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AESTHETIC JOURNEYS AND MEDIA  
PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP  
CULTURE AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES  
FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 10 – 2021

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP  
CULTURE AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES  
FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

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# Journeying to the actual World through digital games: The *Urban Histories Reloaded* project

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper aims at reflecting on the potential of digital games to convey meaning, tell stories and, most importantly, become a tool to discover and experience the actual world. Using as a case study the experience of the Urban Histories Reloaded. Creatività videoludica per azioni di cittadinanza (Urban Histories Reloaded. Digital Game Creativity for citizenship actions) project (UHR), we will discuss the role digital games can play in activating territorial processes, by favouring the engagement with the actual world as well as with playful approaches to city living.*

*In particular, we will focus on the artist residency for game designers, game artists, and game programmers held in Padua between September and October 2020 within the frame of the project and on its main outcome, the mobile game MostaScene. MostaScene consists of a fifteen-minute mobile game set in District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola of Padua. Both its design and its overall content have intertwined with the urban space since the very beginning.*

*Above all, we will inspect the use of digital games for city-making actions via two different paths: on the one hand, through the involvement of stakeholders (public institutions and specific groups, but also and most importantly citizens) as co-designers; on the other hand, using digital games as non-functional experiences that may encourage innovative interpretations of the urban space for player.*

*From a theoretical perspective, this research requires us to look at digital games as both fictional worlds that involve imagination and interpretation, as well as digital worlds that are experienced as part of reality in a phenomenological sense. Once this is acknowledged, we can provide an overview of how games can tackle reality and engage with the actual world.*

## KEYWORDS

Digital games; City-making; City-memory; Memory-making; Urban games; Experiential tourism.

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Despite this paper being the result of shared discussions between the authors, the authorship of each paragraph should be attributed as follows: Stefano Caselli is the author of the paragraphs "Brief Notes on Digital Games and the Actual World"; Farah Polato is the author of the paragraphs "Introduction" and "The Tourist Figure in the UHR Project"; Mauro Salvador is the author of the paragraphs "The Urban Histories Reloaded Project" and "Digital Games and the Actual World: Games Tackling Reality and the Game MostaScene". The "conclusions" are co-written by Stefano Caselli and Farah Polato.

## Introduction

Using as case study the experience of Urban Histories Reloaded. Creatività videoludica per azioni di cittadinanza (Urban Histories Reloaded. Digital Game Creativity for citizenship actions) project (from now on, UHR), with a focus on the mobile game *MostaScene*, we will discuss the role digital games can play in activating territorial processes, by favouring the engagement with the actual world as well as with playful approaches to city living.

UHR is part of the Per chi crea 2018 programme by MIBAC and SIAE (The Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and the Italian Authors' and Publishers' Association), which is devoted to the promotion of artistic creativity in Italy through a strong connection between the artists involved, the territory, and the people who live in it. Through the lens of the programme, artist residencies are the ideal context to encourage these encounters.

In line with the aims and tools expected by Per chi crea call, UHR promoted an artist residency for game designers, game artists, and game programmers (from here on: artists in residence) to be held in Padua between February and April 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic it was then rescheduled to September and October 2020.

A team characterised by different fields of expertise and professional profiles coordinated UHR: IMPACT SRL, an academic spin-off of the University of Padua working to enhance local cultural and economic development, and the DBC-Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali (Department of Cultural Heritage) of the same university together with IVIPRO (Italian Videogame Programme), an Italian national and cross-regional project that aims at facilitating the production of video games set in Italy or that engage with the Italian cultural heritage.

The main output of the residency was the concept and development of a prototype of a narrative mobile game focused on a specific area of the city of Padua. During the five-weeks residency, the artists developed the open access prototype of *MostaScene* (Various authors, 2020). *MostaScene* is a fifteen-minute mobile game inspired by the place where the residency was set, District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola in Padua, as well as its design and its overall content which were intertwined with the urban space since the very beginning.

The choice of District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola as an area of interest is due to its historical dynamics, emblematic of their social and cultural processes and evolution. In

the past the district was one of the main destinations of the rural migration towards the city. During the Second World War, some of the inhabitants took part in the Italian Resistance. In recent times, it has become a working-class neighbourhood, and now it is an area with a high rate of immigrants and citizens with foreign origins. Even nowadays, District 5 has been the theatre of civic actions, public engagement and grassroots movements promoted by the inhabitants, associations and other social institutions. Among them, it is worth mentioning the protest against the conversion of a public football field into a residential area (April 2015, Picture “Il campo di via Dottesio ai bambini del rione!/Dottesio Football Field for the childrens of the district!”; see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** A scenario of MostaScene (left side), protests against the conversion of the public football field of via Dottesio into a residential area and the football field (right side) or the involvement of the inhabitants in the process of public space re-thinking (*Contratti di Quartiere/Neighborhood Agreements*, an ongoing process from 1998) (Licari, 2006).

In this reshaping of urban spaces, a specific attention was paid to the urban renewal of the little square, the beating heart of the district, which changed its name from *Piazza*

*Toselli (Toselli Square) to Piazza ai Caduti della Resistenza (To the Fallen in the Italian Resistance Square).*

In October 2020, in accordance with protest movements born in different countries around the world, the local movement named *Decolonize Your Eyes* coordinated public demonstrations (<https://www.facebook.com/DecolonizeYourEyes/>), questioning the toponymy of the district, where several street names recall the Italian colonial period. As an example, the ‘ancient’ Toselli Square, mentioned above, was dedicated to Captain Pietro Toselli, the ‘hero’ of the Amba Alagi battle (1895), who fought during the first phase of the Italian colonial military offensive in Ethiopia. The artists in residence were able to follow the public actions promoted by the *Decolonize Your Eyes* movement thanks to the live streamings of the events or the testimonies of the activists (Frisina, Ghebremariam Tesfau’, Frisina, 2021).

The narrative world of MostaScene was inspired by events of the past – and their narrations – and the present, as we can observe from the relevance given in the game to the football field as stage, to the activism during the Italian Resistance, and to the lively, intercultural life of the district nowadays.

As said above, the residency should have physically taken place in Padua, but the first COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in Italy on the day the guests were supposed to arrive. The project had to be reshaped, from a full immersion two-week period to a less intensive five-week period with scheduled meetings and milestones. The actual journey of the participants had to be transformed into a virtual one and, while this change was initially felt as risky and potentially harmful, it opened several new opportunities.

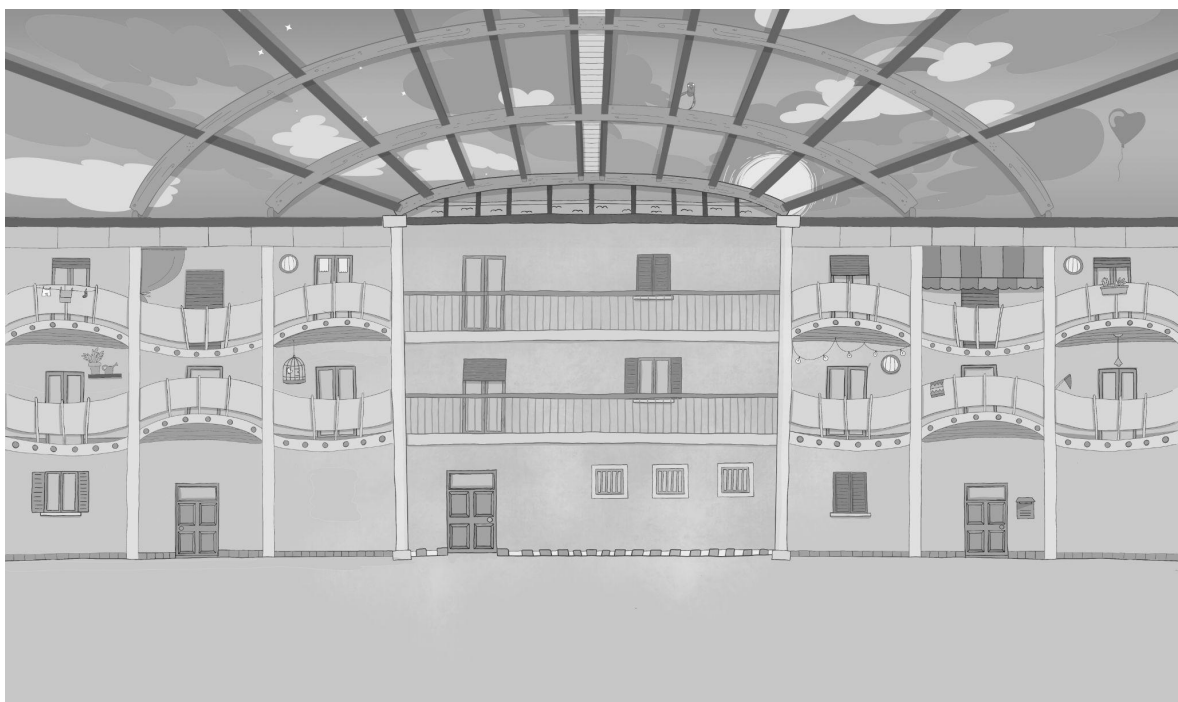
During the first week of the residency, some organisers and instructors managed to visit the neighbourhood and to record urban explorations and interviews. Moreover, different stakeholders and local people participated in live discussions online with the artists in residence, preserving somehow a “first-hand” feeling for those mediated explorations. Also, the systematic use of agile and functional digital tools (such as the online board Mirò) improved the efficiency of the design processes.

Eventually, what was perceived as an obstacle, turned out to be an improvement for the overall experience, especially in terms of smoother workflow and easier involvement of citizens.

During the residency, the artists in residence developed the open access prototype of *MostaScene* (Various authors, 2020), a narrative digital game inspired by the place where the residency was set (see Fig. 2; Fig. 3; Fig. 4).



**Fig. 2.** Splash screen, map, and last section of *MostaScene*.



**Fig. 3.** A scenario of *MostaScene*.



**Fig. 4.** Picture of “il giardino d’inverno”-District 5 Padua.

Based on this project’s experience, this paper questions the potential of digital games not only as narrative machines, but also as effective tools to discover and experience the world that surrounds us, and the role digital games can play in activating processes of space awareness and territorial actions on both individual and community levels.

In the next pages, we will briefly describe the UHR project, then we will specifically focus on the experience of the residency and on its impact on District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola. Then, we will provide a broader theoretical framework, concerning virtual worlds and actual contexts, that will help us set the UHR project as a specific case study to acknowledge how digital games can offer memory-making experiences for local contexts and histories, ultimately stimulating both top-down and bottom-up city-making actions. In fact, thanks to these experiences, citizens may ask for a deeper participation and for further knowledge about how cities are planned and how they evolved. Their interest might evolve specifically into improving urban environments for the inhabitants, and expressing a strong desire to co-design public spaces and their use (Schouten *et al.* 2017). As we will see in a moment, the UHR project did not aim at



generating specific responses in its user, but rather aimed at starting processes of thoughts and reasoning about the places it was about.

Finally, we will introduce some reflections on the tourist as a key figure in the conception of the *MostaScene* project. As the focus on the reloading process aims to stress the polyvocal narrability – never exhaustive – of a territory, the tourist-figure – someone coming from outside and staying for a while – seemed useful to evoke a notion of knowledge and experience that is partial and anchored to a specific status. Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge and the feeling of ‘unfamiliarity’ are also fruitful, postulated at the basis of the tourist’s curiosity and desire to explore other places and meet people. The tourist-perspective offers as well a different point of view different from the internal and acquired ones, thus allowing switches that may be interesting. In the design of *MostaScene*, this approach is echoed in the photographer-tourist main character, to whose point of view is linked to the player’s experience.

### **The Urban Histories Reloaded Project**

The UHR has been conceived in three main phases. In the first phase, the artist residency, six participants conducted the “mediated” visits to District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola described above, virtually met people who live or work there, and recorded information about it. The aim of this phase was the development of a short, playable prototype set in the district. The six artists came from different backgrounds, both technical and artistic. They had a fair share of experience in producing digital artefacts, and they shared a common point of view and a common set of references about the type and genre of product they were going to design (a short and narrative-driven experience, using mobile games like *Florence (Mountains 2018)* as references). Only one out of six lived near Padua and, even if not in depth, already knew the district. This fact, combined with the absence of an actual, physical, visit to the neighbourhood, pushed the artists towards the design of an informative solution rather than a “place-making” one, a game in which the player gets to know a place better, rather than intervening, even if virtually.

*MostaScene* was developed in Unity3D using original scripts and original graphic assets. The game lasts fifteen minutes and the user plays the role of a photographer visiting the neighbourhood for the first time from a first-person point of view. With the excuse of chasing their cat that has run away from a window, the player explores the

neighbourhood, engages with its people, and takes photos. At the end of the game, she stages an exhibition of photographs taken during the journey. The artists in residence produced a representation of District 5 divided into three distinct scenarios. In these scenarios, the player interacts with simple gestures to discover texts and images related to historical and present events of the neighbourhood (see Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** The three scenarios of *MostaScene*.

The following phase of UHR consists of an event, organised to allow people who live or work in the neighbourhood to watch and play the game prototype. Some of them were people that the artists had already met [and who had contributed to the project]: thus, storytellers had become story-players. Others became aware of the project and of the game only thanks to the event: they played histories of their neighbourhood, narrated and revisited by other people.

The third phase is ongoing: it aims to extend the narrative world of the game through other stories, ‘reloading’ them into the game. To this purpose, a week-long event for game developers has been organised in collaboration with Progetto Giovani, an office of the municipality based in District 5 and specifically devoted to youth policies that supported the project from its first steps. During this last event, developers accessed a set of stories of the neighbourhood, collected thanks to the involvement of people and associations during the first phase. Throughout the following months, this reloaded

version of the original game *MostaScene* was presented to an audience consisting of the inhabitants of the district (*Scopri il quartiere 5 con un videogioco!/Discover the district 5 with a videogame!*, official presentation in collaboration with Progetto Giovani, Padua, 15 December 2021) as well as of the city of Padua as a whole (Game Developers Session, Festival FÉMO-Festival dell'espressione multimediale, Padua, 12 April 2021), as well as of other cities (Venice-Lido, 6 September 2021).

### **Brief notes on Digital Games and the Actual World**

UHR is based on a significant assumption: that digital games, in a way, can engage with actual contexts of experience, and that they can therefore represent the (at times astonishing) complexity of the actual world. It is worth providing an at least brief overview on how digital games can engage with the actual world and convey meaning before we proceed. This will allow us to approach the matter at hand more clearly and unproblematically. However, the aim of this paper is not to deepen concepts such as 'virtuality' or 'world', which we refer readers to the more thorough theoretical accounts that other scholars have provided for further discussion.

To begin with, we look at digital games as virtual worlds, and virtual worlds, in turn, as both digital and fictional worlds. This implies looking at digital games' potentiality to engage with the actual world in a way that is peculiar and substantially different from those of other media. By referring to authors such as David J. Chalmers (2017), or to game scholars such as Nele Van de Mosselaer (2020), Jasper Juul (2005), and Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella (Gualeni, 2015; Gualeni and Vella, 2020; Vella and Gualeni, 2018), we argue that digital games are both fictional, representational experiences that require of their user a certain degree of interpretation and imagination, and experiences that can be understood as 'worldly' in a phenomenological sense.

Without delving into the phenomenology or philosophy of fiction, suffice it to say that playing a digital game means simultaneously interacting with a set of real objects and environments (in this case, objects, events, and digital spaces made of bits or strings of code – Chalmers calls this thesis 'virtual digitalism'; Chalmers, 2017) and interacting with a set of unreal fictional objects, relationships, and events (Chalmers calls this thesis 'virtual fiction'; Chalmers, 2017)

While every digital game entails the experience of a digital (real) world, the same is not true for fictional worlds: slaying a dragon in a digital game may be experienced as merely

making some bits disappear from the screen, without any degree of interpretation or imagination involved. If a user fears that dragon, recognises it as a fictional dragon, and knows that that dragon can breathe fire, and that its claws can cut down an oak tree, then she is interpreting and imagining a fictional counterpart represented by those bits (see also Fluck, 1988). To interpret digital games as 'half-real' (Juil, 2005), then, it means claiming that they are real experiences from a phenomenological perspective, and that at the same time they tend to give rise to narratives that are subject to interpretation. From now on, we will use the term 'virtual world' to refer to both these understandings, i.e., with 'virtual' we will mean at the same time real (digital) and non-real (fictional).

So, what does it mean to deal with the actual world through a digital game? It means providing the user with a digital world (made of bits, data, and digital spaces) that represents, or re-interprets, the actual world. The intertwining of representational content and interaction is pivotal here: while the player acts within virtual worlds following rules and activating meaningful procedures (Ian Bogost introduces the concept of procedural rhetoric to point out how procedures can convey meaning; Bogost, 2007), at the same time she tends to interpret and understand those procedures according to the representational content of the virtual world in question. Of course, procedures themselves cannot provide meaning without representational content (Bogost, 2007). Nonetheless, it would be reductive to claim that digital games can provide meaning or tell stories only based on in-game representations, regardless of the chance the player has to configure them (Aarseth, 1997) and to produce meaning through in-game actions and procedural rhetoric.

Developers that choose to represent the actual world within a digital game, then, provide the user with a fictional version of the actual world, in which she is free to act and to produce as well as to interpret meaning.

Of course, it is worth noting that to be recognised as a reinterpretation of the actual world, the representational nature of the world has to be acknowledged by the player: if she knows nothing about Padua, for example, she might assume that it is some fantasy city or country. To discuss the relationship between virtual worlds (and digital games) and actual contexts, it is therefore worth referring to hermeneutics, especially to ideas such as resonance and implied authorship (Apperley, 2010; Arjoranta, 2015; Grace, 2020; Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni, 2020). This requires looking at digital games and virtual worlds as analogous, at least to a certain degree, to texts in the

hermeneutic understanding of the term (Arjoranta, 2015). In an attempt to summarise widely different approaches, for brevity we may claim that, to interpret in-game actions, in-game representations, and in-game meanings as entangled with actual contexts, the player has to:

(1) have a previous knowledge of relevant contexts, i.e., the content of the game has to resonate with the experiences or background of the player (see, e.g., how Adam Chapman applies the concept of resonance to history in Chapman, 2016) and

(2) acknowledge that the developers of the game are willingly dealing with such contexts, i.e., the player must construct an implied author (Schmid, 2009) of the world that refers to certain specific contexts.

If these two pre-conditions are met, then the player may interpret the virtual world, as well as her actions within it, as dealing with its actual counterpart both before, during, and after the gaming experience, since the hermeneutic spiral of possible interpretations of a text is not limited to the duration of the textual experience itself (see Gadamer, 1977; 2006).

Engaging with actual contexts through digital games, then, means the production side (i.e., game designers and developers) must design a fictional world that represents those contexts more or less explicitly and promote interpretations by the user that may acknowledge her representationality. On the receiving side (i.e., the user), on the other hand, it means to recognise – depending on personal backgrounds, knowledge, and interpretations – that the content of the game refers to actual contexts.

The same goes for other non-interactive media and related mechanisms of meaning production, and for all those media that favour the experience of fictional worlds. Suffice it to think of historical fictions such as historical movies, novels, or comics, and how they cannot but be interpreted as “historical” once they are recognised as representing actual contexts through interpretation (Chapman, 2016; see also Zhang, 2004).

What sets digital games (and virtual worlds at large) apart from other media is their accessibility. Such worlds have to be interpreted as representation but are then accessed, experienced, and modified.

**Digital Games and the Actual World: Games tackling Reality and the Game *MostaScene***

Digital games can engage with the actual world in different ways. On the one hand, they can be pervasive: games are capable of generating experiences that renegotiate the limits of the playful situation in a spatial, temporal or social sense (Montola *et al.*, 2009). Games like Google's *Ingress* or *Pokémon Go* integrate themselves into the actual world they represent; they are designed to be played directly in this world by adding a playful layer to it (Frissen *et al.*, 2015).

On the other hand, games can favour forms of critical play, in which, through playful interactions, certain social and cultural dynamics are represented for and experienced by the player. Games like *Papers, Please* or *September 12th* provide a virtual environment in which the player can safely experiment with positions and choices that are different to or riskier than those she would undertake in the actual world (see Goffman, 1961). What should emerge from these experiences is an individual and autonomous critical thought about the actual world situations portrayed, explicitly or implicitly, by the game (Flanagan, 2009). Critical play can be described in different ways, for example historical games represent events through the experience of a designed scenario in which the player interacts and makes choices. These games attempt to represent the historical memory of certain facts, often controversial or traumatic facts (on trauma and digital games see, among others, Smethurst and Craps, 2014), and use different design strategies and precautions tailored to the event itself or to requests from specific stakeholders (i.e., victim relatives; see Ferri *et al.*, 2017).

Another approach to critical play is the so-called serious urban games: play experiences that take place in urban environments through guided explorations often (but not always) using geo-localised devices. The label 'serious' is intended to be a synonym for critical, stressing the fact that these experiences also aim to activate an interpretation of the actual world through a playful layer (Ferri and Coppock, 2013). In recent years, this approach to urban gaming has moved towards innovation and design practices, often related to the development of smart or hackable cities (de Waal *et al.*, 2018). Smart solutions to approach the most varied problems that an urban environment may face are hypothesised through playful design methods and developed as playful experiences. This synthesis is obtained by directly involving stakeholders in the problem at hand and rethinking the definition of public spaces:

This use of play fits into a broader approach that understands the urban public sphere not so much as a predetermined spatial site, but as a potential event space, which has recently also been embraced by city governments as a strategy to increase the quality and functionality of public spaces, a development that the UK government for science has called 'vibrant cities' (Schouten *et al.*, 2017: 27; see also Calzada, 2016).

This use of games for city-making moves through two different paths: on the one hand the stakeholders (public institutions and specific groups, but also and most importantly citizens) are involved not only as testers or potential final users, but also as co-designers. As Schouten *et al.* point out, the 'reflective understanding' of situations represented by a game is not something that naturally emerges through play, but it is something that can be triggered by participation: different stakeholders better understand the issues tackled by a game not only by playing it, but also by co-designing it (Schouten *et al.*, 2017). This co-creation occurs in what can be called the shared 'affinity space' that games generate (Shaffer 2006).

In the context of these games, the very concept of city living is developed through a playful approach, based on what Bernard Suits called 'lusory attitude' – a playful way of acting that can be adopted in most (if not all) human actions (1978). This attitude keeps a constant focus on a fundamental feature of games: their uselessness. Considering this non-teleological reading, instead of being considered tools to be used to obtain a specific result, games are capable of producing free, non-functional experiences within the urban fabric with great potential for innovative interpretations.

The creative focus of the artist residency proposed by UHR dealt with several of the issues discussed so far from different perspectives, with noteworthy implications.

First of all, District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola has been reinterpreted by a group of people that do not live there, as a result of a co-design process in which citizens produced thoughts on citizenship actions during their dialogue with the artists in residence. During the residency, the artists designed this representation, inevitably to be considered a reinterpretation, through a long discussion. The discussion was necessitated by the fact that, due to the COVID-19 lockdown, they could not effectively visit and live in the neighbourhood (with a few exceptions). Because of this, most of the urban explorations that laid the foundations for the design were narrated by other people (experts living in Padua or citizens) and mediated by technologies such as videos or pictures from Google Street View. This, along with the overall difficulty of telling and describing a place to

people who are not locals, led to two consequences: the artists in residence decided to use a main character who arrives on the spot without knowing it (the photographer) and decided not to represent ideas about the future of the neighbourhood (the game is set in present time and is about present or past events).

These choices move the focus from the general idea of triggering citizenship actions through play, towards a different approach that employs the player's reasoning on possible interventions in a later time, disconnected and independent from the game. This premise reveals that the people involved in the project were not interested in setting up a "gamified" context in which game structures aim to trigger predetermined reactions in the player (i.e., she gains points when she completes a level) (see again Schouten *et al.* 2017 and Fuchs *et al.* 2014). The aim has always been to create a "chilled" narrative, set in an urban context to be discovered just out of curiosity. In terms of design, then, the game focuses more on environmental storytelling (Ryan in Koenitz *et al.* 2015) and narrative-driven exploration, and less on deep interactivity and player's sense of agency. There are no complex goals, and the only real objective is purely narrative: to find a fled cat. This objective functions as an excuse for the player to freely explore, interact and discover places and stories, without any kind of pressure or competition, as happens in games like *A Short Hike* (Adamgryu 2019) or *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013) that are not easily linked to classical categories of video games (i.e., the "role-playing games" described by Apperley (2006) or Flanagan's "artist's locative games" (2009). Through its main character, a tourist but also a traveller getting lost in the relational texture the game depicts, *MostaScene* metaphorically represents a non-teleological wandering, a journey as discovery and encounter conducted with Suits' 'lusory attitude' (1978), which defines a possible playful approach to city living (Montola *et al.*, 2009). For the game to be an activator of the subsequent reasoning mentioned above, in-game actions, in-game representations, and in-game meanings are entangled with actual contexts: *MostaScene's* target player is a citizen of District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola, and as such she is supposed to know the urban space portrayed by the game, which obviously resonates with her background. In turn, the artists in residence deal with this urban space by adopting an external perspective, made explicit during the game through the in-game narrative expedient of the photographer.



Citizen involvement has been pivotal during the design phase: citizens spoke with the artists in residence, sharing stories and opinions about the district itself. These interactions were then fully interpreted as a co-design process carried out within an effective affinity space using a human-centred approach (Ideo, 2015); the citizens involved can be considered the main stakeholders of the citizenship actions at hand. A clear example of this process happened during the second phase of UHR, a playtest session conducted with some citizens. While playing the game, among many confirmations and acknowledgements, in certain cases a bit of confusion between the participants emerged. Specifically, one of the scenarios presented in the game deals with an episode of the Italian resistance during the Second World War that not all the citizens involved in the playtest knew. In an emergent narrative exchange not controlled by the artists in residence conducting the playtest, one of the citizens that knew this episode decided to tell and explain through her family's memory the historical facts to the others.

This prolonged relationship between artists in residence and citizens who are both co-designer and players led the game design in a strong non-solutionist direction (Morozov, 2013). The game aims not at proposing practical ways of addressing problems but at 'making complex situations more understandable and accessible for researchers and stakeholders alike' (Schouten *et al.*, 2017: 41). *MostaScene* does not speak of the future or of possible active citizenship interventions in an explicit way. Instead, it aims at providing an experience that will stimulate comprehension and deepen personal knowledge of a specific place.

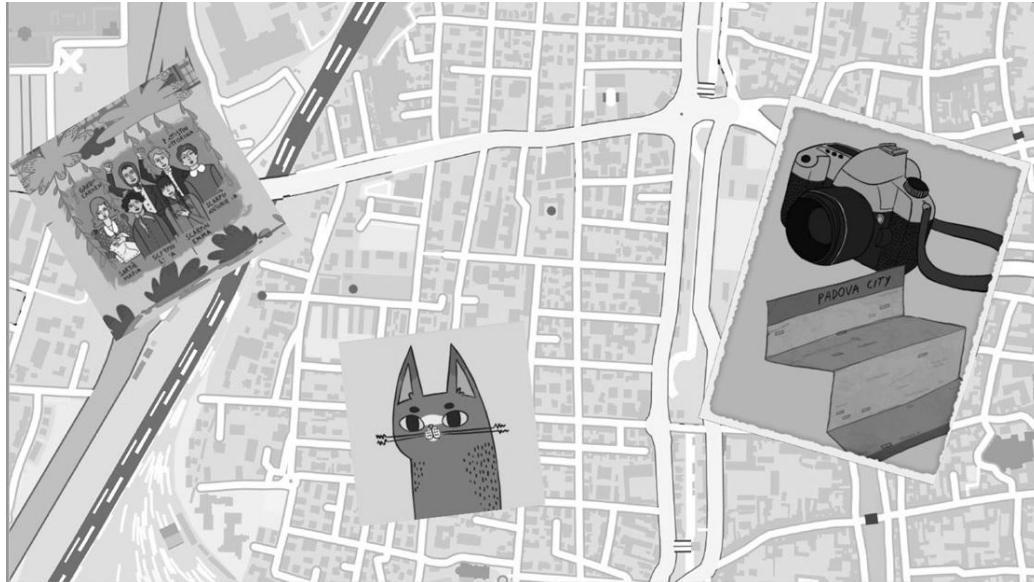
### **The Tourist figure in the UHR project**

The developments of UHR also intersect other perspectives, different from those outlined so far. One is that of tourism and territorial promotion. In this regard, despite their problematic status in Italy and their slow entry into academic disciplines,<sup>1</sup> digital games increasingly enjoy great attention, as highlighted by the engagement of the Italian Film Commission and IIDEA (Italian Interactive Digital Entertainment Association) in the

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, digital games have been recognised as audio-visual works only recently with the law n. 2020 (2016), entitled *Disciplina del cinema e dell'audiovisivo*, which reforms the provisions of the previous law.

mapping of digital games set in the country or linked to Italian culture, developed by IVIPRO. Being part of this map, *MostaScene* can be used as a tool for promoting an exciting and unusual tour of a multicultural neighbourhood in Padua (See Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** Map.

Another level of this relationship concerns the key-role given to the tourist-figure in the concept and design of *MostaScene*. As we have highlighted above, UHR project intersects this figure in different moments of its development and in different ways: in the approach of the artists in residence and of the developers of the third phase, in the position of a player, in the concept of the game design and, finally, in the main character of the *MostaScene* prototype. Moreover, it has a determinant role on the notion of reloading process, also stressed in the title of the project, *Urban Histories Reloaded*. The latter identifies the idea of a potentially endless reloading process, allowed by the open access code of the prototype, and promoted by the third phase, a week-long event, which aspires to preserve the attitude towards an endless curiosity and discovery.

This concept has been inspired by some recent developments in tourism studies that question the dominant notion of tourism and tourist-gaze as merely expressions of the commodification of culture “unquestioning” embraced with the market (Bianchi, 2009 p. 484). As Urry clarifies in his 1992 *The tourist gaze revisited*, follow-up of the foremost *The Tourist gaze* (1990), the commodification of culture is not the only field of application of the tourist gaze, while the tourist experience is also not limited to the gaze. Considered as a product of the recent ‘cultural turn’ in social sciences, fresh

approaches address tourism as a controversial phenomenon, interacting with social-cultural representations and promoting social-cultural processes, including the empowering ones. Assumed as a political project and an 'academy of hope' (Ateljevic, Pritchard and Morgan, 2007, 3), the so-called 'critical turn' in tourism studies looks at a model of tourism that may break the submission of touristic experiences to business prerogatives. As we noted in the previous sections, in *MostaScene* the tourist-gaze has been brought into play in different kinds of gaze and experiences, both external and internal, as well as the performativity of the tourist way of seeing. On the external side, the artists in residence, as well as the developers of the reloading phase, adopted for themselves the perspective of tourists visiting District 5 Armistizio-Savonarola: like the photographer in the game, they have been curious explorers, aware of their being strangers but, at the same time, captured by, and caring about, the places they were discovering. On the internal side we find the neighbours: in the first phase they have been storytellers and they testified about their experiences. By playing, the neighbours shift to an external-touristic position, from which they discover different ways and perspectives to see and live in their domestic space, as we have seen during the mentioned playtest. In this regard, we notice that the parameter of distance, as well as that of duration, traditionally involved in the definition of the tourism phenomenon, are now less influential than before, while the experiential factor is becoming increasingly important.

In chasing this shift, UHR focuses on a tourist that has abandoned a safe and distant positioning (protected from the window of a tourist bus or supported by guides in his/her encounter with places and people) and for whom discovery has become something to make an experience of. In touristic terms, an extensive and comprehensive definition of 'experiential' engages participation, involvement, immersion, and an active attitude that goes along with the will – and the pleasure – to learn first-hand about the places visited (Edgell, 2019). Advancing from the traditional paradigm of the tourist gaze, defined as fundamentally visual and image saturated (Urry, 1990), the influential 'performance turn' takes part in breaking the notion of distance between the tourist and the visited places and stresses physical and corporeal patterns into tourism, therefore suggesting that it necessarily consists in 'performing' rather than 'gazing' (Larsen and Urry, 2011). At the same time, the very notion of the touristic journey has changed. Whilst it has been traditionally associated with far away,

even exotic places, the touristic journey has recently been influenced by a fascination with the rich and exciting ‘unknown near’: in other words, the desire to discover or rediscover, but most of all to experience, has taken the place of a desire for distance and for displacement.

In this regard, in opposition to the idea of the tourist as a mere consumer and prisoner of the tourism industry, some argue that tourism and tourists can be included in the enhancement of local heritage and even take part in its ‘creation’ (Palmer and Tivers, 2019; Montella, 2016). The dynamic and broad notion of ‘heritage communities’ (‘comunità patrimoniali’ Bonesio, 2007; Carmosino, 2013) involves every person who pays attention and cares about spaces, monuments, or objects: not only the natives or inhabitants of a territory or the citizens of a nation, but everyone who cares, including the figure of the tourist we are talking about. On the other hand, the recent trends towards domestic tourism and slow-travel approaches are involving more and more indigenous people in the role of tourists (e.g., in the so-called Km Zero tours). Inhabitants are then involved both into the relational path, as tourists interact with them in an experiential mutual exchange, and as potential tourists themselves of their own territory, which becomes a place to discover, enjoy and care about, even if only for a while.

### Conclusion

As outlined so far, the UHR project aimed at favouring the engagement with the actual world, and especially with experiences of city-living and tourism. This has been achieved by the *MostaScene* co-designing participatory processes (involving both stakeholders, citizens, and institutions) we described above. More importantly, as we have outlined, the playable prototype designed during the project favours an innovative and autonomous interpretation of the urban space by a player, by providing her with a non-functional digital experience. In other words, *MostaScene* is a playful digital experience that aims at empowering individuals and at favouring active citizenship, and at the same time at triggering proximity tourism and proactive city living.

Such ‘empowering sway’ is not limited to the game experience itself: not only can *MostaScene* favour novel interpretations of the urban space in the user but, maybe more interestingly, it can favour such interpretations and territorial processes due to its openness. By allowing developers and designers to download, modify, and expand

the open-access source code of the game, the UHR project may achieve its most interesting implications: co-designing the game becomes itself an action of citizenship.

This chance of ‘reloading’ new areas, characters, narratives, representations, and game mechanics, at the same time, is one of its most uncertain aspects – as a matter of fact, the openness of the project may require the interlocking skills and backgrounds of further groups of designers, artists and programmes, and therefore the empowering effect of UHR may run the risk of remaining unexpressed.

Despite this, of course, some outputs and developments of the project seem to confirm the interest that both institutions and associations have towards the project.

On the one hand, the municipality of Padua was interested in promoting new policies of *neighbourhood* storytellings, in echoes with other experiences carried out in Italy, such as in the case of the graphic novel *Quartieri. Viaggio al centro delle periferie italiane (Neighbourhoods: A Journey into Italian Suburbs, 2019)* by the designer and geographer Giada Peterle and the sociologist Adriano Cancellieri, which focused on five neighbourhoods in five different Italian cities, including the District Arcella in Padua. The impact aroused by these narrations is able to support internal and external touristic attention influenced by the new waves of touristic thinking and praxis above recalled, such as in the case of the success of ‘migrant tours’ inside the Italian cities or of so-called alternative (to the monumental ones) urban itineraries. On the other hand, on the association side, a cooperation with Geacoop as associated partner has launched the Project Consortium, to carry out the project’s proposal, “SPORT is N.E.A.R. – Sports in Neighbourhoods for Empowerment, Activation, Reconnection”, which was submitted under the Erasmus+ Cooperation partnerships (ERASMUS-SPORT-2021-SCP) of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission, to promote a European cooperation on the Priority “Inclusion and Diversity”. GEA is a non-profit social cooperative, founded in Padova in 2004 focused on the promotion and the implementation of activities and programmes aimed at facilitating integration and active citizenship of migrant people, families, communities, with specific attention to women, youth, and vulnerable groups. Another example is the collaboration for the Abitare Festival (To Inhabit Festival, 5 August 2021), event of the Next to me - Reti di vicinanze project (Next to me – Networks of proximities), promoted by several territorial entities, including the municipality of Padua, in partnership with the University of Padua and social associations, supported

by the European council related to the strategies on social inclusion and legality. The *MostaScene* experience has been selected as well for the EduTalks@Council of Europe on the pedagogical potential of video games for developing digital citizenship (October 8, 2021). Concerning the tourism impact and the promotion of the territory, it is worth mentioning the presentation given in the frame of the encounters organised by Veneto Film Commission and Regione Veneto during the 78th Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica (6 September 2021).

Such expressions of interest, together with the repeatability of the project, may favour the rise of other similar experiences, eventually based in other cities or local contexts.

At the same time, as we may have outlined throughout this paper, and regardless of its future iterations, the UHR project may already have proven useful for theoretical reasons. It exemplifies how participatory processes of co-design may result in empowering playful experiences, favouring active citizenship in both users and designers, even if for the moment we are dealing with provisional conclusions and recognition of potential. For a deeper and more precise report on the results of such an intervention, we would need a new field study to observe both the eventual long-term effects on District 5 citizens and the eventual further uses of *MostaScene* or its future versions.

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