

Evocative games

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983 Electronic Arts, currently one of the world's largest game developers, publishes, in various magazines (Scientific American among them), a visionary ad. It started with the question “can a computer make you cry?”. The ad proposes to go beyond where previous software developers went, through it the company show the intention of not being just an association of coders and engineers, but of electronic artists with the common objective of exploring the computer enormous potential. The ad also makes an auspicious allusion to McLuhan (1967), concluding that the traditional distinctions between art, education and entertainment aren't always valid.



Figure 1: Electronic Arts ad “Can a computer make you cry”, 1983

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In a way, the ad brings forth some of the same questions of Sherry Turkle's work (1984), published one year later. Can a computer make us cry? Can a software help us better understand ourselves? Can a game affect us and change how we think? This abstract (part of a larger and still ongoing research about the player communities and the game-related content they create) explores Turkle's (1984, 2007) concept of evocative objects as a tool to help us better understand the bonds we form with digital games and how they change us.

THE EVOCATIVE OBJECT

Barthes (1957) says that if they mean something, even the objects become discourse, and, to Foucault (1966), the things themselves hide and manifest their own enigmas, just like the language. Having studied, herself, on France in the late 1970s, Barthes, Foucault and even Lacan and Lévi-Strauss works were no strangers to Turkle.

The objects, understood in such way, work as companions to our emotional lives, through them we connect with ourselves, with those around us, with our memories and feelings. Not just that, the objects work as catalysts of thought, our relationship with them helps us to define how we understand the world and how we delineate our reasoning. As Turkle (2007) explains, in our relationship with the objects, thoughts and feelings are inextricable: we think with the objects we love, and we love the objects we think with.

The consequences of the technologies and the technological objects aren't focused on their practical effects alone, they affect not only the tasks we perform, but also how we think (Turkle 1984), hence the evocative object has a certain power of attraction, and connect us to ideas and to other people – the object, not confined by its concrete and material aspects, is also, itself, an idea, a feeling, something the propels us to think. Here we recall Huizinga (1938, 7) ponderings, when he says that behind every abstract expression hides a metaphor, and that every metaphor is wordplay, hence, when giving expression to life, the human creates another world, a poetic world, right beside nature's world.

As Turkle (1984) herself affirms, the objects exert roles that are manifold and in flux, as are our relationship with them and their meaning by us internalized. As such, the evocative trait has many faces: a particular box of photographs may provide a sense of ancestral connection to someone, or awaken a feeling of responsibility and commitment in another; it may as well mean nothing to a third someone.

GAMES AS EVOCATIVE OBJECTS

Manovich (2001) bring forth the concept of a cultural digital artifact that, being itself a product of our culture, retroacts over culture itself, resignifying it. Digital games contains such characteristics, they are the product of who we are and at the same time change those who play them. Being cultural digital *artifacts*, they can also be *evocative*.

An emblematic example of games as evocative objects can be observed on Koster's (1998) article "*A story about a tree*", a fragment of his experiences playing LegendMUD (Menton et al. 1994), where the Norse Traders guild was slowing dissolving. The older members were aware of the guild's founder absence, and believe it was partly to blame for the guild's decadence.

After two months of absence, some guild members decided to search for Karyn (the founder), only to realize she passed away on a car accident. Even players absent from the game for months heard the news and showed up at a virtual memorial service honoring Karyn, organized by her guild and online friends. The players created the Garden of Remembrance, inside LegendMUD. There they planted a tree and even

modified the game's code so that objects left in the garden had persistence in the world, leaving the place filled with flowers, chocolate boxes and little pieces of paper with poetry.

In the end of his article, Koster affirms that Garden and the tree served not only as a memorial to a dear person, but as a milestone where many players realized that all of that wasn't "only a game", that the bonds they made were real¹.

Most instances of games as evocative objects, however, probably won't be so dramatic or universally understood as Koster's story. Sometimes the connection we have with a game is very personal, something that would appear quite small to most people looking from the outside. That doesn't stop the evocative games from exerting, over us, the anxiety of influence, to add Bloom's (2002) thoughts to the discussion. The contact with the evocative object may be enough to motivate us to create. This abstract is no exception, as are also, we suspect, plenty of other works in the field of game studies: we, as researchers, love our evocative objects, and with them we think and create.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Spaight (2003), later decided to make his own investigation about Karyn's case and comes to the conclusion her whole identity and death was a hoax, to which Koster responds "the heart of the story still stands: that the bonds we form with others online are real. Realer, it seems, than the people themselves, sometimes" (2003).