

Nibia and the ludic component.

Tomás Lorenzo

Associate Professor

Laboratorio de Medios, Facultad de Ingeniería, Universidad de la República

tomas@laurenzo.net

Abstract

In this paper, an interactive art installation –*Nibia*– is presented. The piece questions the relationship between Uruguayan society and its past, through a locally well-known image.

The piece, in spite of being explicitly interactive and engaging for its users, is not perceived as a video game of sorts, but, instead, induces to reflection and awe.

We propose that this occurs thanks to a combination of factors: the density of the message, the natural interaction, and the aesthetic setup.

Background

Nibia Sabalsagaray (1949 - 1974) was a twenty-four years old Uruguayan literature teacher and social activist, tortured and killed in captivity at the beginning of the last military dictatorship (1973-1985) in Uruguay.

The Military Justice categorized this crime as a suicide by hanging.

Despite the validity of Uruguayan Law 15.848 (*Ley de Caducidad*) that granted amnesty to military responsible for crimes committed during the dictatorship, in September 2004, Sabalsagaray's sister presented to the Uruguayan Justice a letter requesting the change of the categorization of the expedient, from suicide to murder, and the identification and punishment of those responsible.

Since the submission of the letter, there were systematic attempts to stop it, archive it, and thus deny the application: it was not accepted initially by the Court, then it was argued that it had to be presented in the same office that was involved in 1974, which no longer exists, then Judge Vomero dismisses it because of Law 15.848, but is finally accepted because of the request of change of categorization.

It arrived to the Executive, Dr. Guianze is assigned as a prosecutor and Vomero again drops the file. Guianze requested a historic autopsy, the judge denied it. This denial is reversed and the autopsy is performed.

In 2008 Vomero indicates that the file should be closed. Guianze demands that it is unconstitutional to apply the Law 15.848 in this case. The Prosecutor of the Court rejects the proposition. Nibia's sister, Stella, requests again and, thanks to her being family, its accepted, and arrives to the Executive, which rules that the Law is unconstitutional.

The Legislative and the General Assembly reaffirm it: but those pronouncements had no legal effects. The Prosecutor of the Court and the Court endorse and legitimizes the proposition and declared the Law unconstitutional in October 2009.

In 2009, for the first time, an active General, Dalmao, is summoned to appear before the court.

On November 8, 2010, Judge Vomero indicted General Dalmao and retired Colonel Chialanza to be responsible for the especially aggravated murder of Nibia Sabalsagaray.

As of June 2011, both military are in the process of appealing the sentence.

In spite of the numerous attempts to deny the request to the Court, the case, sometimes for reasons more circumstantial or accidental, as the assignment of Guianze as prosecutor, and many others by the strength of the presented evidence, and the work of those involved has advanced in its path.

The work

The project presented is an interactive installation¹ that questions the relationship between (Uruguayan) society and the recent past, through recontextualization and redefinition of a particular image.

It tries to explicit, moreover, that the relationship with the recent past and its iconography is never foreign: the military dictatorship was not an exogenous phenomenon but a direct product of the activities of those who carried it out and those who supported it. The society is never passive. The current reading that we all are chemically pure victims, that –as victims twinned by the painful shared past– the only thing to do is find the best way to turn the page, is, at best, reductionist.

The work consists of a room, dark, with black walls, with only one entrance, blinded by double black curtains.

Hanging towards the end of the room, there is a projection of the locally very well known picture of Sabalsagaray, in black and white (it has a sepia tint). Two meters ahead of the projection, there is a wooden stool with a standard lighter on top of it.

In this site may only enter one person at a time.

¹ Video documentation can be seen at <http://www.vimeo.com/17309160>



Fig 1. Nibia Sabalsagaray

If this person decides to take the lighter and lights it, the picture in the area corresponding to the projection of the position of the lighter onto the image begins to burn, disappearing, becoming black.



Fig 2. Burning Process

But it is impossible to burn the image completely: a short time after a zone is burnt, it is reconstructed, allowing the image to reappear, not letting it ever fade completely.

Outside the room, a four-paragraph text with a condensed version of the *Background* section of this paper is displayed. It is to note that the spectator is confronted with the text before entering the room.

The relationship between the spectator and the image is drastically resignified, by making explicit the underlying interaction between the graphic representation and its consumption.

By allowing the spectator to try to burn the image, it is not only said that there are always people who burn it (and that in a way –perhaps distant– we all are), but also that the perception of any cultural phenomenon is never apolitical.

But, analogously to the expedient submitted to the Justice, the image persists, resurges, perhaps by itself.



Fig 3. *Nibia*, 2010, Tomás Laurenzo, installation. (Owner of the image).

Technical details

The construction of the piece presented three specific technical difficulties: the detection and tracking of the lighter's fire, the burning simulation and the image reconstruction.

The detection and tracking is done using either a Wii Remote controller (a device for videogame control produced by Nintendo), which contains an infrared camera and detects up to four infrared sources, or by using a PlayStation Eye camera and segmenting the image blob produced by the fire.

All the software programming, including the burning simulation and the image reconstruction was done in C++, using OpenFrameworks² a creative programming framework.

The burning simulation is done by manipulating the pixel values (using an algorithm similar to the burning effect of traditional of image manipulation software), following an upward motion constructed by randomly mixing several motion paths recorded using a drawing tablet.

² <http://openframeworks.cc>



Fig 4. *Nibia*, 2010, Tomás Laurenzo, installation. (Owner of the image).
In this picture the lights are on so that the stool, camera, and spectator can be seen. In the installation, the lights are off, being the projection the only source of light.

The reconstruction is done directly: after a certain amount of time without interaction, the pixels gradually recover they original colour.

The ludic component

Much has been said in the literature about the artistic component of videogames and the influence that they may have (and do have) in different more established art forms.

This is said by usually assuming that the potential expansion of the universe of possibilities and of what may be interpreted by the spectator is consistent with the artist's interests, id est, it is assumed that the mapping between the language of video games and the the artwork and its consumption is consistent with the artist's desires and plans³.

This is very often true, as an example, films like *Run Lola Run*, *Being John Malkovich*, *The Matrix*, [1] and many more have had a determining impact by videogames aesthetics and dynamics, both in the aesthetic characteristics of the pieces, as in the framework that the public uses for its consumption.

This mapping from videogames to other art realms not only conveys the aforementioned expansion but also carries an interpretation framework that situates the spectator in a ludic attitude. This is especially true for interactive art pieces: the user of the art piece expects to play with the piece, usually trying to figure out how it works (as Norman puts it: people are explanatory creatures [2]).

³ We must here avoid falling into the discussion of how relevant the artist's desires are for the artwork itself, nor should we insist in the Duchampian truth that is the spectator who finishes the art piece, which implies that the way the artist's desires or techniques impact in the final product is unpredictable.

Such attitude towards interactive artworks may or may not be consonant with the artist's intention. However, in the latter case, one question remains: what characteristics an interactive art piece should have in order to be engaging but not playful?

Even if we don't have an answer for that question, we believe⁴ that in *Nibia*, such engagement is achieved by a combination of factors: the piece's background, the text, the aesthetic setup and the ambivalence of the affordances.

The first two factors are very straightforward: the piece's socio-political background is such that, especially in a context where Sabalsagaray's death is well known, it situates the spectator in a more reflective state.

This is reinforced by the text that is shown by the entrance of the installation.

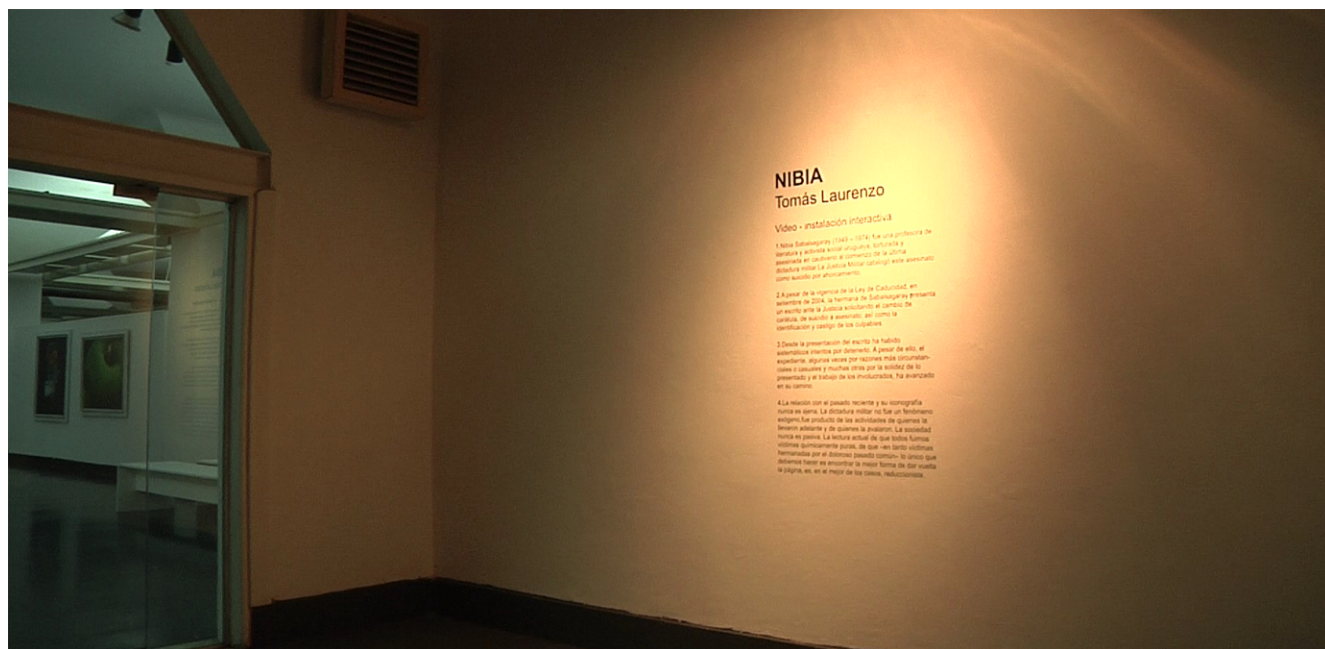


Fig 5. The text as shown in the Subte Municipal Museum, Montevideo, 2010.

In the same vein, the aesthetic setup (a dark room, Sabalsagaray's picture floating in the middle of the room) naturally conveys images of shrines and, in the context of a museum, situates the spectator in a contemplative state.

However, none of these factors tackles the interactive aspects of the piece, and it is in the interaction setup where the fine line between engagement and playing is drawn.

In *Nibia*, everything is intrinsically ambivalent (in consonance with the role that society has played in cases such as Sabalsagaray's).

Interactive artefacts' affordances invite the user to use them. In *Nibia*, the artefact –the lighter– is situated on top of the stool, with no predictable

⁴ It is to be noted that no formal quantitative research has been performed; instead, this conclusion is based on informal interviews carried on by this paper's author, and on the observation of the audience at the exhibition of the piece in two Uruguayan Museums.

connection with the rest of the oeuvre. In addition, its unnatural situation creates a tension (what is it doing there? is the user expected to use it?) that calls for the spectator attention (although it is the image's extremely powerful presence what dominates the scene).

This ambivalence is also present in the stool⁵, its affordance is very clear, but the role it plays in the piece is not.

When (or, better, if) the spectator decides to use the lighter, the direct manipulation type of response of the piece generates two different, yet simultaneous effects in the user: the amazement at the *magical* reaction is subdued by its naturalness: the simulation of the image's burning is convincing enough for the user to forget the technical aspects allowing him or her to focus on the *meaning* of the action.

If they feel that they are actually burning the image, then it is necessary to reflect on why, instead on how.

References

[1] Henry Jenkins, "Art Form for the Digital Age" in *Technology Review* (Boston: MIT, September/October 2000).

[2] Donald Norman "The Psychology of Everyday Things". (London: Basic Books, 1988)

⁵ The stool was chosen partially because this ambivalence, and in part because it is a type of stool typical of the School of Architecture of Montevideo, where Sabalsagaray's partner was studying at the moment of her death.