



A gaming patography

Matteo Bittanti

According to Marshall McLuhan, technologies have become an extension of our senses, particularly those of sight and sound. Additionally, they have expanded our central nervous system. As such, they greatly augment, enhance, and extend our body as well as our mental faculties. But beneath a technophilic façade, this theory conceals its inner luddite nature, especially when we consider that McLuhan, the shaman of the Global Village, suffered frequent strokes and brain related disorders, culminating with the surgical removal of a tumor as big as a tennis ball from the back of his cranium in 1967, at the apex of his astounding career as a media guru. McLuhan's peculiar vascular condition – an abnormal growth of the carotid arteries, i.e.

the major vein that supplies blood to the brain – made the Canadian thinker prone to recurrent strokes and left him with large memory gaps. Often, McLuhan would freeze in the middle of a lecture, only to start again a few seconds, sometimes minutes later, as if nothing had happened. Although no physician has ever claimed that his condition was related to media consumption, we firmly believe that his deformed carotid and his recurrent brain short circuits were directly caused by an unbalanced diet, so to speak. In other words, McLuhan suffered from a techno-pathology: media do not massage us, they *massacre* us. The evidence is everywhere. Countless studies have shown the effects on vision, skin, muscles of several game-induced pathologies



Xbox Hypertrophy, (2011),
WiiMote Shoulder Dislocation, (2011).
C-Print, 50x66 cm



ranging from Nintendonitis to PlayStation Thumb, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and Repetitive Strain Injury. Consider, for instance, British researcher Wendy Emberson's seminal 1999 study on joystick-related illnesses or Julius Bonis "Acute Wiitis", published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2007. Richard Robinson, Dominic Barron, Andrew Grainger, and Ramakrishnan Venkatesh wrote about the horrors of "Wii Knee" in *Emergency Radiology* (2008), while Susan Robertson, Jane Leonard and Alex J

Chamberlain discussed a syndrome known as "PlayStation Purpura" in the *Australasian Journal of Dermatology* (2010). Using dermoscopy, dermatologists found point-like hemorrhages and onycholysis (grave nail damage) in patients affected by game-induced hyperkeratosis. Video games can cause "physical agony", concluded a late 1990s report by the BBC. And in 2005, the *South African Medical Journal* published the findings of Safura Abdool Karim on PlayStation gaming ("From 'playstation thumb' to 'cellphone thumb': the new epidemic



Game Orthopedics: Cast#1
(2011)
joypad and silicone,
15x17x10 cm

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Game Arthritis



Atari Skinning, (2011),
Playstation Thumb, (2011),
WASD Syndrome, (2011),
First-Person Shooter Carpal Tunnel (2011),
Nintendo Arthritis, (2011),
3D Optical Disorder (3DOD), (2011).
 C-Print, 50x66 cm

us that many diseases are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Similarly, in *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (2010), sociologist Ethan Watters wrote that several conditions created by the toxic synergy between big pharma and mass media have gradually become “real”. Finally, several influential movies - e.g. *Bug* (William Friedkin, 2006), *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2008), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) - have pre-mediated the epidemic of 21st century techno-diseases like Morgellons, a condition that may or may not exist, but certainly has created massive disruption among the population, as Will Storr reported in *The Guardian* in May 2011.

Often dismissed as urban legends, the pathologies collectively known as **Game Arthritis** lie at the intersection of the physical and the metaphysical, in the interstices between scientific research and *arthritic*, pardon, artistic experimentation. Subverting McLuhan’s original message, we came to realize that technologies greatly damage our central nervous system, arms, hands, and fingers. Rather than expanding our faculties, making us posthuman, they force us into a subhuman condition. At the end of our investigation, we concluded that there cannot be an effective remedy for a non-existent syndrome. At the same time, there is no worse condition that one which cannot be cured.

Matteo Bittanti + IOCOSE
Game Arthritis

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in teenagers”), which concluded that gaming can be extremely harmful to players of all ages. These phenomena are becoming more and more visible due to the increasing popularity of gaming, but they are by no means recent. The first documented cases can be found in literature as early as the 1970s, when the Atari 2600 was introduced onto the market. It is hard not to see the irony behind this epidemic: the pathologies of the digital age seem to affect mostly hands, fingers, arms. Digital, after all,

comes from the Latin *digit*, meaning number, but also finger. And yet, the overabundance of information about game pathologies is counter-balanced by a bizarre lack of concern by the medical industry and by the authorities. Many doctors and psychiatrist dismiss these conditions as self-inflicted, confining them to a niche of delusional, paranoid subjects - thus implying that gamers are mentally instable to begin with. Intrigued by this paradox, we decided to investigate.

In 2011, we successfully made contact with several individuals affected by videogame-related disorders. The result is Game Arthritis. It was not easy to document a phenomenon that the medical establishment has been denying for decades. We suspect that the official refutation is meant to prevent mass panics. Dermatologists, psychiatrics, and doctors spoke to us on condition of anonymity. To clarify, the harmful nature of gaming has been long demonstrated. Like

tobacco and radiation, gaming is unmistakably unhealthy. In several speeches, President Barack Obama has recommended the youth of America to “unplug”, suggesting that videogames are one of the primary causes of obesity in the US. At the same time, **Game Arthritis** is symptomatic of a deeper malaise: mass media play a crucial role in generating anxiety, obsessions, and phobias regarding dubious pathologies. Michel Foucault cogently warned

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