

ULTIMA. Towards a Patrimonialization of Video Games

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Number 107, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/81081ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

2368-030X (print)

2368-0318 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Chantoury-Lacombe, F. (2016). ULTIMA. Towards a Patrimonialization of Video Games. *ETC MEDIA*, (107), 20–23.

TOWARDS A
PATRIMONIALIZATION
OF VIDEO GAMES

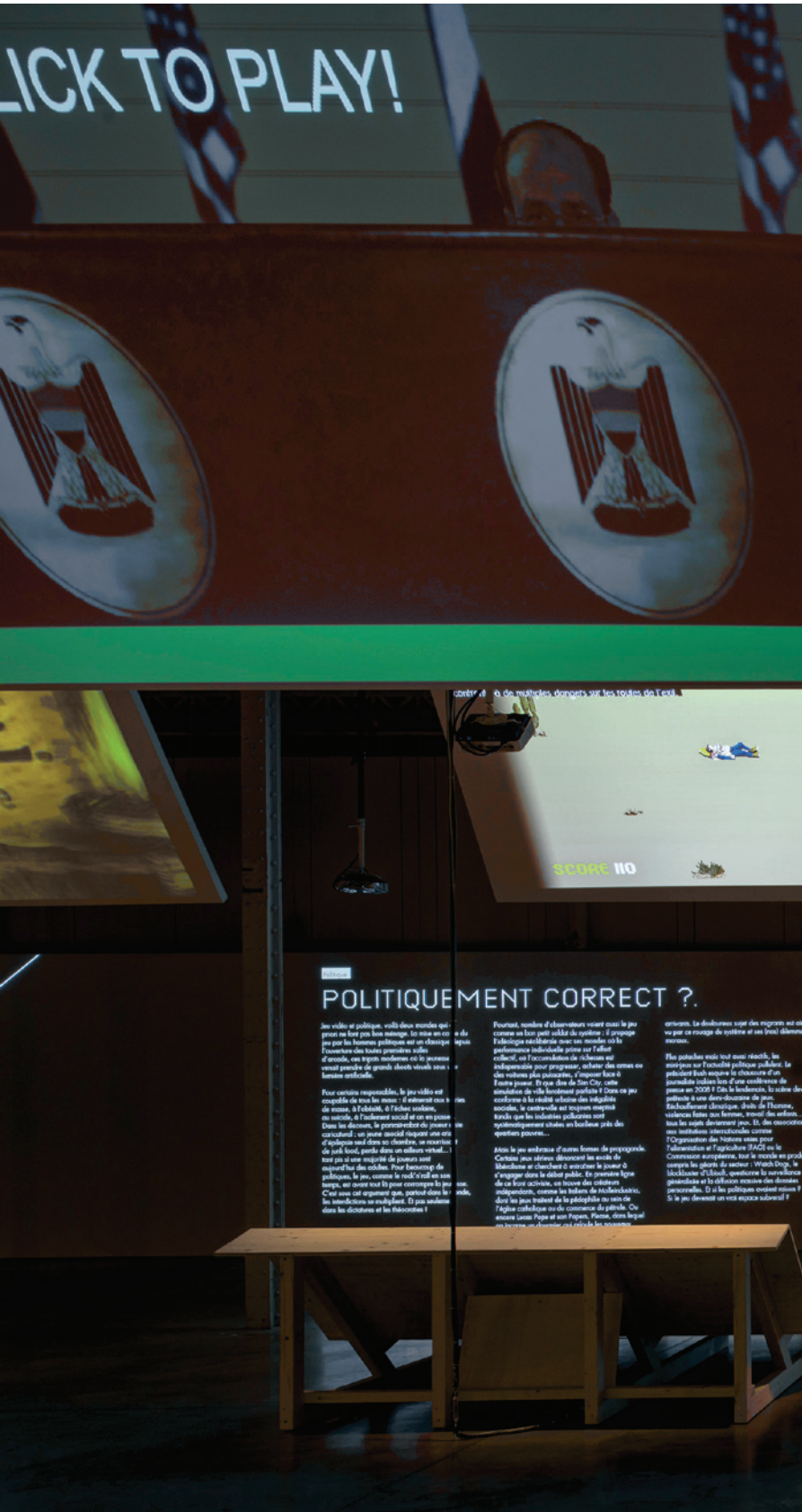
ULTIMA

The early 21st century attests to various forms of patrimonialization of video games, which undeniably constitute a privileged sphere for investigating the current cultural role of images and their new modes of dissemination. From July 3 to September 20, 2015, Le Lieu unique, the national centre for contemporary arts in Nantes, presented the multimedia and interactive exhibition *Ultima*. Curated by artist Pierre Giner, this exhibition was conceived as an openly free and digitally rich space devoted to video games. Acknowledging this visual culture that feeds our contemporary imaginations, *Ultima* prompted visitors to interrogate their own visual behaviour. In contrast to models of museumization, the installation of the exhibition was organized around highly compelling themes. A wide range of media offered over 225 videos, exploring the plurality of our contemporary world, as though letting a breath of fresh air in through an open window.

Entering the exhibition, visitors encountered a wall of sounds and images offering an exhilarating flood of interviews with prominent figures in the gaming world: researchers, historians, game studies scholars, as well as artists who appropriate the language of video games, demonstrating that art does not have a monopoly on images. While the image has been the substance of art for a long time, today it is its raw material—a hybrid material given the diversity of contemporary media. According to the curator, the ceiling of the exhibition space resembled a remarkable “electronic vault” covered with twelve screens showing video games. The suspended screens presented a panorama of the cultural codes of gaming. From the era when devices were limited to a few large pixels to represent game environments to the atemporal world of the first role-playing and adventure games, which lacked a succession of days and seasons or other representations of time, video games have evolved into relational forms and sensory mediation. Visitors could recline on loungers and contemplate this electronic sky undisturbed or play the video games.

The video games projected on this virtual ceiling manifest aspects borrowed from other media, such as the labyrinth imagery of Nintendo’s *Donkey Kong* and the post-apocalyptic quests of *Fallout*, as well as a militarized masculinity and a Tolkienian or postmedieval imagination. This comprehensive view of video games shows the gaming universe to be primarily concerned with the city and catastrophe. Inequalities, real estate battles, ethnic segregation, the ties between finance and politics, the fragmentation of the metropolis, heightened security, and gangs are the most common subjects in this virtual context. The gameplay of the first online games represented urban life in a summary and stereotyped manner: business districts consisting of anonymous buildings, classical monuments, car traffic or deserted streets created a sense of the hopelessly empty virtual city. The model of the ideal city of Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti, and Piero della Francesca, constructed according to the new geometric rules of perspective, constituted a reference based on our modes of perception. This archetype offered clear rules for situating oneself in space and time. The invention of perspective established an analogy between the gaze and the representation of the world; it placed the subject in front of the image. The vanishing point was dependent on the viewer’s perspective, such that the image functioned as a device for viewing and interpreting the world. Today, we apprehend places using another logic—3D technology gives players the possibility to inhabit the image. Movement encourages the readability of the city, facilitating how gamers recognize and interpret the elements of the landscape in order to orient themselves. For example, the gameplay of *Grand Theft Auto* gives players the possibility to gradually form a mental image of the places visited. This virtual navigation establishes a new culture of multimodal wandering and will certainly influence our way of conceiving mobility in the future.

The back wall of Le Lieu unique featured a more common museographic model in a long display case showing old video paraphernalia. Viewers could gaze upon this gallery of plastic relics, from the first generation of Magnavox Odyssey consoles (1972 to 1975) to MicroVision, the first handheld game console that used



interchangeable cartridges, or the portable Game Boy with a monochrome display, to the latest version of Wii controllers. Generations intersected here, between older people’s nostalgia for the devices of their childhood and young people’s fascination with retrogaming. It is perhaps the most disappointing part of the exhibition, since here the museum reappears to insulate the objects, de-animating the previously operational devices. This strategy overdetermines their signification



and extends their meaning into a field of intensified attention, yet gives viewers the feeling of dead objects.

From screen practices...

In *Ultima*, the profuse mutation of screens is striking. At first only peripherally present through its display function, the later interactive screen transformed the

vocabulary of the image through its sensory, tactile, and kinaesthetic experience. In the history of media, the dematerialization of screens definitely wrote a new chapter on the relationship between the gaze and the image. In the history of visual arts, the plane or surface that receives the projection, whether a wall of frescoes or an oil painting on canvas, is not a screen in the strict sense of the term. While the painted panel can be understood as a screen device, the term itself has



LE JEU VIDÉO. UN BON PETIT SOLDAT ?

À des milliers de kilomètres de sa cible, les yeux rivés sur son écran, un pilote de drone lance un missile avec le bouton d'un joystick. Une action qui questionne tout autant la guerre hors-sol que les liens entre jeu vidéo et monde militaire. Ces liens sont anciens : Computer Space, ancêtre des jeux vidéo, a été développé dans les années 1960 au sein du complexe militaro-industriel pour mesurer la puissance de calcul des ordinateurs.

Le succès de Call of Duty, Counter-Strike ou Battlefield, dans lesquelles on rejoue conflits passés et contemporains en mode multijoueurs, ne se dément pas. De même avec les reconstitutions historiques : guerres napoléoniennes, guerre de Sécession, Première ou Seconde Guerre mondiale, guerre du Vietnam ont droit à leurs simulations. On peut aussi se battre dans l'Antiquité, devenir un spécialiste du maniement des hallebardes dans les jeux de combats médiévaux. Et que dire de tous les jeux spatiaux où les combats font l'objet de mises en scène spectaculaires, comme dans Eve Online ? Sur

terre, sur mer ou dans l'espace, partout il faut se battre pour sauver son pays, le monde, l'univers.

Aujourd'hui, toutes les armées du monde s'entraînent sur des simulateurs de guerre toujours plus sophistiqués, développés par les mêmes entreprises qui font les jeux grand public – la plus cotée est la tchèque Bohemia Interactive. Le jeu est pour elles tout à la fois un outil de propagande et de recrutement. L'US Army diffuse America's Army, l'armée française une série de mini-jeux. Des militaires viennent même faire leur marché lors des conventions de jeux vidéo, comme le montre implacablement la documentariste norvégienne Tonje Hessen Schei dans La Guerre des drones.

Les États ont vite compris l'influence des jeux vidéo pour construire leur grand récit nationaliste. La Russie soutient le développement de jeux à la gloire de ses conquêtes militaires, le Vietnam met en scène sa victoire à Dien Bien Phu, la Chine continue sa guerre mémorielle avec le Japon

par jeux interposés, l'Iran interdit Battlefield 3 qui se termine sur une attaque de Téhéran...

Logiquement, le jeu de guerre devient aussi le terrain d'interventions politiques. Pour son projet Dead in Iraq, l'artiste américain Joseph Delappo s'est servi de la messagerie d'America's Army pour publier, de 2006 à 2011, la liste des soldats américains morts en Irak. À l'opposé, Iraqi Warfare, un mod d'Arma 3, offre d'incarner des djihadistes de Daech pour tuer des soldats kurdes et irakiens.

Face à cet afflux d'armes et de violences, certains choisissent des chemins de traverse. Le jeu This War of Mine met ainsi en scène des civils qui doivent survivre dans une ville assiégée. Cette façon de montrer l'envers du combat rappelle que la guerre glorifiée dans les jeux vidéo reste sale et meurtrière. Même menée à la manette depuis une base américaine du Nevada...

Exemple :

Konami, 1981
Dans ce classique du jeu de tir à scrolling horizontal, un vaisseau spatial tire sur tout ce qui bouge.

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been confined for a long time to the decorative arts, as in fireplace screens. From the cathode ray to the touch screen, via the plasma and LCD screen, we have advanced to an era of the miniature or transparent screen. Players can now immerse themselves in the imaginary world of the game's fictive space. The player's point of view is thus moved inside the projected image. The game *Portal* is one example

of how crossing over into the image is not merely metaphorical, since it is itself a game of teleportation. So the image is no longer something that one regards, but rather an entity that one inhabits.

The remarkable challenge of *Ultima* is to assert that the image is much more than a support applied to a surface. The video games assembled in *Ultima* demonstrate



Ultima. ©Martin Argyroglo.

myriad viewpoints on immersion. Our relationship to the image is radically altered by immersion and our regular experience of media. Alberti's painted image as an open window, with its frame that delimits representational space, giving painting a framework of signification in Western art, is no longer valid. This Western conception of the image is undermined by the numerous meanings that immersion

gives it. The image absorbs and transports us. These two effective functions go hand in hand with the permanent transformation of the image by ergodic media. In the latter, interaction with the device is essential for the media to evolve; the player's actions reconfigure the physical and perceptual materiality of the virtual environment. Such is the case in augmented-reality games, such as *Ingress*, where players experience a physical space, most often urban, in which they must use digital, virtual, connected, and mobile devices. In this new virtual geography, the experience of moving through the city expresses the physicality of the player's visual experience. The game space of *Ultima* thus prompts one to reflect on the spaces in play. The concentration of images in the exhibition triggers an analysis of our varied modes of experience when interacting with the artifacts, the constructed and lived situations, which in turn posit new relationships to art and video games. It is doubtless in this sense that one can speak of practicable and habitable images.

...to the screen's disappearance

The Western conception of the image spread worldwide, as the first rounded, convex screens were gradually replaced by deliberately rectangular and increasingly flat screens. It was all made to recall a painting hanging on a wall. Yet in this new conception of the image, the screen tends to be silent or forgotten; it becomes transparent and even curved. Perspective no longer fixes the subject. In the video game, the subject is not a solitary unit standing before the representation; rather, the subject enters the frame, passes through the mirror. Video game immersion has literally shattered the frame and the screen. The latter is no longer merely the parergon that frames the narrative representation. In *Ultima*, Giner pushes the experience even further by removing the screen altogether, as with *Johann Sebastian Joust*, a motion-controlled game based on the music of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. Here, the image has disappeared. Players are simply guided by the sound, the vibrations, and the LED lights of the motion controllers, which create a novel improvised choreography. The subject's location and point of view thus take on new dimensions. This technological advancement shows that users of digital visual culture are sensualists rather than readers; above all, they seek visual pleasure and physical stimulation. The viewer-user of a digital image wants to be visually shocked. The image once more becomes a device for interaction, experimentation, and exploration, as it had been historically in visual art and as it has been recently described in the anthropology of art. It is no longer the fixed view established by the museum's hermetic way of displaying art. Using alternate worlds, where players enjoy coordinating their movements, seeking the immersion possible through the realism of the graphics, situations, and characters, Giner succeeded in orchestrating this digital creativity in *Ultima* to bring out renewed forms of the image. The long history of the frame as an open window, established by Alberti in the 15th century, has come to an end. The screen has replaced the traditional mode of viewing with multiples interfaces. But to plunge headlong into the image, as many video games demand, elicits a mixed response. Plato's allegory of the cave has determined our relation to the imagination—some still interpret the perceptual illusion taken as fiction as having a dangerous magical element. However, the imagination is the faculty of creative association of ideas with reality, and this is the basis for our ability to adapt to life—what we call discernment and intelligence. To participate in forging a collective memory of video games and to change the relation of practices to the image is a compelling aim. Given these conditions, we have begun to pass through the mirror; soon ubiquity will no longer be the privilege of gods.

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Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

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