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street art and videogames

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Playing with the city: street art and videogames

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Abstract. In this paper we introduce and describe the phenomenon of videogame street art as a specific kind of street art. We consider its materiality and significance, and conceptualize it in the light of a double manifestation of play: the playful appropriation of the city by the artist and the fact that street art encapsulates the act of playing videogames in a visual form. Digital play spills out of our computer screens and occupies the urban space with the explicit intention of involving spectators, who are invited to play in symbolic ways that actualize nostalgic memories of gaming and can be related to a more general “play turn” in our culture.

Keywords: Street art; graffiti; videogames; play; city.

[es] Jugando con la ciudad: street art y videojuegos

Resumen. En este artículo se presenta y describe el fenómeno del street art inspirado en videojuegos como un tipo específico de street art. Se considera su materialidad e importancia, y se conceptualiza a partir de una doble manifestación del juego: la apropiación lúdica de la ciudad por parte del artista, y el hecho de que este tipo de street art encapsula el acto de jugar videojuegos de una forma visual. El juego digital sale de nuestras pantallas y ocupa el espacio urbano con la intención explícita de involucrar a los espectadores, quienes son invitados a jugar a través de formas simbólicas que actualizan recuerdos nostálgicos de los videojuegos y que responden a un “giro lúdico” de nuestra cultura.

Palabras clave: Street art; graffiti; videojuegos; juego; ciudad.

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1. Introduction: what is street art?

Street art is a kind of visual art found in public spaces that includes traditional graffiti but is a more complex and heterogeneous category than graffiti, including techniques as varied as sticker,³ posters,⁴ stencils,⁵ mosaic tiling,⁶ or wheat pasting⁷. Whereas graffiti artists depend on the spraycan to produce their work (Ganz, 2004), street art goes beyond the aerosol and the traditional perceptions of the classic graffiti style embracing a new aesthetic ideal, more open and eclectic. For this reason, and because at some point in the 1980s graffiti entered the art world, street art is sometimes described as “post-graffiti” (Dickens, 2009: 17) or “neo-graffiti” (Ganz, 2004: 10). Street artists innovate through creative and imaginative use of alternative materials as well as through their choice of subjects.

Just like other urban subcultural practices such as punk, skate or hip-hop, street art began as an underground art form, although it has now become an important part of the visual space in many cities as well as an acknowledged art movement. There are even highly recognized street art “stars” such as Banksy, Shepard Fairey and Swoon, who all have being subjects of international media coverage and have crossed over into the museum and gallery system, that is, into the institutional artworld (Dickens, 2009; Molnár, 2011; Irvine, 2012).

Because of their interest in playfully disrupting the dichotomy of artistic versus everyday experiences, street artists can be considered the heirs of earlier avant-garde art movements. As Richard Murphy has argued, the goal of the avant garde is to “lead aesthetic experience out of its isolation (...) in order to drive it back into the real world, where it can play its part in the transformation of everyday life” (Murphy, 1999: 11). Street art is also defined by actions, events, appropriations, performances, interventions, *détournements* and subversions. Its conceptual force relies on “the audacity of the *act* itself” (Irvine, 2012: 5), the act of “getting up as developed in traditional graffiti where, as Castleman notes, “Style, form, and methodology, major concerns of most writers, are secondary in significance to the prime directive in graffiti: “getting up” (1984: 19).

Originally, “getting up” meant to successfully tagging an area (usually a high place) with graffiti. Now it means tagging anything, anytime, anywhere, with any form of media and through different techniques. Tagging is closely related with the origins of graffiti. It is the writer’s logo, his/her stylized personal signature. It is about choosing a name and making it as visible as possible, usually in difficult locations. This is related with the practice of “bombing”, that is, prolific aggressive tagging on the streets (Dickens, 2009: 141), marking with ink or paint. Tagging or “bombing” multiple surfaces in an area can become a source of recognition, a way of gaining respect and prestige among others. In fact, as different authors have noted (Miller, 2002, cited in MacGillivray and Curwen, 2007: 362), one of the main purposes of

³ Sticker art uses stickers with an image or a message that are pasted in public spaces.

⁴ Street poster art uses handmade or printed images in a thin paper in order to be placed in urban surfaces.

⁵ The practice of stenciling refers to the process of applying paint across a stencil (a thin material with letters or a design cut off it) to form an image on a wall or another urban surface.

⁶ Mosaic tiling is another form of street art that creates images with an assemblage of small pieces of colored stone, glass, or other materials.

⁷ Wheat pasting refers to the practice of adhering paper posters to a wall or another surface by using wheat flour paste.

tagging is “the desire to ‘be known’ or to achieve fame and recognition within a particular community”. *Quantity*, that is, the number of times a tagger “writes” or “bombs” is therefore a priority in the tagging community and a way to achieve status (MacGillivray and Curwen, 2007: 366). *Quality* is also important since “your work must be better than everyone else’s” (Ganz and MacDonald, 2006: 10).

Tagging in street art is not limited to spray painting nor to words, letters or numbers. Street artists can tag and bomb with images and through stencil. They can also wheat-paste images and stickers. This makes street art a paradigmatic hybrid and (re)mixed form, one in which different techniques, media and styles converge in surprising and creative ways.

The intended audience of street art also differs from that of graffiti, which is often only readable to insiders, so “the main audience is other graffiti writers and crew members. Graffiti is used primarily for internal communication within a subculture” (Molnár, 2011: 4), to promote yourself and your crew. By contrast, street artists “aim expressly to communicate with the broader ‘lay’ public as well. Accessibility and readability by ‘outsiders’ are integral to the agenda of street art practitioners” (Ibid.). The content street artists develop is not only understood by insiders but by a wider audience, as for instance some of the well-known Banksy pieces about war and capitalism⁸.

Due to its illegal nature, street art is *ephemeral*⁹ in essence but is being increasingly documented and shared on the Internet through new media technologies, specifically digital photography. Of course, photographic documentation of graffiti can be found before the rise of Internet. A good example, as noted by Molnár (2011: 12), is “Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant’s seminal photo essay on New York graffiti, entitled *Subway Art* published in 1984”. But street art is closely related with digital media in a way graffiti was not. Pictures of street art are daily disseminated in websites, social networks, forums, blogs, etc.¹⁰ Walls and screens are increasingly interacting with each other and the specific pieces of street art we find in our daily city walks can be easily captured and instantly shared.

Though closely tied to locations and the temporal performative act, the practices of street art as well as the works themselves vacillate between the specific materiality of urban space, street locations, local contexts, and the exhibition, distribution, and communication platform of the Internet and Web. Street artists since around 2000 continually code-switch back and forth between the city as a material structure and the “city of bits”, the city as information node, the virtual “space of flows”, networked and renderable in multiple digital visualizations (Irvine, 2012: 10).

Thus, along with the *institutional* museum and the *street* museum, street art can be found in a “global Web museum without walls” (Ibid.), where the people and the artists themselves are documenting this new form of art digitally as it is found or executed.

⁸ Banksy's pieces can be found at his website, <http://banksy.co.uk/>

⁹ Street art is even more ephemeral than graffiti since the spray-painted graffiti can be difficult to remove from walls while stickers, posters and wheat pasted images can be easily torn off the walls and are more fragile to weather exposure.

¹⁰ See for example: www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=street%20art, www.flickr.com/search/?text=street%20art, www.tumblr.com/search/street+art.

2. Tagging videogames

Videogames are a cultural force that look and interact with other media and other cultural trends in novel and creative ways. Games are in complex interaction with cinema, art, music, literature, comics, and even with everyday objects such as pens, notebooks, posters, socks, caps, t-shirts, and other merchandising. Games thus represent a growing sub-program of a much broader and “ever-expanding entertainment supersystem” based on “transmedia intertextuality” (Kinder, 1991: 1; Gottschalk, 1995). Although both graffiti and street art have become a well-documented and institutionalized object of study (Ganz, 2004; Ganz and MacDonald, 2006; Lewishon, 2008; Shove, 2009; Dickens, 2009; Irvine, 2012), there is very little research¹¹ about the relations between graffiti/street art and videogames. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

We have collected a number of videogame street art expressions, either photographed by ourselves or distributed online, and used them as a starting point for an analysis that investigates the connections between an analog form of artistic expression and the digital inspiration of videogames. In what follows, we describe this phenomenon, looking into its different formal manifestations and also touching upon the *double nature* of its becoming, as street art is produced twice: first it is realized in the physical world, and then it is uploaded digitally and shared online via Internet.

Relations between videogames and street art, usually graffiti, can be found since the origins of the medium. Back in the days of arcade games, a lot of classic beat-em-ups depicted graffiti walls in order to give the backgrounds of the streets a more authentic feel (Quan-Madrid, 2007). The presence of graffiti pieces in these games had primarily a decorative function, but they also attempted to evoke the rough and wild streets of America. We can see examples of this in titles such as *Double Dragon* (1987), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1989), or *Streets of Rage* (1991).

Games like *Jet Set Radio* (2000) or *Marc Eckō's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure* (2006) went beyond the use of graffiti only as decoration and transform it in a gameplay mechanic. *Jet Set Radio* introduced the player as a member of a gang called the GGs whose goal was to spray over other gangs' graffiti pieces by collecting spray paint cans littered across the game. *Marc Eckō's Getting Up* focused on an amateur street artist who uses graffiti and street art techniques in order to protest against the lack of freedom in New Radius, a dystopic city dominated by a totalitarian government.

Other games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) and *The Warriors* (2005), both developed by Rockstar, featured graffiti and street art minigames, while others such as *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* (2004) allowed the player to spray a graffiti tag, which can even be designed by herself.

These are examples of games featuring graffiti and street art as either a decorative device or a gameplay mechanic, but others have done the opposite movement (from videogames to the physical streets) and created graffiti and street art based on videogames. Popular characters from videogames such as Mario, Zelda or Pac-Man have been an inspiration for street artists since the graffiti revolution. However,

¹¹ Some academic work on street art mentions videogames in passing as a possible motive, but doesn't explicitly engage with the form, such as for example Dickens (2009: 85).

graffiti's ephemeral quality has been an obstacle to its wider recognition, though it was democratic "in the sense that it was accessible to ordinary city dwellers, it could only be enjoyed temporarily until it was removed and it was often encountered not intentionally but by chance alone" (Molnár, 2011: 12). As noted above, photographic documentation of graffiti can be found long before the rise of the Internet. But the proliferation of Web 2.0 platforms and the new generation of smartphones and digital cameras have revolutionized the recording, sharing and dissemination not only of traditional graffiti but also of the broader category of street art. Molnár stresses "the extensiveness of the new digital archives of street art that are created, shared, and maintained by thousands of practitioners, fans, and simple spectators across the globe" (Ibid.).

3. Playful Artists

In the case of videogame street art, the physical-digital dynamics can be illustrated by looking at the work of *Invader*, a well-known French street artist who uses the popular arcade game *Space Invaders*' characters as an inspiration for his art. He chose his name because he literally "invades" public spaces. When invading *space*, he transforms it into *place*, since the notion of *space* usually refers to something anonymous or formally defined, whereas *place* is seen as socially constructed, a meaningful experience of a given site (Lefebvre, 1991; Tuan, 1977). We could wonder who is able to appropriate the place created by *Invader*. Ordinary passersby would need a basic knowledge of videogames to be able to fully appreciate the experience. *Invader* translates the screen into the street, the pixel iconic characters of *Space Invaders* into small coloured square mosaic tiles (very pixel-like), recontextualizing or "remediating" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) these popular video game characters in an urban environment and blending them into the landscapes, noises and social interactions of the streets. As he says remembering this association:

That was a kind of an accident because I was not involved in graffiti or street art. It was just an idea which came to me, because at this time I was doing some canvas made with mosaic tiles in a digital aesthetic. I realized that the mosaic tiles were a perfect medium to be put on walls and outside in the streets (cited in Dunbar, 2008, para. 4).

Invader reinvents both traditional mosaic art and videogame visual culture by using these mosaic tiles in a novel way. The artist playfully appropriates the city, bringing symbols of imagination and fun into the daily lives of thousands of unaware citizens. This could be considered a disruptive act of the normal landscape of the city, and can be compared to the playful strategies of art movements such as the avant-gardes of Dada and surrealism at the beginning of the XXth Century (Prager, 2013). Indeed, regarding his mosaic-invasions, *Invader* insists on their playful aspect, saying that these real-life invasions are much more entertaining than anything he'd ever found in a previous videogame: "Going in a city with tiles and cement and invading it. This is the most addictive game I have ever played" (cited in Dunbar, 2008).

Invader does his work in cities across the world, literally "bombing" them. For each city he invades, he creates a map of all his mosaics in order to let the people

know where to find each invader. He does so in a playful way, giving himself points when he invades a new city. He also released the reality game “Flash Invaders”¹², an IOS and Android free app whose mission is to “Spot and “flash” the street mosaics of Invader. Fill your gallery, score points and compete with other players”.¹³ Through this app, the public is called to participate in the Space Invaders project and remains in digital interaction with the very artist and with other users/players.

Under Invader playful interventions in public space there is also a political message against the way corporations and advertising have visually invaded the cities with their logos and messages.

If there were not artists like me to make things in the street, there would be only advertising everywhere. Advertising is just a kind of big brother. It is not to make people happy or to show nice pictures. It is just to make you spend your money and to make you buy it. That's why I think I am not a vandal. What I am doing is good for the population because it's an alternative to the advertising¹⁴.

This point of view is similar to other street artists that interpreted their work as an anti-commercial counter point to advertising in our media-saturated world. As London-based street artist D*face says:

Advertising is more invasive and often less considered, yet most people take this for granted and never question its presence and effect. I like to see my work as subversive intermissions from the media-saturated world that we live in (Wolbergs 2007: 296; cited in Molnár, 2011: 9).

This is probably true insofar as the street art interventions paste media-culture symbols onto the streets (as opposed to commercial logos) even though it could be argued that the original games are also commodities in their own right. Moreover, it is not certain that passersby always interpret them in the way desired by their creators. There is a risk of street art being incorporated into a cultural system of signs that are all equal (losing their disruptive power); that is, a risk of becoming decoration at the same level as Christmas street lights or the fancyful exhibitions of shop windows. We deal with this aspect below, as we consider the reception of videogame street art and its ties with nostalgia, a powerful individual trigger for aesthetic appropriation.

¹² <http://space-invaders.com/flashinvaders/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The film excerpt can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSXuAr8DD2U>



Figure 1. Invader.

But let us go back to our example. The case of Invader also shows the *nomadic condition* of many street artists in our globally networked world. As Irvine (2012: 19) points out, “this is a very new kind of art practice, doing works in multiple cities and documenting them in real time in the web”. It is also a new kind of *ritual*, a set of repetitive actions such as the *physical* act of doing the art in a specific location and the *digital* act of capturing it in a digital form and distributing and commenting it through the Internet.

Besides Invader, there are other artists trying to make a link between both media forms. One example is Commander Ankle, an Australian street artist who wheat-pastes images of Billy Blaze, the main character of the 90’s id Software series of videogames *Commander Keen*. The figures are printed on paper which is fastened on the wall with wheat paste. The image has a pixelated retro form reminiscent of the aesthetic of the original videogame. The wheat pasted version of Billy Blaze is depicted standing, running or jumping between brick walls, traffic signs, street names, fences and other urban spaces. Always in motion, Billy Blaze is a cinematic symbol of play, his movement captured by the street artist as if we took a print of our screens when playing the game.



Figure 2. Billy Blaze.

4. The aesthetics of videogame street art

Videogame street art is not limited to the depiction of game characters. It can also include other elements such as console video game controllers and digital objects such as the Question Blocks in the *Super Mario* series. It is also not limited to the manipulation of walls but also other urban elements such as fire hydrants, street sewers or crosswalks. In doing so, street artists play with their surroundings in creative ways, offering a new way of looking and experiencing the everyday reality of our cities, turning the crosswalks into a Wii game controller or the street manhole covers into PacMan.



Figure 3. Wii game controller.

Videogame street art could be seen in the light of the idea of the *objet trouvé*, or “found object”, also known as “ready-made” as preferred by Marcel Duchamp. This concept refers to the use of an everyday object in an artistic context, and probably the most famous example is Duchamp’s own *Fountain*, from 1917, a common urinal presented as an object of art. In street art, the found object would be the urban element chosen as vehicle for the intervention: a wall becomes a canvas, a street water pump the head and body of Super Mario. But unlike Duchamp’s ready-mades, that want to elevate the everyday object to the category of art, videogame street art imposes an extra symbolic level on the everyday object: an icon coming from the world of videogames.



Figure 4. A street water pump as Mario.

Symbols point to another world, another reality that in this case is embodied into a mundane object and thus becomes visible in the same plan of perception. If we look at the image above, we might wonder if it is Mario that has gained a metal body or if it is the water pump that has gained a new identity, dressed up as something else.

The superposition of Mario and a water pump is partly justified by the shape of the pump, which can be considered to be humanoid in its proportions. It could thus certainly embody any humanoid character, but the choice of Mario is particularly humorous because he is a plumber, and the pump is certainly one of the objects a real plumber would be able to fix and operate. The anonymous street artist was exercising his or her combinatorial creativity “a cut and paste process” in which “two concepts or complex mental structures are somehow combined to produce a new structure, with its own new unity, but showing the influence of both” (Boden, 2004: 130). This piece evokes at the same time the conceptual domains of plumbing/water pump and videogames/Mario. Actually, the shape of the water pump also

is reminiscent of the mushrooms that play such an important role in many Mario games, incidentally also full of pipes and pumps and other similarly shaped objects. The reception of this work is of course determined by the knowledge of the viewer: a person ignorant of videogames might not even recognize Mario and just think it funny that someone drew what looks like a cartoon character on top of a water pump; another can recognize the character and knows what it stands for, and a third might be an avid player of the many Mario games and feel compelled to approach the water pump, touch it and maybe even feel like jumping on it, like Mario does in the game.

Much videogame street art chooses to represent iconic characters that are part of the canon of classic videogames: Mario, Pacman, Sonic, Link... and even some of the villains or secondary characters from the same legendary games. Often they are interacting with the city in ways appropriate to the shape of the “found object” as in the case of Mario above: a pacman eating the lines in a crosswalk, a pacman ghost hovering in an arch-shaped doorway or a toilet sign where the heads of the man/woman signs have been replaced by mushrooms from the Mario games.

As suggested above, the city is not only decorated, it is also transformed by the symbols from this other world; videogames come out of the screens of fan enthusiasts and are forced into the public perception. The strong colour palette and caricature features ensure that even people who don't know or care about videogames pay attention to them.

Another important visual characteristic of videogames street art is that even the interventions that are not based on particular shapes or objects, those on walls where videogame scenes are simply painted, show a remarkable sense of scenography. The artist who painted the wall below cleverly has used colours to recreate the tunnels in which Sonic the Hedgehog and his friend Tails run crazily around. Anybody who has ever played this game or a similar tunnel racer feels the pull of the tunnel, the desire to press the button and send the hedgehog speeding forward, of seeing the tunnel twist and turn while we struggle to keep control of the character and touch the point-giving balls. A boring flat wall has been turned into an endless labyrinth of fast-paced tunnels.



Figure 5. Sonic & Tails.

This kind of presentation can be said to offer the spectator the most “pregnant moment” of that particular game, i.e., the best instant, the most significant, crucial instant. The pregnant moment idea was developed by Lessing in his aesthetic treatise *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, in an attempt to conciliate the temporal with the essential spatial character of the visual by choosing the right moment, “that is most suggestive and form which the preceding and succeeding actions are more easily comprehensible” (Vidal, 2012: 116). In a visual representations of videogames, the pregnant moment will not only make characters and scenes recognizable, but also encapsulate the action that best defines that particular game, the kinetic movement that only gets set in motion with the participation of the player. In Graeme Kirkpatrick’s spirit, we could call it the moment in which we are invited to dance as players, that is, the invitation to play. For him, a player interacting with videogames is like a dancer who has a script of the music to be danced, a coreography which she has to interpret creatively, not only mechanically (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 137). If videogame street art can make spectators recognize the pull of the game, it is a measure of success of this essentially visual form.

The representation of game interaction (the invitation to play) is thus the core of the aesthetics of street art, which turns these interventions into something more than mere decoration, to continue the discussion introduced above in relation to *Invader*. What makes his alien symbols different from the logos of commercial firms plastered all over the city is that they evoke in the viewer the impulse to move her spaceship from left to right, to shoot the descending aliens to pieces and get ready for the next wave. The fact that *Invader*’s aliens descend upon luxury goods shops adds a new layer of meaning to the interactive dance of the game, in an expression of remarkable combinatorial creativity.

5. Pixelated nostalgia

As we can see from the examples of *Invader* and *Commander Keen*, an important part of the videogame inspired street art pieces is their devotion to the old pixelated-characters of the early days of videogames, which suggests a kind of nostalgia. Holak and Havlena define nostalgia as “a positively balanced complex feeling, emotion, or mood produced by reflection on things (objects, persons, experiences, ideas) associated with the past” (1998: 218). It is a yearning for the idealized past that can be evoked by any kind of object, not only the personally experienced past, but also collective understandings of the past, which even may have occurred before an individual was born (Baker and Kennedy, 1994).

Videogame street artists rescue favorite old game characters and put them in the sites and surfaces of the streets, recreating the retro aesthetic in a physical context. As Svetlana Boym points out,

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time -the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. (Boym, 2001: xv).



Figure 6. Zelda.

Following Boym, the yearning for the video game experience of our childhood is perhaps also a rebellion against modern technology, graphics and sounds.¹⁵ It connects with an entire generation of gamers that look at pixelated street art pieces as a nice gift and a surprise. This can be illustrated by perusing the comments to Street Art pieces posted on Flickr, as for example the ones tagged with “Commander Keen”: “Commander Keen , thats a blast from the past. I remember my girlfriend back in the early 90’s spending countless hours playing it on a 386”. This dialogue between artists and users shed new life to old and “dead media” (Sterling, 2008) creating new uses, new practices, new aesthetics, and a whole new art/gaming community.

The nostalgia evoked by street art is more than a particular look or surface aesthetics, as prevalent in other kinds of current retro fashions merely concerned with form. Videogame street art nostalgia is about essence, about remembering a particular mechanics of play: the left to right swipes of our spaceship, the satisfactory advance of the point-eating pacman, the ever cheerful hopping of Mario. Our videogames *repertoire* is made not only of visuals and sounds, but also of the rhythms of classic videogames. Videogame street art keeps the playful rhythms of the past alive.

6. Videogame Street Art and the gaming age

The practice of graffiti and street art can be seen as something playful in general. As female street artist Mickey clearly says: “Doing graffiti is like playing” (Reiss, 2008, 27: 49). It is a play with the city’s surfaces, from walls to crosswalks, street sewers, traffic signs, etc. It is another way to express our necessity to play and to

¹⁵ A similar feeling can be found in the so-called “chiptune music”, electronic music that uses the microchip-based audio hardware of early home computers and gaming consoles and repurposes it for artistic expression. See Márquez (2014: 68).

share it with others, physically and digitally. In the case of videogame street art, this is even more true and intense. The presence of play is double, because it is not only about playfully making an intervention in the city, but also about visually representing play, and putting spectators in the state of mind that was/is play. In that sense, videogame street art can be understood as a kind of “tactic for a playful city” (Borden, 2007: 332) in which

The playability of an enjoyable city is not confined to the existing interiors of buildings or to the way these have been conceived, but is rather an expanded field that incorporates the full range of possible architectures – that is to say, all kinds of objects, insertions, spaces, practices, ideas and emotions (Ibid.)

There is even an additional element of play in the habits around this new art form, and that is the need for documenting these interventions, which often are photographed by the artists themselves, but also by passersby, and shared online in social media.¹⁶ The online encounter with videogame street art is probably not as intense an experience as seeing it on the streets of our city, but still, the humorous contrasts are appreciated and re-circulated in various social media. Players send videogame street art pictures to their friends. *Do you remember?* Memories of play are shared and get a new meaning after having been made corporeal in cities around the world.

In that sense, the *information age* is also a *gaming age*, because gaming and its associated notion of play may become a master metaphor for a range of human social relations, with the potentials for new freedom and new creativity (Boellstorff, 2006: 29). We are witnessing a growing “play turn” (Pearce, 2009: 278) in which, “far from being a marginalized fringe activity, play is beginning to pervade every aspects of our lives”. We see games and play embedded in mobile phones, social networks, web sites, and increasingly in the streets thanks to the work of the street art artists inspired by old and modern videogames. The works and practices of these artists can also be related with the emerging genre of “alternate reality games” (ARG) or “big games”, such as *Majestic*, *Big Urban Game*, *The Beast*, *I Love Bees* or *Pac-Manhattan*, although their scope and goals are very different. These games turn the streets into a giant playground in which both the physical world and the digital world are reconfigured into a game. Street artists do a similar thing “occupying” the streets of the cities and the sites of the network in innovative ways through videogame-inspired pieces that reshape and reimagine in a gaming fashion both physical and digital cities. Thus, the “global village” of McLuhan is being more and more reconfigured as a “global playground” (Pearce, 2009: 279), less passive and more discursive, collaborative, social and ludic than what McLuhan initially envisioned. And street art is playing an important role in this emergent global playground. Digital play has become visible through videogame street art, it dresses up wearing the body of the city and it calls forth your fond memories of playing. Will you come and play?

¹⁶ If one for example writes “videogame street art” in a photo sharing service like *flickr*, thousands of examples pour in, with photos of interventions in many cities around the world, that are shared and circulated globally.

7. Conclusions

Thorough this paper we have tried to shed some light on the complex relations between two contemporary cultural forms: videogames and graffiti/street art. Videogame street art is an interesting phenomenon that has not received significant scholarly attention. It shows how the videoludic imaginary (characters, aesthetics, textures, etc.) is being appropriated and reinterpreted in the streets by a new generation of street artists that grew up with videogames and are now fuelled by their nostalgia and in some cases have an explicit agenda of social change. Videogame street art is also creating new uses, new aesthetics, and a whole new art/gaming community through the practice of documenting and sharing.

Many researchers have noted that we are now witnessing a growing “play turn” in our culture (Pearce, 2009: 278). For some it is linked to games, such as the idea of an “emerging culture of ubiquitous gaming” (McGonigal, 2007: 237) or Boellstorff’s “gaming age” (Boellstorff, 2006: 29) and for others, to playfulness, so pervasive that it becomes “a mode of being” (Sicart, 2014: 26). Videogame street art is a crucial manifestation of this emergent ludic reality in which the walls, sewers, water pumps and crosswalks of the streets become videogame characters or console controllers by this interesting “hand-made” or “artisanal” process of *physical ludification*, one in which the city becomes a videogame we can play every day.

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