Mass Effect and *Citizen Kane*
On the Birth of a Medium and How Cultural Studies May Consolidate it

CRISTIAN PRALEA

Abstract: *This paper draws a parallel between the contemporary cultural significance of video games (generically named so) and the birth of film as medium of artistic expression. It works with a specific question formulated by Ian Bogost, and debated by film and video game critics alike: can we identify a definitive, and unanimously considered so, medium defining masterpiece? Can we find a* Citizen Kane *of video games? The paper tries to clarify and nuance this question by focusing on the cultural situation surrounding* Citizen Kane *and a popular video game trilogy named* Mass Effect. *The context in which these two products appeared is similar and, thus, provides for a positive answer to Bogost's question.* Mass Effect *may be that long awaited* Citizen Kane *of video games. Moreover, from this very debate, we may draw a side set of conclusions about the scarcity of methods and means to use in analyzing this new artistic medium. The paper ends by proposing a Cultural Studies approach to the study of video games as the most fitting type of discourse – that would not only interpret but also consolidate this very young medium.*

Keywords: *Cultural Studies, video game studies, film studies, Orson Welles*

The Supreme Court of the United States decided in 1915 (*Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*) that film is just an entertainment business and not an art form. Thus, films cannot enjoy the privileges granted by the First Amendment of the American Constitution. This particular decision was overruled in 1952 due to another Supreme Court case: *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, a case built around the censorship of Rosellini's *L'Amore*. However, beyond the legal treatment of this medium of artistic expression, we should also take a look at the cultural situation surrounding and influencing this 1952 decision. On the one hand, after the Second World War, we are dealing with the emergence of a series of European film directors treating this medium explicitly as one of artistic expression and not just moving pictures entertainment (Rosellini being one of them). On the other hand, the American cinema itself saw the making of a masterpiece, signifying exactly this emergence of film as a medium of artistic expression: Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941).

Now, roughly a century after *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, we seem to be facing a similar situation of a different medium, named more or less

correctly 'video games.' Video games and their audience have matured considerably in the past years, but the issue of this medium's artistic qualities did not come to the forefront of a public debate until 2005-2006, when famous American film critic, Roger Ebert, advanced the argument that video games can never be art, just because of their primary feature: interactivity. Confronted by an online riot, Ebert revised his argument 'conceding' that video games cannot be art at least during our lifetimes. Of course, this is not much of a conceding, however, there was another idea, and perhaps a more interesting one, that emerged from this debate: video games do not have (and, therefore, they are still waiting for) their own *Citizen Kane*, a masterpiece synthesizing the medium's specific means and relating to its audience in a manner of artistic reception.

Obviously, between 2006 and 2012 (and even before 2006), we may be able to identify quite a few candidates to a *Citizen Kane* status, however none of them seems to gather enough of a critical praise and, therefore, always fall short of it. This can also be a sign, of course, that perhaps the idea of a *Citizen Kane* of video games may be wrong from the start. Perhaps indeed, these two media are so different that such a comparison cannot stand. Despite all this, the release of a video game called *Mass Effect 3*, in March 2012, managed to generate a huge debate on this topic, a debate that went far beyond the video game industry. This debate became basically a collective *ad-hoc* attempt to define the artistic nature of video games, (relatively) slowly but surely surpassing the question whether video games can ever be or not art. It was a conflict carried on various video game review sites, but also on the established media channels (CNN, BBC, *Forbes*), and eventually on academic venues as well: a battle between authors, consumers, and professional reviewers.

Is *Mass Effect 3* (or, can it be) the long awaited *Citizen Kane* of video games? Let us then, explore the similarities between these two cultural products, but also cultural situations. However, beyond offering a definitive 'yes' or 'no' answer, I will try to draw attention towards two very important aspects. First of all, not *Mass Effect 3* in itself, but the huge debate generated by it, signifies a passage to adulthood of a young medium of expression. Secondly, it is quite clear that we lack the means and proper discipline yet to interpret the works of this new medium; however, we may find that taking a cultural studies approach, turning our questioning towards cultural situations, might prove useful exactly towards developing said means.

Let us take a brief look at *Citizen Kane*. First, we need to highlight a small (rhetorically speaking) detail: *Citizen Kane* has nothing to do directly with the 1952 Supreme Court decision. Between 1941, the year of its release, and 1956, the year when it started to be screened on television, *Citizen Kane* was not exactly a popular movie, something that has to do quite a bit with William Randolph Hearst's desperate attempts to hamper its distribution (he interpreted the movie as a personal insult). Therefore, despite the general positive reviews and two Oscar nominations, Hearst's opposition eventually condemned the movie. However, after the Second World War, French critics like François Truffaut, or Jean-Luc Godard, rediscovered *Citizen Kane* placing it on its proper place in the history of film. This coupled with the 1952 Supreme Court decision

and its acquisition for television screening in 1956, brought *Citizen Kane* back for both critics and general public.

Slowly, but surely, in the course of fifteen years, *Citizen Kane* became the masterpiece everyone was searching everywhere without knowing that they already have it. The fact that it is an American film that suffered because of the lack of a decision like *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* can only augment its importance. British Film Institute journal *Sight and Sound* operates a study every ten years, starting in 1952, trying to reflect the public and film industry's views on the best movies of all times. *Citizen Kane* occupies only the thirteenth place in 1952; however, from 1962 onwards we keep finding it on the first place.

Beyond the legal and cultural situation surrounding *Citizen Kane* though, and also beyond the (quite arrogant) claim of 'best movie of all times,' Orson Welles' masterpiece has a series of features that makes it indeed a turning point in the history of cinema. *Citizen Kane* presents a synthesis of specific means: it is a synthesis that shows the ability of this medium of expression to develop a narrative and to invite its audience to meditate on social, personal, or philosophical topics, under its direct influence. Orson Welles uses a series of subjective narrators in order to tell us a scintillating story. Thus, *Citizen Kane* takes the form of a remembrance built from a collection of biased points of view. This means that the film is telling us this story beyond its actors' play and script. On the one hand, Welles' use of light and shadow can be considered a narrator on its own, smoothly influencing the audience. On the other hand, we have the now famous technique called 'deep focus:' all elements on screen are equally in focus, which means that the spectator's eyes are either free to focus themselves, or influenced by the staging of a particular scene. In fact, what Welles does here is just to build moods – with the help of light and sound, and through his scene staging – around a mystery to be explored (in this case: *rosebud*), to then let his audience come up with definitive answers.

Citizen Kane is really an anti- *Birth of a Nation*. If we can say that *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is for silent movies what *Citizen Kane* is for talkies, *Birth of a Nation* is also pure racist propaganda. We might even say that, given the riots caused by its distribution, or given the Ku Klux Klan's use of this film to revitalize itself, *Birth of a Nation* is also a testament of this medium's manipulative power. In fact, the company distributing *Birth of a Nation* was the very same company we find involved in the 1915 Supreme Court case ruling that film is not art: Mutual Film Corporation (with *Birth of a Nation* being one of the films banned in Ohio at that time). *Citizen Kane*, through its approached topic (the life of a media mogul – maker of news) and through the way it approaches it, may be interpreted as a direct attempt to provide an answer to the situation created by *Birth of a Nation*. *Citizen Kane* is a commentary on two different levels over this manipulative power: on the one hand we have Kane's power and the way he uses it, and on the other hand we have Welles' specific way of building a narrative, one that invites its audience to an interpretive decision – the only way to surpass, or build a certain immunity to this medium's subtle manipulation power.

We have now a similar situation with that of film: a different medium is confronted with a lack of and fight for legitimacy, one that we currently name, in an improper way

I might add, 'video games.' Curiously or not, the debate on the possible artistic qualities of video games originated within a different medium altogether: Roger Ebert's challenge. The first American film critic to win a Pulitzer prize, Roger Ebert launched himself, almost regularly since 2005 on his *Chicago Sun-Times* blog, in various debates and controversies regarding the artistic nature of video games. His stated and re-stated argument revolves around video games' perhaps most defining feature: interactivity. It is exactly this interactivity that causes the product (or the work, if you prefer) to stop belonging to its author/s and start belonging to its audience. Therefore, the question he asks is: can a work without authors (essentially) still be considered art? If we can choose how *Romeo and Juliet* ends, would it still be the same art work we are all supposed to enjoy? Would it still have the same strength? Of course, says Ebert,[1] video games are capable of generating immersion, but can we become, through experiencing this immersion, more intuitive, more intelligent, and more empathic? The difference between a video game and a movie (both being visual media) seems to be similar to that between circus shows and ballet. Both may be fun, but only one of them can provide a satisfactory intellectual experience (obviously, in Ebert's view, that would be ballet).

All this debate generated and admirably maintained by Ebert slowly led to the idea of a lack of a *Citizen Kane* of video games: a masterpiece that would synthesize the specific means of this medium, and that would demonstrate the uniqueness of its artistic expression. Guillermo del Toro, for instance, in an interview for *Wired*,[2] evoked Henry Jenkins' convergence culture theory talking about emergent 'narrative engines' that would melt television, film, and video games into a single medium that would change the rules of fiction. Of course, even if he mentions this fabled *Citizen Kane* of video games, del Toro has in mind more of an online experience, rather than an isolated one (let us say 'single-player'). Before del Toro though, Ian Bogost (originally a philosopher, now professor at Georgia Institute for Technology and one of the few academic voices attempting a critique of video games) directly proposed us to wait for the savior *Citizen Kane* of video games.[3]

It is not enough, however, just to attempt to identify a product, a work created in this medium, to which we may attach an explicative critique highlighting its artistic qualities. *Citizen Kane* is a good movie indeed, but its fame, or at least the general perception built between 1962 and 2002 that considers it the best movie of all times, is also caused by the cultural context in which it was made, and then rediscovered, between 1941 and 1956. This means that the video game medium is not so much in need of an actual *Citizen Kane* (and, after all, why turn towards film, why not a *Moby Dick* of video games?) as it is in need of a similar cultural situation.

On March 13, 2012, Bioware, a video game studio with a long history in narrative experiments specific to this medium, launched *Mass Effect 3,* the end of a trilogy started in 2007. *Mass Effect* belongs to the science-fiction genre, being an explicit synthesis of some of the most influential ideas or themes of this genre (be they expressed in literature, television, or film). This video game draws heavily from works like Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, or from Isaac Asimov's artificial intelligence stories, and also from films like *Star Wars, Aliens,* or *Bladerunner*, and television shows like *Star Trek, Farscape*,

Babylon 5, or *Battlestar Galactica*. The explicit intention of the *Mass Effect* authors was to create a universal science-fiction, a fictional universe able to relate to the largest possible audience within this particular genre and beyond. This was because the narrative experiment began in 2007 needed this particular common ground in order to succeed. It was not the fictional universe that was supposed to take the spotlight, but the video game specific narrative technique itself. The first *Mass Effect* was not a clear success as far as its critical reception was concerned, being faulted for excess of exposition and some rather clunky game mechanics. It was only the second *Mass Effect* (2010) that managed to impose itself as something unique on the video game scene, going beyond its own role-playing game roots and setting a new narrative standard in the industry. Obviously, this set some rather huge expectations for *Mass Effect 3* and, in general, they were all met with one notable exception: the end of the game itself, and of the trilogy.

This one notable 'exception' generated an unprecedented public madness in the history of video games. While professional reviewers praised the game, its users became more and more vocal. Over just a few weeks, for instance, Bioware's forum thread dealing with the end topic went over two thousand pages. Some users even managed to get organized into an *ad-hoc* pressure group (called 'Retake Mass Effect') demanding from the authors a new ending for the series. The tactics they used included petitions, letter writing, and charity donations (raising about eighty thousand dollars). Besides 'Retake Mass Effect' Bioware's forums were invaded with surprisingly lengthy and well articulated critiques, while several feature length documentaries, interpreting the game and explaining why its ending was an unforgivable narrative mistake, were uploaded by various users on YouTube. Slowly, but surely, the debate around *Mass Effect*'s ending became surprisingly elevated and shifted from just a video game critique to a public meditation on the artistic nature of video games and their specific narrative rules.

Gaining momentum, the debate spread towards the established press. BBC and CNN tried to keep an 'objective' distance, however failing to hide their slight confusion regarding these events (especially CNN seemed to have a problem understanding how a video game can raise so much passion, although to their praise, they did manage to pose an important question: perhaps we are working with the wrong definitions in the case of video games, perhaps it is not exactly proper to call *Mass Effect* a game anymore).[4] *Forbes*, realizing the importance of this particular moment, covered the debate quite extensively, being also one of the few media outlets to somehow take the users' side in this. Meanwhile, the specialized press (dealing mainly with video game consumer reviews: *IGN*, *Gamespot*, *Eurogamer*, *Escapist Magazine*) began its own 'war' with *Mass Effect*'s users, deriding them for what they thought it was just a juvenile display of 'entitlement.' This is particularly odd, to think that exactly the specialized press turns against, after all, its own intended audience. Things may become clearer though, if we start noticing that the stakes in all this noise, and as well as its reason, went beyond the simple discontent of a group of consumers with the product offered for consumption: this was about defining a new artistic medium. However, without a structured debate, the participants were focused on and feared different things: CNN had a problem of

definitions, *Forbes* had a problem of seriousness, while the specialized press together with the users (although on opposite sides) had a problem of authorial position.

In the specialized press' perspective, but also in the users' perspective, Bioware had to be seen as the author of an artistic product. However, if Bioware would break under the users' pressure to change the ending, they would compromise their 'artistic integrity.' The specialized press wanted desperately that *Mass Effect* should be considered a work of art, and Bioware an artist. To give in to their audience's demands would only prove someone like Ebert right. At the beginning of April 2012 however, Bioware announced a *Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut* effectively giving into their audience's demands but still claiming to keep their artistic integrity intact: they would not change the ending, but only clarify and expand on it.

What exactly happened here? The answer regarding the artistic qualities of the medium (and implicitly of the trilogy) was given exactly by the relation that Bioware built with its audience over the course of time. Many times over the five years spanning the production of this series, *Mass Effect*'s authors stated again and again the paradoxical fact that their work belongs to them in the same measure it belongs to their audience. This was not just a manner of speaking. *Mass Effect*, just like many other narrative based video games, invites its audience to build their own narrative line within a set of pre-established parameters. The art (understood here as technique) is to offer exactly enough freedom of choice without compromising narrative coherence. However, such a thing cannot happen from within an authorial ivory tower, but only at the end of a real dialogue (whatever form this dialogue may take) between authors and audiences.

Freedom of choice and involving the audience in the narrative process are neither new, nor radically different, nor specific to video games. However, *Mass Effect* does bring something new, compared to other media: it consolidates the permanence and mandatory nature of choice. We are talking here about a narrative stretching well over a hundred hours: an important choice made after ten hours that has visible consequences only after thirty hours may be called a more or less permanent choice within the trilogy's context. This means two things: on the one hand the guiding of the narrative line loses its experimental nature (as the audience needs to learn to live with the consequences of their actions), while on the other hand the choice in itself becomes mandatory for the reception of this kind of work's (as refusing to choose would simply mean refusing to experience this particular work). Furthermore, these two things mean that the choice becomes a real choice, being transformed from pure arbitrariness into an informed decision. As an informed decision, the choice involves, necessarily, a worldview decision, a decision over the moral principles that guides each member of the audience experiencing the work. Thus, perhaps more than other media, or maybe just in a different way, the video game medium, used like this, constitutes itself into a structural moral mirror – which is mandatory, because it cannot be experienced in any other way. A narrative like that of *Mass Effect*, demands constantly and imperatively from its audience an interpretive decision (about the narrative and about themselves at the same time). A book, or a movie, may be processed quite well in absence, their words or images may flow unhindered. This does not mean that a video game like *Mass Effect* cannot

have this kind of 'post-processing.' On the contrary, in its case, post-processing becomes specific just through this mandatory bringing together of content interpretation and introspection.

Seen in this light, Bioware's decision to modify the ending of their trilogy does not seem to be hazardous, nor does it 'betray' the artistic qualities of their work: it is a normal decision, born at the intersection between two communities (authors and audience) that understood very well, even if only implicitly, the nature of this medium. This is because the main critique regarding the original ending was focused exactly on a choice supposed to end the narrative arc of the trilogy. The problem with this choice was that it was insufficiently explained, therefore appearing to be arbitrary, while its consequences were completely absent. The main character was ending her story with a death understood in the same way Lévinas did: pure rapture, the violent absurd of the lack of answer coming from the Other's face. If there are consequences to that final decision, whether the world lives on or not, the main character does not know anymore. Announcing the *Extended Cut*, Bioware stated that this was not their original intention and the final choice was supposed to have the same weight and more so, like all the other important decision that defined this narrative. By modifying (or tweaking, rather) the ending, Bioware managed to finish their work coherently, and also *en fanfare*. The three final choices became three revelatory decisions for the particular ethics and *Weltanschauung* driving each member of the audience. More than just generating introspection, the three ending decisions offer three different and troubling interpreting keys for the entire narrative. Furthermore, Bioware added in their *Extended Cut* a fourth possibility as a commentary on this genre, on the particular interpreting demanded by this genre, and, finally, on each of their audience member's perception of their own moral integrity: it is a refusal option, one that hangs on the Lévinasian death allusions, while asking an uncomfortable question on the power, utility, and virtue of moral compromise.

Is *Mass Effect 3* that long awaited *Citizen Kane* of video games? Of course, analyzing the means synthesized by these two works we may find a lot of similarities. We may even find similarities (as surprising as it may sound) in their chosen topics: media manipulation in *Citizen Kane,* indoctrination and subliminal propaganda in *Mass Effect*. However, this is actually less important. After all, we are talking about two different media. A *Citizen Kane* of video games does not need to be an uncontestable masterpiece, but rather the right work at the right time, a work able to generate a perception shift regarding a medium. *Citizen Kane* is less important (even from a film history point of view) than the context of its making. Thus, I would advance this argument, that because of its context (the wait for the ‚saving' *Citizen*, for the synthesizing masterpiece), because of the debate generated by its reception, and because Bioware's gesture (to offer its audience the proper place in the creative process), *Mass Effect 3* represents an historical moment in the development of this new artistic medium, incorrectly named 'video games.'

The most obvious thing standing out in the *Mass Effect* debate though was the conceptual confusion and lack of structure. Most of the analyses came from film studies

and literature, and no common ground seemed to have formed. It is, therefore, clear that especially from this moment on, the academic world needs a discipline able to address this medium. Being a medium that draws from different other media, it is quite clear that a discipline able to address it needs to be also inter-disciplinary. However, we can already identify a discipline used to the particular critical approach that this medium seems to demand. It is a discipline used to analyze the medium and the message as cultural discourse, a discipline used to build its critique attentive to audiences, even treating the author as part of an audience first, a discipline already used to operate a genealogical hermeneutics of cultural products: cultural studies. However, there is a long path ahead, until a set of methods and an interpretive structure fit for this medium would be developed. The first step though, needs to be taken towards definitions, and the capturing of *Mass Effect*'s defining and re-defining challenges to this medium seems to be the perfect opportunity.

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Notes

[1]   Ebert, Roger. "Games vs Art: Ebert vs Barker". Web. < www.rogerebert.com>. 21.06. 2012.
[2]   Brown, Scott. "Q&A: *Hobbit* Director Guillermo del Toro on the Future of Film". *Wired Magazine: 17.06*. May 22, 2009.
[3]   Bogost, Ian. "Time for Games to Grow Up". *The Guardian*. August 8, 2007.
[4]   It is hard to cite such things, however I can provide a link to a user made quite comprehensive list of links to such various reactions across various media: http://social.bioware.com/forum/Mass-Effect-3/Mass-Effect-3-Story-and-Campaign-Discussion-Spoilers-Allowed/The-Data-Cache-A-Comprehensive-list-of-ending-grievances-media-articles-and-other-fan-goodies-Please-keep-discussions-CIVIL-UNDER-CONSTRUCTION-321-9851623-1.html