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Games and Cathode Rays

Discourses on a New Medium in the Italian Specialized Magazines (1981-1988)

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the discourses surrounding video games developed within the Italian context during the 1980s. More precisely, it investigates the specialized magazines context, which, in those days, was mainly made up of game-oriented, tinkering-oriented, and video-oriented publications. Through an analysis of the video game "dispositive", this study observes the emergence of specific epistemic frameworks and discursive layers: these magazines are crucial for reconstructing the cultural context of a specific area while a new medium is taking over the Italian living rooms and game arcades. Through an analysis of such materials, the article pinpoints pivotal discourses around value that surrounded the emergence of video games in the Italian media landscape. It also reflects upon the kind of readers implied by those magazines. Therefore, this article reconstructs the epistemic framework in which video games emerged as a cultural phenomenon in Italy, observing both the discursive recurrences concerning the medium and how specialized magazines molded their audiences.

KEYWORDS: Game culture; Video Culture; Magazines; Discursive Production; Italian Context (1981-1988)

1. INTRODUCTION: VIDEO AND GAMES

Between 1984 and 1987, a relevant increase in consumer electronics consumption marked the mass media landscape in Italy (Gervasoni, 2010, pp. 97-114). Most of all, it concerned the circulation of hi-fi systems, television devices, videorecorders, video cameras, game consoles, and home computers. Their mass distribution was strictly intertwined with how affordable such devices were for audiences and users: for instance, the first videorecorder that costed less than 1.000.000 liras (1.800 euros ca.) was only on sale since 1982. Such devices were accompanied by the development of new artistic domains, such as video art, and the emergence of cultural practices such as telephilia, video communication,

and video gaming. Over the years, these topics became pivotal for many specialized magazines and journals: as a result, discourses on video and computer cultures (in all of their manifold forms and structures) took a leap forward.

Throughout this paper, I will analyse the discursive frameworks surrounding video games in Italy during a specific historical phase, which began with the first transition from arcade/coin op gaming to console and computer gaming (early 1980s) and ended with the commercialization of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) home console (December 1987). The development of the console and home computer market was mirrored by the evolution of discourses that defined it, as has already been investigated by Addeo, Barra, & Di Giuseppe (2020) who surveyed game journalism in Italy. The Authors provide both a quantitative and qualitative survey of specialized magazines in Italy, although they seem to overlook early years' publications such as *Video Magazine*, *Video*, *Sperimentare Computer*, and *Videogiochi*, focusing instead on top sellers like *Zzap!*, first printed in its Italian edition in 1986.

Conversely, my goal is to shed light on those magazines, columns, and articles that fostered the development of this discursive field in Italy; such a field was partly made up of reviewers that operated without an explicit cognizance of the complex social, cultural, and economic layers implied in the medium of video gaming (Bittanti, 2005a, p. 10). Other columnists were instead committed to legitimizing it as a fully-fledged cultural practice: on the one hand, video games needed to be culturally accepted; on the other, they were regarded as the core of potentially massive social networks. This is why the case studies chosen for this article broaden the scope of the research in video games, including video-oriented magazines as well as publications mainly referring to consoles and pc/home computers (Addeo, Barra, & Di Giuseppe, 2020, p. 111). The materials discussed herein all appeared before the best-selling and specialized *Zzap!*. Rather, one can find them in the early columns hosted by non-game specialized magazines, such as *Video Magazine* and *Video,* from 1981 to 1988. Likewise, a tinkering-oriented magazine such as *Sperimentare Computer* was printed from 1983 to 1986. *Videogiochi*, a game-oriented publication, released its first issue in January 1983[1] (Albini 1989, 20), and it was published until May 1987.

The connections between the material basis of the video game intended as a dispositive (Albera & Tortajada, 2011) and the discourse around it is at the core of my reflection: my main target is to stress how specialized magazines fostered the cultural acceptance and social pervasiveness of video gaming in Italy during the 1980s and how their issues and thematic columns fulfilled the compelling need for legitimization of this new media practice, accomplishing their mission at the end of the decade, when NES finally entered the market. We can fully observe these interactions from a specific methodological perspective, based on the epistemology of media by François Albera and Maria Tortajada. More precisely, I will focus on their notion of dispositive, which:

1. Although its first issue was dated January 1983, *Videogiochi* was already available at the end of 1982.

> has not been simply borrowed from Foucault: it comes not only from the exchanges in the field of historiography of cinema, and particularly 'early' cinema, but also from the broadening of the discipline, which has freed itself from semiotic or aesthetic discourse on the one hand and a purely technical (i.e., historical or functionalist) discourse on the other. This is the background of our specific epistemological approach (Albera and Tortajada, 2011, p. 11).

The dispositive, then, does not configure itself as the mere technical device through which media communication takes place. On the contrary, it is a network formed by material, practical, and discursive elements, affecting how users, media representations, and media technologies engage in a dialogue: there are "concrete elements of the dispositive", which constitute its material level; moreover, we have "the abstract notions associated with the dispositive or with the concrete elements constituting it" – for instance, the notions of "decomposition and synthesis of movement" related to film projection or tv signal transmission; finally, there are "key notions or types-notions, abstract or concrete, which at a given historical moment come to define a given dispositive: they are then instituted as references. They convey a certain idea of cinema or photography, the phonograph, television, the radio, and so forth" (Albera and Tortajada, 2015, p. 34).

Abstract notions and key notions constitute the discursive sphere of the dispositive: although they perform specific functions, they are intrinsically tied to their material apparatus. In other words, within a dispositive, materiality and discourse superimpose, generating a cultural form through which a media object becomes operative. During the Eighties, specialized magazines represented one of the cultural catalysts of the video game dispositive: among them, for instance, we can also find those non-traceable practices linked to retailing, where discourse took place alongside commercial practices, and documents such as trade catalogues, which are hard to retrieve today. These are mostly, if not all, lost to history, but we should not assume that they did not have a relevance in shaping the discourse around video games. That being stated, specialized magazines played a major role in it, helping consoles and home computers to penetrate the Italian domestic mediascape in the 1980s: they constantly referred to the technologies they dealt with; at the same time, consoles and computers cannot be investigated without taking into account their discursive framework.

Dispositive analysis, then, is the lens through which I aim to interpret the magazines' discourses around video gaming. Although methodology is not addressed in a specific chapter, several epistemological knots are untied throughout the paper, shedding light on each case study: I will focus primarily on *Video Magazine* and *Video* and their video game columns; secondly, I will reflect upon *Sperimentare Computer* and the relationships between tinkering-oriented magazines and video games; thirdly, I will examine game-oriented magazines, such as *Videogiochi*.

2. GAMES AND THE VIDEO APPARATUS: VIDEO MAGAZINE AND VIDEO

As argued by Riccardo Fassone (2020), the history of video games in Italy began with companies producing electromechanical pinball machines and coin-op games, such as Bologna-based Zaccaria, officially founded in 1973. In this specific case, pinball machine production, which involved a complex network of electrical mechanics, designers, component providers, and glaziers (Fassone, 2020, p. 45), established a solid ground for the development of the arcade games section: at the turn of the 1980s, Zaccaria became an important developer in the arcade market worldwide, commercializing hit games such as *Money Money* (1983) and *Jack Rabbitt* (1984) (Carlà, 1984, pp. 66-68).

Pinball machines and coin-op games remained at the core of Zaccaria's production until 1984, when the company filed for bankruptcy (Fassone, 2020, p. 46). Throughout all these years, however, they completely missed the relevance of the console market, which started to be a mass phenomenon in Italy since the early 1980s. More precisely, Zaccaria's case represents a perfect example of how the Italian game industry, which was formed by gifted artisans and small companies, lacked the capacity to jump into the console/home computer market. This is the reason why console and coin-op manufacturers did not engage in dialogue, evolving separately and, sometimes, clashing against each other: as Fassone argues, a certain "tension between public consumption, in arcade rooms and pubs, and private consumption, referring to consoles and computers […], was at work in the Italian media ecosystem as well" (Fassone, 2016, p. 95).

Discourses around video games constituted an integral part of this tension. At the beginnings of the Eighties, domestic consoles and computers transformed the cultural spaces in which video gaming was taking place. Specialized magazines played an important part in these changes at least since 1981, when several articles dedicated to the new phenomenon appeared in youth-oriented magazines – for instance, Francesco Carlà, who founded Simulmondo software house in 1987 (Carbone, 2020, pp. 53-81), was the head of the video game section of a rock music magazine named *Rockstar* (Addeo, Barra, and Di Giuseppe 2020, p. 107) – and video culture-oriented magazines such as *Video Magazine* e *Video* considered video games as a new medium to be legitimized. From this point of view, video games were not an ancillary *addendum* to the discourse around video; instead, they represented a key issue for figuring out how the electronic image works.

It was not by chance, then, that *Video Magazine* hosted a feature article about video games titled "Videogiochiamo con Atari" ("Let's Videoplay with Atari") in its first issue of September 1981. Its core meaning is crystal clear: in 1981, the "arcade era" was over and consoles – especially those fabricated by Atari – could provide the user a more satisfying game experience. Readers interested in video culture could not ignore this phenomenon anymore: for this reason, *Video Magazine*'s editorial board decided to dedicate an article to video games every two months, and, since April 1982, a monthly column.

At the same time, we can also find an article about this topic in the first issue of *Video Magazine*'s rival, *Video*. Written by Stefano Belli and titled "Guerre spaziali, corse della morte, computer & C." ("Star Wars, Death Races, Computers, etc."), it analyzes the dispositive transformations from coin-op to console games. In other words, Belli stresses the relevance of this transition: cassette games are better "programmed, more expensive, and constituted by a slot into which the user inserts the cassettes of their favorite game" (Belli, 1981, pp. 80-83). Furthermore, the author focuses on sixteen new Atari games – *Paracadutisti* (*Parachuters*), *Scacchi* (*Chess*), *Superman*, *Backgammon*, *Indy 500*, *Fuorilegge* (*Outlaw*), *Breakout*, *Matematica* (*Math*), *Basket*, *Battaglia aeronavale* (*Aeronaval Battle*), *Bowling*, *Corse d'auto* (*Car Races*), *Guerre spaziali* (*Space Wars*), *Golf*, *Concentration*, *Incastro* (*Interlock*): a sort of Atari canon is established, ranging from educational (*Matematica* [*Math*]) to sport games (*Indy 500*, *Basket,* etc.).

The structure of Belli's article, which does not dwell on specific issues concerning the gameplay experience of each cartridge and elaborates on the general matter of the transition from arcade to console games, highlights why a magazine like *Video* was interested in video games: its columnists thought that their implicit, i.e., intended readers,[2] mainly interested in videomaking and videorecording apparatuses, would be intrigued by the new gaming landscape, even if they were not necessarily to be considered as enthusiastic supporters of the emerging gaming medium. Moreover, being the implicit readers attentive technophiles, they would be keen on exploring the Atari world: a focus on video games, then, was an indispensable complement of a discourse on the innovations in the 1980s media landscape, when the electronic media became dominant.

In this regard, the two-year period 1982-1984 was crucial. During this time span, articles and columns dedicated to video games increased in number: more specifically, if we take *Video Magazine* as example, this was the main topic of a monthly column published from 1982 to 1988. Its success depended on "the punctuality of the game reviews: at least once every two months, a complete survey of new games was available for the reader, from Atari's *Warlords* to Philips' sport games (*Baseball*, *Soccer* and *Ice Hockey*), from Mattel's *Space Battle* to Intellivision's *Pac-man*" (Cavallotti, 2018, pp. 154-155).[3]

In May 1983, *Video Magazine*'s editorial board decided to double down on video game columns, creating "Notizie videogiochi" (Videogame News) and "Recensione videogiochi" ("Videogame Reviews"). The first column referred to the presentation of new cartridges. The second one featured in-depth analyses. The columns were merged into one in September 1984, after a general reconfiguration of the magazine's guidelines: it was decided that other practices and dispositive modules should be investigated, such as video art and informatics. From that moment, video game analysis and reviews found their space in a column dedicated to computers. This change was necessary, on the one hand, to keep up with the market evolutions – while the "console crash" was reaching Italy, computer gaming was becoming crucial –, and, on the other, to

2. With the notion of implicit reader, I refer to Wolfgang Iser's theories and to his essays *Der implizite Leser. Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (1972) and *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976). According to Iser, the implicit reader is the one who "includes all those predispositions necessary for the literary work to exert its effects – predispositions designed not by means of an external empirical reality, but by means of the text itself" (Iser 1976, 60).

3. Throughout the essay, non-English references have been translated into English by the paper's author.

present *Video Magazine* as a publication that dealt not only with video devices, but also with media culture in its broadest sense.

Media culture legitimization, then, was a distinctive function of specialized magazines like *Video Magazine* and *Video* in the 1980s, alongside canon elaboration. Although this topic seems to be critical even today, as argued by Federico Giordano (2017), video game reviews and top ten sales charts established a first step towards canon selection, assigning an order of importance to games and consoles/computers. On the one hand, then, there were video games the user could not do without; on the other, the most relevant consoles/home computers: during this period, in fact, a conflict arose between American (especially Atari and Mattel) and European (Philips) companies. Besides these companies, there were several console/computer producers, such as Commodore and ColecoVision, and game developers, such as Activision, which played an important role in the market: for instance, it is to highlight that ColecoVision's version of *Donkey Kong* was a great hit, remaining on *Video*'s top ten chart for almost a year in 1984; while Activision's *Pitfall* held the first place for three months between September and November 1983. These data are fundamental for mapping the development of the Italian market, which, in 1983 and early 1984, did not seem to be affected by the recession in the U.S. industry. On the contrary, console game distribution ramped up in Italy, while, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Atari's cartridges were buried in the Alamogordo dump.

That being stated, one has to acknowledge that these sales charts are not the only way to observe and analyze consumer behaviour. At the beginning of 1984, for instance, *Video*'s editorial board decided to start a new magazine section, called "Videogamers club", run by Francesco Carlà. This section was open to the reader's participation: they could send their comments, requests, and questions, which were then answered by Carlà himself. The importance of establishing a rapport with the readers is also witnessed by ads concerning club activities hosted by record shops and electronics stores: here users could "buy, rent or exchange videogames of all brands and nationalities", as in the case of the Megagames club. These clubs represented a grey zone for the game industry: their members could trade cracked games coming from Northern Europe (especially Great Britain and Germany), which constituted a relevant part of an underground market. As Tosoni, Tarantino, & Pachetti argue, this was a typical feature of the Italian context (2020, p. 84), which was characterized by "an evident deregulation of copyright, [and] the experimentation of alternative distribution channels, such as the newsstand" (Tarantino and Tosoni, 2017): in this legal and commercial framework, eluding copyright and circulating cracked videogames became common practice and fostered the establishment of parallel circuits in which collectors could operate. Cracking, then, took a specific meaning within the game community: it became a cultural claim, which was only hinted at on mainstream publications such as video magazines.

From a dispositive analysis perspective, I underscore how *Video Magazines* and *Video* covered a wide range of topics, each of them corresponding to a specific material/discursive interaction. More precisely, I have referred to dispositive and gameplay surveys, sales overview – which helps us to understand the social circulation of these media products –, and the emergence of underground practices such us the trade of cracked videogames in game clubs. Specific dispositive issues cross these matters, which relate, on the one hand, to the position held by videogames in the media environment, and, on the other hand, to the description of the video game infrastructures.

Concerning the first issue, I rely on those articles in which video games are presented as an emergent media and, at the same time, as an extension of the video set: between the Seventies and the Eighties, new media technologies were added to it, generating a complex technical network ranging from videorecorders to game consoles and home computers. Furthermore, we can observe significant differences in terms of media practices: in this multi-layered media environment, in which the magazine reader was not a mere couch potato, the video dispositive entailed a new subject, capable of engaging in several cultural activities, from cinephilia to video art, from videoamateurism to video gaming. From this point of view, *Video Magazines'* and *Video*'s journalists seemed to have grasped the relevance of the transition from a "coin-op centered" to a "console/computer centered" industry. These changes did not concern only the video game dispositive, but also the whole video dispositive, its infrastructure, and the space (both material and symbolic) taken by these apparatuses in the houses of Italian families and consumers during the 1980s.

Concerning the description of the video game infrastructures, I mainly refer to console reviews. These articles focus on specific companies – e.g., Atari – and seem to be addressed to non-expert readers, becoming a kind of buyers' guide. Consoles are described in detail: the authors provide exhaustive information about the general configuration of the game dispositive and its components (joysticks, cartridges, wheels, keyboards, and knobs), also elaborating on their operationality. For instance, in "Videogiochiamo con Atari" ("Let's Videoplay with Atari"), published by *Video Magazine*, the game devices are thoroughly outlined: the article analyzes every step to be taken to start the console, from powering it on to connecting two joysticks, and describes every component function, concentrating on connection cables, selection buttons (through which it is possible to decide the game's difficulty level), etc. On *Video*'s side, the same attention is paid to console operationality. In "Guerre spaziali, corse della morte, computer & C.", the author describes how an Atari cartridge works: it is a "complex technical unity" in which numerous microchips contain "enough data to process the game, its several levels, and variations" (Belli, 1981, p. 82). In other words, these magazines bridged the gap between industry and consumers: on the one hand, they provided a shop window for game developers

and companies; on the other, they introduced unaware readers, which were just getting used to the micro-practices of gaming, to new devices.

To sum it up, one could argue that magazines such as *Video Magazine* and *Video* played a major role in the material/discursive interactions, considering the video game dispositive as a part of the broader video dispositive, also on a concrete level – in fact, consoles and home computers could be connected to the video/tv set. Video games held a significant place in the household hierarchy. If the television was often described as the contemporary fireplace, the game console and the computer were the play corner: they were technical objects capable of transforming the electronic screen into an interactive interface. It was a leap forward in the development of consumer electronics and video, in which not only gaming enthusiasts were involved, but also technophiles intrigued by new media technologies.

3. FOR THE EXPERT'S EYES ONLY: SPERIMENTARE CON L'ELETTRONICA E IL COMPUTER

Tinkering-oriented magazines constituted an important part of discourse construction regarding consumer technology. They aimed to extend the expert's knowledge in the field, providing specific insights on the most relevant innovations. Unlike *Video Magazine* and *Video*, which were addressed to readers interested in video culture, but not necessarily to well informed techno-enthusiasts, tinkering-oriented magazines targeted a narrower audience, composed by self-taught computer scientists, who knew how to reverse-engineer an electronic device, code in Pascal or in Basic, and read wiring diagrams.

They were the implicit readers of *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer* (*Experimenting with Electronics and Computers*). This magazine had a complex history. Its roots dated back to 1967, when a journal called *Sperimentare* (*Experimenting*) was founded by Jacopo Castelfranchi Editore (J.C.E.). This publishing house belonged to the same owners of G.B.C., a Milan-based company specialized in the import of technical objects such as radio and television components, television sets, radio transmitters, video cameras and recorders, etc. At the end of 1970, *Sperimentare* merged with another J.C.E.'s magazine, *Selezione di tecnica radio-tv* (*Selection of Radio-Tv Technique)* (Cavallotti, 2022). This new publication rapidly became a key reference for technology experts: its issues were mainly composed by how-to articles and in-depth reviews about the technical novelties. However, despite the ambitious project behind the magazine, J.C.E. decided to restore the old formula: *Sperimentare*, which was targeted to techno-bricoleurs and advanced hobbyists, became available in newsstands across Italy once again. It was published until March 1983, when the editorial board changed its name into *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer.*

The name update entailed a general reconfiguration of the editorial guidelines: exclusive attention was paid to computer hardware and programming, ranging from a general overview on the most innovative devices to interface analysis, from peripherals testing to coding. Often, articles focused on video

games, both in terms of hardware and software: on the one hand, there were console ads and in depth-survey on joysticks, keyboards, and monitors; on the other, since July 1985, there was a column, titled "Software", also dedicated to game review.

Console ads were recurrent in *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer.* More precisely, in 1983 and 1984, the magazine hosted several advertising pages in which cassettes and cartridges for ZX Spectrum, Atari, Commodore, ColecoVision, and Sega were listed. They contained games such as *Space Raiders*, *Gridrunner, Donkey Kong*, *Star Jacker*, and *Mario Bros.* – the last one was distributed through Atari's network in Italy in 1983. The need to push these products was a signal that, as I have already shown, the Italian market was still flourishing, although a large-scale collapse – the so-called "Video game crash of 1983" (Ernkvist, 2008, pp. 181-188) – was hitting the U.S. industry. Consumers were still very interested in console games: the recession tide of the American market seemed to be far from the Italian shores.

Regarding the device peripherals, joysticks were widely investigated. For instance, the editorial board dedicated articles to a home-made joystick for Apple II (Cattaneo, 1984, pp. 127-129), a programmable interface that speeds up the latency of joystick controls (Anona, 1984, pp. 77-79), and a multiplexer device for Commodore VIC 20, which allows users to add a joystick port to the home computer (Anonb, 1984, pp. 62-65). In all these cases, a general hardware description is always accompanied by programming information or electrical diagrams, in which the technical object is thoroughly analyzed: the implicit readers of the magazine, then, appears to be a gamer and a techno-enthusiast, capable of understanding the language of hard science.

This subjective typology emerges in the report regarding the home-made joystick for Apple II. Its electric circuit is described both in a diagram and in the body text: we have two resistors, which "help to bring the logic ports to a low level; in this way, elements with a physical value ranging from 1000 and 4700 Ω – ¼ W are going to work" (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 127). Moreover, there is a filter condenser, whose "minimal value must not be less than 4,7 μF, with a working voltage of 6 V", and other two condensers, whose "capacities need to be chosen in order to obtain a time constant of 0,0033 seconds in combination with the 100 kΩ potentiometer resistance" (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 127). This system responds directly to the control stick, which can take 255 different positions: every position change entails a distinct activation of the condensers and the potentiometer. The article also shows how to practically assemble the home-made joystick. The reader, in fact, needs to weld each part, while the control stick is supposed to be bought separately. Finally, once the device is ready, the users are going to employ it as a tool for data input into CAD software and to play games such as "'Pac Man', 'Space Raiders', and 'Defenders'" (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 129).

Another focus is on hardware enhancement, more specifically on a programmable joystick interface, commercialized by Tenkolek, which is compat-

ible with every software. This interface is composed by a printed circuit board with four integrated chips and it "is accessible through ten colored wires" connected to "sockets in different combinations" (Anona, 1984, p. 78). The article also explains how to program the interface using a specialized, although understandable, language. In other words, this report seems to be dedicated not only to computer engineers, but also to gamers keen on experimenting with hardware. Not by chance, then, the anonymous author affirms that this interface is indispensable for gaming, and it can be employed also for driving or flight simulators (Anona, 1984, p. 79).

Hardware enhancement is the key reference for another article, dedicated to a joystick multiplexer for Commodore VIC 20. This home computer has only one joystick port: if a game would envisage two users participating in it, it would actually be impossible to play. Concerning the general structure of the article and its implicit reader, we can observe that it is much more complex than the report on the programmable joystick interface and it is addressed to a more skilled technician. The editorial board, which is the collective author of this article, explains how the multiplexer works, referring to wiring diagrams, components lists, and a fragment of software code, also showing how to program its functions. In the body text, in fact, one can find more than a detailed study on a technical object: it is a complete practical guide to the multiplexer assemblage. Thus, the implicit reader configures itself as an advanced bricoleur, capable of building an electronic device from scratch and programming it.

These three examples make us aware of the importance of hardware analysis for tinkering-oriented magazines like *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer.* Each article refers to the multiple facets of an implicit reader that is not a mere electronic engineer: their profile, in which practical and theoretical skills meet up, is complex and multi-layered. Of course, they can elaborate a technical project; at the same time, they can weld wires, assemble a device, and connect it to a home computer, also coding its software part. Furthermore – and above all – they are video game players, interested in knowing more about computer hardware, in our case studies about joysticks.

The relevance of video games was mirrored by the increasing editorial space earned by this topic in the magazine. In fact, in July 1985 a regular column titled "Software" changed its format and target: before that date, it was dedicated to coding languages; afterwards, it became a key reference for game review. "Software" columnists focused on home computers such as ZX Spectrum, Apple Macintosh, and Commodore 64, and a wide range of game typologies, from sport to detection, from action-adventure platform to vertical scrolling shooter games, highlighting their production genealogies.

An interesting example is the review of *River Raid*, originally marketed by Activision in 1982: it is noted how patient users have been, waiting three years for Activision to port this game for Spectrum computers, alongside products like "*H.E.R.O.*, *Enduro*, *Zenji*, *Shuttle*, and *Pitfall II*" (Anona, 1985, p. 84).

Distribution issues intertwine with gameplay description, referring, on the one hand, to game content and storylines, and, on the other, to its apparatus. More specifically, *River Raid* is presented as a game in which the player flies a jet over a river, which is divided "into different sections, each of them delimited by a bridge built at their border" (Anona, 1985, p. 84). The tasks are twofold: they need to avoid colliding with the riverbanks and to engage and destroy as many enemy fighter jets, helicopters, warehouses, ships, tanks, and bridges as possible. The score depends on the object to be destroyed, ranging from a minimum of 30 points (ships) to a maximum of 750 points (bridges). Regarding the game infrastructure, the player can control the jet through keyboard or joysticks, also enabling multiplayer sessions: in *River Raid*, then, cybertext performance pertains to different user configurations, in which the "player 1 vs player 2" mode complements the "player vs computer" one.

Content and apparatus description constitutes the central part of the review, whose structure is completed by the magazine's tips – the author suggests several game strategies to the reader/player, in order to maximize the score, as well as the general evaluation of the product, which, in this case, is not good. In fact, Activision's *River Raid* appears to be old-fashioned compared to those new games designed and produced by companies such as Psion or Ultimate for home computers. In other words, porting *River Raid* for ZX Spectrum in 1985 was a late commercial operation, which did not take into account that the user's taste had changed in a small amount of time.

As one can see, this review does not only provide a gameplay description, but also an accurate appraisal of marketing activities, revealing how multilayered the circulation of video games was. Reviewers, then, should consider more than the game itself and elaborate a precise report about publishing and porting it within a complex media environment. In *River Raid*'s case, a key issue was the delay in the circulation of the game among ZX Spectrum's owners, which represented a typical condition of the industry in the Eighties: after the market crash in the United States (1983), developers and publishers needed to adapt their games to a large number of home computers in order to extend their market reach, giving rise to a long-term value chain in which products risked to age very quickly. Thus, reviewers were supposed to be aware of this complex infrastructure, fine-tuning their evaluation criteria to its inherent dynamics.

Nevertheless, reviews in which gameplay analysis is crucial are recurrent in "Software". For instance, the article about Ultimate's *Underwurlde* (1984) focuses on its content/textual features and its gameplay material configuration. In the first place, the review author pinpoints *Underwurlde*'s genre coordinates: it is an action/platform/graphic adventure, referring to the same game patterns of *Sabre Wulf* (Ultimate, 1984). Compared to this game, *Underwurlde* presents a far more sophisticated structure: the player controls the pith-helmeted main character, Sabreman, through 600 flip-screens composing an underground maze, while there are only 256 flip-screens in *Sabre Wulf*. Furthermore, the player's

goal is to defeat the Lord of Darkness and to reach the surface, which is directly connected to the last and most dangerous level of this multifarious "electronic Inferno" (Anonb, 1985, p. 26): the design variety of each room represents an actual highlight of this game, especially in comparison to the homogeneity (and repetitiveness) of *Sabre Wulf.*

This general overview on *Underwurlde* is complemented by strategy tips on how to progress in the game. The review author affirms that special attention should be paid to power ups and weapons: it is necessary to "pick up the catapult the player comes across at the beginning of the game; and it is quite difficult to sort out the maze without the magical dagger to be used against the hideous guardian of the dungeon [the Lord of Darkness]" (Anonb, 1985, p. 26). Moreover, the magical gems that are scattered all around the maze are fundamental power ups capable of making Sabreman invincible for a limited amount of time: collecting them, players move across the several platforms of *Underwurlde* and increase their score. An innovative gameplay is then configured, in which graphic adventure tropes merge with platform game modalities.

Another issue considered by the magazine journalist is the material apparatus envisaged for this game. In fact, *Underwurlde* was designed for ZX Spectrum, and Ultimate's developers claimed that their products aimed to push the boundaries of this home computer, both in terms of graphics and hardware: not by chance, then, the player can control Sabreman using the keyboard or "a wide range of joysticks, from Kempston devices to Interface 2 peripherals" (Anonb, 1985, p. 26). In particular, joysticks are preferable because "key disposition [on the keyboard] seems to be illogical" (Anonb, 1985, p. 26) and makes it very difficult to control the character's movement.

Drawing on these examples, one could state that video games played a relevant role in a tinkering-oriented magazine like *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer.* Its columnists focused both on the material structure of computers and on game reviews, entailing specific implicit readers: they were advanced bricoleurs, capable of building electronic devices such as joysticks and to enhance their home computer station; at the same time, they also appeared to be interested in coding and software issues. More specifically, they were intrigued by video gaming, needing to be led in the exploration of this cultural practice. Game reviews performed this task, helping a non-expert reader to browse a variegated field, in which different typologies and genres emerged.

If one is to compare *Sperimentare*'s discursive strategies to those concerning magazines such as *Video Magazine* and *Video*, then they will realize that an important shift occurred because the ways in which the magazines entailed and outlined their implicit reader had remarkably changed. On the one hand, as we have already noted, *Video Magazine* and *Video* addressed someone who was interested in consumer electronics and video culture; on the other, *Sperimentare* targeted a different reader typology, who corresponded to the home computer owner and the technophile fascinated by computer culture and interactive

products such as video games. From this point of view, another layer was added to the subject negotiation imposed by the video game dispositive: if *Video Magazine* and *Video* focused on video games as an emergent media within a complex landscape, *Sperimentare* concentrated on video games as a part of the home computer infrastructure.

4. "FUNNY, FRESH, WITTY, HANDY" MAGAZINES: VIDEOGIOCHI

In the early Eighties, both the Italian specialized magazine and game industries reached one of their turning points. As we have already noted, publications concerning video culture widely spread all across the country (Cavallotti, 2018), while consoles and home computers finally breached a coin-op centered market (Fassone, 2016, p. 95). The combination of these trends fostered the foundation of a monthly magazine exclusively dedicated to video games, named *Videogiochi* (*Video Games*). This is considered to be the first Italian video game magazine: its publisher was Jackson Italiana Editore, which was founded in 1975 by Paolo Reina and Giampietro Zanga, two former editors from Jacopo Castelfranchi Editore – as we have already mentioned, J.C.E. printed and circulated *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer* at the beginnings of the Eighties. That being stated, *Videogiochi* was not a mere duplicate of *Sperimentare*: it was the Italian equivalent of *Electronic Games*, which was first published in the United States in 1981.

Videogiochi, then, configured itself as a precisely characterized magazine: founded by journalist Riccardo Albini and edited by Studio Vit, which, later on, was known to be the editorial team of seminal publications such as *Zzap!* (from May 1986 to April 1988), *K* (from December 1988 to January 1995), *Game Power* (from January 1991 to November 1997), and *Zeta* (from February 1995 to March 2001) (Addeo, Barra, and Di Giuseppe, 2020, pp. 103-123), it dealt with a wide range of topics and content typologies, from coin-op games to pinball machines, from portable games to consoles and home computers. Another relevant feature of *Videogiochi* was its international scope, which became evident in the recurrent updates from the most important electronics fairs (Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago and Las Vegas, for instance). In other words, Jackson Editore, Albini and Studio Vit did not aim to elaborate a collection of reviews or anecdotes about the game industry; on the contrary, their project was to create an editorial space in which video game culture could find a proper place. By this notion, we mean those multi-layered practices and symbolic values attached to video gaming, which involve both textual production and the creation of a consumption community (Shaw, 2010, pp. 403-424; Bittanti 2005b).

The first issue of *Videogiochi* (January 1983) mirrors these intentions and cultural needs. Its index, for instance, configures itself as an introduction to a multifarious world, in which we can find the most important news concerning video games – the column titled "Ready: fatti e notizie" ("Ready: Facts and News"); an in-depth analysis of Disney's *Tron*, which represents one of the first cases of intermedia hybridization between cinema and video games; previews

of the most innovative games on the market, collected in the "A che gioco giochiamo" ("Which Game Are We Playing At") column; an article dedicated to the most important coin-ops ever produced; hit parades from all over the world; a general overview on console and home computer games; a nostalgic column about pinball machines, titled "Pinball Wizard"; a report on the new portable LCD games; a whole section about home computers, in which the reader finds feature articles regarding the most useful functions of these devices, coding, and video games exclusively designed for Commodore VIC 20, Atari 400, and Tandy Color Computer.

In other words, since its first issue, *Videogiochi*'s editorial board was fully aware of the magazine's mission, which was to legitimize video game consumption and highlight the relationships between video games and the broader media landscape – see, for instance, the intermedia entanglements with cinema, the role played by home computers in the development of the game industry, etc. This two-fold mission is clearly addressed in the article about *Tron*: its anonymous author affirms that in the "ultra-futuristic world" portrayed by the film's director, Steven Lisberger, "the art of video gaming is raised to a matter of life and death" (Anona, 1983, p. 13). Video games became, in the first place, an aesthetic source for visual culture. *Tron* celebrated this phenomenon, configuring itself as "a real monument" for "the new image technologies" (Anona, 1983, p. 11).

Video games, then, were described as the most innovative effort in outlining the distinctive features of the contemporary moving image. Game culture was not a branch of the overarching video culture: it was neither a mere subculture, in which collectors, geeks, and technophiles joined together to share their objects of affection, nor a bunch of consumer practices tied to a useless – if not dangerous – hobby. On the contrary, it was a fundamental and autonomous part of the mediasphere, linking the most advanced technical objects to an expanding field of symbolic production.

At the same time, especially in Italy, video games were strictly intertwined to the arcade game industry, thus implying a dichotomy between highbrow symbolic production – see the already mentioned references to cinema, *Tron*, and the status of the moving image in contemporary culture – and lowbrow pastimes. For instance, although marketing hierarchies were very different compared to the late Sixties and Seventies, pinball machines and video games were still produced by the same companies, as in the case of Zaccaria, whose top-notch pinball game *Soccer Kings* (1982) was reviewed by "Pinball Wizard" columnists (Anonb, 1983, p. 45). In this case, one can observe how video games affected pinball gameplay, in which electronics became a fundamental component: in fact, pinball cabinets were composed by multi-level shuffleboards and relays that activated synthesized voices.

The constant reference to these devices, and to other arcade games, brings out a crucial issue at stake here: in the early Eighties, video games were at the crossroads of different practices, concerning which public and private spaces

overlapped and collided at once. In the broad field of game culture, then, the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow was complemented by the dialectics between the public and the private sphere. The first pole – the public sphere – referred to coin-op apparatuses, whose cabinets were placed in penny arcades, and constituted a specific dispositive configuration: the player stood in a public place, among other players and surrounded by several devices (pinball machines, shuffleboards, etc.), and the coin-op cabinet entailed specific ergonomics regulations. On the other side, the second pole – the private sphere – referred to the domestic room in which the player sat in front of a console or a computer screen alone. These structures were remarkably different to the point where one could state that, in those days, the video game dispositive was at least two-fold. Although the apparatuses were diverse and multifarious, *Videogiochi* provided the same and all-encompassing editorial space, in which video games were analyzed in all their complexity: the material and the discursive layers of the dispositive engaged here in a prolific dialogue regarding the cultural status of video games.

Not accidentally, the last section of its first issue, titled "Di fronte al fatto computer" ("Facing computer facts"),[4] regards home computers. As it is reported in the main feature article, "Home sweet home" (Anonc, 1983, pp. 56-61), these electronic devices were going to play a pivotal role in our daily lives. Therefore, one should have learned how to deal with them, starting from their basic functions and components. This is the reason why a small dictionary appears in the last pages of the article: the author defines technical terms like RAM, ROM, peripherals, floppy disk, joystick, program, and mass storage, explaining also how they form a complex and coherent system (Anonc, 1983, p. 60).

This focus on home computers is supplemented by three reviews of video games designed for Commodore VIC-20 (*Road Race* [1981]), Atari 400 (*Caverns of Mars* [1981]), and Tandy Color Computer (*Chess*), which appear to be similar to those published by *Sperimentare* in the "Software" column. In fact, they share the same textual structure: there is a general introduction to the game's production context, and, after that, an in-depth analysis of the gameplay, both in terms of material structure and textual features. Moreover, the review is enriched by tactical tips: for instance, in *Road Race* the player must preserve the car engine from overheating and losing power (Anond, 1983, p. 62).

More broadly, feature articles and reviews about home computers and computer games pertained to a long-term editorial strategy. In fact, although the U.S. industry was crashing, consoles still represented the core of the Italian market: however, Albini and Studio Vit foresaw that, in a couple of years, it would have decreased as well, and home computers would have become the main device for video gaming. In other words, *Videogiochi* placed itself at the junction of the old, the present, and the new, considering pinball machines or coin-op cabinets (and their evolutions), game consoles, and home computers. From this perspective, the magazine elaborated a multi-layered genealogy of game systems and apparatuses, proving to be flexible enough to survive the downsizing of companies like Atari.

4. It is a pun stemming from Italian idiomatic expression "Di fronte al fatto compiuto", which means "To deal with a fait accompli" in English.

Albeit the structure of *Videogiochi* was kept rather constant throughout the years, in September 1985 the editorial board decided to change the magazine's name into *Videogiochi & computer*. It had become clear that computer games were playing a pivotal role in the market, as Riccardo Albini and Paolo Reina, respectively the editorial director and the publisher, state in the opening note of the twenty-nineth issue:

> "Welcome to *Videogiochi & computer*! Why this new name? The answer is quite simple: 1) because *ViGi* [*Videogiochi*] merges with *HC-Home computer magazine*, which had stemmed from *Videogiochi* and was dedicated to home computers; 2) because the home and entertainment informatics market is now dominated by home computers. The name *Videogiochi* seems to be too simplistic if we take into account the intentions and the contents of this magazine: the term "videogiochi" [video games] hints at console games, but *Videogiochi* was much more than that. […] *ViGi & Co* – this could be the new nickname – will be two magazines in one to give you the best of electronics entertainment (Albini, Reina, 1985, p. 5).

In 1985, then, consoles progressively vanished from the scene, and a trending magazine like *Videogiochi & computer* granted more editorial space to games designed for ZX Spectrum, Apple Macintosh, Commodore 64, MSX, etc., and, broadening the scope, to the analysis of those electronic devices that had become an integral part of our daily media environment – telex, computer components and software, etc. In this case, however, their implicit reader was slightly changing: the shift from consoles to home computers entailed an older audience, whose members were, for instance, young professionals who had enough money to afford the most innovative electronic devices.

However, within a year, *Videogiochi & computer*'s publisher, Jackson Italia, decided that the important niche composed by teenagers and young adults should have been involved again: since the thirty-eighth issue, the magazine changed its format, editorial staff, and name, becoming *Videogiochi news* (*Video Games News*); the new director was Diego Biasi, who took over for Riccardo Albini. As affirmed by Biasi, three years after its foundation, *Videogiochi* "needed to be renovated, taking into account the reader's preferences and the publisher's requests, also paying attention to our brand image" (Biasi, 1986, p. 3). This project referred to a sort of "pop attitude", which started to characterize *Videogiochi news*'s layout and contents – for instance, the magazine hosted comic strips and interviews to young VIPs about their gaming preferences. Despite these efforts, *Videogiochi news* did not break through, probably because other and more updated magazines like *Zzap!* held then a prominent position among gamers: its last issue was dated May 1987.

From a discursive perspective, *Videogiochi* referred to several subjectivity negotiations. Firstly, between 1983 and 1985, the implicit readers were members of the broader game community interested in all the possible layers

of video game culture. Secondly, between 1985 and 1986, the implicit reader became the home computer owner, who was intrigued by new technologies; editors were fully aware of the fact that video games played a pivotal role in the emergent computer culture, and, vice versa, home computers were then the main gaming device. Thirdly, from 1986 to 1987, one sees the emergence of a youth-oriented magazine, which was intended by the publishers as having to be "funny, fresh, witty, handy", so that it could attract new readers: video games became a product for young consumers, although the old consoles era was over.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper I have shown how, even before 1986 and the foundation of the Italian edition of *Zzap!*, video games were widely investigated by Italian magazines, whether as a topic linked to the emergent video culture, as technical objects that could be manipulated and reconfigured, or as an autonomous media domain that was going to be a fundamental field of symbolic production––and a significant element of people's daily lives. More specifically, the discursive field developed by specialized magazines presented itself as a cultural space through which one may observe not only how products, devices, and the industry were changing, but also how social actors like readers came into play.

The overarching structure in which these evolutions and negotiations occurred was the video game dispositive, which, in those days, as we have already mentioned, was at least two-fold, including the arcade and the console/computer apparatuses. Their material and discursive elements engaged in a dialogue, constituting a conceptual space in which the whole game culture took shape. In other words, magazines such as *Video magazine*, *Video*, *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer*, and *Videogiochi* were more than simple repositories of funny anecdotes and in-depth hardware analyses. Within their pages, in fact, one can observe the impact of video games on different social targets: video technology experts, techno-bricoleurs, and gaming enthusiasts. Through magazines, relationships between game communities, industry, practices, and social values were established and an order of symbolic production concerning video games was dynamically formed. The role of the dispositive in this process was crucial: the dispositive configured itself as a material and symbolic network in which the emergence of technical objects was linked to the emergence of new discourses. In turn, this entailed different subject profiles – the implicit readers.

By analyzing these magazines, one can notice that a process of cultural elaboration concerning video games was taking place in Italy since the early Eighties, several years before they became a widely spread phenomenon thanks to the distribution of NES by Nintendo at the end of 1987. During this time span, discursive production was entrusted to publications about video culture, tinkering oriented periodicals, and game-oriented magazines, each of which referred to specific implicit readers and subjects. Specifically, *Video magazine* and *Video* considered video games as an extension of the video dispositive, therefore

configuring an implicit reader who was intrigued by them as a media practice among others, such as cinephilia, videoamateurism, and video art. On the other side of the spectrum, one can notice how *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il compute* entailed an implicit reader who was not only a bricoleur, whose interests did not mainly revolve around console/computer hardware, but also a technophile fascinated by computer culture. Game culture emerged at the intersection of two negotiations of subjectivity: *Videogiochi*'s implicit reader was intended as someone keen to learn more about symbolic and textual production, while, at the same time, standing as an expert technophile. Thus, Italian gamers, even prior to gaming becoming a mass phenomenon at the end of the Eighties, were more than young geeks: on the contrary, they appeared to be pioneers of a complex media practice, through which a new era of the moving image – and of symbolic production – was rising.

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