History, Mnemohistory and Trauma in the Italian Videogame Scene

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With this abstract we want to argument about two italian Serious Games, *Progetto Ustica* (IV Produzioni, TBA 2018)[1] and *A Little Anti-Fa Story* (Mauro Vanetti, 2017)[2], defining Serious Game as "a game designed for a primary purpose other than pure entertainment" (Djaouti, Alvarez, Jessel, 2011), where storytelling can be applied "outside the context of entertainment, where the narration progresses as a sequence of patterns impressive in quality... and is part of a thoughtful progress" (Lugmayr, Suhonen, Hlavacs, Montero, Suutinen, Sedano, 2016). Furthermore, "beyond the surface of gaming actions – or embedded into those –, Serious Games try to evoke learning processes or even complex experiences (e.g., through taking the perspective of political refugees, trying to bring them out of a danger zone)" (Fromme, Jörissen, Unger 2009).

Both these videogames were created in order to keep alive the memory of traumatic and controversial events accoured in Italy in recent years through the mechanics of a Walking Sim, where the player is a passive witness of events recreated with historical accuracy and enhanced by the use of VR (*Progetto Ustica*), and a Visual Novel, less immersive due to its text based gameplay and where the facts are blurred by personal memories of the developer, but more engaging for the player with its branching-path narrative focused on moral choses (*A Little Anti-Fa Story*). In this context, we propose studying these cases by using the concepts pointed out by Assman (2000) of "history", the search of the past as itself based on facts, and "mnemohistory", the approach to the past focused on the memory or on how we want to remember it, as well as through the Trauma Studies in the works of Caruth (1995) and Alexander (2004). We refer also to the tripartite methodology proposed by Smethurst (2015) for analyzing trauma in videogames, useful to examine the rhetorical feedback loop between player and game (interreactivity), which creates a very specific experience for representing trauma (empathy) by implicating the player as a perpetrator (complicity). This methodology, however, does not fully account for videogames being able to represent trauma in ways that do not end in making the player complicit in the trauma (as in the case of *Progetto Ustica*).

Progetto Ustica's main purpose is to maintain alive the memory of the sudden explosion of the airplane DC9 Itavia above the Tyrrhenian Sea on June 27th 1980, which caused the death of the 81 passengers on board and whose dynamics still remain uncertain. Barring some minor passages, *Progetto Ustica* is based on valuations and official documents (e.g.,

the acts of the judge Priore and the valuations of the Turin Polytechnic in 1999), and try to recreate the most realistic representation of ambient, objects and aircrafts. The player witnesses the last minutes before the explosion, starting as an extra passenger from the inside of the plane: her aim is to find particular objects or details which provide first information on them (in form of static illustrations, texts or dialogs), and then unlock different points of view and/or identities (e.g., a fisherman who witnesses the explosion from in boat; the outside of the DC9; a foreign fighter pilot's standpoint). The interreactivity is minimal: the player is free to wander, but can interact only with a very small number of objects, and in just one order. The game doesn't require the player to make moral chooses to advance, there is no complicity as Smethurst define it. *Progetto Ustica*, instead, experiments the use of VR to enhance emotional empathy, reaching his zenith in the last minute of the game, where the player experiences the explosion and the fall of the airplane as one of the passengers. A very intense moment with the aim to "create a trauma and commit it to memory", *Progetto Ustica'*s producer Ivan Venturi stated in an interview (Aguiari, 2015), as Cathy Caruth (1995) says "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1995).

A Little Anti-Fa Story is a Visual Novel created "to support the Antifascist Network in Pavia, Italy, that have been attacked and denounced by the police as a consequence of their peaceful but resolute attempt at stopping a Fascist march through the city centre on November 5th, 2016", as its developer Mauro Vanetti describes it. The fact are presented with blocks of text and static illustrations: unlike the developers of *Progetto Ustica*, Vanetti was a witness of the events, and in a *A Little Anti-Fa Story,* although the use of newspaper articles and photos as official documents, it's clear that the memory of the facts was deformed by his own experience and ideology (e.g., the representation of fascists supporters and police officers, both with pig noses and no differences but the military dress or not). Furthermore, in *A Little Anti-Fa Story* the player has to make some moral choses which lead to various conclusions, good or not, comparing them with the real one once finished the game and encouraging to play again. This branching-path narration also encourages the creation of alternative memories, all of them strongly influenced by Vanetti's antifascist vision. In *A Little Anti-Fa Story*, trauma is seen as a disfunction that produces a specific vision (Alexander, 2004): the traumatic event experienced by the Pavia's Antifascists is a starting point for a larger discourse, in this case on the recent raising of fascist and right extremist violent actions (not only) in Italy.

Progetto Ustica and *A Little Anti-Fa Story* are just two examples of how videogames can explore and elaborate trauma, keep alive or create brand new individual and collective memories, two cases that encourage further studies on Smethurst methodology and the between Videogame Studies and Trauma Studies.

BIO
Mattia Filigoi is currently a PhD student at the University of Udine with a thesis on the Italian Contemporary Independent Videogame Scene.

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ENDNOTES

[1] At Feb. 2018, the Beta Version of the videogame is freely downloadable at http://www.progettoustica.it/it/progetto-ustica-2/. For this abstract, the author tests a more recente and unreleased alpha version of the game, the closest to the final version.

[2] Freely playable at https://maurovanetti.itch.io/lan