Video/Game

Andri Gerber in Conversation with Johannes Binotto, Winterthur, February 1, 2019

Andri Gerber: Let's begin with the end. I know that you have a weakness for the proverbial "happy ending." What if for this book, we would replace it with "game over"?

Johannes Binotto: What interests me about the happy ending in cinema is that it represents a suspended condition: there is a postulated, assumed end; at the same time, it remains a fragile situation. In contrast, the "game over" of a computer game is, interestingly enough, both more arbitrary and more absolute. It obviously also depends on the type of game. There are games that have a strong dramaturgy and are more prone to a happy-ending type of game over.

I think that this doesn't apply to games that you really end, that you truly finish, but to those in which the game over can occur normally, at anytime. Think about when you suddenly have to turn off the computer. Time is over; this is totally arbitrary but also absolute, because the game is not continuing. Maybe extreme gamers would contradict me on this, and claim that they keep on thinking about the game even when not playing it, but I would say this is not the case for the average gamer. One can restart anytime, but it's a new start.

In the case of the happy ending in film, as well as in literature, there is a cut but the text goes on writing itself in the minds of the observers. This is not the case with a game, or at least not in the same way.

Gerber: The real drama is when you haven't saved the game—and your parents walk-in and pull the plug! That's an absolute cut! But would a happy ending also be possible in a game? To be honest, I don't remember ever playing a game until the very end, and this is quite frustrating.

Binotto: That is an interesting thought. I am interested in happy endings that are considered cheap, *deux ex machina* happy endings. But I am interested in these because they make a categorical jump, or what Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) calls a "qualitative leap".[1] Something happens that overthrows the entire set of rules that were valid before. I cannot imagine how this would be the case in a video game. Perhaps we can envision it like this: while the end of a game usually implies that all levels have been completed, that all coins and tokens have been collected, in our new game, this reward could happen at any moment instead of only at the end. This would be interesting, very Brechtian, but I have never heard of that.

Gerber: In video games this *deux ex machina* does not exist, as you are subjected to all sorts of rules and constraints. This is precisely where many subversive game designers intervene, questioning the game itself by subverting its rules.

Binotto: You need to develop a hacker-mentality, refusing to play the game the way you should. I think there are similar situations, in particular as related to the spatiality of video games. So for example in GTA—*Grand Theft Auto* (1997)—this would imply that suddenly you leave the car, go for a walk, and simply watch the leaves on a tree. And this could then be the happy ending, because you have left the game, while the game itself goes on endlessly.

Gerber: One is still in the game, but at the same, one has left it …

Binotto: Exactly!

Gerber: You work in the field of media and cultural studies, and so you move between different disciplines: primarily literary studies, film studies, psychoanalysis, and architecture. It is my understanding that space is what combines all these disciplines in your work. And space, as you know, is an obsession for us architects, as it is both fundamental yet eludes a fixed definition. What is your definition of space, considering how all these disciplines converge in space?

Binotto: My definition of space would be: making a difference. I love the beginning of *Espèces d'espaces* (1974) by Georges Perec (1936-1982), where he says: at the beginning there is a line. A line immediately fabricates a coordinate system; through this, one understands that space is produced

1 | Compare: M. Jamie Ferreira: "Faith and the Kierkegaardien Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay, Daniel Marino Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 207–235.

and can be transformed constantly. This is why I am so interested in media studies: they imply the possibility of transforming space. At the same time, this represents the "lust" of architecture, a lust that is constantly frustrated because of the problem of the building. You cannot create stability while constantly transforming space. In architecture, if you want to build, you have to obey certain physical laws. Mediated space and space in media, however, is a non-Euclidian, topological space, an ever-fluid space. I think this is something that makes architects jealous—whereas media artists might be jealous of the architects' actual buildings.

Gerber: Here I recognize the psychoanalyst talking [laughs] ... I would assert that architecture has lost its role as a metaphor for construction and stability. Since the introduction of new media, the references we typically use are "networks" or "fluids." So this confirms, somehow, the pretended and long-lost "spatial innocence" of architecture ...

I often accidentally write video-game with a hyphen, instead of separating the two words. We know both how important language is, and that this kind of separation is not casual. What would be the prerequisite for binding the two words, video and game, with a hyphen, in order to bring them closer together?

Binotto: This is a very interesting question. "Video game" is, in and of itself, an extremely loaded term, in a way that fascinates me. First, we need to be aware that the medium "video" is a completely different medium than "film." Video is not a photographic medium, and perhaps not even necessarily an optical medium. Rather, it is a medium of writing, and this difference is extremely important. The video signal, as produced in a cathode ray tube, is not projecting actual images onto the screen of your TV set; it consists only of a moving dot of light. The movement of this dot is then mentally constructed into images. In film, one can, of course, say that the movement is an illusion, since movement cannot actually be recorded optically, but can only be simulated through a rapid progression of images. Nonetheless, it is an optical medium, consisting of the individual photograms of the film strip, which are then projected in rapid succession. With video, however, these single images do not exist, and it therefore becomes problematic to define it as an optical medium, unless the definition of what an image is becomes incredibly broad. Video theorist Yvonne Spielmann refers to this when calling video a "reflexive medium": a flexible medium that is defined by constantly folding back its signal onto

itself.[2] This also explains why video artists are interested in effects like optical feedback and noise, decaying images, or disturbances. They are precisely because they want to show that these are no longer images, in the traditional sense. Video is a medium that is built on instability; it was not intended as a medium of recording. It is important to remember that video originally consisted of a constant flow of signals without any possibility of storage. Mediums for recording, such as video cassettes, were developed much later. In order to record an early video broadcast, you had in fact film the TV screen, in order to store it. The default mode of video is "send" not "capture." I think this is where the affinity with games exists: the game is a strange activity, one which is not built on a final result, but rather, a process that is self-sufficient. When we play together, we do not actually play in order to win, to win the most marbles, but we play for the sake of playing. There is nothing you take with you from the game once it is over. It is a performative medium that consists only of being played. This makes "video" and "game" so closely related.

Gerber: So in both cases, we have an inscription.

Binotto: Yes exactly. It is all about a constant overwriting process.

Gerber: Like a palimpsest …

Binotto: Correct.

Gerber: Let's move from one connecting line to the other, from the hyphen to the slash. You have used the slash extensively in your publications—*Tat/Ort* or *Film/Architektur*—what would be required to relate video and game with a slash, and what would the slash imply for the two connected items?

Binotto: In my work, it implies that it is not clear which element is primary, and the two items could exchange positions. Normally, you use the slash to indicate an alternative name, like a.k.a [also known as]. If video and game—written as video/game—could exchange positions, seeing video from a video-art perspective becomes possible; a playful, experimental position, aware of the fact that a video showing images is only one of its many possibilities. This explains the "messy" work of video-artists; they do this, in order to make the medium's own messiness clear. As Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) points out, every new medium is generally misunderstood, since it is first believed to be merely a continuation of an old medium. For example, everyone believed that TV was just a continuation of film, only

2 | Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

to realize that it is something else much later on. The video signals in TV can, of course, simulate film, but actually, it is something completely different. You can also plug a sound synthesizer instead of a camera into the TV monitor and you'll start to "see" sound. Expecting video to comprise "images" is thus a very limited and naive understanding of this medium. Instead, we must adopt a playful or experimental attitude towards this medium, one which is less oriented towards a result and more towards a pure process. Once you comprehend this, it would be a "game-attitude" towards video. Then you have video-slash-game, and they become interchangeable.

On the other hand, when the game gets exhausted by its own process, then it comes close to being video. If, for example, you no longer want to arrive at the finish line in a car racing game—when you no longer collect and "store" all the coins and treasures on your way, but rather, you get out of the car to have a stroll, or you just drive endlessly—then you would have a video-attitude in game. That would be video/game, which deserves its name.

Gerber: On a related note, there are several artists creating images based on video game aesthetics, Matthias Zimmermann (*1981) for example. But you would find the video component lacking in such attempts.

Binotto: The late work by filmmaker Harun Farocki (1944-2014) and his four-part video cycle *Parallel* is particularly instructive. Farocki was interested, very concretely, in how video-game makers do games, how they create elements such as wind or plants, and how one could explore these virtual words differently. The videos themselves seem almost utopian, at least to me: they reveal what a different kind of game could look like. Take the television series *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014-17), for example, about the revolution of the computer industry in the 1980s and early 1990s. In this show, a game designer has created a game called *Pilgrim*, of which she is very proud, but people do not understand it. To her, it is the ultimate game, because it is just an endless exploration, with no final destination. Sadly, consumers are not interested in that.

Gerber: The slash both separates and connects. Through the cutting and the connection, this space in between becomes tangible. This leads me to another aspect of games I think is worth discussing: weight. By this I mean the "weight" one loses by editing down and the weight of a new, almost solid connection. There is a weight between video games and reality: as much as video games attempt to copy reality, they will always remain a

"lighter" variant. I would argue that architecture in gaming is even lighter than in other mediums, such as photography or film.

Fig. 22: Harun Farocki, Parallel, Germany 2012, Digital Frame Enlargement

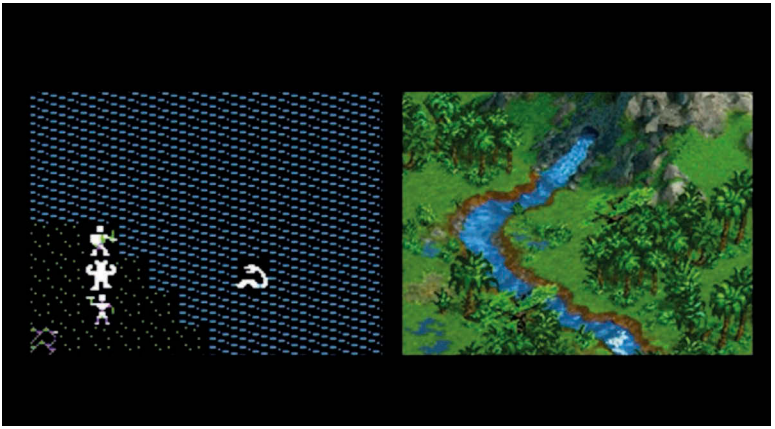

Fig. 23: Juan Campanella, Halt and Catch Fire, episode 4.1 "So It Goes," USA 2017, Digital Frame Enlargement

Binotto: I would agree with you, that architecture is "lighter" in image than in reality, also because the former can be so easily manipulated. The medium of video implies that something is in a constant state of change, that everything is a continuous permutation. In photography and in film, this exists in grains and noise, for example. If I had to compare them, I would say that a photographic image is a thick soup, while video is fog. You clearly feel this, because buildings in computer games are made of this fog, and can be exchanged easily and quickly. They have almost no substance.

Gerber: Well, in video games you can do almost anything, and the challenge is to make this architecture look like real architecture …

Binotto: Exactly.

Gerber: This brings us to the matter of technique. You are currently researching the role of technique in film, not only as a corollary, but rather, as the subject of film itself. I would argue that in video games, technique is almost invisible and has no real influence on the game. What about digital filmmaking? Has technique ceased playing this role?

Binotto: On the contrary! I would argue that the influence of the technique has become even stronger. If you consider the fact that a digital movie is no longer made of images, but instead of pixels that the beholder has to assemble themselves, this is very plausible.

An example of this is films shot in high-definition digital images telling stories that are "pixelated"—fractured and discontinuous narratives without a teleological story arch. Films like *Miami Vice* (2006) by Michael Mann (*1943), for example, or the recent movies of David Fincher (*1962), such as *Gone Girl* (2014). Here, it seems there is no longer any frame of reference, no "hard" reality, just a constant flux of information, endless movement without a goal. And it's not by accident that we find shots of radar and television screens, prototypes of electronic images in such movies. I would argue that something originating with the technique inscribes itself into the film and its stories.[3] While Mann and Fincher seem to be very conscious of that, it also happens in other cases. Even if you use filters and try to make digital video look like an analog film, as soon you stream these movies online, buffering effects will inevitably occur, glitch-

3 | See: Johannes Binotto, "Closed Circuits. Immanence as Disturbance in High Definition Cinema," *Disruption in the Arts*, ed. Lars Koch (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 171–185.

es and data corruption. Moments like this reveal something that actually pertains to the new medium. You witness a deconstruction, in which the digital technique inscribes itself into the movie. This cannot be escaped easily.

As for games, I once had an interesting experience with a simple car racing game, in which I was projected out of the course in a turn, yet I could then keep driving. I was literally driving on the border of the game! On the left, the screen was grey; on the right, there was the game. I was driving along this threshold, and suddenly, I could see the true nature of the game. That was a great experience! This is exactly why some games don't allow you to exit the car and walk around, because this "outside" has not been programmed. But this is exactly where the computer game becomes interesting to me. When you walk towards this invisible border, you recognize the mediality of the games.

Fig. 24: Michael Mann, Miami Vice, 2006, Digital Frame Enlargement

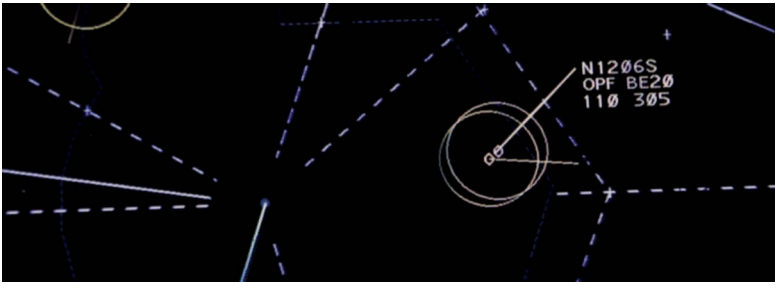

Fig. 25: David Fincher, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, 2011, Digital Frame Enlargement

Gerber: One could thus read the development of games in time as a constant attempt to make this border smaller and more inaccessible, both as space and as narrative. In this sense, I think there is a big difference between a movie and a game: in movies, space is constructed and is all about limits and borders, while games are all about the illusion of boundless space.

Binotto: You shall have the illusion that you can go anywhere!

Gerber: The frame is part of the movie, because without borders, you have no space. In games, the opposite is true: you would have, let's call it a landscape, and then we would have to start discussing the sublime and the picturesque as possible conditions of the beholder. But considering your previous work, it might make more sense to talk about the uncanny as a condition of these game landscapes. I would argue that there are no uncanny games, precisely because gaming happens against borders. Thus, there is nothing to turn the *heimlich* (the familiar), into the *unheimlich* (the uncanny), also because you literally inhabit them.

Binotto: I wouldn't agree with you. What characterizes the uncanny is a sudden moment of impossibility or disorientation. The moment where you leave through a door and realize that, through this very door, you actually entered the room you wanted to leave. So this concerns topologies; it is about spatial impossibilities—this is at least how Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) characterizes it. In this sense, the video game has a lot of potential. You never know if people will react to something uncanny, if it triggers an emotion in them. *Monument Valley* (2014) is a good example for this, and I would call it a perfect case study of the uncanny. It corresponds a great deal with what I would call uncanny, even if one does not perceive it as disturbing. Maybe this is because you can feel at home in the uncanny, and you don't feel a rupture between the two conditions of the familiar and the uncanny. This seems to be peculiar to the uncanny of the video game.

When I think about it, another such example would be *Portal* (2007) and the question of where I am.

Gerber: This brings us back to the issue of "game over." Because a game is played over and over, you are more likely to feel at home in the uncanny in a video game than in another medium. I would say that there are few movies that are uncanny when watched a second or third time, once this moment of surprise is lost.

Binotto: … because you know that there is a rupture coming, but you don't experience it as a rupture anymore, as it has become part of a dramaturgy.

Here is a very good example of this: I have not experienced this personally, but Danish filmmaker Johan Knattrup Jensen (*1979) has created such a situation with virtual reality (VR). He set up the following: In a theater, the public is seated and each person wears a VR-device. He then calls one person in front to join him; the audience's VR-sets are linked to this person, so everybody in the audience can see what the person sees. Then, he inserts movable walls around himself and this one person so the public is no longer visible. Then, he takes the wall away and the public is gone. He walks through the seats. In reality the public is still there, but through the eyes of the person on stage, they see empty spaces where they are sitting. They see themselves as not being physically there. This must feel extremely uncanny!

Fig. 26: Johan Knattrup Jensen, The Shared Individual, 2016

Gerber: We definitely cannot avoid thinking about the possibilities of augmented and virtual reality, especially in the context of video games. I had a very uncanny experience on a rollercoaster in *Legoland*. While waiting in the queue, you see that after the first hill, the track drops down to the right dramatically. When you get on, and you have a VR-headset on, that

puts you in a virtual Lego race. The disturbing thing is that the virtual race gives you the illusion of moving forward after the rise, while your body drops down to the right. So even if you know what will come, you are completely immersed in the virtuality displayed through the device.

Binotto: And this is why we should consider one more thing: The uncanny as Freud defines it, is something that has to do with minimal shifts, with subtlety. It is this small suffix, the "un," that mediates between the familiar and the strange. The smaller the difference is, the stronger its effect will be. It would not be able to be about the total collapse of the world. So, in talking about virtual reality, the uncanny is about small changes, about a detail, not something so evident or all-encompassing, such as in *Pokemon Go* or your rollercoaster, even if you experienced it to be uncanny.

Gerber: A good example I have from you is the head of the murder reflected in a mirror in Dario Argento's (*1940) *Profondo Rosso* (1975). At first you do not notice it, even though your head registers that there is something strange. That's really uncanny.

Binotto: Yes, that is a very good example.

Gerber: Let's discuss another issue. You work with the concept of "heterotopia." Do you think we could apply this also to video games? In general we tend to talk about game spaces in terms of utopia or dystopia, because you have other worlds or destroyed worlds, but not necessarily in terms of heterotopia.

Binotto: We must first distinguish between the two ways in which Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has used this term. Foucault's first use of heteropia comes from *Les Mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966). There, this notion is used to describe a world, in which the common classification system is suspended and another, yet unthinkable system is possible. He explains this by referencing the work of Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). So, if we want to apply this to video games, we have to look for games that do not simply consolidate existing systems, but create new systems of order. We would have to examine this more deeply, but it is interesting to consider that games are often advertised as introducing completely new worlds and new rule-systems. The question is, then, whether or not this is true, in the sense of heteropia. This would be the true challenge for game designers.

In architecture, we are primarily confronted with his second use, which he discussed in a 1967 radio program entitled *Des éspace autres*. According to his definition, these other spaces—he mentions, for exam-

ple, brothels, colonies and cemeteries—are concrete places that you can find on a map, yet that function in a different way. Applying this to video games would imply shifting the focus from the game itself to the whole dispositive of the person who is playing: What is the relation of the room in which the computer is to the desk, to the chair, and what are the dispositives one is arranging. If you work with a joystick, that makes it even more interesting, because you have lots of feedback from the body, table, room, chair and game worlds. Then, the notion of heterotopia would be very fruitful and precise in this context. So when a child sits at the desk in front of the computer on a chair, and is making certain movements, at the same time, the child is somewhere else. And the chair is the same one it sits on when doing homework, yet at the same time, it is not the same chair and these are not the same movements.

Gerber: It is indeed very difficult to create something completely different. You see this very well in all historical examples of utopia, when it comes to thinking of a new and different architecture and urban environment: at the end everything is just bigger or richer, but not really different. Furthermore, when it comes to the narratives beyond games, almost everything can be brought back to Greek tragedies and comedies ...

Binotto: Yes, indeed. Or could we possibly have "Jorge Louis Borges" type of games?

Gerber: In games, you always need a certain degree of recognizability. Probably, the game you are dreaming about could not be played, and would be too far removed from reality. Games oscillate between two conditions: the "normal" and the truly "impossible," and both cannot be achieved as pure conditions.

Binotto: We should then refer to the incredible success of *GTA*. What is it that makes this game so successful? In reality, it is made up of copies of film-like images; it is a constant citation of pictures we recognize from movies. So what makes it so attractive?

Gerber: Maybe the sense of freedom and its realistic setting?

If we take a step back, referring to the concept of heterotopia, it is interesting to consider how we used to play arcade games in the 1980s and compare this to today, where we move on the street with mobile phones hunting Pokémons superimposed onto the backdrop of "reality."

Before, you really were in another space. I remember playing *Double Dragon* (1987) after school or going to the mythical *Astra Games* in Milan, with its cacophony of sounds coming from the different arcade machines,

where I would mostly play *Street Fighter* (1987). These were total heterotopias, in which you delved into another space and time with a fascinating kind of nerd-counter culture. We constantly got robbed by drug addicts that where hanging around there, waiting for little kids with tons of coins ...

Binotto: We can read it in both ways: the fact that you can carry your console with you means that you can turn any place into an arcade. This would be the optimistic interpretation. A more pessimistic interpretation, and this has also been discussed in film theory, is that you have reduced infinite possibilities to a pocket size and thus "castrated" game or movie. My stance is ambivalent. I am definitively fascinated by these possibilities, in particular when you can observe how people act while playing and how this changes the space we occupy. At the same time, I am irritated by the possibility of taming not only the scale of reality, but also the game itself, by spending money or looking for shortcuts to overcome its challenges.

Gerber: Again, this is about continuous flux and resistance, tension and flow.

Binotto: The whole gaming industry revolves around these paradoxes: if there is too much tension it is disturbing, yet it cannot be too self-contained. This is why I am so fascinated by the idea of playing a "game against the game," for example, by exiting the car in *GTA* and walking around aimlessly, without any limitations. That's not in the industry's interest, because they don't want you to be satisfied with just one game that you can explore endlessly. They want to sell you another game. From a purely economic point of view, in a game you would need only a corridor to quickly lead you to the end, so that you can buy the next game. But a mere corridor would be far too boring—you need more freedom. So they have to find a compromise.

Gerber: We could say that in games, subversion must be part of the system. However, this obviously cannot be ...

Finally, I ask all of my interlocutors a concluding question: Do you regularly play games? If so, which ones?

Binotto: I must admit, I play computer games rarely, and if I do, I often play the most boring game of them all: *Patience*. As you know, I'm obsessed with minimal differences; as such, most games are far to active for me. My preferred games are movies. And movies are much more passive, particularly when you watch the same movie over and over again, which I like the most. However, this passivity permits subtle activities,

for example, discovering small details. Similarly, my ideal game would be an extremely complex and at the same "boring" world, in which there's nothing to do but simply to remain—no run against the clock, no coins to gather, simply things to observe. Designing such a game would be rather expensive and I would probably be the only one playing it, so I don't think it will ever be made. This game would, actually, be very similar to how I experience the real world anyways. So, why bother?