

IVIPRO: Narrating Italy through Videogames

Descrizione

Abstract

Videogames can become the way to discover the world that surrounds us: this is the premise of the Italian Videogame Program project. IVIPRO is a national and cross-regional project, working closely with all local institutions. On one hand, we are mapping Italy from a videogame-oriented perspective, to identify locations and stories that are more suitable for virtual worlds; on the other hand, we entertain a continuous dialogue with software houses, local institutions and museums, in order to understand their needs and help them in discovering how to promote the Italian heritage inside videogames.

The core of the project is the recently launched Places & Tales database, available in Early Access. A tool – based on four different categories: Locations, Themes, Characters and Objects – which can give developers inspiration for the narration of their video games, offering in-depth analysis of Italian places and stories.

The article will focus on: an overview on the Italian videogame industry and cultural context; IVIPRO and its goals; an in-depth analysis of the database, plus some concrete examples of games set in Italy and of fascinating locations and stories.

Introduction

To understand the work of the Italian Videogame Program, we first need to refer to two tendencies that have become well-established in the Italian business and cultural contexts. On one hand, the growth and maturation process of both the users and the videogame industry; on the other, the increasing affirmation of an awareness already experienced in the movie business: the idea that heritage can be valued with clear benefits for tourism and territorial marketing through audiovisuals. These two tendencies reveal a certain complementarity: the encounter between a burgeoning videogaming establishment and a territory increasingly aware of its marketing potential can give rise to a new and fruitful form of storytelling and indirect promotion of heritage. From this point of view, in Italy there's no shortage of possibilities.

According to the data disclosed in May 2017 from AESVI, the trade association representing Italian videogame editors and developers, the industry in Italy is in good health both on the revenue and public consumer fronts. Among the many elements analyzed **[1]** the increase in revenue (+8,2% in 2016 compared to 2015) deserves particular attention, as well as the data related to consumers. Not only is there substantial parity among male and female players, but the absolute number of players appears to be significant: in fact, one out of two Italians play videogames.

So the Italians are a population of videogame consumers, but what about production? The census promoted by AESVI in 2016 describes an industry still very modest compared to other nations, but noticeably increasing. It's a sector with a strong international orientation from a distribution point of view. "The videogame production in Italy - as you can read on the AESVI website - still maintains a low annual revenue (the Association's estimate is about 40 million euros versus 20 million in the previous census), but in general it's possible to detect a large upheaval in the sector, with a growing number of companies operating within the territory, getting younger and younger, both in terms of the age of entrepreneurs (with a medium age of 33 years) and of the companies themselves (62% being less than 3 years old, against 45% of the previous census)." **[2]**

Let's jump to the other side now, from the videogame industry to the cultural and territorial heritage. The Film Commissions are administrative bodies financed by regional or local authorities, whose role is to attract film and audiovisual productions to a given territory by ensuring logistic and bureaucratic assistance and facilitating workforce activities. This is a free service that has evident positive impact on the involved areas: producers invest themselves, work is given to local professionals, and the location, as background for the project, is valued. To describe this last aspect, which is to say the ability of a movie or an audiovisual project to encourage actual exploration of the places represented on screen, a new specific term was coined, one used more and more often: this term is movie tourism. It's the audiovisual manifestation of a colourful universe: naturalistic tourism, ethnographic tourism, seaside tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism, food and wine tourism, just to name a few. **[3]**

Let's talk, for example, about one of the biggest cinematic successes of 2016, the movie *Quo Vado?* from the comedian Checco Zalone. It seems that in the same year, Italian tourists in Norway - where the film is partly set - increased 39% **[4]** Also consider the Montalbano effect in Sicily: in the village of Punta Secca, on the coast

near Ragusa, business has increased 300% due to the explosion of the TV show. **[5]** And how many of you are aware of the Castle of Highclere, in the Hampshire? A name not very well known, maybe, but what if we reveal that it was the family residence of Lord Grantham in the celebrated Downton Abbey? The success of this English series was so vast that tourist visits have more than quintupled since the show was broadcast. **[6]**

From Movie Tourism to Videogame Tourism

In the book Videogame-induced tourism, Fabrizio Berardone recognizes in videogames a “good example of how you can induce a user more or less dedicated and more or less young [...] to leave the monitor for a moment and start to actually experience those places, the scene of many challenges, raids and adventures”. **[7]**

In this respect, it's undeniable that the celebrity of the Tuscan village of Monteriggioni exploded at the end of 2009 with the release of Assassin's Creed II and the start of the saga of Ezio Auditore. From the 1st of January to the 30th of June 2010, as noted by Andrea Capone in his thesis Videogame Tourism: Travelling with Assassin's Creed II between Monteriggioni and San Gimignano **[8]**, we witnessed an increase of 7,24% in arrivals and 16,28% in overnight stays, compared to the same period in 2009 and with the same number of available beds. During 2010, an increase of 30% was also registered among visitors to the Armor Museum and the walkways on the walls. This is a positive trend although, truth be told, it actually started in 2005.

Although it's not possible to fully quantify the numerical impact the game had on tourist flow to the village, the investigations promoted by the city hall of Monteriggioni offer a very interesting insight. “In August 2016” – declared Raffaella Senesi, the Mayor of Monteriggioni **[9]** – “the administration promoted an investigation asking 500 tourists to fill out a questionnaire. Among the questions was one regarding the knowledge or not of Assassin's Creed II and we detected that 16% of people answered they knew about Monteriggioni thanks to the videogame. Many years after the publication of the game, the name of Monteriggioni is still associated with Assassin's Creed II.”

From movie tourism to videogame tourism is only a short step: videogames can become the door through which we can rediscover the world around us. Based on this premise, and in light of improved productivity and the cultural context just analysed, the Italian Videogame Program was born, a project supported under the framework protocol signed between AESVI and the Italian Film Commissions. **[10]**

What Is IVIPRO?

Italy owns a historical, architectural and urban heritage like no other. A heritage that can be promoted through the creation of videogames set in Italy or focused on Italian culture. It's this awareness that guides the work of the Italian Videogame Program. The program was conceived within a national context that in recent years has started to embrace the enormous potential of videogames.

The recent extension of the tax credit to the gaming industry **[11]** and the cultural recognition from minister Dario Franceschini and MiBACT (the proof is the inclusion of videogames in the portal Italy for Movies **[12]**) are important signals of a new declared awareness: videogames, in the same way as other media, represent an industry to support and sustain.

IVIPRO's goal is to facilitate the production of titles set in Italy on one side, and on the other to enrich the mapping of our national territory from a videogame perspective by identifying the most suitable locations for videogames and cataloguing places, monuments, stories and characters. This is a job that will benefit both the institutions and companies interested in exploiting the huge historical and cultural heritage of our territory. IVIPRO has a double linking function: on the one hand it enriches the database, on the other hand it entertains a continuous dialogue with software houses, in order to understand their needs, to know their projects, to guide them and to provide specific contents. Besides research work, IVIPRO is committed to introducing developers to the administrative bodies working in the territory: Film Commissions, Regions, Municipalities, Museums and other cultural places.

Playable Italy

If the places depicted in cinema appear generally more rooted in the collective imagination, it's important to discern how Italy has already been the backdrop for popular gaming experiences to prove the peninsula's charm on national and international authors. Assassin's Creed II and Brotherhood represent the most famous cases: besides exploring Monteriggioni, the player moves into important cities like Florence, Venice, San Gimignano, Forlì and finally Rome. However, it'd be too simplistic to stop at Ubisoft's blockbuster.

The work of IVIPRO was built from the need to identify what has been done previously. The results of research have been channelled into a specific area, called Italy in Games, which offers an overview of videogames - foreign and Italian - already on the

market that are fully or partly based in Italy. Profiles contain a brief description of each game and focus on the location presented in it. From this research some interesting details have emerged. First of all, that the number of games already produced and connected to the territory and Italian culture total over 150. **[13]**

This is a number still in progress, because the section is being constantly updated. In some cases, for ease of consumption it was decided to merge the examination of multiple works belonging to the same series into one single profile (see the cases of Age of Empires and Forza Motorsport, to name just two important brands). Finally, it was determined that any titles whose referrals to Italy were marginal or pretentious would be ruled out entirely. Nevertheless, we are talking about a significant corpus of videogaming works already on the market and bound to the Italian territory.

The Falzarego Pass, in the Dolomites, appears in Battlefield 1. In Uncharted 4, developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony in May 2016, Nathan Drake lands on the Amalfi Coast although no specific city is mentioned and the Gulf of Salerno stays in the background. To craft the city of Noatun in Bayonetta 2, the developers paid visits first to Bruges, in Belgium, and then to Florence, Venice and Santa Margherita Ligure. The Gears of War 4 developers journeyed to Italy to learn from certain locations, too: the Fenestrelle Fort in Turin, the Dolomites, and the city fortress of Palmanova in the province of Udine. In such cases, Italy assumes a dual capacity: main character and iconic source of inspiration.

Another aspect that clearly emerges from the analysis of titles included in the Italy in Games section is a certain stereotyping in the choice of locations: the majority of videogames made in Italy are concentrated around Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome and the Amalfi Coast. This data deserves further consideration: for example, it'd be interesting to compare the different types of treatment of our country between foreign and Italian developers.

What emerges, in any case, is the importance of transmitting a deeper and more diverse knowledge of Italy. Meaning, to propose narrative routes that will dig deep into the multifaceted wealth of our peninsula. That's what the work of IVIPRO operates for: next to the Italy in Games section is the heart of the research project, the Places & Tales database**[14]** : a tool that strives to gather locations and stories scattered throughout the territory so that videogame developers can discover them.

Places & Tales: Videogame-Friendly Narratives

The database qualifies as an ever-improving collection of Italian locations and stories that can become ideas for future videogames. The aim is to provide a useful tool both to developers and institutions.

Developers have the opportunity to browse the catalogue looking for sources of inspiration, anecdotes and stories related to the historical and cultural heritage of the peninsula, carefully selected with a videogaming eye. At the same time, thanks to the database, institutions can come to understand the audiovisual potential of the heritage they protect, and imagine new possibilities for dissemination through videogames. In line with the wider purposes of the IVIPRO project, Places & Tales strives to create a bridge between institutions scattered around the Italian territory and the makers of videogames.

It's not just a simple catalogue, but a real narrative library powered by four primary strands: Locations, Objects, Characters and Themes. Each profile is linked to thematic tags belonging to these four categories.

The user can make simple searches or cross tags to discover, for example, all the Italian castles whose stories are interwoven with the lives of great writers, or all the villages mentioned in tales of monsters and legendary creatures, or finding museums in which fascinating objects or archeological relics are kept.

You can even narrow the research by region. Within a profile, beyond the introduction and background history, there is ample room for targeted narrative focus and videogame suggestions.

Although Places & Tales represents a broad narrative basin that's useful even for authors outside the videogaming world, the approach to its contents takes into account the specificity of the medium.

The gaming suggestions, in particular, try to highlight possible uses of the narrative material within future videogames. These helpful recommendations, however, are never intended to replace a developer's own vision, merely motivate and complement it.

Specific genres or mechanisms are rarely mentioned; the aim is to let details emerge, to drive the developer's attention to specific elements that might provide a first creative inspiration.

The database aims to promote research and narrative routes in order to further explore Italy's potential for videogaming, starting with characters, stories and objects populating our territories.

The testimony of citizens – those stories often passed down orally – will be, for example, added to the database in the future, as a demonstration that the narrative wealth of the country is also found in the people living here.

Playing with the Places & Tales database could mean, for instance, discovering that the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia usually attended the Grand Hotel et des Palmes of Palermo, a hotel scene of many dark crimes.

To the mystery of Raymond Rousell's death, Sciascia dedicated one of his writings. And again Sciascia, along with the writer Luigi Natoli, were connected to the Church of Annunziata, of which today only the bell tower remains.

Staying in the capital of Sicily, it's no surprise that the incredible Capuchin Catacombs have attracted and charmed many intellectuals, poets and writers from all over the world: Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas, Thomas Mann, Mario Praz, Fanny Lewald, Carlo Levi.

And speaking of poets, a few profiles later you can find Recanati, the birth city of Giacomo Leopardi: in the gallery supporting the page are photos taken by IVIPRO that, presented as animated frames, direct the user to the terrace where L'infinito was given birth.

Travelling in other directions, and tapping into the wide range of monsters and mythical creatures populating our territory (and many videogames), you could come across the legend of the werewolf of Pontremoli, in Tuscany.

Another exploration of the legends takes us to the region of Marche and the fairy handmaidens of the Sibilla – esoteric deviations which, curiously enough, end up in science: Giovanni Schiaparelli, whose name is associated with the Merz-Repsold Telescope, an astronomical instrument now kept in the Science Museum of Milan, attended a committee, chaired among others by the famous Cesare Lambroso, to verify the truth about the talents of Eusapia Palladino, spiritualist and medium very much active at the end of the XVIII century and the beginning of XIX century. Regarding Schiaparelli, his observations of Mars contributed to the birth of the Martian myth. **[15]**

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- [11] www.aesvi.it/cms/view.php?dir_pk=902&cms_pk=2700
- [12] www.italyformovies.it ; the videogame section of the portal is curated by IVIPRO
- [13] <http://ivipro.it/it/italia-in-gioco/>
- [14] storie.ivipro.it
- [15] For all the references: storie.ivipro.it. The English version of the database will be available soon.

Campi meta