

The accuracy of the vague and the lightness of the weight in VG as a sample of Minor Poetry

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Abstract. Maybe we do not assume or assume with some doubt the idea that gaming will save the world, as Asi and Parker suggest referring to social games. But we cannot surely accept the assumption that Video Games cannot be a form of Art (while wondering whether Art can even be defined and also whether its definition is even needed). The famous Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* can offer some strong paradigms to endeavor to outline a first analysis of their poetics. Also Leopardi's *Theory of Poetry* offers an interesting element we consider: in his opinion nothing in itself is so poetical as the *Vague*, not to be confused with vagueness of expression. So, the main idea that permeates these short pages is that Video Games certainly have social, cognitive and many other affordances, but that what justifies the increase in their use could be their ability to generate images from images, and to live even with immersive mode all the elements that make up the material/stuff of poetry from the dawn of time: Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity and Vagueness. The one of them that first sets up images seems to be accurate lightness of software supported by the accurate weight of hardware: it allows her to be not mere surface but deep space affording also the new territories of the digital sublime arousing from two of the four axes on which to place games according to Caillois historical groundwork: *ilinx* (vertigo) and *alea* (chance).

Keywords: Accuracy, Caillois, Calvino, Lightness, Minor Literature, Poetry, Propp, Sublime, Video Games, Visibility.

1 Introduction

According to a recent (2016) report of ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics), less than half the population in Italy reads books. And moreover, reading books in leisure time is falling sharply. 3 million and 300 thousand readers have been lost from 2010 to today. It is a relevant phenomenon that cannot be overlooked. On the other hand we are witnessing a general increase in the sale and use of Video Games.

Seventeen percent of Americans from the USA in 1992, had read a work of poetry at least once in the past year. That number 20 years later had fallen to 6.7 percent, by more than half. Those numbers come from the national Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA 2015), a massive survey that's run every few years as part of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. "Since 2002, the share of poetry-readers has contracted by 45 percent, resulting in the steepest decline in participation in any

literary genre" the study concludes. Over the past 20 years, the downward trend doesn't show signs of abating. So, if the internet has made poetry more accessible than ever, some numbers reveal that since 2004, the share of all Google searches involving "poetry" has fallen precipitously (fig. 1). Today, poetry searches account for only about one fifth of the total search volume they accounted for ten years ago. It may be interesting to try to understand if people simply do not love poetry books, but love poetry and they look for it elsewhere, for example in Video Games.

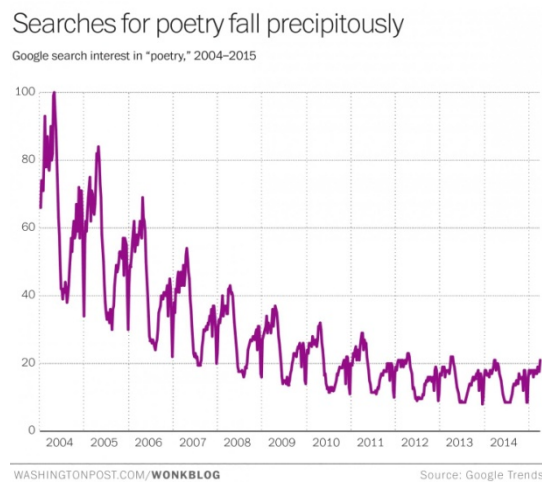


Fig. 1. Google search interest in "poetry" from 2004-2015.

2 Video Games as a form of art

The positions of scholars, academics, writers and mere observers on role, function and dignity of Video Games are still very different and so to speak magmatic. For instance, Asi and Parker' *Power Play: How Video Games Can Save the World* (2017) highlights case studies of Video Games released over the past 20 years whose purpose was to promote social change in a variety of areas. Co-written by the former head of Games for Change, the stories presented in this book make a strong case for the growing belief that Video Games can be a force for good in the world.

In 2006, at the Conference on World Affairs entitled "*An Epic Debate: Are Video Games an Art Form?*" Ebert stated that Video Games don't explore the meaning of being human as other art forms do. A year later with a kind of half-palindomia he wrote: "A year or so ago, I rashly wrote that Video Games could not be art. (...). Of course, I was asking for it. Anything can be art". Probably this dispute has no solution, since others, for example Thomas Bets (2014) in his doctoral thesis at the University of Huddersfield, *An Investigation of the Digital Sublime in Video Game Production*, even speak of Computational Sublime: "Therefore the concept of the computational sublime is introduced – the instilling of simultaneous feelings of pleasure and fear in the viewer

of a process realized in a computing machine. A duality in that even though we cannot comprehend the process directly, we can experience it through the machine – hence we are forced to relinquish control. It is possible to realize processes of this kind in the computer due to the speed and scale of its internal mechanism, and because its operations occur at a rate and in a space vastly different to the realm of our direct perceptual experience”. Bets’s interests lie in the margins of flow and control; he also observes that it is interesting to see how Huizinga and Caillois examined states of order and disorder in game play. He writes: “Huizinga and Caillois are important to my research because they established the idea that games could be transformative events. Games can take the player out of the mundane world and into seductive virtual space (the magic circle) where the battle between order and disorder might give way to a sublime experience”. McCormack and Dorin envisage the computer as the ideal tool for exploring the new territories of the digital sublime arising from two of the four axes on which to place games according to Caillois historical groundwork: *ilinx* (vertigo) and *alea* (chance).

Furthermore, it seems still not well defined if Video Games can be placed in the wide field of narratives even though stories are important mainly in the ones of them with a pronounced narrative intention. In addition, the elements of play and multiplicity of their narrative makes it difficult to analyze them with traditional critical paradigms, because of the particularity of the elements that make them up, because of the copious presence of paratextual affordances and because the textual artifact of the game is substantially contained in the player’s experience. Maybe they are a Minor Narrative (also a Minor Poetry?) according to Deleuze and Colebrook (2001) since they do not appeal to a standard but create and transform any notion of the standard. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari would observe that any great literature is a minor literature, deeply refusing (also in its “rhizome”) any already given standard of recognition or success. It has in its DNA the bent to transform into something else and in addition contains the seeds of a collective (political?) enunciation.

Minor Poetry, we said. So, focusing on poetry, how is it? What is its current condition? Also, to these questions it isn’t easy or immediate to answer, but some indication can be returned. It could be said that it has been at the same time marginalized and is in turmoil. From the revolution of the free verse onwards, everything conspires to the multiplication of styles, techniques, procedures. The truth, perhaps, is that the inherited structure of the poetic forms was in crisis, we cannot go back. But we should remember that poetry is the only art that has changed its medium of transmission, passing from orality to writing: this is a huge thing and it is changing again. At this moment in fact we are witness of the return of orality, in the sense of secondary orality encouraged by electronic media (Ong, 1982).

So, the main idea that feeds these short pages is that Video Games certainly have social, cognitive and many other affordances, but that what justifies the increase in their use is its ability to generate flowing between order and disorder, wandering between accuracy and vague, eliciting images from images, and to live even with immersive mode all the elements that make up the heavy and light material of poetry.

Maybe the well-known Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* can offer us a good compass or, better, some strong paradigms to confirm not just their artistic but, more, their poetic status.

3 Calvino's six memos

When Italo Calvino was offered the 1985–1986 term of the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry he wrote that his confidence in the future of literature consisted in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. So, he outlined six of them, beginning with Lightness, perhaps, in his mind, the most poetic and gentle of all. The others were Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity. He died before completing his memo on Consistency. Looking back on his own forty years career Calvino observes: “My working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language. I have come to consider lightness a value rather than a defect”. This is the reason why we start from Lightness.

3.1 Lightness

Calvino's analogy, which better illustrate the gist of lightness, is Perseus avoiding direct eye contact with the head of Medusa while still wielding its power to turn his foes into stone. Let's note that in his intentions the starting point is not the analysis of the myth to classify the old heroic narratives in mythology like in Joseph Campbell's seminal work, *The power of Myth* (1988): we mean the well-known monomyth theory whose flexible structure is useful to both players and designers. This theory surely offers a solid framework to analyze narrative Video Games as has been shown by Carli Wrisinger in his *“Link”ing Monomyth and Video Games: how The Legend Of Zelda connects myth to modern media* (20014). As we will understand beyond Calvino access the myth with other aims. He who flies with winged sandals, Perseus, is the only hero able to cut off Medusa's head: he does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield. To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus is supported from the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror. Medusa's blood gives birth to a winged horse, Pegasus, and the heaviness of stone is transformed into its opposite: lightness. With one hit of a hoof on Mount Helicon, Pegasus gives rise to a source where the Muses drink. When his enemies are about to overwhelm him, he just has to show it, holding her by his sinuous strands, and this bloody booty becomes an invincible weapon in his hand. It is a weapon that only uses in cases of dire necessity, and only against those who deserve the punishment of being transformed into statues. “Here, - Calvino remarks - certainly, the myth is telling us something, something implicit in the images that can't be explained in any other way. Perseus succeeds in mastering that horrendous face by keeping it hidden, just as in the first place he vanquished it by viewing it in a mirror.

Perseus's strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden".

Lightness: the “prophet” of software.

Gambardella (2015) in *Profeti della software culture* observes that Joyce, Rilke and Calvino seem to have anticipated our "numerical humanism", in which digital media dominates and writing tends to coincide with orality. But it is precisely in this solid linguistic hybridization that all the skills of literature are preserved. Calvino himself introduces to the idea of hardware and software: “In the boundless universe of literature there are always new avenues to be explored that can change our image of the world. But if literature is not enough to assure me that I am not just chasing dreams, I look to science to nourish my visions in which all heaviness disappears. Today every branch of science seems intent on demonstrating that the world is supported by the most minute entities, such as the messages of DNA. Then we have computer science. It is true that software cannot exercise its powers of lightness except through the weight of hardware. But it is software that gives the orders, acting on the outside world and on machines that exist only as functions of software and evolve so that they can work out ever more complex programs. The second industrial revolution does not present us with such crushing images as rolling mills and molten steel, but with “bits” in a flow of information traveling along circuits in the form of electronic impulses. The iron machines still exist, but they obey the orders of weightless bits”.

So, it seems that we can deduce that Perseus's task is the task charged to artists: it is to acknowledge the weight of their content and to create the desired effect but without an obvious confrontation with the material. This could refer also to the hardware that game designers are called to challenge: they have to accept the burden of programming language, treat it gently and make it affordable, like the fine grace of the coral touches the savage horror of the Gorgon. And why not thinking to the weight of natural body and anxiety that players can leave, diverting their sight to lighter images while playing? Once again let's listen to Calvino's words: “Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I do not mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification”. Of course, Calvino's thought should not be forced: in fact, he doesn't mean that when people have problem they have to escape in virtual reality: but actually, they do it. Like other people, when they are in troubles, find solace in reading poetry, just because it may give lightness to weight. Nevertheless, the *anguiferum caput* (the snake-haired head) sometimes transforms into stone, holding back in its coils and turning in a holic the ones that look at it; but more often it happens that it turns itself into the elegant beauty of coral: and its horrible weight fades like nightmares in dreams.

Lightness in motion.

Calvino explains that a work must be light “in the highest degree,” it must be “in motion” and it must be “a vector of information”. Motion refers to the progression of the plot and to the outlook the reader takes on throughout the text, and lightness of motion relies on abstraction and allusion to the subtext containing these changes. A vector implies that motion in a single image radiates all the story. To give an example of this concept Calvino uses the character Guido Cavalcanti, from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, vaulting over a tombstone: this implies that the heaviness of the fear of death does not limit the protagonist’s enjoyment even if he is deeply aware of his own mortality. With all evidence Video Games in their ontology satisfy this criterion of being in motion regardless of the function of the game. Their space is not a merely geometric space, but a space “that lives on the movement of the user’s body” (Diodato, 2005) with or without a purpose. In an interesting post in Gamasutra (2014) Oscar Barda game designer, head of *Video Games at La Gaits lyrique*, director of the Them Games studio, and theoretician of Video Games speaks of movements in Video Games; “Justwalkingism” he says “is an art movement dedicated to start game design anew: to strip games of the clutter of mechanics that hinder the player’s relation to the world. To seek a deeper and more meaningful journey by pacing games and allowing the player to sip inside the space through forgetting goals and assertions of dominance”. It is a sort of autotelic wandering that evades the heaviness of life and its constraints. Not to mention the flight, a reaction to the weight of living in folk tales: the search for lightness as a flight to another world is a common occurrence. Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) lists a great number of examples of the hero flying through the air: on horseback or on the back of a bird, in a flying boat, on a flying carpet, on the shoulders of a giant or a spirit, in the devil’s wagon.

3.2 Accuracy and the Vague

Lightness for Calvino goes with accuracy, not with vagueness and the haphazard. In fact, Paul Valéry said: “Il faut être léger comme l’oiseau, et non comme la plume” (One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather). Calvino adds: “One might say that, in Newton’s theories, what most strikes the literary imagination is not the conditioning of everything and everyone by the inevitability of its own weight, but rather the balance of forces that enables heavenly bodies to float in space”. On the other hand, according to Leopardi in *Zibaldone* poetry aims to producing the effect of the vague. What is clear, precise and definite is not so appealing as its opposite. It is the very nature of illusion, mainly poetic illusion that should produce in us the sense of vague. Are the two instances conjugable? And how? Through the accuracy of coding and the vague? The vague instilled by both vertigo which consists of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and chance as a sort of passivity and randomness? Could we consider this conjugation a sort of digital sublime according to Bets? He notes that’s the digital sublime exhibits the same core features of its non-digital counterpart and represents a point where human comprehension cannot keep pace with the subject’s apprehension of concepts or experience. In other words, the sublime occurs when the subject is faced with ideas or phenomena that are beyond their power to process or determine, i.e. they are light and vague even if supported by the exact accurate calculus

of software and the strong weight of hardware. So, when the elements of a digital experience such as autonomy, abstraction, permutation or complexity become undeterminable by the subject the gap between apprehension and comprehension gives rise to the sensation of the digital sublime. In his thesis, in fact, both chance (in terms of permutation) and vertigo (in terms of overwhelming audiovisual stimuli) are potential triggers for the digital sublime. Although Caillois refers to physical or sensory activity as the stimulus for *ilinx* (the dance of the dervish, the rollercoaster), he extends the idea of chaotic play into the space of the digital sublime.

3.3 Visibility

Calvino defines himself as son of the “civilization of the image”: this is the reason why he proposes the strategy of visibility as the starting point to access the linguistic and literary forms, because they are the translation of imagination into the universe of sensible forms. He distinguishes “two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression”.

So Calvino thinks to imagination as a tool for knowledge, with the rational and analytical intention that is implicit in science. But for him imagination is also closer to the sphere of art products where styles and traditions are mixed and blurred in a common and shared “participation in the true of the world”. Calvino identifies another aspect, “a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed, and perhaps will never exist but might have existed”. From this we can understand how he has foreseen what has been raised by the advent of virtual and augmented reality, the current stage of imagination carried by technological tools, which has found tremendous expressive forms in contemporary visual culture dominated by the digital image. This is completely clear when he writes that imagination is “a kind of electronic machine that takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose”: it seems he is describing the processes of a software when generating digital images, a “gulf of potential multiplicity” for their true nature, because they can carry out the link between imagination and visualization.

4 Conclusion

Surveys show the current decrease in the ability of people to understand what is read and also the decrease of reading practices; this reduction increases if referred to poetry. It does not seem out of place to suppose that people have abdicated to it, but we prefer rather think that they recover poetry through other means and in new spaces: the listening to the roving rhapsods and the attendance of the written page are perhaps even replaced by the Video Games, whose use is significantly increased. They, despite their different functions and graphics, provide users with elements that humanity has always needed: experiences and images (visions) that lighten the weight of life and the matter without denying it; the vague, in the movement understood as repetition, digression and wandering; the sublime as tension and challenge to reach an exactness guessed and

never completely grasped (embraced). So, lightness, accuracy, vague, wandering, visibility can be conjugate from people choosing to play Video Games; maybe they also combine reading, maybe not. What seems sure is that they anyway experience art in the form of poetry in its most intimate power to generate images by wandering lightly between them with exact vagueness.

So when the gamer feels that the world is turning into stone, a slow petrification (more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life), he tries to escape the stare of Medusa and enters unawares the space of poetry: he embodies the space of the Video Games that generates and sustains its lightness assuming the weight of the material that composes it, physical weight, energy of bits but also memory and cognitive conceptual mental weight of ideation and composition. There hardware is the heavy face of the lightness of the flight.

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