IT IS DANGEROUS TO PLAY ALONE, SHARE THIS!

Simulacra and simulations via inter-generational games

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses how game features are informed and shaped in and through the relation between different generations and backgrounds. More specifically, the co-play (involving two parents and their 8 years old daughter) of *The legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Octopath Traveler* has been under scrutiny for three months collecting viewpoints, interpretations, and emerging heuristics. Such an observation drawn its cornerstones from game studies and critical studies, with the distinction between simulation and simulacra as a leading analytical key. Methods spanned critical auto/ethnography, game diaries, thinking aloud instances, and creative exercises as debriefing processes. The two video games were selected for their different and yet complementary approaches to digital entertainment past: *Zelda* is an updated re-interpretation of an historical brand, while *Octopath* is a new license mimicking old aesthetics and mechanics. Implications shed light on how gameplay and ludic mechanics change along with personal and generational traits, and on ways to harness shared play for triggering family reflection and communication.

INTRODUCTION

Videogames can work as effective inter-generational bridges. An increasing literature is addressing benefits and best practices in co-playing, from peer-mentoring networks to family well-being. Digital entertainment is no more a new medium, and nowadays parents and caregivers may share common game interests and references with their children. Such a possibility is strengthened by nostalgic trends affecting the sector, providing titles that are both old and new – a crossroad for different gaming ages and then audiences. For instance, historical brands like Zelda, Super Mario and Final Fantasy keep receiving installments and episodes, while remakes and titles mimicking old game mechanics are thriving (e.g., *Resident Evil 2, Spyro, Crash Bandicoot*). However, little efforts have been done in shedding light on how this trend occurs in a domestic setting and from an ethnographic perspective. The current emphasis of the literature is on how collaborative and competitive gaming may 1) foster a positive climate between parents and children and 2) prevent game addiction and disruptive behavior. Flipping this perspective, family interactions can work as lenses through which it is possible to analyze the medium and its players, providing opportunities for constructing new meanings and reflections.

This article aims to fill this gap by presenting an ethnography of family co-play involving the games *The legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (since now on, BOTW) and *Octopath Traveler* (since now on, OT), which are both cross-generational but in divergent ways. Subjects involved were an 8-year-old girl and her parents, whose play was observed and analyzed for three months. This combination of ethnographic and autoethnographic lenses was driven by the sensitizing concepts of simulation and simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983, 1994). Moreover, game design concepts such as game heuristics and game decisions supported the inquiry. Highlights point to a dynamic status of the playing experience,

which is strongly affected by personal background and yet can work as an instrument to find a common ground for sharing perspectives across generations. The article is structured as follows: the first section introduces subjects and games involved; the second explains methods and leading concepts; the third uncovers sensitizing highlights and results; finally, the fourth is for discussion and related conclusions. The perspectives of all the three family members are presented providing a multi-angle overview of co-play.

LET'S PLAY A GAME

Sofia is 8 years old and has been engaging with video games since she was 3. However, she shows to be extremely selective, picking only few titles as long-term playing experiences. *Marvel Super Heroes, Mario Kart*, and *Pokémon Go* can be considered her leading references although she has been exposed to a variety of different titles, from *Splatoon 2* to *Minecraft*. She loves to play alone as well as with the family, which happens once or twice a week for sessions of 2-3 hours (however, it can be less frequent when there are no relevant games); game turns are fluid and do not follow specific standards, while video gaming is not usually discussed outside playing. It can be argued that Sofia prefers exploration-based gameplays to action ones. Her father is a game scholar who started to play in his childhood on Nintendo home consoles. He prefers role-playing and strategy games, and he keeps playing for both pleasure and work. Her mother is involved with the medium as well, although she tends to play more randomly and with casual and puzzle games. Sofia has also a little brother, Alessandro, who is getting used to comment her matches and game sessions, taking part of a such a family dynamic.

The premises of this study can be traced back to the first sessions with BOTW in Spring 2018. The father was supposed to be the only player due to his game preferences, with Sofia and the mother not particularly engaged. However, the first hour with

BOTW was able to involve both in divergent ways: Sofia started to embrace the open world structure of the game in an intuitive way, starting to behave and make decisions beyond the apparent game rationale; the mother appreciated the shrines' structure and their "concentrated cognitive challenges". By contrast, the father struggled with the game itself even if he started to play Zelda games in the Nineties. The idea that a revised historical brand was able to connect with new audiences and problematize the approach of an old player was fascinating. In other words, the father was moved out of his comfort zone, finding that a skill-set developed through the years was not so effective anymore. This take fostered discussion and sharing among the family, pointing to how some game mechanics can acquire a fluid and dynamic meaning. Therefore, a family ethnography was planned and staged in Summer 2018; it was possible to expand this reflection further with the release of OT, another Role-Playing Game (RPG) that deals with the game industry's past but differently – i.e., presenting a fresh brand with nostalgic elements (e.g., 16-bit graphics, specific mechanics). Remembering those first plays:

- Sofia: I did not like Zelda at first. The cave part [Shrine of Resurrection] was…boring. I do not like those instructions. And so much blablabla [text] but then…there was so much!

- Mother: BOTW seemed to me overwhelming – it is me, but it looked like a tedious experience. But the first shrines were different. They looked like levels, slots of engagement that I was able to handle.

- Father: The idea was to play Zelda alone … a sort of personal quality time. My first Zelda was *A link to the Past*, and since then I have missed just few episodes. The first minutes with BOTW were quite disorienting, especially because of all the details to take care of.

The games

BOTW is the last installment of the game series *The Legend of Zelda*, started in 1986 and published by Nintendo. It was released in 2017 for Wii-U and Nintendo Switch, receiving popular and critical acclaim. It is can be considered an action-adventure game with RPG elements set in an open world (i.e., a broad virtual environment to explore). The leading protagonist is Link, who is asked to save the world from the villain Calamity Ganon. The gameplay relies on a combination of exploration, action, and problem-solving tasks. Through the game players can improve their skills, gather a variety of objects, train horses, prepare/cook potions, descent into shrines and overcome their challenges, and so on. The game environment is particularly populated by elements and characters, from wild animals to resources to gather, from enemies to hidden treasures and enigmas. The weather changes dynamically, and game mechanics tend to be realistic (e.g., if there is a storm and the player wears metal, she is going to be hit by a lightning; fire spreads on wood and weapons deteriorate). In terms of plot, there are several references to previous episodes, from starting with neither information nor memories to recurring characters and zones (e.g., princess Zelda, Zora realm).

OT is a Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) developed by Square-Enix and published by Nintendo in 2018 for Nintendo Switch. The player can control eight different characters with unique storylines and abilities in a fantasy world. Proceeding through the game and completing all these narratives, it is possible to team the characters up combining their specific skills. Game rules follow the traditional standards of JRPG genre, with turn-based battles, random encounters, and a tendency to long combat sessions (also called grinding) for becoming competitive enough to succeed. The visual style deploys a hybrid approach, with characters and textures in 16-bit graphics moving in highly defined polygonal environments. The game has been well

received by both players and critics, being associated with past masterpieces like *Final Fantasy 6* and *Chrono Trigger*.

For Sofia and her mother, BOTW represented the first experience with an open world game and OT was the first JRPG ever played.

THE ANALYTIC EQUIPMENT

Coplay has been increasingly addressed in game studies. With this term, the reference goes to experiencing videogames with peers, parents, and family members (Costa & Veloso, 2016), implying that the medium may play a proactive role in domestic and relational wellbeing. Several studies have addressed such a potential in improving communication and social skills across personal backgrounds. For instance, domestic play has been seen as an opportunity to stage intergenerational perspective-taking (De Grove, 2014, Eichberg, 2016). Empirical evidence suggests that family coplay triggers social benefits and positive emotions for both younger and older players (Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2016; De Schutter & Vanden Abeele, 2010; Rice et al., 2012; Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018). Attention has been given to how families pragmatically deal with technology and gaming (Villegas, 2013), from game turns where parents tend to adopt a more passive involvement supporting their children during play (Voida & Greenberg, 2012) to the importance of selecting appropriate content and titles (Coyne et al., 2011). The intent is often to mitigate undesirable effects of video gaming by harnessing contextual and familiar dynamics. Several studies have explored the tie between digital entertainment and (cognitive, emotional, social) outcomes targeting young players (DeLisi, Vaughn, Gentile, Anderson & Shook, 2013; Markey & Ferguson, 2017), while parental concerns have grown (Wang, Taylor & Sun, 2018; Livingstone, 2009). Although the balance between negative and positive effects of videogames is still unclear (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014), it can be argued that

domestic settings are becoming a proactive front for dealing with the medium scope, especially in terms of social ties and processes.

Nevertheless, the argument informing this article follows an inquiry line with alternative premises: using family consumption for better understanding how videogames work and, therefore, playing with related highlights for fostering reflection and mutual understanding. From a methodological perspective, ethnographic observations have been conducted for 2 months (BOTW) and 1 month (OT) (the briefer involvement with the latter was due to the absence of interest from Sofia and her mother). The leading approach was critical (Crawford, 1996; Smith, 1999), focusing on how the researcher (the father) was not a distant observer but rather someone with well-established schemes and viewpoints; it implied to adopt instrumental key terms and seek sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006) during the observation itself. Moreover, the main orientation was creative and generative (Gauntlett, 2007; Pink, 2009), collecting and creating materials for fostering individual as well as shared reflections. Finally, the digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) inspired the whole study due to its focus on how technology can entail novel practices in terms of expression and self-perception.

The aforementioned family routines about video games did not change because of the study. Solo and shared sessions remained fluid, with Sofia's leading role and possible parental support (from active play to aids). However, Sofia was asked to 1) take a diary about her experience with the games (she called it the "journey-report") to fill as she wanted, from drawings to text; and 2) being involved in two different exercises: the spring design and the ideo-cards design. Additional notes and thinking aloud instances about the play were collected by the father.

The spring design was staged after weeks 2 (ROTW), 6 (ROTW), and 10 (OT) and consisted in discussing what was relevant and

what secondary in terms of game elements (mechanics, actions, characters) in the game played. The objective was to break the gameplay itself applying a "contractile elasticity", which is a swing between "tight design" – i.e., a design that keeps only the essential rules – and "elastic design" – i.e., – a design that takes into account both fundamental and minor mechanics – able to enlighten how games work, may work and cannot work (Bateman & Boon, 2006, 110-114). Discussions targeted which game features do not work or do not make sense, trying to envision new insights and features.

The ideo-cards design was staged after weeks #4 (BOTW), 8 (BOTW), and 12 (OT). This exercise was inspired by two board games played as family (*Dixit*) or individually (*Scythe*) and their focus on evoking decks. It relies on using random cards for envisioning hypothetical games and, for this study, new episodes of BOTH or OT. It has already been used in social research (Gandolfi, in press), but in this case it was preferred a simplified version. The family created three decks – blue, red, and green. They filled each with 10 to 15 cards referring to topics (blue), characters (red), and mechanics (green) extrapolated by Sofia while playing. Therefore, family members drawn a card from each deck in sequence (blue, red, green) creating a sequel/remake of the game with the elements picked. This design session was composed by several rounds (7 to 9) and therefore prototypes. In the end, a winner was selected by vote. The rationale of this task was to finalize the spring design session and exploit the potential of thinking by making (Gauntlett, 2007). Cards reported the name of a feature to include (e.g., cooking, environments, enemies) and a related drawing by Sofia.

At the beginning of the observation, two instrumental concepts were deployed for supporting the analysis:

- Range of possibilities: freedom given to the player in exploring and experiencing the game (Adams & Dormans,

2012). It is the feeling of autonomy and control that a game may or may not provide.

- Heuristics [b]: the "rules of thumb that help (. . .) [players] play the game" (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera, 2012, 29). In other words, the lesson taught the game itself in terms of best practices and winning strategies.

They were chosen for their practical dimension, providing clear criteria for reading the game experience and keeping track of it. Sofia was asked to think about them along with emotions and feelings triggered by the play, and also to use working metaphors while describing her experience. Metaphorical thinking can indeed function as a reflective trigger (Ricoeur, 1990), shedding lights on inner processes and opinions that may be challenging to uncover in other ways.

THE PLAYS

The first month

After an initial involvement, the first week with BOTW was difficult for the all family. The initial area was indeed challenging for the absence of the paraglider, which is a crucial instrument for exploring the rest of the map. Moreover, enemies were lethal since the beginning, implicating frequent defeats.

- Father: this the most underpowered Link I have ever seen (thinking aloud).

- Sofia: I do not like it too much. You have to fight enemies, you do not have time to look around (thinking aloud).

- Mother: there is not a clear direction. How are you supposed to escape this area? (thinking aloud).

However, Sofia came up with a basic lesson from her notes: "a good strategy is to run and climb trees. You can breathe". She spent minutes exploring the available map – such an approach

seemed not productive to both the parents, who suggested her to focus on the indications given by the mysterious old man (the non-playable character that guides the player in the first part of the game). By contrast, she was able to understand the simulative layer of BOTW, which is not just a special effect but also a take on the overall gameplay. She started to make her own list of objects collected, and she played with the cooking tools trying different combinations of ingredients. This is how she was able to develop a hot sauce able to warm Link up, allowing her to reach a shrine on cold (and therefore lethal) mountains. Because of this discovery, she was able to fly away from the first area (i.e., Great Plateau) and access the whole game environment.Sofia: "I made it, all the way through!" (thinking aloud) [block quote]

> From her notes (see image 1 for an example):
>
> when you shake a tree the apple [on it] falls.
>
> You cannot run too fast for too long because you may not have enough stamina.
>
> When you come close to an animal it runs away because it's scared.
>
> When you get a horse it still needs training.
>
> If you eat hot food you will go in the snow and won't be cold.
>
> How you cook makes a difference.
>
> When you kill an animal, you can eat it.

Image 1: Sofia's note about cooking.

Weeks #2 and #3 were about exploring the broader game setting, overcoming shrines' trials and figuring new rules out: "When it rains you can't climb anything because it's slippery and wet" (note); "if I reach that mountain, I can see better" (thinking aloud). The father started to help Sofia in dealing with menaces (especially monsters), while the mother was involved in solving shrines' enigmas.

The first spring session brought up Sofia's intolerance for the combat system. According to her, "enemies are too strong and you break your things". What was essential to her was the autonomy in walking around with neither limits nor constrains, and the "agential readability" of the environment itself – "things work as they should [in real life]". From the father's perspective, the combat was a crucial component; he motivated his position by highlighting the importance of an opponent, a villain. Sofia

replied that the wild nature of the game was already dangerous, a menace to neutralize. The outcomes from the ideo-card section were aligned with these reflections. The winning remake was *The Green Link*, where the player must learn how to deal with nature (topic) by interacting with animals (characters) and collecting resources (mechanics) (see image 2). A world narrative was preferred to a mere "fighting monsters" progression, with an emphasis on an improved physical engine – "I cannot dig, I cannot grab water, I cannot build (…) I want something more" (referring to the actual game).

Image 2: Cards generating The Green Link game.

For the father, the first month was what Roger Caillois (1973) would call a "dissymmetry" – a provocation able to overturn standards and expectations suggesting a novel take on a well-known subject. BOTW deployed a straightforward simulative approach based on elements of nature and a living world that

puts the player to the test rather than giving her an advantage. According to him, previous episodes did not adopt such a lens (intuitively also for technological reasons), relying on more guided problem-solving tasks in smaller settings with less variables to consider. With simulation, the reference is to an attempt to recreate and mimic a source realty by keeping specific dynamics rather than others (Adams & Dormans, 2012; Frasca, 2003). A simulation can be seen as a metaphorical translation, through which some processes are filtered and re-shaped within and through an alternative context. The father struggled with such a wide horizon at first, seeing it as a stretch for following open world trends (e.g., *Assassin's Creed* series, *Horizon Zero Dawn*). However, the preparation of the hot sauce worked as a sort of epiphany: he realized that his schemata (Di Maggio, 1997) about gaming were relative and not effective anymore. Sofia's discovery worked as a sort of epistemological rupture (Bachelard, 1986). Since then, he started to see the game in a new light, interpreting it as a *discovery box* rather than as a setting to control.

The mother was more proactive in uncovering the realistic ties of the game. Her pragmatic approach was able to deal with several challenges (e.g., using wood for lighting torches) without suffering from years of game genre-related conventions (Adams & Dormans, 2012). She engaged with shrine-related quests, observing that – "this is the pure ludic spirit: a problem and tools [the special abilities] for solving it".

The second month

The second month was characterized by a refinement of Sofia's game strategies, which became more tactical and spatial-related. She started to draw maps (see image 3) and take pictures for keeping trace of her play. She partially overlooked the main plot (she defeated the first divine beast Vah Ruta), focusing on reaching apparently inaccessible places. Such an effort required

a new focus on fighting due to some required encounters. The father kept helping her, suggesting an initial observation of the enemies before any attack – "it is something real…you must survive" (thinking aloud). Framing the experience as a combination of survival and discovery worked an interpretive (and realistic) lens for her.
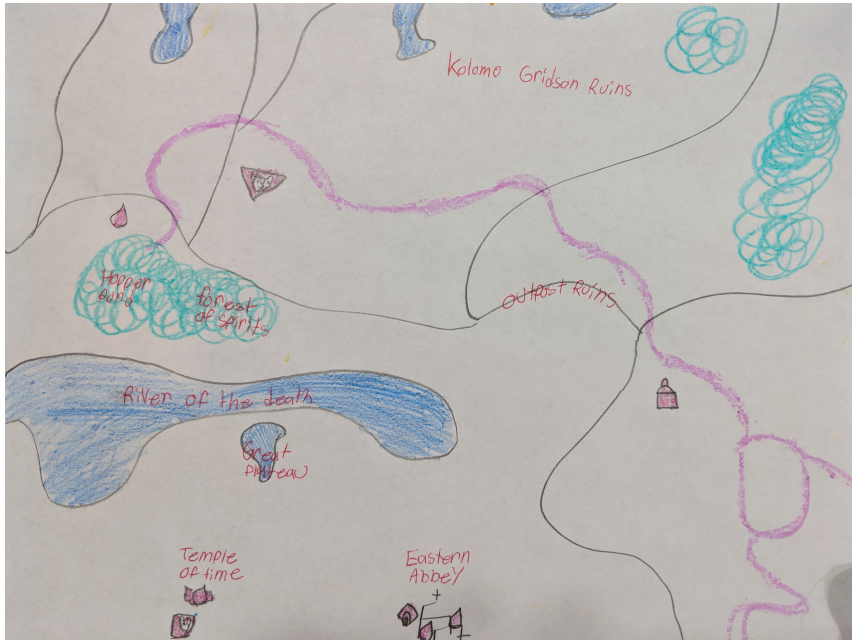

Image 3: Sofia's map

From her notes and thinking aloud instances:

- that dragon [Farosh]…it was wonderful. My dad and I did not speak for a while (note).

- seeing all these animals is so cool…I cannot see what it is next (note).

- let's wait until the monsters sleep, then we attack (thinking aloud).

- if you look at the monsters, you know how strong they are (note).

- there are things I cannot immagine in my head (thinking aloud).

- around enemies there are things you can use against them, but you must have time (note).

The embedded camera became a crucial tool for framing her goals and items. It worked as an instrument to deal with the unexpected and uncover it (e.g., studying monsters) (see images 4 and 5). For example, Sofia stopped her game session just for taking a picture of a lighting: "it is…beautiful" (thinking aloud). At the same time, she started to look at the enemies, implying a new phase of observation and analysis. For instance, she waited minutes before attacking a monster camp because her objective was to use magic powers for saving her equipment. From her parents' perspective, such a caution did not seem the best strategy in terms of time, but she was confident it was the "more appropriate" line of action.

Sofia: "this is how you should play"

Mother: "even if it takes so long?"

Sofia: "yes, it is how it works…it is how the game works."

Image 4: Lighting (picture taken by Sofia).

Image 5: The dragon Farosh (picture taken by Sofia).

In the second spring design the combat was re-framed and partially justified as a need. Training a horse became a new crucial element, able to trigger a significant attachment to game dynamics. Even though her first horse was not particularly skilled, she decided to keep it: "Cheetah [her first horse] is mine,

I do not need other horses". The story was addressed as well: for Sofia, the plot was not important by itself, but some characters like Princess Mipha and Princess Zelda were considered important – although not properly explored – drivers: "Why cannot I play Zelda rather Link? Why did Princess Mipha have to die?" (from spring design). The second deck-cards session saw *The Legend of Zora* as a winner: players have to save a water realm (topic) by impersonating a female character (characters) and training fishes (mechanics) against an increasing pollution.

For the mother, the second month was especially focused on how the sector is dealing with equal representation and gender bias: "it is unbelievable that a saga like this one is still having issues and delays of this kind". It moved her to read more and to support a proactive take during the ideo-card session. Due to her background in puzzle and casual games, these issues were perceived as marginal; during the observation she realized how "the whole sector is behind (…) even if princess Zelda is a strong figure, she stays in the shadows (…) we want to play her, we want to be her". Regarding heuristics, she started to see patterns in the environment beyond the shrines: "if we move all the rocks into the holes, something has to happen" (thinking aloud).

For the father, this month was crucial for understanding the fascination that the game was entailing. Unexpected elements like lightings and enormous flying dragons (see image 5) surprised the whole family; the feeling was to have sensed a secret and yet not to have fully understood it. Such an emotion can be tied to the concept of "seduction" by Baudrillard (1973): the desire fostered by a phenomenon that you cannot completely handle and yet invites you to expand your horizons. This absence of control implies the fact that the source reality (see above) that the secret is referring to is not accessible, and never will be. Rather than "feeling an environment", it is "wondering the environment". Even though current simulations are trying to replicate reality (Baudrillard, 1994), there is always something

missing, a trace of an absence (Derrida, 1967) that triggers an ongoing sense of wonder. This is made feasible by the clear gameplay, which supports such an attitude balancing control and random elements; Sofia noted that "I like…the fact that there are few rules, and they work everywhere". Having a limited set of mechanics with a broad range of application is indeed a design choice suggested by several practitioners (e.g., Adams & Dormans, 2012; Sylvester, 2013). There were exceptions, though. During the spring session Sofia observed that even if you can beat enemies by exploiting the environment (e.g., launching rocks), after a while it becomes "boring and always the same stuff". While working with ideo-cards, she added that "I love to train the horse, but what about dogs [present in the game]? I want to do the same with them".

The second month pointed to 1) a lack of representation that Sofia and her mother were able to detect better than the father and 2) a virtual world that cannot be completely understood, and therefore an environment where you can lose yourself. While the simulative mechanics were able to support an initial feeling of agency (strengthened in the second month), BOTW was also able to feed a sense of wonder and surprise. This combination worked effectively in keeping the family engaged.

The third month

The third month was about OT, with an emphasis on Ophelia's story (one of the eight potential characters). Father's involvement was predominant at the beginning due to the importance of textual instructions and the old-fashioned gameplay. After week #1, Sofia was able to handle the game by herself. OT became a sort of loop – an engaging and yet inconclusive sequence of actions – for her.

- It is like Pokémon Go. You do the right moves, you keep going (thinking aloud).

- Fight and fight, go back to the village, heal, and fight again (note).

- Octopath is a like an aquarium. It is not like Zelda (note).

- That's it, but I like it (thinking aloud).

- Potions are never too many (note).

She was involved with neither characters nor the narrative. Plot decisions were not perceived as "meaningful" and related outcomes were a matter of numbers, an ongoing path of level-ups and damages. She liked the aesthetics but considered them "kawaii and funny", suggesting a struggle with the serious themes characterizing OT. The spring design highlighted the importance of grinding mechanics, while the narrative was not considered essential: "Characters always repeat the same actions until they beat someone…Ophelia wants her sister back, but I do not feel it". The ideo-cards design winner was a game about friendship (topic) in which players had to bond (mechanics, the "path action") with enemies (characters). Such a proposal appeared as a critique to the linearity of OT, with some references to the game *Undertale* (never played by Sofia) and its *pacifistic* mechanics.

While the mother was not particularly engaged with the game, stating that "it is a frustrating circuit", the father felt emotionally attached to it because of his previous experiences with JRPGs (especially *Final Fantasy VI* and *Chrono Trigger*). From his perspective, Ophelia's narrative line seemed meaningful enough and the long fighting sessions worked as necessary steps between plot milestones. Nevertheless, when Sofia stated that she understood the game theme but she did not see any tie to the concrete game mechanics, he realized the limits of his perspective. His satisfaction with the game relied on game "simulacra", which are the result of simulative interactions shaping the sector since the beginning (Crogan, 2011) and now

represent autonomous instances able *to satisfy themselves by themselves*. With simulacra, the distinction between source reality and simulation fades (Baudrillard, 1983), and there is not more room for the secret, the fascination of the unknown, the driver of a playful attitude. The resulting reality sounds like a freezing *lullaby*, written in stereotypical stone and cuddling old gaming generations (see Burrill, 2008). In Roger Caillois's terms, the reference is to a symmetry able to hypnotize players via its familiar patterns and references. Such a pulsion can be referred to recent entertainment trends, from nostalgic movies (e.g., *Ready Player One, Alita: Battle Angel*) to gaming remakes (e.g., *Resident Evil 2, Crash Bandicoot*). For the father, who was the one suffering for such an impasse, playing with a younger player worked as an antidote to such a nihilistic viewpoint. Going back to BOTW, a possible cross-generational bridge was indeed the game ability to surprise old and new audiences, a question mark that cannot be answered. Even though it may be problematic at first (especially for long-term gamers), such a shared feeling may work across generations – i.e.*, seeking control but not really looking for it.*

THE SCORE

It can be argued that these three months and the related exercises provided a remarkable opportunity for the family to re-evaluate the medium itself as a communicative trigger. Before this study, video games were present but yet secondary and rhapsodic foci in family relations. While doing this research, BOTW and OT became an excuse to discuss and share gaming experiences and ideas as never before. It implied talking about personal memories associated with games (for instance, the father remembering the wonder after leaving Midgar in *Final Fantasy 7* and mother's satisfaction in solving the first problems in *The Witness*), trying to situate them within personal narratives (Gauntlett, 2007; Ricoeur, 1990). It provided an opportunity to understand the rich and complex overview that Sofia was developing while playing. Her ability to read and criticize a game environment as

a whole – and to go beyond formal limits and requirements (e.g., spending time for taking a good picture) – surprised her parents, who were not expecting such an open and yet critical approach to the medium. A debriefing was staged after the ethnography for wrapping the whole study up. Parents and daughter spent one hour going through notes and reports. For Sofia, it meant to realize that there are different ways to experience technology and especially videogames. For the mother, it meant to expand her notion of game mechanics and dynamics, selecting what is relevant from apparently complex systems (like an open world). For the father, it meant to realize how his approach was characterized by what Koster (2010) defines "jargon factor" – the tendency of a game genre to become self-referential, a niche destined to consume itself (a simulacrum that does not need external references). Therefore, intergenerational play worked as a break, a way to weaken personal symmetries and expand his take on the sector itself.

As Järvinen (2008) argues, game experiences can be described as a communication between the game system and the player. In this relation, individual stereotypes and schemas play a crucial role (Sylvester, 2013), but they can be overturned fostering a proactive exchange between media habits and patterns. Video games are becoming wide cultural objects, able to acquire a fragmented identity based on being rather than on to be (Hall, 1997). Reflecting on how they can problematize well-established cultural standpoints (Lotman 1993) can work as a stimulating strategy for coplaying, considering the medium as an object to enlighten rather than just as a tool to deploy. These highlights echo what Villegas (2013) claims about the inclusion of parent-child discussions after media use, which would strengthen communication and mutual understanding. In addition, Sofia's creative engagement allowed her (she was able to see her journey reports anytime) to frame her ideas and stay on track for design and creative exercises. In other words, she developed a shared

roadmap with her parents generating new ideas and insights. The implications of this experience are already visible, with *Kingdom Hearts 3* and *Into the Breach* as current leading family games. Sofia and her parents decided to keep the *journey report* and the ideo-cards design as heuristic instruments for discussing playing and expanding its scope.

Even if limitations related to ethnography approaches have to be considered (from situated findings to an emphasis on specific viewpoints), the present research depicts a case study (with related methods) that may suggest a peculiar way to use video games as intergenerational devices – i.e., harnessing them as battlegrounds, environments to analyze, instruments to problematize. This approach has been particularly effective in the authors' domestic setting, and further studies and explorations are needed to uncover its potential and detect its limits. In the end, simulations and simulacra are fluid attributions, and generational leaps happen every day in digital entertainment.

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