manipulate existing techno-narrative stru- tures towards different ends or, as described by artist Brett Stia Baum, “to hack at the cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do.”

We have looked at videogames as a source for the imagination, and a new place – both in terms of a new living arena, a setting for life and action, and as a common place, a cultural point of reference, a new source of trends and subcultures. This would be enough to enable us to decree that videogames have all the prerequisites for launching a new, powerful form of Pop Art, or ultra-pop, as Matteo Bittanti describes the work of Mauro Coccini. But besides all this, videogames also provide art with something infinitely more than a simple pop rendering of its iconography, idiom and aesthetics: artists can actually create videogames or modify the software of existing games. Videogame art is still an emerging sector, in view of the production costs of making a videogame able to compete with mainstream offerings. Moreover, in a day and age when many are begin- ning to acknowledge the artistic nature of videogames, and when some of the great game designers, such as Will Wright, are coming up with culturally complex products, with declared artistic intent, perhaps it is better to avoid using ambiguous terms like “videogame art”. There is however an interesting “alternative game design” scene, at times in the form of little games created in Flash or with other simple game design tools, and which often reveals a political intention to offer a form of counter-in- formation, in opposition to the ruling ideology of mainstream videogames. There are also more complex, demand- ing objects (also in terms of production), which introduce alternative narratives or bypass gaming dynamics to focus on the creation of navigable virtual worlds and characters whose psychological de- velopment interests us more than their adventures.

Escape from Woomera (2004), 11 for ex- ample, is a videogame developed by an independent Australian collective which uses the form of the first-person 3D ad- venture game to tell of the daily life of a detainee in one of the most criticized immigration reception and processing centers in Australia, that of Woomera. Meanwhile Waco Resurrection (2003) 12 by the American collective c-level, enables the player, in the role of a “resurrected” David Koresh, to rewrite the history of the Waco massacre, which cost the lives of seventy-six members of the Branch
Davidian sect in 1993, under fire from the FBI and American army. Acmiapark (2001–03), by the Australian group Selecaps, focuses on the creation of a virtual online world waiting to be explored and transformed into a stage for impromptu musical performances. And it is this field of “experimental game design” which often involves artists but is targeted more at gamers than the art world—which has taken up the challenge to broaden the aesthetic horizons of the videogame, currently stifled by an overwhelming push towards photorealism. One group which springs to mind is the European collective Tale of Tales, which came about from the work of the Davidian sect in 1993, under fire from the FBI. The group, which is targeted more at gamers than the art world—which has taken up the challenge to broaden the aesthetic horizons of the videogame, currently stifled by an overwhelming push towards photorealism, is an attempt to create one from scratch. Video games are an editable medium, and behind their wonderful interfaces lie digital code and software. This means that in Game Art—this is the ugly term which most of the works in this book have ended up being defined as—we find the whole legacy of the impact of the web, hacking, software and IT on the consumption of contemporary art. The aesthetic consequences are just a small part of this impact, which has meant we have had to leave out a number of works that have played a decisive role in the history of Game Art, but the strength of which is not immediately evident in a single image. Editing mainstream video games is an extremely complex cultural phenomenon, which arises around the mid-nineties following the extraordinary intuition of the company id Software to distribute Doom (1993) online as shareware. As Tillman Baumgartel writes, «With Doom, a medium developed out of a game, an opportunity to create one’s own worlds. With Doom, id Software put a potent piece of software for creating three-dimensional spaces into the hands of its customers.» In January 1994 a New Zealand student, Brendon Wyber, put the Doom Editor Unit in circulation. From that moment on, the idea of customizable games began to take hold, and became increasingly popular not only among users but also among mainstream producers, up to the point of developing virtual online worlds such as The Sims Online or Second Life, where the user’s creative input represents an important part of the gaming experience. Artistic modifications or patches may have a range of different aims: to personalize the interface of the game, integrating it with other sense systems; to protest against its ideology, or to deconstruct its interface, revealing the structure and conventions it is based on, and so on. In all of these cases what the artist does is work with the game’s algorithms—as Manovich intends it, not the code as such, but the deep cultural structure of the software. As Anne-Marie Schleiner observes, videogames are cultural constructions which can be manipulated to make them do things they were never originally designed to do. Schleiner, in collaboration with the American Brody Condon and the Catalan Joan Leandre, was responsible for one of the most formidable hacks that any videogame has ever been subjected to. Velvet Strike (2002) is a collection of pastich graffiti daubed on the walls of the violent multiplayer game Counter-Strike. Aside from its undoubted political and ideological value—video games are public places and as such subject to the same forms of social use and revision—this project also juxtaposes the videogame’s polygonal aesthetics with those of the graffiti, its symbols and icons.

Photorealism versus Abstraction

The photo-real push is almost as established a part of game culture as shooting or driving, and for some it is becoming just as tired. Maybe enough, games have to push all the way to photo-realism before intentionally pushing away from it. But in order to get his or her hands on a videogame, an artist does not need to be as far as to say that creating a game that attempts to be aesthetically pleasing is an ideological choice in itself. But in order to get his or her hands on a videogame, an artist does not need to create one from scratch. Video games are an editable medium, and behind their wonderful interfaces lie digital code and software. This means that in Game Art—this is the ugly term which most of the works in this book have ended up being defined as—we find the whole legacy of the impact of the web, hacking, software and IT on the consumption of contemporary art. The aesthetic consequences are just a small part of this impact, which has meant we have had to leave out a number of works that have played a decisive role in the history of Game Art, but the strength of which is not immediately evident in a single image. Editing mainstream video games is an extremely complex cultural phenomenon, which arises around the mid-nineties following the extraordinary intuition of the company id Software to distribute Doom (1993) online as shareware. As Tillman Baumgartel writes, «With Doom, a medium developed out of a game, an opportunity to create one’s own worlds. With Doom, id Software put a potent piece of software for creating three-dimensional spaces into the hands of its customers.» In January 1994 a New Zealand student, Brendon Wyber, put the Doom Editor Unit in circulation. From that moment on, the idea of customizable games began to take hold, and became increasingly popular not only among users but also among mainstream producers, up to the point of developing virtual online worlds such as The Sims Online or Second Life, where the user’s creative input represents an important part of the gaming experience. Artistic modifications or patches may have a range of different aims: to personalize the interface of the game, integrating it with other sense systems; to protest against its ideology, or to deconstruct its interface, revealing the structure and conventions it is based on, and so on. In all of these cases what the artist does is work with the game’s algorithms—as Manovich intends it, not the code as such, but the deep cultural structure of the software. As Anne-Marie Schleiner observes, videogames are cultural constructions which can be manipulated to make them do things they were never originally designed to do. Schleiner, in collaboration with the American Brody Condon and the Catalan Joan Leandre, was responsible for one of the most formidable hacks that any videogame has ever been subjected to. Velvet Strike (2002) is a collection of pastich graffiti daubed on the walls of the violent multiplayer game Counter-Strike. Aside from its undoubted political and ideological value—video games are public places and as such subject to the same forms of social use and revision—the project also juxtaposes the videogame’s polygonal aesthetics with those of the graffiti, its symbols and icons.

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The push for photorealism aims to make the sense of immersion in a story increasingly effective, whether it be interactive or not, and to render the gap between fantasy and reality harder to perceive. However, photorealism is a concept entirely alien to the deep-seated nature of the medium in which it is generated, which works with digital data and mathematical equations, and visualizes the images obtained by means of pixels. In this way, while the mainstream media embrace the long tradition of high-brow culture which from a commercial viewpoint, on the cultured tradition of programming and from an aesthetic point of view, the difference is strikingly evident. Computer graphics, which tends to subvert the tendency to think of videogames as a mere tool of military propaganda. Moreover the juxtaposition of reality and videogame fiction is one of the most characteristic stylistic traits of the so-called digital folk art which can be found on the net, produced by fans and amateurs who intuitively feel the need to render this in a single image. Nullsleep refers to this scene in his New York Romscapes (2003) to it. It is obvious, through photography, is compared with the polygons of an FPS, or the pixel blocks of Zédela, or the geometrical patterns of Tetris, or the isometric vision of a strategy game. There is another side, which focuses on accentuating the imperfections and defects in the contemporary version of photorealism, highlighting the polygonal, isometric aesthetic of the gaming experience. Polygons, the limit to this form of realism held in check by processor capacity and band width, become a stylistic element, and isometry. «a technique which falsifies real proportions at the very moment it attempts to reproduce them. The push for photorealism aims to make the sense of immersion in a story increasingly effective, whether it be interactive or not, and to render the gap between fantasy and reality harder to perceive. However, photorealism is a concept entirely alien to the deep-seated nature of the medium in which it is generated, which works with digital data and mathematical equations, and visualizes the images obtained by means of pixels. In this way, while the mainstream media embrace the long tradition of high-brow culture which from a commercial viewpoint, on the cultured tradition of programming and from an aesthetic point of view, the difference is strikingly evident. Computer graphics, which tends to subvert the tendency to think of videogames as a mere tool of military propaganda. Moreover the juxtaposition of reality and videogame fiction is one of the most characteristic stylistic traits of the so-called digital folk art which can be found on the net, produced by fans and amateurs who intuitively feel the need to render this in a single image. Nullsleep refers to this scene in his New York Romscapes (2003) to it. It is obvious, through photography, is compared with the polygons of an FPS, or the pixel blocks of Zédela, or the geometrical patterns of Tetris, or the isometric vision of a strategy game. There is another side, which focuses on accentuating the imperfections and defects in the contemporary version of photorealism, highlighting the polygonal, isometric aesthetic of the gaming experience. Polygons, the limit to this form of realism held in check by processor capacity and band width, become a stylistic element, and isometry. «a technique which falsifies real proportions at the very moment it attempts to reproduce them.
Retro-Aesthetics

Here and there we have seen the illus- trious ghosts of a pixelated, JD past – Pong, Super Mario, and Space Invaders – emerge. This should come as no surprise: retrogaming is one of the most lively trends in videogame culture and the emergence of a retro aesthetic is the inevitable outcome. Almost all videogame artists and hackers grew up with these “primitive blips” in their eyes: it was inevitable that sooner or later they should turn to their childhood. The focus on childhood is a constant in all modernist art and almost always, from Dadaism to Art Brut, springs from a revolutionary energy of their idiom – they also represent the consummate expression of aesthetic taste based on the internal subversion of commodities game. The ironic counterpart of aesthetic taste in the present day – Pong, Super Mario, and Space Invaders – emerge. This should come as no surprise: retrogaming is one of the most lively trends in videogame culture and the emergence of a retro aesthetic is the inevitable outcome. Almost all videogame artists and hackers grew up with these “primitive blips” in their eyes: it was inevitable that sooner or later they should turn to their childhood. The focus on childhood is a constant in all modern ist art and almost always, from Dadaism to Art Brut, springs from a revolutionary inspiration, from the desire to oppose the classic art forms of every era – from Western figurative art to the academic reproductions of geo metric abstractions – by unleashing the unny force of instinct, the irrational and unconscious.

But Cory Arcangel and Brent Gustafson hacking into Nintendo cartridges, and JODI’s work on Jet Set Willy represents much more than this. The old games and platforms are more than just the games of our childhood, they are simple, more elementary technologies which are much easier to manipulate. They are junk technology waiting for someone to give them a new life, to be of use or at least of interest once more, according to William Gibson’s definitive description in the article Rocket Radio (1986): “The street finds its own uses for things – uses the manufacturers never imagined.” At the same time the artists are not merely nostalgic about the games of their childhood (for their sentimental value or the revolutionary energy of their idiom – they also represent the consummate embodiment of what Fulvio Carmagnola has indicated as the ideal user of the new media society: the trickster. This trickster is a conscious, cheating player who does not reject the rules of the media society and global commercialization on principle, but who, like a sort of jujitsu uses the power of language, communications and commodities as a point of departure or lever for a reflective reconsideration of its meaning, turning it on its head. The practices of the trickster are a form of aesthetic behavior and taste based on the internal subversion of the commodities game. The ironic counterpart of aesthetic taste in the present day it would be difficult to provide a better definition of artists who move with ease between different worlds, reconstructing old technologies and subverting new ones, but above all playing – with symbols, code, tradition, and with the spec tator: artists who are contributing to the definition of a new aesthetic paradigm.

(English translation by Anna Carruthers)

Notes

2 In L. Manovich, id.
8 In L. Manovich, “The Language of New Media”, quoted, p. 299.
9 In M. Manetas. Copying from videogames, is the art of our day, 2002-03, available online at www.manetas.com/leti/videogames.html.
14 www.escapefromwoomera.org/.
15 www.vacco.o-level.co/.
16 www.selectpark.net/asmtpark.htm.
17 See D. Bolter, quoted.
19 D. Hayward, quoted.
21 In The Language of New Media Manovich, discurs- ing on the logic of databases, observes that videogames do not follow the logic of the database, but appear to be more logical-based. He then quotes Ed Fries, the creator of The Sims, (playing the game is a continuous loop between the user (viewing the outcomes and inputting decisions) and the computer (calculating outcomes and displaying them to the user). The user is trying to build a mental model of the computer model. According to Manovich, this is another example of “transcoding”, namely computer code being trans formed into cultural code. See L. Manovich, The Language of New Media, quoted pp. 272-78.
22 In D. Hayward, quoted.
24 http://nostalg.org
26 See D. Hayward, quoted.
27 See D. Hayward, quoted.
28 See D. Hayward, quoted.
29 In D. Hayward, quoted.
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Authors’ Biographies

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Matteo Bittanti is a PostDoc Researcher at University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on the cultural, social and theoretical aspects of emerging technology, with an emphasis on the interrelations of popular culture, visual culture, and the arts. He is the editor of videoludica: game culture, a series of books that examine videogames from a broad academic and critical perspective. He received a Ph.D in New Technologies of Communications from Libera Università di Lingue & comunicazion in Milan, Italy. Previously, he received a M.S. in Mass Communications from San José State University, in San José California, and a B.A. in Philosophy and Media Studies from Università cattolica in Milan, Italy. He is also affiliated with the Stanford Humanities Lab and the “How They Got Game” Project.

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Domenico Quaranta is curator and art critic focused on new media. He works as editor of the magazine Cluster and contributes on a regular basis to other magazines such as Exibart, Exibart onpaer, Arte e Critica, Ts. Off, Digimag. His articles, reviews and interviews appeared on Il Corriere della Sera, Flash Art, Boiler, Noemalab, A minima, Titolo, Maska, Around Photography. Drome. He wrote the monographs Magritte and Warhol for the Italian arts publisher Skira. In 2005 and 2006 he worked for Piemonte Share Festival, curating respectively the Gamescenes and the Radical Software sections of the exhibition. He also published Net ARt 1994-1998. La vicenda di Äda’web for the publishing house Vita e Pensiero and co-curated the exhibition “Connessioni leggendarie. Net Art 1995 - 2005”. He teaches net.art at the Accademia di Brera of Milan. He lives and works in Brescia, Italy.

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Rebecca Cannon is an Australian media artist, writer and developer, working professionally in online service delivery, with an academic interest in the history of artistic computer game modification. Rebecca has written papers relating to artistic computer game modification which will be published in the books Re: Skin (MIT Press) and Anomalia: Video Games and Art (Intellect Books), both forthcoming.

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The aesthetics of videogames is more. Over the last few decades videogames have increasingly grown to influence our lives in different fields. It is an important media, a tool for play and interaction, as well as a cultural phenomenon. The aesthetics of videogames is something this paper tries to investigate in terms of gameplay to the individual player, and how it affects the emotional investments subconsciously delegated to the player. In game design the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) framework is a tool used to analyze games. It formalizes the consumption of games by breaking them down into three components: Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. These three words have been used informally for many years to describe various aspects of games, but the MDA framework provides precise definitions for these terms and seeks to explain how they relate to each other and influence the player's experience. I approach game aesthetics following the make-believe theory of representation developed by Professor Kendall Walton, which states that representational art is continuous (but more sophisticated than) children's games of make-believe. When we look at a painting — say, Van Gogh's Starry Night — we play a game of make-believe with it in which it is prescribed we imagine certain things (such as that we are looking at a star-filled night sky). In the field of game studies, aesthetics refers to the visible elements of a game, including artwork, the interface, and audio. As mentioned in his book, The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses, Jesse Schell considers aesthetics to be an important element of game design because "they have the most direct relationship to the player's experience" (Schell, 42). He includes it in his Elemental Tetrad alongside mechanics, story, and technology. Subtle presentation choices can also influence where a player Game aesthetics.