

Bad Wolf, Good Wolf

If there is such a thing as metaphysics, it exists in the endless universes of computing.

"The wolves in this work are trying to rebuild a cybernetic virtual network within the space of the game, to help maintain life on the planet. The central theme of the piece is the recreation of an internet by these animals in a post-apocalyptic future."

[...]

"The game is divided into levels of ascending difficulty, with each level presenting a different spatial network configuration composed of nodes and connections, which have to be connected to the planetary network. The wolves have to go to the nodes to activate them and connect them to the rest of the network. As they connect the nodes, the immersive visual and audible environment reflects the current state of the connections in the game. The creation of an interconnected network between us is central to the idea of this work. From a non-human form of animality, the piece explores the construction of networks between spiritual forms, like emotional networks, while simultaneously creating a game based on the real functioning of the internet and the way computer nodes in the network interconnect and transmit data packets to communicate and respond to each other. The piece functions as a dynamic and interactive portrait of a network that has shaken the space and altered the way life works on the planet."

– André Sier on Wolfanddotcom

Writing about an allegory whose principle of existence resides in a generative computational order, with no fixed space or definite time, which has been designed, programmed and written step by step by its author, and whose cognitive and sensory condition is, by definition, unstable and

dependent on the activity of one or more 'patients', known as 'bachelors' in Duchampian terminology and as 'agents' in Game Theory (Neumann, 1928; Neuman and Morgenstern, 1944), is not the same as writing about a finished object, whether it is a material thing or a work of art.

Unlike ruins, graves and other sacred places, unlike artesian crafts, decorative arts, Renaissance paintings and sculptures, unlike Malevich's 'suprematist' paintings, Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, and the semiotics appropriated by so-called 'conceptual art'—in short, unlike creativity materialised in physically defined forms, a specific aptitude is required to enjoy André Sier's 'indeterminate' or 'generative' prototypes (Gell, 1998). His works demand a little less than perfectly mastering the literature and technique of the video games or skateboarding, and a little more than an intention to avoid the simple sensation of being close to an 'index' (Gell, 1998)—in other words, a little more than resorting to the same kind of interpretative observation and attention needed for works of art whose meanings are definitive and immutable, that do not change according to the 'performance' of their readers or observers, who in reality they can only interpret and respond, rather than change the course of the narratives or alter the aesthetic forms they perceive. At their limits, decorative forms and pre-digital artistic objects can show signs of aging. Generative computational works, therefore, are different; they are unsusceptible to dust or decay.

It is true that each time we look at the black oils in Anthony Van Dyck's paintings—in the extraordinary portrait A Genoese Noblewoman and Her Son, for example, which today belongs to the National Gallery of Art in Washington—and every time we read Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy, translated from Russian by António Pescada (published by Relógio D'Água), these works seem to

acquire a new life. That is why we look again at paintings, reread books and listen to certain musical pieces countless times. In reality, we are the ones that change every time we repeat an act of love with a given work of art. The art itself has remained the same ever since its creator finished it. What changes is our subjective relationship with the intrinsic and historically determined subjectivity of any work of art by any artist. The fine beauty and symbolic depth of the relational aesthetic representations do not exist without the community life of successive generations touched by the inherent value of the arts and collective memory, however fragile it may be. Their particular form is not dependent on the time that has passed since their creation, but still conceptually and/or physically completed works of art change the space and time in which they exist, as long as they correspond to civilized ages, where the memory of the dead is respected. But whatever these finite works are, they are never determined by their age, nor by the duration of the gaze or sensory attention of those who admire or use them. They do not even change shape or content based on the number and status of their admirers. They can be abused, over-analysed and poorly observed, but they do not change, unless they are changed, censured, mistranslated or destroyed.

So what distinguishes computational generative art from pre-electronic and pre-digital arts?

From a broad perspective, a new, binary, immaterial, metaphysical world appears to have emerged from the technique, inhabited by lines of code, computer processes and data convertible into information and representations, but at the same time inhabited by humans, meaning art also has a right to citizenship.

This world is certainly an artificial world, but it is much more than a mere collection of tools and networks like the numerous substitutes for chipped stones, seashell necklaces and the first aqueducts. The new world into which the old world is expanding is a binary galaxy that serves not only as a digital replication of the information,

representations and knowledge that we have been producing since we stood up on two feet and began thinking in a more complex and productive way, but also produces a kind of symbiosis between natural and synthetic biology, between natural (divine) nature and the artificial nature created by the friction between the natural thinking of living beings and the artificial thinking of nano-machines, augmented reality networks and post-human hybrids.

Without properly recognising the characteristics of this pattern emerging from humanity, without assuming that this cyber-teleology is going to accompany us until the next extinction event in a future that we cannot predict, it will be difficult to observe the specific differences between this nascent cognitive art and the rhythmic, graphic, imagistic, plastic, literary and conceptual technologies that served as the primary manifestation of subjectivity (art) until the middle of the last century.

Between Kantian metaphysical indeterminism and Hegel's statism, between what is universally pleasing without concept and the conceptual implosion of art by means of a historical and dialectical conceptual determination, so-called contemporary art has been languishing in continuous uncertainty and endless revivalism.

The symbolic rituals of increasingly large, dense, culturally degenerative urban societies submerged in a culture of conspicuous consumption with no symbolic density have been dominated by egotistical alienation, narcissistic eroticism and democratic passivity, which has opened the door to populism.

There is a new social and cultural normality based on the psychological repression of creative freedom. The growing enslavement of urban societies, though steeped in images of prosperity and pleasure, has resulted in a loss of emotional balance and successive ruptures of collective solidarity. Under these circumstances, both individual and religious radicalisation increase simultaneously. The hells of Dante and Bosch have

returned to the arts (especially in illustration) as a protest against this cultural implosion.

It is nonetheless symptomatic that even in this new world generated by computational cognitive art (1), such as Wolfanddotcom, the scenario presented by this non-predatory game-art involves the prospective extinction of humanity and a corresponding appeal to the creative energies of survival, even when these may be confused with a kind of restoration of the proscribed animality symbolised here by the central role of the wolves and their packs.

All games, including video games, stimulate a primordial but not unique area of our survival instinct. Like other mammals, humans learn to pick things up after they have been weaned, in order to eat. Thus, from the instructions of parents and the animal group to which they belong, as well as from the taste (phylogenetic memory), they learn what they should or should not ingest. But since not everything is free and easily accessible, the search for water, food and success requires knowledge and strategy, both of which arise from individual and collective learning about friends and enemies, what offers more or less resistance, what is available to sow, or on a larger scale, about the difference between hunting and gathering; capturing and being captured; life and death; dominance, submission and cooperation; reflexes and instincts; actions and reactions (politics); and speculation (theory).

All living beings who play and perform do so as an outlet for their aggression and the struggle for individual, social, or genetic survival, or as an erotic prelude to sexual interaction and reproduction. The difference between a game of table-tennis or a boxing match and the grunt of a mating deer is that the former are derived from the sexual and power strategies associated with the procreation and defense of a given genealogy, whereas the fantastic choreographies among deer have a more direct purpose. In the first two cases, the animals are performing a simulation, in the second, they are fulfilling a natural desire.

Wolfanddotcom references, or rather, pays tribute to the book *Wolf Totem* (2004) by Chinese writer Jing Yin (1946), who considers himself a left-wing thinker who defends both democracy and individualism. Jing Yin, a pseudonym of Jiang Rong, is an intellectual concerned with the possibility of China returning to a form of despotic bureaucracy with zero tolerance for creative freedom. In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, he even went so far as to say that if China did not adopt a proper democracy, it risked becoming "like Nazi Germany".

This reference helps to highlight the originality, intensity and enormous success achieved by the book—which has also been adapted for cinema and manga comics—since being translated into several languages. The writer, who was one of the Red Guards supported by Mao Zedong (1893-1976) during the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), lived in Inner Mongolia for eleven years, a location far enough from Beijing and Shanghai that he could maintain his library and read without the censorship and distrust of the revolutionary guards, which so delighted the student youth and European (mostly French) intellectuals. It was during this long period of seclusion (1967-1978) that the idea of writing *Wolf Totem* developed. The Inner Mongolia he got to know led him to meditate on how the world's biggest ever empire was destined to fail under the rotten peace of peasant conformity and bureaucracy.

In the past, monuments (totems) were erected in homage to one of the most famous symbols of this immense region: the Mongolian wolf. Although these totems may represent no more than a legend, the truth is that the Siberian wolf, as it is also known, is seen in the region as the spiritual ancestor of Genghis Khan and all Mongols. Its power and aggression, as well as its strategic intelligence, and above all its independence compared to the domestic dog, make it an excellent symbol of 'molecular' animality, as opposed to the ever-denigrated 'molar' animality (2). This generative animality is a metaphor for the 'restarting' of a tired cybernetic system, full of waste and disease.

The success of Wolf Totem probably stems from the growing global perception that the world is indolent, bureaucratic, apprehensive, opportunistic and domesticated, undergoing a phase of rapid aging and extinction. The survival of this old world, or rather its metamorphosis seems to depend only on a return to the vital animality (molecular, or philosophical) that the Siberian wolf has always represented to the Mongol empire.

The mythological, lacerating violence of the lycanthropes and its association with the notion of renewal must be considered, due to our ceaselessly growing anxiety and psychological and social tension. But we must also consider the astuteness of the pack; the idea that to build a new, post-cataclysmic world, we will need the time to think about it with imagination and the development of a strategy—a network strategy, says Sier: Wolfanddotcom.

The collapse of the utopia seems to be part of a mass extinction process. It is against this black backdrop that Wolfanddotcom borrows the libertarian metaphor of the Mongolian wolf, using its logic to engender a simulation of universes and worlds where the strategic game of metaphysical wolves can give rise to a new ecological network, capable of reviving the processes that will allow them to protect the future of the threatened species, which are all species!

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NOTES

1. In pre-generative computational-based arts, the technique (τέχνη)—dots, lines, symmetries, contours, fillings, voids, colours, sounds, silence—shapes the idea and aesthetic expression. In pre-generative art, there is always a final product that the audience incorporates directly into their rituals and their sensorial and ideological expectations, while in generative art, the artist proceeds to create a world with rules, where art emerges in direct proportion to the cognitive ability and sensorial acuity of those who willingly enter its labyrinth of possibilities and revelations.

The artist's own skills are needed to construct these worlds, without which it would be practically impossible to imagine and build the generative fabric of the game-art. It should be remembered that the artist does not paint every landscape, nor every one of its inhabitants, only the rules that regulate the emergence of the phenomena, landscapes, and creatures that inhabit and move within them. For example, the mountains in Wolfanddotcom where the wolves walk and weave their strategic network are generated from sequences of bytes and processes on the Linux operating system, where Wolfanddotcom resides in a kind of potential world. In other words, these shapes, backgrounds and objects are created using the code from the most powerful, open and difficult to configure/control operating system in existence—the system that underlies the internet itself. The representation is intrinsic to the code, not a reflection of light bouncing off the code or a refraction of light shining through the digital sequences of zeros and ones.

The innate computational nature of the alternative world known as Wolfanddotcom, a new constellation of selves and others, ends up determining a specific materiality of the images and sounds that reach us as we immerse ourselves deep within this electronic universe.

2. Jing Yin. *Becoming-Animal: Becoming-Wolf in Wolf Totem*