PIERRE-YVES DESAIVE

GO PLAY YOUR VIDEO GAME[1]

Introduced in 2011, Twitch is a platform specialising in video game live streaming. It is therefore not intended for online gaming, but instead for watching others play video games. Millenials are not baffled by this approach, as they see it as a natural expansion of the live broadcast of major sporting events. As with football or basketball, online games have their own federations. Discussions are currently underway to include eSports in the Paris 2024 Olympics (while the Larousse French dictionary restricts its definition of sport to a physical activity aimed at improving one's physical condition, Wikipedia includes electronic games as well).

Each year in Seattle, The International tournament brings together the best players of *Dota 2*, 'a multiplayer online battle arena'. They compete to win the first prize whose worth continually increases: in 2011, the Ukrainian team pocketed $1 million for winning first place. Barely seven years later, this amount was multiplied by 11, the second and third places having to make do with a consolation price of $4 and $2.6 million respectively. Like many other high performance sports, eSports generate money, and in turn require substantial financial means. In November 2018, France's leading eSports team, Team Vitality, announced that Indian billionaire Tej Kohli had invested 20 million to create a 'training centre' as well as a range of new marketing, merchandising, and video streaming tools.

But one figure illustrates the full scale of this phenomenon: 970 million. It represents the price, in US dollars, that Amazon paid to buy Twitch in 2014.[2] Every day, more than 15 million internet users visit the website, which at the time of purchase generated 1.8% of the internet traffic in the United States, ranking fourth behind Netflix, Google, and Apple. Although mainly free, the platform is able to rely on significant advertising revenue as well as on the players themselves as they switch from *freemium* to *premium*. Amongst other features, the upgrade allows users to comment during ongoing games, and interact with other viewers and gamers. The success of the platform thus relies on the latter. Their names are Ninja, Gotoga or Myth. They're in their twenties, and earn a tremendous amount of money. For example, 27-year-old Tyler 'Ninja' Belvins – with 11 million followers on Twitch, and another 18 million on YouTube – recently declared a monthly income of over $500 000 generated by his online activities as well as other more traditional revenue streams, such as paid partnerships with major brands. These superstars, in both the real and virtual worlds, are surrounded by teams who manage their careers, and triumphant public appearances.

Wim Delvoye couldn't help being drawn to this example of the almighty capitalist model *reductio ad absurdum* (Amazon being a perfect example): the stock-exchange-listing project for *Cloaca*, or the issuance of shares for the Delvoye Art public limited company, and the *Art Farm China* project are evidence of his interest in the many possibilities offered by the market economy, even when considered from an artistic perspective. The fact that a retailing giant like Amazon gambles on the added value generated by post-adolescents playing video games is not any stranger than speculating on

the performances of a machine reproducing the digestion process of the human body. Both push the boundaries of the capitalistic system (a little bit further) without actually questioning it.

However, the fact that video games dominated the news led Wim Delvoye to take a closer look. Their monetisation, the gamers being turned into stars, and the colossal investments from private investors are telltale signs that a real social phenomenon is currently at play. The appeal of novelty is a constant feature of Wim Delvoye's work. Research for the development of *Cloaca* was conducted at the same time (pre-2000) as the notions of 'bio-art' or 'biotech art' began to emerge, i.e. works located at the crossroads of art, science, and more specifically biology. Eduardo Kac, eToy, or Art Orienté Objet are but a few of the artists and artistic collectives that are known for their experimentations in this area. Curiously, Wim Delvoye does not appear on the list, even though *Cloaca* meets all the criteria to be awarded (hands down) the bio-art label. Obviously, his oeuvre goes well beyond the label, but we can't help but regret that its humoristic, sociological or scatological (or all three) dimension masked its major contribution to an artistic movement that was still in its infancy. Another example of this love for novelty is the use of metal laser-cutting, with which Wim Delvoye built his impressive corpus of Gothic-inspired sculptures and architectural works. He is amongst the first to bring into the art world a technology that was largely confined to industry at the beginning of the new millennium.

It is not so much the desire to be the first to seize a concept (social, technological, or otherwise) that motivated Wim Delvoye, but rather the will to be the first to artistically challenge what he sees as a deep-rooted trend: the interaction between art and science, the increased presence of cutting-edge technologies in artistic creation, the rise of a new economy based on online gaming. Both out

of playful curiosity and real interest, the artist studies, online, the popularity of the subjects he is exploring (or is considering exploring in his work), thanks to Google Trends. Launched by Google Labs in 2006, this programme is a powerful analytical tool that allows users to follow the progression of search queries for any given keyword or topic on a local (country) or international scale. The data used by Wim Delvoye goes back as far as 2004, which is also when he studied the possibilities of metal laser-cutting (*Dump Truck* dates back to 2006). By an odd coincidence, Google searches for 'laser cut metal' reached a peak in 2004-2005 (all countries combined) before drastically dropping in 2008 (and then going up again). Similarly, in 2005-2006, just as the artist was investing in a new *Art Farm* in China intended for his tattooed pigs, Google searches for 'contemporary art China' reached two remarkable peaks. Since then, it has dropped (and Wim Delvoye has left China) to almost zero (volume of data insufficient to be analysed) in 2017. In recent years, artists' interest in the world of video games often translated into the exploration and appropriation of virtual worlds, as the works of Fred Forest or Cao Frei for *Second Life* demonstrate. Wim Delvoye himself gave it a try, giving his website the appearance of a city inspired by the famous *SimCity*. However, his new series of marble bas-reliefs, a material he rarely used until now, reveals quite a different approach. These pieces can only partially be considered as appropriation art: the artist uses visual elements that he did not create but, as a gamer, he is undeniably the 'designer' of the unique scene of which he takes a screenshot. Frenchman Thibault Brunet also used his video game play (more specifically war games) to create photographs made of images saved while strolling around virtual worlds with the intention of getting viewers to question their own relationship with reality. His highly realistic images of the faces of resting soldiers seem to have been shot on a real-life battlefield. Conversely, in Wim Delvoye's work, the goal is to clearly identify and distinguish which games are being used, in this case *Counter-Strike* or *Fortnite*.

Launched in 1999, *Counter-Strike* is the archetype of the multiplayer shooter video games. Although it was one of the world's most popular games in 2010, it has since been dethroned by the great *Fortnite*, which sits at the top of Twitch bestseller list thanks to its star player, the above-mentioned famous 'Ninja'. On the lookout for novelty, Wim Delvoye immediately perceived the revolutionary character of *Fortnite* in the world of video games, due to the success of its economic model (a game originally free that now generates hundreds of millions of dollars in profit), as well as for its aesthetic features (a shooter game that grants as much importance to construction as it does to destruction), and for its sociological dimension (rise to international stardom for the best gamers).

As is often the case with Wim Delvoye, the relationship to time is at the heart of this new series. The style of the bas-reliefs are in line with that of *Gothic Works*: in both cases, he uses a cutting-edge technology to produce pieces evoking artistic forms of the past (Gothic or neo-Gothic on the one hand, Classical Antiquity on the other). These pieces also challenge the notion of manual dexterity with which they might be associated. Just like steel lace, the marble bas-reliefs are produced completely mechanically: the screenshot of the video game is transmitted to the machine, which mills it into the raw material (the intervention of the artist is required to enhance some of the image's details). In the bas-reliefs, we also find the contrast between highly sophisticated production means, and the prosaic nature of the subjects being depicted: construction machines for the Gothic Works series (with the notorious exception of the large *Chapel*, and its derivatives), video games for the bas-reliefs. Another recent series, Noodle Pots, falls into the same category. *JML Instant Noodle with stewed egg chicken flavour* (2018) is a sculpture that depicts exactly what the title suggest: a pot of Asian chicken-flavoured instant noodles. The object in question was modelled and produced using a mechanical process that considerably increased its

proportions. The material used, onyx, contrasts with the intrinsic value of the original model whilst conferring onto the sculpture the appearance of a Chinese antique.

By putting *Counter-Strike* and *Fortnite* on such a pedestal – both literally and metaphorically – Wim Delvoye represents in his own way an artistic movement where the boundaries between high and low culture are becoming blurred. For example, the New York MoMA's collections[3] have featured video games since 2012, a decision not without detractors.[4] But the bas-reliefs also demonstrate Wim Delvoye's particular focus on exoticism, a theme featured in his work since the late 1980s. At the time, the artist created installations using 'Dutch'[5]-style display cabinets made in workshops in Java. The sculpted patterns on these copies of European furniture sometimes looked more like lotus flowers than roses. Later on, remembering how Le Corbusier was confronted with the problem of workmen who had no inkling of how to work with concrete as he was drawing up the plans for the construction of the city of Chandigarh, Delvoye offered Indonesian artisans the opportunity to make a concrete mixer using their own methods (*Concrete Mixer*, 1991). The work (of which there will be various versions) was a carefully sculpted and richly decorated wood object with no utilitarian purpose, and was presented in 1996 at an exhibition bearing the emblematic title: *The World over – Under Capricorn: Art in the Age of Globalisation*. It was jointly organised by Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, and Wellington's City Gallery.[6]

As was the case with many video games created in the 2000s during the American military operations initiated under George W. Bush's government, *Counter-Strike* stages combats between terrorists and anti-terrorist units, favouring middle-eastern style in the creation of the interior and exterior environments. In these games, the developers generally created an archetypical view of architecture and ornamentation, a form of wartime neo-Orientalism

at the service of the entertainment industry.[7] Yet, this distinctive aesthetic feature echoes Wim Delvoye's current interest in this region of the globe. After China, the artist set his sights on Iran, where he is currently working on restoring a group of 13th-century buildings in Kashan, in the province of Isfahan. Interactions with local artisans led to the creation of the patterns adorning the series of luxurious *Rimowa* aluminium suitcases *Rimowa Classic Flight Multiwheel 971.70.00.4* (2013), as well as the body of an authentic 1961 Maserati 450S made out of the same material. This 'new flying carpet', as the artist describes it,[8] merges Europe and the Middle East, as well as Southeast Asia. This syncretism is not merely cultural: Wim Delvoye had this piece reproduced in Jakarta, thus furthering his reflection on cultural globalisation and its economic impact. In their own way, the *Counter-Strike* bas-reliefs serve as reminders that globalisation could eventually take the form of a military invasion motivated by a doctrine such as the Bush administration's 'War on Terror', and that Iran could also pay the price.

By drawing parallels between recent conflicts and Classical Antiquity, between two-dimensional video game images and bas-reliefs, or even between a computer-operated machine and marble craftsmanship, the series seems to agree with Michel Onfray, who views Wim Delvoye's work as oxymoronic.[9] By choosing to use both *Counter-Strike* and Fortnite simultaneously in his bas-reliefs, the artist leaves his work open to multiple interpretations: people unfamiliar with gamer culture will notice the contrast between a contemporary subject (a video game mimicking a recent war) and the anachronistic medium used to depict this war, without necessarily differentiating between the two games. However, from the perspective of a Fortnite player, the marble bas-reliefs, inspired by *Counter-Strike* and evoking archaeological remains, include elements that also belong to history (albeit recent), more specifically the history of video games: form and substance thus matched Counter-

Strike perfectly, an image of the past rendered into marble. Finally, by their very nature, these pieces are destined to withstand the test of time, and the gamers of the foreseeable future will see all these screenshots in marble, regardless of the game being depicted, as we see ancient artefacts today: images of a lost world.

With his new works, Wim Delvoye asserts himself as an artist resolutely anchored in contemporary life and capable of diverting the most cutting-edge technology to artistic ends whilst fully embracing his love for all things past. His latest *Twisted Works*, made from the 3D digitalisation of 19th-century sculptures kept at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, are characterised by the same approach: the complex process of producing and handling electronic files will ultimately lead to the fabrication of a bronze piece in the purest tradition of foundrymen from a bygone era. In these works just as in *Noodle Pots*, one physical item remains: Jef Lambeaux's *Le Dénicheur d'aigles* and Raoul Larche's *La Danse* – or a bowl of instant noodles. In the bas-reliefs, the item becomes purely virtual: the use of a robust material such as marble, which is commonly connected to ancient history, takes nothing away from the truly digital dimension of the oeuvres insofar as their existence rests on the screenshot of a unique image produced by a software.

In October 2018, Christie's New York caused a small cataclysm in the art world when it organised the sale of a 'painting' (a print on canvas) entirely made by an artificial intelligence program, the Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN). Titled *Edmond de Bellamy, from La Famille de Bellamy*, the piece was devised by the French artistic collective Obvious (Gauthier Vernier, Pierre Fautrel, and Hugo Caselles-Dupré). While this marked a world first, the outcome of the sale was quite surprising: 380,000, or more than forty times its estimated value. The event triggered many reactions and criticisms that, paradoxically, mostly came from the very restrained circle of artists working with

artificial intelligence. For many, there was nothing new about the Obvious collective's use of GAN, and the work did not warrant such attention.[10] Beyond the controversy, this reveals a surprising aspect of the project: although the image database contains more than 15,000 portraits painted over a long period of time, including the 20th century, the algorithm systematically produced works evoking earlier art. It was as though the algorithm, like Wim Delvoye, played a game of hijacking a future-orientated technology to produce forms of past.

Pierre-Yves Desaive is curator for contemporary arts at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.
He also teaches at the École nationale supérieure des Arts visuels de Bruxelles (Ensav/La Cambre).

1   Quote from the song 'Video Games' by Lana Del Rey (*Born to Die,* 2012).

2   Kim Eugene, 'Amazon Buys Twitch For $970 Million In Cash', *Business Insider,* 24/08/2014. https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/amazon-buys-twitch-2014-8

3   Tiia Naskali, Jaakko Suominen, Petri Saarikoski, *The Introduction of Computer and Video Games in Museums – Experiences and Possibilities.* Arthur Tatnall; Tilly Blyth; Roger Johnson. International Conference on History of Computing (HC), London, June 2013. Springer, IFIP Advances in Information and Communication Technology, AICT-416, p. 226-245, 2013, Making the History of Computing Relevant. <10.1007/978-3-642-41650-7_21>. <hal-01455255>.

4   'Exhibiting Pac-Man and Tetris alongside Picasso and Van Gogh will mean game over for any real understanding of art'. Jonathan Jones, 'Sorry MoMA, video games are not art', *The Guardian Online,* 30/11/2012. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjones blog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art

5   See, in particular *Cabinet. Installation of 29 Delft sawblades and 2 Delft gas canisters,* Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, inv. 11375.

6   At the same time, Wim Delvoye completed the monumental life-size wooden *Cement Truck* in the same conditions. The piece was displayed at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

7   Vincent Sarrazin, 'Jeu vidéo et conflits au Moyen-Orient : quand les méchants changent de camp', *Inaglobal.fr,* 18/04/2016. (Video games and conflicts in the Middle East: when the bad guys change side) https://www.inaglobal.fr/jeu-video/article/jeu-video-et-conflits-au-moyen-orient-quand-les-mechants-changent-de-camp-8937

8   Gareth Harris, 'Interview : Wim Delvoye digests the Tinguely Museum', *The Art Newspaper Online,* 14/06/2017. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/interview-wim-delvoye-digests-the-tinguely-museum

9   Michel Onfray, 'Vitraux in vitro et in vivo', in *Eldorado* (exhibition catalogue), Luxembourg, Mudam, 2006; reproduced in *Wim Delvoye* (exhibition catalogue), Luxembourg, Mudam, 2016, p. 19.

10 Gabe Cohn, 'Up for Bid, AI Art Signed 'Algorithm'', *The New York Times Online,* 22/10/2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/arts/design/christies-art-artificial-intelligence-obvious.html