Abstract

This chapter aims at theorising the relationship between media and practice through the lens of media consumption. We wish to examine the ways in which current media practices in popular culture give rise to a ‘playful’ relationship with audiovisual technologies leading to a more active engagement with images. This engagement rests on a model of media consumption characterised by playful production, re-production and remixing of audiovisual content which shapes the emergent cultural practice of sharing amateur video productions over the Internet. We suggest that current theories of audience reception cannot provide a satisfactory account of this new shared practice, and draws instead on practice theory, the anthropology of performance and the media and recent developments in new media theories.

Media practices and cultural production

The increasing relevance of audiovisual user-generated content on the Internet as a cultural phenomenon can be traced through a set of interconnected practices related to the acts of viewing, searching, producing, mixing, sharing and distributing short video productions – generally of low technical quality - on web sites of enormous popularity like YouTube, Revver or Blip TV. These practices allow media consumption to be understood from a transformative point of view that, according to some, breaks down the division between production and consumption of cultural products.

There are two main reasons why such sites represent a challenge to the classic broadcasting model of mass media: first, because of their audience configuration -interactive and decentralised; and second, because they allow people, through digital technologies, to engage in new and simple ways of creating their own content, as well as appropriating mass-media cultural
products in a creative way. This new environment demands a redefinition of media consumption practices in order to consider not only corporate cultural products, but also diverse and complex – and playful - examples of home production and self-distribution. These new media practices have to be understood, as it will be argued, in the context of everyday life, embedded in practices of sociality, identity construction and popular cultural performances that take place, for the most part, during leisure time.

In this chapter, we will focus our analysis on self audiovisual production and sharing, arguing that play has a crucial role in shaping these new media practices. We will try to demonstrate that playful media production and sharing has a strong relationship with the videogames experience, inasmuch as playing with audiovisual narratives is at the core of videogames engagement, but also because they are related to the cultural values of pleasurable leisure activities.

Media studies have often marginalised the domestic and amateur realm of production, focusing on the mainstream cultural industry, the political economy of mass media and the media “effects” on audiences. The critical contributions to the Frankfurt School, the reception studies of the University of Constanza (Jauss, Iser) or even the Cultural Studies approach - such as the work of Stuart Hall (1973) - give audiences the power to “contest” and have theorised audience reception as a key feature of the circuit of cultural production. Nevertheless, in all these previous approaches audiences were not thought of as producers but only as receivers. Thus, amateur or ordinary cultural productions were not considered as related to the media world but inscribed into the household private domains with no connection to media consumption and media-related signifying practices. From an anthropological perspective, authors like Bourdieu (1996) or Chalfen (1987) have seen domestic photography and home video as cultural practices bounded to memories of the self and to the production of familiar narratives. Even Don Slater (1995), while pointing out the crucial role of digital photography, video and videogames for the new economy of image production and consumption, gives no public prominence to self productions, even if he emphasises the importance of public images being introduced in the household through media broadcasting. As a matter of fact, ethnographic studies of media empirically have shown how people appropriate the audiovisual media text, giving it new meanings within their reception contexts. But, like many studies predating the “Web 2.0 revolution”, anthropological approaches had not taken into account the interrelation between self production and media outlets. We cannot think any more of current forms of audiovisual consumption from the standpoint of reception theory alone. As reception theorists sustain, “the meaning of a text is enacted through practices of reception” (Ginsburg, 2002: 6). But we should add that cultural meaning is also enacted through practices of remaking, remixing and re-production…, that is to say, through practices of production. Internet-sharing practices are dissolving the separation between the domestic and the public sphere, between amateur productions and professional media products. Audiences are also cultural producers in their own right.

Current media audience approaches have rightly questioned theories oriented towards ‘media effects’ on so-called ‘mass audiences’. However, audiences still tend to be considered as a category centred on the activity of interpretation and clearly separated from production. In contrast, one of the most important transformations favoured by “new media” technologies lies in the blurring process between the spheres of production and consumption. No more can we think of media consumers merely as “viewers”. Even if we refer to active spectatorship, the act of viewing cannot satisfactorily describe what consumers do with new media. As an example, we can cite the video remixing practices attached to any popular video clip in sites like YouTube.
(new soundtrack, new edits, subtitles, graphic effects or even new image recordings which end up being sometimes even more valued than the original clip).

This is why different scholars have tried to describe this “new media subjectivity” in hybrid terms. For example, Dan Harries defines “viewsing” as “the experiencing of media in a manner that effectively integrates the activities of both viewing and using […] ‘Viewsers’ are the new ‘connected consumers’ who find entertainment pleasure in the multitasking activities being promoted through their computer and television screens” (Harries, 2002: 172). Although this term can be useful to explain emerging forms of media consumption, it still makes direct reference to a traditionally defined concept of reception. We must take into account that, as Lana Rakow states, although research into media uses has to be considered a giant leap forward in the history of media studies, asking questions related to what people do with media as an act of ‘reading’ cannot take us “beyond a model of communication in which institutions speak while citizens listen” (Rakow, 1999: 66).

P. D. Marshall suggests that if we consider that “[r]eception, of whatever media form is a kind of work, a kind of cultural production (…) New media implies a changed spectrum of what defines production and what defines consumption (…) [T]hey are cultural forms that have expanded the capacity for the viewer/user to produce (…), appropriating and making their cultural forms their own” (Marshall, 2004: 8-11). This is what Marshall defines as the cultural-production thesis, characterized by a ‘writerly approach’ to the study of new media, that is, more focused on the engagement in practices of cultural production instead of the traditional ‘readerly approach’ (Marshall, 2004: 11). Like Harries, Marshall recognizes the difficulty of finding a single metaphor or neologism which can describe the qualities of these new subjectivities, as they are not precise enough to “identify the spectrum of involvement that is possible with new media”. While ‘browser’ may be considered as an adequate term in order to refer to distracted uses of new media, ‘player’ becomes particularly relevant as it acknowledges an intensity of experience related to a deep engagement and dedicated use of new media (Marshall, 2004: 26-27).

This new context of distribution and exhibition that the Internet represents has led many researchers to think of a new model of mass communication, discussing its democratising possibilities – and shortcomings. Obviously, the “theoretical” horizontality of Computer-Mediated Communication must be specified. The conceptualisation of a “free” public space has to be specified too, bearing in mind that visibility is organised, to a large extent, on the basis of the criteria of search engines and other devices, and that almost all the big, mass attraction sites within the Internet are in private hands. However, this is not contradictory with the affirmation that the relationships among producers, distributors, regulators and consumers are changing and that the Net opens up new ways of empowerment.

As user empowerment and production activity come to the fore in New Media studies, we want to highlight the notion of the ‘player’, and, by extension, the act of play as a key feature of new media, a feature traditionally circumscribed exclusively to childhood or sports. What we are putting forward, therefore, is that the ludic experience of videogames overlaps with other audiovisual practices like cinema or the self production of pictures and videos. So, videogames can be considered a cultural form that crossbreeds the game culture with the audiovisual culture. This hybridisation process introduces innovative changes in the way audiovisual material is produced and consumed in our contemporary societies. In other words, videogames combine the pleasures of play with the pleasures of the audiovisual experience, whether they are played on an individual or group basis, on the Internet or otherwise. Without overlooking the crucial fact that
videogames are at the centre of a set of social practices related to leisure and sociability among peers and, therefore, closely related to processes of socialisation and formation of collective identities, this paper emphasises the relevance of videogames as a paradigm of the intersection between play and new media consumption.

In this sense, and following what Nick Couldry has put forward, we understand media practices as an open set of practices relating to or oriented around media, decentring media research from the study of text or its production structures (Couldry, 2003: 4). On the one hand, extending Couldry’s arguments to our work, we consider video self-production also as a media practice that implies moving beyond the restricted context of audiovisual products consumption in order to observe how playful practices are related to media practices and how they are socially organised.

On the other hand, the anthropology of performance and of experience introduced by Victor Turner (1986) and developed and adapted by media scholars such as Roger Silverstone (1999) allows us to understand media practices as lived experiences and to incorporate the senses in the engagement with media.

In order to understand new media practices we have to understand people’s experiences and examine the whole process of these new kinds of productions and how they are related to mass consumption and popular culture. But, before turning to audiovisual self-production practices, we want first to highlight some of the key features regarding the pleasures of play and new media consumption.

**Media consumption and the pleasures of play**

As Roger Silverstone pointed out, play must be a tool for the analysis of media experience, vindicating its role as a core activity of daily life: “There are many ways in which we can see the media as being sites for play, both in their text and in the responses that those texts engender” (Silverstone, 1999: 59-60). Taking this proposal a little further, we suggest that media play can be seen as a practice related not only to computer games or quiz-show programmes, but also related to the appropriation of media outlets through practices of production. Fan activity can be seen as paradigmatic example of this kind of appropriative practices. Matt Hills has argued that play is at the core of fan activity, for instance remixing and remaking favourite commercial products: “it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play” and that this playful attitude can explain fans’ creative engagement and emotional attachment (Hills, 2002:112). However, fans activity alone does not explain the array of practices surrounding production and sharing in the new media landscape where the means of media production have become accessible to media consumers, and user-created content changes the nature of media production. Kücklich and Fellow (2004) turn to videogames as an exponent of greater changes not only as regards how media are produced and consumed but also in the way leisure is organised and in the role of play in our everyday lives. For them and other authors, videogames are the key cultural form to understand new media practices in so far as digital game design theory attempts to overcome the distinction between producer, text and audience.

Videogames place “play” at the core of the audiovisual experience and introduce innovative changes in the way audiovisual products are consumed and experienced. The “voyeuristic” pleasure of watching a film or a television programme is qualitatively different from the
“pleasure of immersion” that derives from the articulation of the audiovisual experience with the embodiment and the feeling of agency and control by the subject.

Videogames can be seen as an intersection of two different logics: narrative representation, characteristic of the audiovisual culture, and the pleasures of play, characteristic of the game culture. Playing videogames can be understood as a sensorial experience that involves media and non-media practices; that is, game experience is embedded within a media practice, transforming previous forms of audiovisual pleasures.

In videogames, our relationship with audiovisual representations has to be understood not just as processes of identification with the characters or as aesthetic pleasure through our exposure to images, but also in terms of action, embodiment and control. The identification in the game is produced, according to Aarseth, by the integration of the player’s representation into the world of the game and of its influence capacity (Aarseth, 1998: 6). The interaction of the player with the narrative elements of the game mobilises a series of coordinated answers, be they auditory, visual, cognitive or kinetic that erase the distance between the player and its characterisation, so that we can say that we “experience” jumping, running, flying or shooting while clicking our mouse or pressing the buttons of our console. Following Bukatman (1993: 196), videogames currently represent the most complete symbiosis that a human being and a machine (computer) can achieve; a fusion of goals, options and prospects that are attained through the embodiment of the game experience, and for which, according to Lathi, we experience a complex relationship between our bodily experience and our subjectivity (Lathi, 2001: 158). According to Andrew Darley (2000), videogames involve ‘kinaesthetic performance’, which is the primary source of pleasure which they provide.

Other authors emphasize the “cybernetic” quality of games; in other words, the relationship between player and the program design, as well as with the apparently inevitable submission to the rules of the game. Following Newman (2004: 21), we must also take into account the pleasure of the player while exploring the limits of the rules, trying, at the same time, to learn and overcome them. He points out that this relationship with game programmers through the very act of play can be not only pleasurable but, also, even the main challenge for the player. On the other hand, Fiske notes the pleasures which may emanate from the fruitful opposition between freedom and control. Thus, the source of the pleasure of games would lie at the interplay between game rules and the margin of movement they allow their players, a pleasure which constitutes the quality of openness, essential to videogames and new media alike. For Fiske, “[g]ames and texts construct ordered worlds within which the players/readers can experience the pleasures of both freedom and control: in particular, for our purposes, playing the text involves the freedom of making and controlling meanings” (Fiske, 1987: 228). As far as Fiske is concerned, play oscillates between freedom and control in a continuum similar to Caillous’ concepts of paidia (involving fun, improvisation and fantasy) and ludus (involving constraints, arbitrary rules and effort). The pleasure of breaking the rules lies in exposing their arbitrariness, so “[t]he pleasures of play derive directly from the players’ ability to exert control over rules, roles and representations” (Fiske, 1989: 236).

The cybernetic dimension of games is of particular importance to remind us of the tight structure of games and new media systems. In videogames, Manovich suggests that the “user is asked to follow the mental trajectory of a new media designer” (Manovich, 2001: 74). But it is equally important to bear in mind that, being rules central to the system, there is room for negotiation of
these rules and inscribed logic, as it is made clear by gamer-made alterations, modifications or customisations. Challenging the interpretation patterns and the limits of the game rules can also be a source of gratification for players.

As a matter of fact, an important aspect that videogames share with other “new media” cultural forms is their informational structure, which opens some transformation possibilities, unthinkable in other cultural packaged products. So, we can not understand videogames exclusively as a consumption product – they must also be viewed as a means of production. Furthermore, as an informational product, videogames are, at the same time, a product, a tool and a toy. Hence, and picking up Manovich’s observations (2001: 258), we can not limit our analysis of videogames as finished objects - we have to take into account the programming tools, their technical architecture and the parameters that are set by default, as well as the possibilities that they open up of transformation and customisation. We will sustain that this transformative element of play is one of the clues for understanding new media practices.

**Transformative media practices**

There is no doubt that games, as a cultural form, are increasingly affecting other media, from television to movies to cell phones and the Internet (Boellstorff, 2006: 33). As Mihai Coman has stated as regards mass media (2006: 19), games are not a simple channel through which cultural symbols circulate; they are part of the very cultural system. Certainly, as we have seen, videogames can be also understood in terms of an intersection between leisure culture, computer-mediated interaction, visual culture and Information Societies (Simon, 2006). We also can easily find different ways in which film industry ‘remediate’ games, such as digital animation, special visual effects and non-linear narrative structures (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 47-48). But what is more interesting here is that there are more and more new media ordinary practices imbued by this playful component, as can be seen in blogging practices, in fan fiction creation and the whole process of the so-called ‘clip culture’ – as well as, of course, in game modding practices. We will now examine how this playful component can be found in new media practices related to audiovisual content from a transformative standpoint, beginning with videogames and going on to Internet practices related to video production and sharing.

The production of *machinima* is a helpful example in order to analyse the cross-linking between videogames and audiovisual narratives, between ludic practices and the production of cultural meanings, while it offers a new form of understanding the relationship between producer and consumer in the new media ecology.

Machinima are short animation clips generated from a computer using the virtual 3D environment of a video game, which are produced by manipulating its game engine. The term machinima is commonly defined as the sum of ‘Machine’ (referring to the engine of the video game) plus ‘cinema’ (referring to its linear narrative structure). According to Jones, an important instrumental element for the early development of machinima was the capacity of game-session recording (for instance, one of the first known machinima movies was ‘Quake done Quick’, made to showcase the player’s abilities). In this way, a short machinima becomes an audiovisual narrative narrated from the space of the game (Jones, 2006: 271). In this sense, machinima represent the convergence between ludic practices and audiovisual narratives.
For Jones, creating computer-generated animation based on the use of game engines and of virtual 3D environments can be considered a transforming practice, as it goes beyond the intended use of the game software, self producing an audiovisual experience. Unlike “playing” within the game system – where, in spite of the control upon characters, the range of options is limited to the rules and narratives pre-established by the game design - the “transforming” game entails the alteration of the game by the players, so that they introduce new scenarios, they change the characters, etc.

The idea that games can contain transformative practices is already found in the work by Richard Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (1971). It is found as well in the game treatise by John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938), which gives prime importance to the game as a culture’s creator, yet separates it out from daily life. Huizinga refers to the “magical circle” as a metaphor in order to explain the creation of a temporary and spatial sphere typical of the game and where its rules have validity. Yet, later authors like Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen highlighted the pleasure of crossing these borders that allow, among other things, players to meta-operate upon the game and transform its rules (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 19). As Victor Turner suggested, game is a “cultural performance” that opens a social space of liminality where actors can “play” with factual and commonsense systems in unexpected ways in the mundane sphere (Turner, 1986: 25). For Turner, playfulness is “volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vias of games of competition, chance and strength, in modes of simulation such as theatre…”. Play could be termed dangerous because it may subvert social order, logical rules, and rational thought. Play is “transcendent” in the sense that it can meta-operate over the game rules and can overpass the confinements of the game (Turner, 1986: 168).

Even if recent videogames such as *The Movies* include machinima as one of their key features, this doesn’t eradicate its transformative power. Such transgression of the rules found in transformative practices as mentioned above can be traced also – one way or another - in all the three case studies which follow.

*The French Democracy*

*The French Democracy* is a 13-minute machinima movie created with *The Movies* game by French designer Alex Chan, in November 2005. The clip narrates a version of the facts that led to the riots of the *banlieues* in different French cities the same year. Based on the modification of available scenarios of the game, the narration shows the socioeconomic situation of the immigrant community, and tries to explain how the death of two youngsters, after a round-up by the French police, led to a fierce response in their neighbourhood, which finally led to demonstrations and outbursts of violence in the suburbs of different French cities. Its critical political stance rapidly attracted user’s attention that paved the way for its coverage in the printed and online press. Different articles in The Washington Post, MTV.com or Business Week described how the intention of the young designer was to offer his explanation of the facts in opposition to the official version, which he believed was made up by the media. However, as it is indicated in a blog review about this movie: “*The French Democracy* can be a milestone in the history of machinima, but from the moment in which Activision has the rights of the film contents (the characters, the scenarios, etc) it can legally intervene in any moment and force to
taking out this production from the Internet “; thus, posing the question of copyright and the power relation between the media industry and user appropriation.

The performance practices involved in this case show important differences in comparison with early machinima: the user performs the “player”, but also the designer, the film producer and the social activist. For Jones (2006: 272) machinima video clips literally represent a transformation of the means, from an interactive game into a film, a product to be looked at and shared. Although the final product does not take the form of an interactive game, the process of a machinima creation has to be considered as a ludic practice. Until now, the consumption of cinema or television allowed for a certain playful attitude through the interpretation process of the text, like Fiske suggested. Now, what we find in videogames is a modification of the same consumption product and a use that can go beyond its original design. The player has a direct intervention, creating a new “product” for circulation, and this is what lets us identify a really new audience practice, not any more limited to text interpretation, but also – and mainly - on its appropriation and modification. These practices are not exclusive to videogames: we can find them in other forms of “new media” consumption, and somehow, they are related to other audiovisual media practices. The remakes and re-productions of video clips that can be found on the Internet, based on films, advertisements, television programmes, etc. are a good example.

Another question is up to what point these transformative practices can be considered as practices of popular cultural “resistance” in the face of the discourses of the big cultural industries and media corporations. Jones (2006: 267-268) suggests that the appropriation of the original mainstream products must not always be understood as a “resistive”, contra the position of Jenkins - following De Certeau - who associates transformative practices with an act of resistance (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins’ argument is based on the consideration that the producers’ power is questioned since they lose the control over the means of production and distribution, and - up to a certain point - since they lose the control over the very product which is altered and modified. As a matter of fact, De Certeau limits this capacity to a “tactical” reading of the texts proposed by the industry, with which he is recognising the hegemony of the industrial production upon the user’s creation. We consider that these playful practices of appropriation of the means or of the products in order to make “something else”, represent, to a certain extent an act of cultural “response”, since they imply that people appropriate the tools and the products in order to re-elaborate contents that are important and significant for them; and from this perspective, they are practices of cultural production that challenge the industry rules. However, as later Jenkins states, this empowerment is connected to a complex tension between corporate and grass-roots interests, as exemplified by the battle for copyright (Jenkins, 2004) or by what Maxwell & Miller (2005) define as ‘cultural labour’, that is, when the industry takes advantage of the consumer empowerment for its own marketing purposes.

Transformative play, together with other media practices related to digital communication and information technologies, are altering the “circuit of culture” established within the mass communication system, where the roles of cultural production and consumption were clearly delimited and where the distribution circuits of professional production were clearly differentiated from domestic and amateur production. In order to understand this new scenario, Jenkins proposes understanding it in terms of cultural media convergence and the emergence of a participative culture. This author moves away from a notion of convergence as just technological
change, but as a tension between two opposed but interrelated trends, the confluence of two cultural production logics from the combination of different technologies: “[c]onvergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process... Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users. They are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture” (Jenkins, 2004: 37). For Marshall, one of the reactions of cultural industries to this new context is what he labels as the ‘intertextual matrix’: a strategy by which the industry offers intricate cross-media environments, formed by different media forms (cinema, television, DVD, Internet, videogames), in order to maintain the audience, the viewer or the player in a limited system of entertainment options. In this intertextual matrix, institutionalised ‘play’ has a key role (Marshall, 2002: 69). The sophistication of these cross-media connections is best exemplified when they give rise to multi-channel storytelling. Here we find that each element in the matrix is part of a narrative which can be consumed in different ways. In most of the cases, each element is self-contained in order to allow for an autonomous experience, such as in The Matrix franchise (‘transmedia storytelling’). Christy Dena labels as ‘transfiction’ another approach where a single story is conceived to be experienced through different media. That is the case of The Beast game, which originated as a marketing device for the film Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, 2001), and which required “gamers to traverse websites, work out puzzles, hack code, receive faxes and SMS, find clues in posters, make phone calls and so on.” (Dena 2004: 2).

From these perspectives, we can understand the current cultural production scene as the crossover of two logics that collapse in the Internet. The transmediatic logic of cultural industries in front of, and mixed with, the transmediatic practices of the people. The first entails the entrepreneurial concentration and the diversification of intertextual products, as well as different strategies to incorporate the users’ production into the corporative universe. It is evident, for example, in the Star Wars Fan Movie Awards, where candidates are asked to comply with determinate requirements that do not compromise the franchise (for instance, until 2007, dramatic films have been systematically excluded). In the case of videogames, we can find modding contests organised by the industry to attract modding production back to the industry’s umbrella, like the one organised in 2003 by Epic Games (Sotamaa, 2004: 15). The second logic supposes the appropriation, modification and re-production of these products by users, who openly distribute their content on the Internet, thus creating social and sharing networks. In any case, it seems that this “new” power is linked to consumer productive capacity (consequent to new technologies literacy) and to new means of distribution and relation among peers offered by the Internet. And even if it were easy to overestimate the global engagement of media users in these kinds of practices, it seems clear that there is a growing community of consumers who devote part of their cultural “consumption” time to appropriate, produce, exchange and share audiovisual products with others. Thus, as we have mentioned earlier, cultural consumption can not be understood only in terms of reception – it must also be understood in terms of production and in terms of the pleasure derived from the involvement in these shared practices.

The Bus Uncle
A key example of this interplay of media practices related to a self-made video can be The Bus Uncle case: in the spring of 2006, a passenger of a Hong-Kong bus recorded with a mobile phone video camera a simple - and fairly surrealistic - argument between two other passengers. Shortly,
the video became one of the most requested in YouTube and became an authentic phenomenon in Hong Kong: some of the sentences became popular taglines among local teenagers, while a multitude of audiovisual replies were generated and uploaded to YouTube. They were re-production of the original video with new sound, music, subtitles, digital manipulation of the images and, in short, a multitude of parodies and re-creations. At present there are still more than 300 entries for “The Bus Uncle” on YouTube, some very recent and some other very interesting ones like a film reproducing the event with Javanese shadows (Wayang Kulit), and even an interview with the author to the delight of fans.

But traditional media did not keep to one side: from radio debates and TV news reports reflecting on the phenomenon and making conclusions about the pace of life in the metropolis, to offers for the unsuspected protagonists–turned celebrities to appear on reality TV shows, The Bus Uncle ended up being the central axis of the advertising campaign for the coverage of the 2006 Football World Cup. This case, one among many other local well-known cases, displays the role of ludic culture through new media, which affects both amateur and professional production.

However, what is notable about The Bus Uncle example is that it is an exponent of a “successful” self produced video. As in other cases, their “fame effect” is produced by “jumping” from the sphere of the Internet to the mass media sphere. In some way, the media industry appropriates these videos for its own audiences. There are two key issues which must be taken into account regarding the ‘fame effect’ of this and other similar self produced videos: on the one hand, they allow YouTube to legitimate itself as “media”; able to produce a ‘mass phenomenon’; on the other hand, they allow the ‘old media’ (especially the press and television) to construct the new media audience in ‘old media’ terms (for instance, through the weekly publication of rankings of the ‘most viewed’ videos in YouTube, as just another TV station).

Acrobats
This reflection on the ‘fame effect’ leads to another and last example of self production, taken from our current study on self video production in relation to playful practices (San Cornelio et altrì, 2007). Acrobats is a self-video production uploaded to YouTube also in 2006 that presents a group of friends jumping and doing somersaults in a train on the Madrid subway. This low quality recording, probably made with a mobile phone camera, seems at first sight a spontaneous, chance action.

The clip constitutes a whole sequence without cuts and with original sound, so there is no montage at all. It seems that the main interest is to capture the action as it is taking place, the pirouettes and movements as they are being performed in front of the astonished passengers. The characters in this video interact between the public space and the camera operator and both the acrobats and the camera appeal to a potential audience by saying: “if you want to see us in action… YouTube.com” (in Spanish it becomes a rhyming slogan: “si nos quieres ver en acción... YouTube.com”). They also reinforce the idea of a performance with sentences like: “this is a happening” The person recording the action appears to be also a member of this group of friends, and in a way, provokes the continuity of the action that is being produced by often shouting: “do it again!” or “come on!”. The transgressive element is also highlighted by the camera operator, whispering to an imagined audience “look at the face of that man there!” obviously referring to an astounded passenger.
When interviewed for our study, the author—an architecture student—explained that the presence of the camera recording is essential to their performance and that, in fact, the camera is an additional element of fun”. In spite of the apparent spontaneity of the recording, there is no action without the camera: we are in front of a mediated experience of “playing”, which only makes whole sense when it is recorded and displayed for a YouTube audience. In this case, the playful component is present not only in the very nature of the performance, but in the pleasure they expect from uploading their works on the Internet. As we found out through the interview, part of their “game” is to upload the video. Their fake hooliganism is not only rooted in the act of transgressing proper behaviour on the subway, but in trying to annoy users that would find the video by chance on the Internet. In fact, they try to reach as much users as possible using “wrong” tags such as “sex” or “hot” to provoke YouTube’s audience with their “unexpected” and “unbearable” videos. For them, the criticism or negative responses on the video site are considered as a success, as they manage that infuriating viewers is a sort of ‘online game’. Even if it is far from a ‘success story’, Acrobats is actually a very complex performance that involves the audience in completing its narrative circle, expanding the playful experience to audience reception.

Through these examples, we have seen how playing with media allows audiences to ‘play at being producers’, strengthening the pleasures of transgression and the celebration of self-empowerment (be it to overcome ‘official media’ for political purposes or, in the last two examples, to experience public spaces as spaces for performance and appropriation). However, we must take into account that all these practices take place in a media environment ruled by economic (in 2.0 fashion) factors. It would be then a mistake to take YouTube as a Utopian place for free expression, as it would to consider it under ‘mass-media’ rules or as a monument to inanity, narcissism or nonsense (as it is suggested by Andrew Keen, 2007). We are examining audiences’ practices and how they include sites like YouTube in their performances. Even though the sites are in private hands, they configure a new public sphere where the circle of cultural production can be consumed by the users.

Play as a disperse cultural practice

Play experience is embedded in current new media practices, especially those involved in videogames and in audiovisual production and sharing on the Internet. Game pleasures define most of the transformative practices such as modding and machinima, but also practices of remixing media outlets and of self producing video clips. Through these productive practices, audiences are “playing” at assuming the role of producers, shaping their own imagined audiences. Meanwhile, professional producers are also trying to appropriate this ‘playful aesthetic’, as it is the case in some advertising campaigns, which look like amateur in order to surprise their target audiences. This back-and-forth process between popular and corporate media production reshapes the professional and the domestic contents and formats of playfulness in a spiral of cultural production that somehow increases the complexity of the circle of culture proposed by Hall and Du Gay (1997). The creation of new content by users, widely spread through the Internet, challenges the one-way-oriented relationship between consumers and producers that has so far characterised mass media cultural diffusion. Then, “new media” can be seen as a new model of cultural production that, in a number of ways, breaks free of the linear
process of production, circulation and consumption of cultural products. Even more, playful practices with media tools have broken down the boundaries of the household and opened the circulation of private images through public broadcast systems. This is why some authors such as Van Dijk (2006) refer to the media practices related to YouTube as ‘homecasting’ (even though a perfectly suitable alternative term could be ‘self-casting’).

This relationship between play and popular productive media practices drives us again to the nesting between the game culture and audiovisual consumption. To explain this permeability, Schatzki’s notion of practices can be useful. This notion refers to an organized set of bodily and mental activities that form an inextricable conglomerate constituted by the understandings about what has to be made and what has to be said, the rules or instructions that regulate them and the teleo-affective structures that orientate them, among which is an emotional component of satisfaction and desire (Schatzki, 1996: 89). For this author, the practices can be of two types: disperse or integrative.

Disperse practices, as their name indicates, are practices found dispersed across different sectors of social life and that characterise themselves by their being a nexus of said or done things mainly linked by the understanding of the practice that they express (Schatzki, 1996: 91). Some examples of disperse practices would be ‘to explain’, ‘to describe’, ‘to ask’, ‘to examine’, ‘to greet’, ‘to obey’, ‘to suppose’ or ‘to play’. Schatzki insists on the fact that speaking about dispersion does not mean isolation: thus, a disperse practice can help constitute another (for example ‘to ask’ in relation to ‘to reply’). Integrative practices are practices that constitute particular domains of social life. Some examples are agricultural, culinary and leisure practices, banking, or also legal, religious, educational, academic... or media practices—we can add. Schatzki warns about failing to understand integrative practices as a simple assembly of disperse practices, since often these are seen transformed when they come to be part of an integrative practice. Thus, the disperse practices of asking and replying are seen as being transformed in a very clear way when they become part, for example, of legal practices. It should also be taken into account that the three elements that organise an integrative practice do not necessarily have to intervene in the same proportion when governing certain behaviour in a practice (Schatzki, 1996: 98-103).

Applying this model of practice organisation to our proposal, it could be said that the game practice is a disperse practice (play) that comes to be part of an integrative practice that is the videogame (game), which in turn, is part of a set of media practices. In this sense, it is not unrealistic to think that the play practice, present in videogames, can be also be present in other media practices, as we have tried to demonstrate here. It must be said that ludification of practices related to the production and consumption of images is not really a novelty. What we consider really new is the way in which videogame practices are contributing to the characterisation of a new model of subject position in relation to the use of the audiovisual media and of information and communication technologies. These playful practices with media are transforming the social definition of the relationship between “producer” and “audience” and the ordinary practices around media consumption.

Actually, we can trace important interconnections between the history of media and the history of play through the twentieth century, even if its relationship has been largely unacknowledged. We cannot ignore, as Marshall points out, that play has gone through a process of patterning and commodification: “The mass production of toys (…), was closely aligned to the origins of sophisticated marketing and promotional strategies to give meaning to these new toys (…) In a
broader sense, toys were connected to other products and other cultural commodities to provide a wider range of interactions and forms of play” (Marshall, 2002: 72). Throughout this chapter we have also observed how informational technologies, as consumer goods turned into ‘playable tools’, show the interrelation between patterns of production and patterns of consumption. Silverstone and Hirsch remember us that “the significance of information and communication technologies in our societies requires us to see them as social and symbolic as well as material objects, and as crucially embedded in the structures and dynamics of contemporary consumer culture.” (1992:2).

What we are arguing, then, is that the interrelation of different media practices has to be considered as embedded in the ordinary consumption practices in our technological mediated societies. As we have shown, we can not study videogame practices in isolation but as a part of current cultural production and consumption practices that not only challenge the hegemony of narrative forms such as television and film, but also introduce the notion of game in broader media practices contributing to the definition of a new model of media ecology that we have identified by “new media”.

As it has been emphasised throughout this chapter, play practices are crucial for understanding the new media engagement. The study of the interrelation between media and play is an open line of research in order to understand how cultural production is reconfigured and the role of ordinary people productions in this new media model. An approach from a practice theory perspective has been useful to understand new media not as a “new” technology but as a set of interconnected practices that transform the way we produce and consume audiovisual representations, among other cultural products. In this sense, videogames and audiovisual pleasures are a starting point to find out how new media practices not only transforms the productive structures and political economy of media systems but how correlate with socially significant, bodily and emotionally lived experiences as play pleasures are.

Works Consulted


