# Organizing the performativity of a creative vision: a longitudinal study (1987-2013) of the rationalization of game design at Ubisoft

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# ORGANIZING THE PERFORMATIVITY OF A CREATIVE VISION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY (1987-2013) OF THE RATIONALIZATION OF GAME DESIGN AT UBISOFT

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***In the context of a structuring video game industry and growing game development teams, this article explores how Ubisoft creates, develops and deploys a game design vision. The authors highlight the importance of creative leadership by showing the role of translators and trainers in coupling the leader's vision to his or her socio-material presence, as well as the importance of the density of devices to implement this vision.***

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The recent literature on discursive leadership has shifted traditional focus of literature on leadership from a leader's abilities, such as personality traits or charisma, to his interactions with followers and institutional settings, and his material presence. To date, however, little work

has thoroughly examined leadership in creative industries in this perspective[1], i.e. the capacity of a leader to implement his creative vision. Yet, this is the objective of any leader: to become "performative", i.e. to shape the organization according to his own vision[2].

This questioning is of particular interest within the context of creative industries[3]. Indeed, in these industries, creation is central and often guided by an individual vision (of the "creator"). Nevertheless, it is also a collective activity[4] and the creator's vision is difficult to formulate and share. Following Orson Welles's quotation – "A writer needs a pen, an artist needs a brush, but a filmmaker needs an army", – this article focuses on the organization as a collective creation tool for the creator. In this context, the creator becomes a creative leader[5] whose role is no longer to create by himself, but to imbue the organization with his vision. However, following Becker's conception of "art world"[6], scholars have considered creation as a collective action formed through the coordination of many individuals. This perspective examines the structure of relationships that enable collective entities gathered in organizations to perform creation activities. By highlighting the role of devices such as communities[7], knowledge brokers[8], visual artifacts[9], organizational routines[10] and processes[11], research following this perspective analyzes mechanisms aimed at coordinating collective creation across organizations. So, how does organizing proceed when creation is both collective and individual? This study of leadership in creative industries moves from a purely individualist

[1] For a literature review, see: C. Mainemelis, R. Kark, O. Epitropaki, "Creative Leadership: A Multi-Context Conceptualization", *Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2015, p. 393-482.
[2] We define vision as "a picture of the desirable future" for the company and/or its products, a statement that determines "where you want to go and what it will look like when you get there". We borrow this definition from Senge's "The Shared Vision". See P. Senge (ed.), *The Fifth Discipline, the Art and Practice of Learning Organizations*, London, Century Business 1990, p. 358.
[3] R. E. Caves, *Creative industries: contracts between art and commerce*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000.
[4] H. S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, ; P.-M. Menger, *The Economics of Creativity – Art and Achievement Under Uncertainty*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014.
[5] The denomination of the position in the company is Chief Creative Officer (CCO). To avoid confusion with the acronym of the literature of Communication as Constitutive Organization (CCO), we use "creative leader" in this article.
[6] H. Becker, *Art Worlds*, *op. cit.*
[7] P. Cohendet, L. Simon, "Playing across the playground: paradoxes of knowledge creation in the videogame firm", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 28, n° 5, 2007, p. 587-605.
[8] P. Chiambaretto, D. Massé, N. Mirc, " 'All for One and One for All?' – Knowledge broker roles in managing tensions of internal coopetition: The Ubisoft case", *Research Policy* vol. 48, n° 3, p. 584-600.
[9] N. Endrissat, G. Islam, C. Noppeney, "Visual organizing: Balancing coordination and creative freedom via mood boards", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 69, n° 7, 2016, p. 2353-2362.
[10] P. Cohendet, L. Simon, "Always Playable: Recombining Routines for Creative Efficiency at Ubisoft Montreal's Video Game Studio", *Organization Science*, vol. 27, n° 3, 2016, p. 614-632.
[11] P. Lê, D. Massé, T. Paris, "Technological Change at the Heart of the Creative Process: Insights From the Videogame Industry", *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 15, n° 2, 2013, p. 45-60.

model of creation towards an understanding of how it is performed in an organization, through a multiplicity of organizing devices.

Studying whether and how a leader's vision succeeds or fails to shape an organization and how it articulates individual and collective dimensions of leadership raises methodological and empirical challenges. To address these challenges, we conducted a longitudinal case study focused on a leader's vision in a video game company, Ubisoft. We built our analysis on unique and rich empirical material gathered through field work, semi-structured interviews and archival data of Ubisoft. This videogame publisher was founded by the five Guillemot brothers in 1986 in a small village in Brittany called Carentoir. In a few years, the number of small French game publishers grew, but only a few managed to gain a solid position in the market. Ubisoft, one of these happy few, became an international firm, went public in 1995, and is now one of the three largest independent game publishers in the world (behind Activision-Blizzard and Electronic Arts).

In 2022, Ubisoft is widely recognized in the gaming industry for having developed and installed strong brands with significant and lasting success, for instance *Assassin's Creed*, *Raving Rabbits* and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*. The development of Ubisoft's games and its editorial line have long been inspired by the man who held the position of worldwide creative director between 2000 and 2020, and whom we refer to in the following as the "creative leader". During twenty years, he initiated, nourished and deployed a unique vision of game development based on an analysis of the player's experience. Interestingly enough, this happened in a context of the progressive professionalization of the video game industry (in the 1990s) where there is no convention in terms of video game creation and in particular game design. There was no school and university to train video game creators. The reflection on methodologies and creation practices was therefore carried out by industry players such as Ubisoft. In this context, Ubisoft experienced various profound organizational changes over the years, putting to the test the creative leader's vision on video game creation. One of the main challenges was the international growth of the firm and the increasing organizational gap or distance between the leader and the rest of the organization.

Our results show that at first, when the leader first expresses his singular vision of video game creation (i.e. its principles, rules and objectives), it succeeds to shape the organization because of direct communication with followers. But then its performativity is quickly challenged by organizational growth and resulting organizational distance between the leader and his teams of game designers. At that stage, a translation phase seems necessary because the creative vision appears very personal and insufficiently formalized. This translation occurs

through the setting up of an internal Game Lab of "translators". Translators implement several socio-material devices. But our case study shows that followers still fail to adopt the creative vision then. Deployment of the vision truly occurs when training sessions are organized, to facilitate the vision's adoption.

Our paper makes several contributions to the literature on leadership and on creative industries. We first provide empirical evidence that in that field, leadership can be constituted of both 1) human and nonhuman interactions through socio-material devices (connecting with the Communication as Constitutive of Organization – CCO – literature); and 2) of coordination mechanisms (connecting with the structurationist studies of leadership). We therefore bridge the gap between two strands of the literature on leadership. We then concretely highlight the conditions under which organizational distance may impede leadership's performativity, resulting in a creative vision becoming orphan in the organization. Ultimately, we identify devices density and devices adoption as two crucial conditions for successfully performing leadership in the creative industries in a context of high organizational distance.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a succinct overview of recent leadership studies and communication as constitutive of organization approaches. We then present our methodology before describing our analysis based on the three stages in the performativity of the leader's vision. The discussion concludes with our contributions.

## 1. USING A "COMMUNICATION AS CONSTITUTIVE OF ORGANIZATION" LENS TO UNDERSTAND LEADERSHIP

Originally seen as a unique ability, leadership has become a complex and multiform concept that the literature has tackled from various angles. Communication approaches to discursive leadership study how leadership may impact an organization through influential acts or socio-materiality.

### 1.1. Leadership: from an ability to interaction with context

The prevailing literature in management suggests that leadership is a set of abilities or personality traits that makes the leader an influent individual[12]. In this context, functionalist studies aim at understanding correlations in leadership, between personality features and

[12] B. M. Bass, "From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision", *Organizational Dynamics*, vol. 18, n° 3, 1990, p. 19-31.

leadership aptitudes, exploring what makes a good leader[13] and what the different forms of leadership are[14].

A growing body of literature examines leadership not as an individual ability, but as a collective phenomenon that can be distributed and shared[15] and which involves a form of performance in organizations[16]. This approach is illustrated through the many diverse labels used to transcend the heroic and romantic view of leadership and to link the leader with his organization, such as: performing leadership[17], transformational leadership[18], visionary leadership[19], distributed leadership[20], and discursive leadership[21].

In that vein, Edward Peck, Timothy Freeman, Perri Six and Helen Dickinson[22] analyze the relationship between leaders, followers and their institutional settings. They distinguish between two approaches to "performing leadership", i.e. performing in the sense of efficiency, or performing in the sense of happenings. Both approaches strongly relate to institutional contexts that set the parameters of such performances, but develop into different research agendas. In leadership as performance (i.e. happenings), one of the major issues is to analyze performative "repertoires" (i.e. arrangements of speeches, texts and actions) that leaders use to repeat their narratives and thus keeping their followers committed.

More recently, Mats Alvesson and André Spicer[23] have argued in favor of a more critical approach to leadership that addresses the tensions of contemporary leadership. They purport that the leader has to find a balance between authority as a creative source of power and a harmful one, through what they call "deliberative leadership," i.e. collective decisions about when and how more individual authority is needed. Following this line of thought, Nancy H.

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[13] T. Trottier, V. W. Montgomery, W. XiaoHu, "Examining the Nature and Significance of Leadership in Government Organization", *Public Administration Review*, vol. 68, n° 2, 2008, p. 319-333.
[14] V. H. Vroom, A. G. Jago, "The role of the situation in leadership", *American Psychologist*, vol. 62, n° 1, 2007, p. 17-24.
[15] J.-L. Denis, A. Langley, V. Sergi, "Leadership in the Plural", *The Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2012, p. 211-283.
[16] E. Peck, T. Freeman, P. Six, H. Dickinson "Performing leadership: Towards a new research agenda in leadership studies?", *Leadership*, vol. 5, n° 1, 2009, p. 25-40 ; E. Peck, H. Dickinson, *Performing Leadership*, London, Palgrave McMillan, 2009.
[17] F. Allard-Poesi, Y. Giordano, "Performing Leadership", *M@n@gement*, vol. 18, n° 2, 2015, p. 102-131.
[18] B. M. Bass, "From transactional to transformational leadership", *op. cit.*
[19] F. Westley, H. Mintzberg "Visionary leadership and strategic management", *Strategic management journal*, vol. 10, n° 1, 1989, p. 17-32.
[20] R. Bolden, "Distributed Leadership in Organizations: A Review of Theory and Research: Distributed Leadership in Organizations", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. 13, n° 3, 2011, p. 251-269.
[21] G. T. Fairhurst, *Discursive Leadership: In Conversation with Leadership Psychology*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2007.
[22] E. Peck, T. Freeman, P. Six, H. Dickinson, "Performing leadership", *op. cit.*
[23] M. Alvesson, A. Spicer "Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity", *Human Relations*, vol. 65, n° 3, 2012, p. 367-390.

Harding, Jackie Ford and Hugh Lee[24] develop a theory of resistance in organization studies to analyze the behaviors of employees who refuse to submit to forms of power and oppression in organizations. They do so by studying the "performative constitution" of managerial resistance. They refer to an approach developed by Judith Butler[25] where performativity constitutes the self based on political dimensions, and Karen Barad's "new materialism"[26], based on material contexts. The authors argue that both dimensions (political and material) are needed in order to develop a performative theory of resistance.

**1.2. Performativity in organizations**

This concept of performativity has grown recently in organization and management studies[27] and found a rich development in the school of Montreal, named "Communication as Constitutive of Organizations" (CCO)[28]. The CCO approach studies organizations not only as a given state or a set of members and stable activities, but as a set of processes centered around communication, dis/ordering organizations[29]. CCO studies how communication can perform, i.e. how it can bring organization into being through textual agency, and communication events[30]. Indeed, organizations result from continuous processes of superposition, interconnexion and textual and speech agency[31]. As Lars Thøger Christensen and Joep Cornelissen observe, "Depending on the connections that individuals make while communicating, the organization and its identity [are] constructed rather than antecedently given or residing in individuals"[32].

[24] N. H. Harding, J. Ford, H. Lee "Towards a Performative Theory of Resistance: Senior Managers and Revolting Subject(ivitie)s", *Organization Studies*, 2017, p. 1209–1232.
[25] J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, London, Routledge, 1997.
[26] K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.
[27] J. P. Gond, L. Cabantous, N. H. Harding, M. Learmonth, "What Do We Mean by Performativity in Organizational and Management Theory? The Uses and Abuses of Performativity: Organizing Performativity", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 2015, p. 1-24.
[28] *Ibid*.
[29] *Ibid.* See also: K. L. Ashcraft, T.R. Kuhn, F. Cooren, "Constitutional Amendments: 'Materializing' Organizational Communication", *Academy of Management Annals*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2009, p. 1-64 ; L. L. Putnam, A. M. Nicotera (eds.), *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication*, New York, Routledge, 2009; A. Wright, "Organizational routines as embodied performatives: A communication as constitutive of organization perspective", *Organization*, vol. 23, n° 2, 2014, p. 147-163 ; C. Vásquez, T. Kuhn, (eds.), *Dis/organization as communication: Exploring the disordering, disruptive and chaotic properties of communication*, New York, Routledge, 2019.
[30] K. L. Ashcraft, T. R. Kuhn, F. Coorens, "Constitutional Amendments", *op. cit.* ; F. Cooren , "Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings", *Organization*, vol 11, n° 3, 2004, p. 373-393.
[31] F. Allard-Poesi, Y. Giordano, "Performing Leadership", *op. cit.*
[32] L. T. Christensen, C. Joep, "Bridging Corporate and Organizational Communication: Review, Development and a Look to the Future", *Management Communication Quarterly*, vol. 25, n° 3, 2011, p. 405-406.

In this performativity approach, where communication is a key concept for organizational change, language has a special role by giving form to organizations[33]. Only material and concrete communication anchors can produce organizations[34]. Communication therefore must materialize in concrete processes[35], in objects, in architectural sites, or in socio-material devices such as emails or phone messages[36]. According to the CCO approach, it is through a set of communication practices that organizations not only come into being[37], but also stabilize their organizationality, i.e. identity and actorhood[38].

### 1.3. Communication approaches to discursive leadership

Various studies of leadership have developed a communication approach. For instance, transmissional leadership focuses on leadership as the transmission of a message, through inputs, processes and outputs [39]. Also relying on the power of language, Mark Learmonth[40] highlights the power of giving jobs specific titles, such as leadership, management, and administration. These words act as discursive resources that shape organizations. Furthermore, through communication, it is leadership itself that can perform within a team[41].

Jackie Ford, Nancy Harding, Sarah Gilmore and Sur Richardson's[42] further conceive leadership as a set of material presences. Their paper builds on K. Barad's[43] materialist theory to analyze micro-dynamics, by which a leader's body is constituted through material presence, arguing that leaders must materialize themselves as such in organizations [44].

Furthermore, the CCO approach to leadership provides an understanding of leadership as a combination of microprocesses and influential acts [45]. There are two main communities:

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[33] L. T. Christensen, M. Morsing, O. Thyssen "CSR as aspirational talk", *Organization*, vol. 20, n° 3, 2013, p. 372-393; J. R. Taylor, F. Cooren, "What makes communication 'organizational'?: How the many voices of a collectivity become the one voice of an organization", *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 27, n° 4, 1997, p. 409-438.
[34] F. Cooren, "Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings", *op. cit.*
[35] *Ibid.* See also K. L. Ashcraft, *et al*., "Constitutional Amendments…".
[36] F. Allard-Poesi, Y. Giordano, "Performing Leadership", *op. cit.*
[37] K. E. Weick, K.M. Sutcliffe, D. D. Obstfeld, "Organizing and the process of sensemaking", *Organization science*, vol. 16, n° 4, 2005, p. 409-421.
[38] L. Dobusch, D. Schoeneborn, "Fluidity, identity, and organizationality: The communicative constitution of Anonymous", *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 52, n° 8, 2015, p. 1005-1035.
[39] C. E. Shannon, W. Weaver, *The mathematical theory of information*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1949; F. Westley, H. Mintzberg "Visionary leadership and strategic management", *Strategic management journal*, vol. 10, n° 1, 1989, p. 17-32, *op. cit.*
[40] "Doing things with words: The case of 'management'and 'administration' ", *Public Administration*, vol. 83, n° 3, 2005, p. 617-637.
[41] F. Allard-Poesi, Y. Giordano, "Performing Leadership", *op. cit.*
[42] J. Ford, N. H. Harding, S. Gilmore, S. Richardson "Becoming the Leader: Leadership as Material Presence", *Organization Studies*, 2017, p. 1553-1571.
[43] K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, *op. cit.*
[44] J. Ford *et al.*, "Becoming the Leader: Leadership as Material Presence", *op. cit.*
[45] G. T. Fairhurst, S. L. Connaughton, "Leadership: A communicative perspective", *op. cit.*

the CCO School, which was discussed earlier, and the structurationist studies approach[46]. In the CCO School, nonhuman agency plays a key role in leadership, especially during crises[47]. Fairhurst's study[48] shows that Rudy Giuliani's charisma during 9/11 was a result of interactions between human and nonhuman agents, such as texts. These studies highlight the importance of socio-material devices. Conversely, the structurationist branch of CCO tends to focus on rules, resources and activity coordination rather than nonhuman agency[49].

To date, however, little work has thoroughly examined whether a leader's vision succeeds or fails to transform an organization and how it is concretely enacted. Yet, this is the objective of any leader: to become "performative," i.e. to shape the organization according to his own personal vision. As a result, scholarship endorses a narrative of leadership that either focuses on rules and activity coordination or on socio-material devices[50]. Ultimately, this leads to a fragmented conceptualization of leadership and its performance in organizations. This perspective falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding of how a leader's vision becomes performative. In this paper, we propose to bridge the gap between the two branches of CCO and their approaches to leadership, in order to study leadership as a combination of rules, coordination activities and human and nonhuman agency.

**Comentado [A1]:** Cette phrase apparaît déjà plus haut dans le texte

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This article is based on a single case study of Ubisoft, a leader in the video game industry. Given this context, and in order to understand a phenomenon that has received little attention in the literature, a single case study – in which dynamic processes are studied in organizations – appears to be the most suitable method to investigate our question[51]. In the following description, we clarify the way we collected and analyzed data, and how we built our analytical framework. This research project was developed in collaboration with the publishing

[46] *Ibid.*
[47] G. T. Fairhurst, *Discursive Leadership… op. cit.*; G. T. Fairhurst, F. Cooren, "Leadership as the hybrid production of presence (s)", *Leadership*, vol. 5, n° 4, 2009, p. 469-490.
[48] *Ibid*.
[49] R. D. McPhee, P. Zaug "The communicative constitution of organizations", *The Electronic Journal of Communication*, vol. 10, 2000, p. 1-16 ; L. L. Putnam, A. M. Nicotera et R. D. McPhee, "Introduction: communication constitutes organization", in L. L. Putnam, A. M. Nicotera (eds.) *Building Theories of Organizations: The Constitutive Role of Communication*, , New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 1-19.
[50] G. T. Fairhurst, F. Cooren, "Leadership as the hybrid production of presence (s)", *op. cit.*
[51] A. M. Pettigrew, "The character and significance of strategy process research", *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 13, n° S2, 1992, p. 5-16; A. H. Van De Ven, "Suggestions for studying strategy process: A research note", *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 13, n° 51, 1992, p. 169-188; R. K. Yin, *Case study research: design and methods*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2012.

and strategy departments at Ubisoft, whose goals were 1) to better understand the evolution of the company's game design practices and 2) to train staff and disseminate a creation approach that is unique to the company.

**2.1 Data collection protocol**

With the aim of analyzing the evolution of Ubisoft's design vision, we followed methods that allowed us to ensure a high level of rigor during our analysis[52] and to triangulate data from different sources. Interviews with people involved in game design (at different levels) at Ubisoft studios located in Montreal, Paris and Bucharest constitute the main source of data used in this article. We also collected secondary data from internal documents such as publishing department reports, training materials, information from an intranet site devoted to game design, PowerPoint presentations and videos. Other secondary data came from external sources, such as online magazines specialized in game design, press articles and books about the creation of certain games. This secondary data was used to triangulate the interviews and thus improve the reliability of the data.

This research started as an exploratory study in the form of six semi-structured interviews with directors and managers involved in areas related to innovation and game development (between May 2011 and December 2012 at the Paris head office). We were seeking to understand the company's context and the types of issues the organization faced in terms of game development, in order to translate it into a suitable research question. The researchers paid particular attention to the company's well-known capacity for creation and innovation and they expected it to be explained by the literature on innovation and creativity management. However, the interviews revealed a much more complex picture, where one of the company's leaders' established vision of game development appeared to play a critical role in the way the company produces its game design.

Therefore, we decided to focus our analysis on this leader's influence, the evolution of his vision and the associated game design practices. We sought to describe and explain a temporal sequence of events involved in a major organizational change for the company[53]. Following Jane Ritchie et al.[54] and Michael Q. Patton[55], we built our sample on an intentional selection criterion: the interviewees had to have a direct or indirect connection with game

[52] M. Gibbert, W. Ruigrok, "The 'what' and 'how' of case study rigor: Three strategies based on published research", *Organizational Research Methods*, vol. 13, n° 4, 2010, p. 710-737.
[53] A. H. Van de Ven, G. P. Huber, P. George, "Longitudinal Field Research Methods for Studying Processes of Organizational Change", *Organization Science*, vol. 1, n° 3, 1990, p. 213-219.
[54] L. Ritchie, L. Lewis, *Qualitative Research Practice*, London, Sage, 2013.
[55] M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage, 2002.

design at the company. Consequently, we carried out 32 semi-structured interviews (between November 2012 and September 2013) with directors/managers, vice-presidents, course instructors (design academy), gameplay programmers and game/level designers. To complete our data collection, we met with 9 directors/managers and 3 former employees in June 2013 to collect information thought to be lacking, as well as information on recent changes in the organization.

With the help of a company employee, the selection of interview subjects was carefully carried out to ensure diversity[56] in terms of hierarchy, seniority, geographic distribution and involvement at different times and levels in game design definition. Most of the interviews were carried out face-to-face in Paris and Montreal, the others, by video-conference. All interviews were transcribed. The interview protocol was the same for all interviews in order to facilitate the comparison of data and also coding. In order to describe and explain the evolution of the leader's influence and his vision in the company, we used a technique called "temporal bracketing"[57]. On a timeline, interviewees were asked to trace the stages and important events that have marked the history of game design practices and thinking at Ubisoft. For each stage they considered important, interviewees were asked to describe the history of the stage (How did it begin? How did the situation evolve? What were the results?), the key actors involved in these stages, and the communication and decision-making processes.

**2.2. Analysis and reliability of data**

Once collected, we analyzed the primary and secondary data in two stages: pre-coding and coding. In the pre-coding phase, we sought to identify the major stages that characterize the evolution of the game development's vision as perceived by the interviewees. Our analysis of the chronologies of events revealed three major phases: the creation, translation and deployment of the vision. We set up a work session with the directors and managers of Ubisoft to show them our analysis and get their feedback. As suggested by Michael Gibbert and Winfried Ruigrok[58], all of the data collected, the preliminary analysis and the notes taken during the work session were stored in the same place (online), so that it would be available to all the researchers involved in this study and also readily accessible for future analyses.

**Comentado [A2]:** Est-ce utile ?

[56] *Ibid.*
[57] A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, University of California Press, 1984.
[58] M. Gibbert, W. Ruigrok W., "The 'what' and 'how' of case study rigor…", *op. cit.*

Following an exploratory approach, we conducted a series of inductive coding[59]. Here, the aim was to identify categories related to the three distinct stages so as to better characterize the vision, means of communication and effects on the organization in each of the stages. For example, coding archival training documents helped characterize the translation stage through three types of formalization. Coding interview and questionnaire responses helped to specify the effects of training on the company's game development process. Finally, as suggested by Kathleen Eisenhart and Melissa E. Graeber[60], we organized the emerging categories into tables (see Tables 1 and 2) containing a description of the categories and quotes from the data that illustrate them.

## 3. THE UBISOFT CASE (1987-2013)[61]

Over the course of Ubisoft's history, the rationalization of game design was developed and implemented in the organization in three periods: the creation of this unique vision (1987–2000), its operational translation (2000–2010) and its deployment (2010–2013), summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Creation, translation and deployment of the vision in game design**

Comentado [A3]: Source ?

[59] D. R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data", *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol. 27, n° 2, 2006, p. 237-246.
[60] K. Eisenhart, M. E. Graeber "Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges", *Academy of management journal*, vol. 50, n° 1, 2007, p. 25-32.
[61] The boundaries of the corpus (1987-2013) correspond to the beginning of the reflection on the vision in terms of creation and the end of the efforts for its deployment by the company's headquarters. After 2013, the relay was then taken over in a decentralised manner by the studios around the world.

| | CREATION<br>1987 – 2000 | TRANSLATION<br>2000 – 2010 | DEPLOYMENT<br>2010 – 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Materialization of the vision | Intuitions based on empirical practice | Rationalization based on a meta-rule, common vocabulary and principles | Tools for thinking and conceptualizing through lists and matrices |
| Transfer mode | Informal (mentoring, tutoring) | Formal (documentation and guidelines via emails, PowerPoint, Excel files) | Formal (PowerPoint, video capsules, Excel files) + Informal (workshop, community of practice) |
| Method of communicating the vision | The leader and his proximity to teams (direct supervision) | Applied research laboratory in game design (Game Lab) | Specialized training on the practice of game design (Design Academy) |
| Organizational challenges | Growth of the organization (opening new studios, growth of teams) | Professionalization of the industry (learning and codification of a practice) | Coordination of development teams (spread the vision by sharing it in the organization) |
| Effects | Progressive dilution and loss of the vision in the organization (first failure of performativity) | Clarification and theorization of principles on the basis of good practices, but little impact on practices (second failure of performativity) | Convergence of teams toward a single vision, openness to new ideas, productivity |

**Comentado [A4]:** Il faudrait que l'image soit reproduite dans une meilleure définition

### 3.1. The creation of a unique vision (1987–2000)

At the end of the 1980s, the video game industry was relatively young. There was still no proper video game school and the industry was just starting to professionalize. Methods for developing a game (and game design, in particular) were far from universally established. Game designers were recruited on the basis of their solid empirical knowledge of video games and their creative flair, which resulted in great diversity in the video game market.

Before taking up a management position, the future creative leader began his career at Ubisoft in 1987 as a video game tester. In this rapidly growing company, he quickly came to supervise the development of the first games, some of which enjoyed significant commercial and critical success upon release. Based on his empirical practice of game design and development management, he gradually developed the foundations of a certain vision for video game development. For him, the starting point for a game should be the sensations that the game designer wants to offer the player, and these sensations should guide the entire development process. In his opinion, game design should also be thought out in a rational manner; in this case, the term "rational" refers to a logical and methodical way of setting a challenge for the player. While intuition plays a role in choosing the emotions the game designer seeks to procure for the player (creative intention), how these emotions are provided must be rooted in a rational approach. This logic gives rise to a specific sequence in game design: designers must first decide what sort of challenge they want the player to tackle, and then think about the resources they need to bring into play in order to realize this challenge.

This approach of game design, the creative leader's vision, stands in contrast to the rather "artisanal" practices that were prevalent in the video game industry of the 1990s. The importance of the interaction with the player broke with an industry that was originally dominated by games built on story and plot, where interaction with the player was considered secondary. At this stage, the creative leader's vision had not yet been formalized, but it was nevertheless rooted in an analysis of game development that would allow him to structure the common principles to organize game development in the company.

> "[The creative leader] is among the one percent who focus on gameplay and the sensations of the game... rather than on the story".– A creative director

In practice, the vision influences game development teams in the studios, particularly through the various comments he makes during informal discussions with the teams. The vision's dissemination throughout the company is facilitated by several elements, including: the direct supervision of the teams, the geographic proximity of the leader, and the human scale of the projects.

"[The creative leader] is a visionary. he shows the way and he may well say 'why don't you try it this way, it will be much better!' " – A game designer since the early days of the company

Comentado [A5]: •Ça fait un peu culte de la personnalité

In the 1990s, Ubisoft entered a significant growth phase after the *Rayman* game was released in 1995. This phase was characterized by the development of activities (opening new studios, growth of teams), but also structuration, specialization of tasks, and the implementation of control systems. Production was then organized in large projects with a "head office" structure based in Paris to handle support functions for the group. The teams were located in different studios around the world and mobilized for game projects that might have involved hundreds of people. Each studio worked on several projects and some projects involved several studios.

The growth of the teams and the major international expansion of the company had an impact on its game development activities. As Ubisoft gradually acquired studios around the world, direct supervision and informal discussions were no longer possible, making it hard to instill the creative vision in teams in a natural way. These circumstances diluted and impeded the dissemination of the leader's vision in the organization, which resulted in a great disparity in how the vision was perceived and operationalized in the company.

"The organization had grown so rapidly that it was difficult to fully understand what he wanted. We had recruited a lot of guys who had never worked with him before and they had no idea what his vision was […] Each project did what they wanted in their game design […]". – A former Game Designer, Ubisoft Montpellier.

For the first time in the organization's history, the vision failed to perform the creative process, mostly due to organizational growth and therefore organizational distance.

### 3.2. "Game Lab" and the operational translation of the vision (2000–2010)

In the early 2000s, the strong growth of the company prompted the head office to implement a "stage gate" type of project management process (Cooper, 1990). Part of the team in charge of a project would be asked to come and present their progress on the game to the publishing management team, headed by the creative leader, who would check the quality of the game and determine whether or not his vision was embodied in the form it took. However, this method revealed a failure in terms of the vision's performativity: the creative leader observed several recurring errors in game design, namely, his vision was not found in the games that were being put forward, and he had trouble communicating his intentions to the teams. From this analysis emerged creative leader's desire to formalize the vision and translate it operationally.

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> "I saw that we were always a little too empirical and that we needed to lay down some theoretical foundations, at least to know what a challenge is, what an ingredient of level design is, what an objective is.... The vocabulary was very fuzzy, and even the people on the teams got confused or gave wrong answers because they didn't know what we were talking about". – VP Creation (Montreal), former Director at Game Lab headquarters

A research department for game design called "Game Lab" was created to respond to the need of operationalizing this vision. Its three main objectives were:

1. To test creative leader's intuitions about game design that he had previously developed. The goal of this more scientific approach was to systematically analyze numerous successful video games (from Ubisoft, but also from the competition) and to determine what makes a good practice.
2. To enrich and translate this vision by defining principles and a clear editorial line (i.e. making it comprehensible and usable for all).
3. To constantly improve and experiment with game design practices. Users in the laboratory tested the games produced in the studios. The game lab gave feedback to the production teams regarding the results of the tests.

We describe below the development of this lab in more details.

After a few years of observing games in the laboratory, a certain number of principles emerged. They tackled what worked and what did not work in terms of game design, as well as the right responses to certain design issues. These principles addressed specific questions, such as how to present the player with a game objective or a control to move a character; the amount of information that players are capable of absorbing in a certain amount of time; how to address the challenge or present it to the player; and the choice of vocabulary. A gap appears between these effective design practices that emerged in the laboratory and the actual game development practices that were enacted in the studios. Game design errors were repeated in different Ubisoft games because the game designers failed to provide players with the right challenge.

In addition to these discrepancies between the formulation and dissemination of certain principles, there were communication difficulties between the publishing team and the project teams owing to unclear vocabulary. For example, it is quite complicated to explain the errors found during observations in the game lab regarding how to present a certain challenge to the player, if the very notion of "challenge" is not clearly defined and shared by all of the teams. To respond to this need of boosting the teams' design skills, the company tasked the director of the game lab with developing a more systematic approach to design and implementing it in the teams.

This assignment resulted in the formalization of the vision in three types of outcomes (see Table 2): a meta-rule (the affirmation of a development philosophy axiom), technical terminology (precise vocabulary about game design and its structure), and a specific logic to orchestrate game ingredients. The results of this reflection would serve as the foundation for rational methods in game design.

**Table 2. Three types of outcomes stemming from formalization in the laboratory**

| Types | Objective(s) | Example(s) from training materials |
|---|---|---|
| **META-RULE**<br>Affirmation of an axiom as a development philosophy | Coordinate efforts through an easy-to-remember slogan that gives the teams a common direction | "Form follows function" |
| **TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY**<br>Definition of vocabulary for game design and its structure | Improve communication regarding practices through a shared vocabulary and established conventions | "Gameplay is a set of game mechanics that are linked to a defined challenge."<br>"A game system is a set of gameplays, each of which comprises a set of mechanics." |
| **ROUTINE**<br>Orchestration of game ingredients | Monitor the player's learning through progressive, multiple, and varied challenges | "The objective is to keep the player in the flow [as per Csikszentmihalyi, (2013)], i.e. to present the right challenge at the right level of difficulty at the right time in the game in relation to the player's learning." |

**Comentado [A7]:** Source ?

**Comentado [A8]:** Comme plus haut :il faudrait que l'image apparaisse dans une meilleure définition

The three types of outcome are described formally and explicitly in written training documents (mainly in the form of PowerPoint presentations) available on an internal company website. Consequently, using this knowledge in creating games became one of the requirements to pass various stages in the game development process (stage-gate process). Project team members had to complete documents in the form of Excel tables in order to show that the principles stated in the training documents had been followed correctly. However, the teams did not fully embrace this procedure in designing new games and saw the obligation as an additional administrative constraint. Hence, we observe the development of perfunctory behaviors without an added value to the project, where the requirement to justify using these outcomes was *a posteriori* met: the documents were completed as quickly as possible to get them out of the way. These behaviors reveal a second failure of the vision to perform the creation process.

> "*I admit that nobody really understood anything about the files we had to send to the publishing department. We completed the files in a hurry, after the fact, just before passing the gate, hoping that and his team wouldn't look at them too closely.*" – *Creative director of a game project*

Management quickly realized that the new publishing directives were counter-productive for the development teams. They decided to relax the requirements and provide better support to the teams in using this knowledge – knowledge, which had not yet been fully understood by the game designers.

### 3.3. The "design academy" and deployment of the vision (2010-2013)

This second failure led to the idea of setting up a training program to operationally deploy the vision in all the company's studios. This deployment took the form of a two-week training course held at an external location. The training program operated regularly from January 2010 to April 2011 with two courses per month, which amounted to 25 courses over the entire period. The courses were delivered by three main trainers and occasional internal instructors to small groups of 15 to 25 people. The participants chosen for this training were people with jobs related to game design from all of the studios and company projects.

The two-week training course comprised sessions on theory during the first week and a practical application in the second week, aiming to integrate what had been learned. The goal of the theory courses was to develop a shared vocabulary and reflexes in game design for all of the teams. Each building block of the theory course was discussed during the presentation and then applied in small groups to an actual game. During the second week, everything that had been learned in the first week was applied to a concrete project to be realized in small groups: a paper version of a video game. The team gradually put together a prototype of the game using paper, toys, Lego pieces and figurines. This stage was a proficient way of verifying the efficacy of the experience offered to the player (proof of concept) in order to make any quick adjustments or improvements. The week ended with a presentation of the prototype to all the participants. The trainers and audience would then comment on the game and the formalization produced on paper.

During the training, certain participants suggested the development of tools to facilitate adoption of the methodology. For example, game development support tools were developed within the framework of the training. They were mainly based on the use of lists and matrices.

- The list of types of tool aimed to challenge the intuition of the designers. During the creative process, the game designer intuitively tends to use design responses that are similar to those from past experiences. Using lists enables the game designer to move past his first instinct in order to think about a range of possibilities for a given challenge.

Another tool was a variety matrix which aim was to compel the designer vary the ingredients of the game. The purpose of this exercise was to test new associations that may not be intuitive.

The use of lists and the variety matrix obliged game designers to make explicit their creative process, particularly, by getting them to specify the elements they used in the game while encouraging experimentation with new combinations of elements.

> The two weeks really gave us a framework to design a game, we learn a lot of principles and design tools that allows us to better align ourselves with 's expectations. – Senior game designer, Ubisoft Annecy

Following the deployment of these training courses in the company, the performativity of creative leader's vision in game design was finally observed in changes that affected several aspects of the development process: (1) there was a convergence of teams toward the same vision (2) the development process opened up to new ideas and (3) teams showed greater productivity in game development (Table 3).

**Table 3. Effects on the game creation process**

| Type of effect | Effects on the creation process | Illustrative quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Convergence | Identify design intentions | □ "It [the meta-rule] helps to identify the core substance of the gameplay and get rid of the superfluous"— A game designer .<br>□ "RDG [Rational Game Design] helps to determine exactly what the game is and the right challenge and their parameters that we want to offer the players"— A game designer<br>□ "The training gives you better control over player experience thanks to a set of elements that allow you to set and change the level of difficulty through the game... it is much clearer with this method" —A level designer |
| | Clarify and choose design intentions | □ "It is now much easier for me to explain my gameplay intentions because RGD allows you to make choices, to keep a design simple, and to have a much clearer image of the overall design of the game" — A level designer |
| Openness | Generate ideas and variety in the game | □ "Back on the project... using the variety table was a good way of finding new original gameplay situations" — A game designer<br>□ "Rational methods... give you a different way of thinking and seeing problems with fresh eyes"— A level designer<br>□ "On AC (name of the project), using the variety table was a good way of finding innovative ideas"— A game designer<br>□ "Paradoxically, when we use the RGD tables we create variety and we bring out new ideas by getting rid of some game mechanics rather than by adding them... It's rather counter-intuitive because we used to make the game more complex with a lot of elements, we no longer saw the originality and we tended to reuse the same recipes." |
| Productivity | Make prototypes quickly to identify problems sooner | □ "The idea is to test ideas and 'to fail as often as you can', but to do so in the prototyping stage" —A game designer<br>□ "The rational methods are very useful in the design stage and when the prototyping begins. Later, it helps to greatly reduce the endless iterations by doing more of the thinking upstream."— A game designer<br>□ "The greatest benefit is the common language, shared mainly by designers and programmers, and that's across the different studios" —A VP for Creation |
| | Improve communication | □ "RGD offers a common language, a shared comprehension of design between the different tasks, which simplifies communication when the team agrees to use it" —A game designer |

**Comentado [A9]:** Source ?

**Comentado [A10]:** Idem

The dissemination of the vision has led the teams to converge on the same vision of game development. With an easy-to-remember phrase, the formulation of a meta-rule (form follows function) encourages designers to identify upstream their true creative intentions. Adopting this meta-rule allows to articulate a much clearer image of what a game's design should be, notably, by setting clear objectives in terms of design. Refocusing on the form also obliges the creator to make choices from a range of possibilities, to concentrate on the essential and to keep the design simple and efficient.

Additionally, we observe a more receptive attitude to new ideas during the game development process (see illustrative quotes in table 3). The tools that were developed during the training sessions helped creators generate more diverse ideas. The variety matrix and the lists help combat the creators' tendency to rely on their first instincts in order to facilitate thinking differently, especially by prompting them to see design problems in a new way.

Finally, the dissemination stage has considerably increased productivity in game development. Starting from a situation where each team had its own game design vocabulary, the translation stage produced a common vocabulary that helped to improve communication in projects (between the different activities involved in design), and also to improve relations with the head office in Paris during project management meetings. Additionally, socio-material devices, such as paper versions of video games, contribute to productivity because they can be used to prototype an idea very quickly and evaluate it without entering the development phase. This practice significantly helps reduce iterations during production, by ruling out potential paths that may lead to problems. Therefore, one of the benefits is to have something "fail quickly" so as not to repeat the same errors in future stages of design and production.

## 4. DISCUSSION: PERFORMING LEADERSHIP IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, ORGANIZATIONAL DISTANCE AND DEVICES DENSITY

In this paper, we sought to better understand how a leader's vision could become performative, i.e. give shape to his organization. To do so, we carried out a longitudinal case study at Ubisoft, combining fieldwork, semi-structured interviews and archival data analysis. We aimed to identify the obstacles in the performativity of a creative leader in an organization, and how they could be overcome.

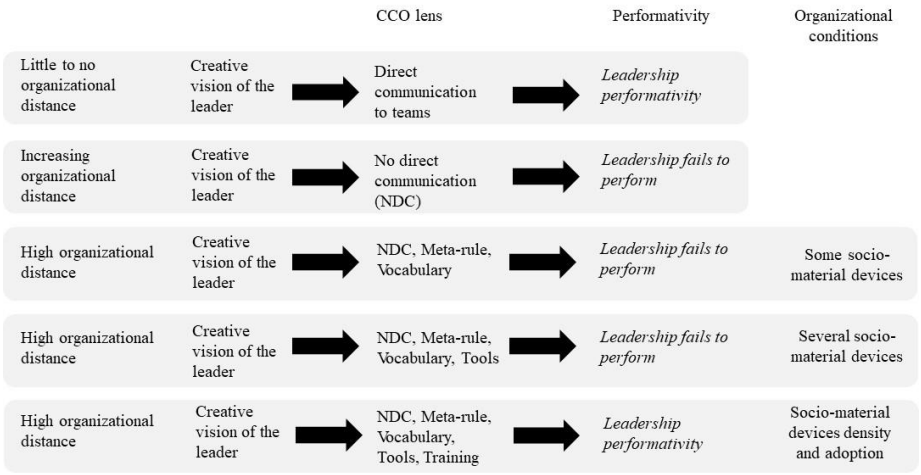
Firstly, we demonstrated how creative leader's creative vision first emerged as singular and strategic, but increasingly failed to perform as the organization grew in size. Therefore, we suggested that a vision's performativity is threatened by organizational distance and the lack of

formalization. We then showed how the vision's operational translation resulted in the creation of various communication devices, such as a meta-rule to guide game design or a common vocabulary among designers. Finally, we showed that these communication devices were not enough to ensure the vision's performativity. An ultimate and crucial step was to deploy an operationalized vision across the organization through decision-making tools and training courses.

By highlighting the three stages (creation, translation and deployment) that we identified in the performativity of the leader's vision, our results reveal the heterogeneous nature of the communication devices used by agents to make sense of, enact and legitimize his vision. In this section, we discuss our results and make several suggestions to guide future research. First, by focusing on the creative vision and by using a creative leader lens to understand performing leadership (as synthesized in figure 1), our paper makes several contributions to the literature.

**Figure 1. A creative leader approach to performing leadership in creative industries**

Comentado [A11]: Source ?




### 4.1. Performing leadership in creative industries: disseminating and enacting a vision in an organization

Our findings contribute to current discussions on leadership first by providing empirical evidence of leadership's performativity, i.e. the ability of a leader to disseminate and enact a creative vision. Recent literature has highlighted the central dimension of power in leadership

studies[62], thus somewhat neglecting its collective dimension. Our study highlights the specificities of leadership in creative industries, which call for clarifying and formalizing the creative vision (i.e. the translation phase) and for implementing it and ensuring its adoption in the organization (i.e. the deployment phase).

Second, our study contributes to these debates by bridging two conceptualizations of leadership. We have shown earlier that creative leader approaches to leadership have either viewed it as an interaction between human and nonhuman agents[63] or as a coordination activity focusing on rules and resources [64]. Our study empirically demonstrates that the success of leadership, i.e. its performativity on an organization, requires both aspects: interactions between humans and socio-material devices (e.g. paper games) and coordination mechanisms (e.g. common vocabulary and training). As such, our paper reconciles two sides of the story of leadership, by bringing together the CCO school and the structurationist studies, to understand the performativity of a leader's vision.

4.2. Organizational distance as a source of leadership performativity failure: when the creative vision becomes orphan

Next, we identify a major source of performativity failure. A caveat is in order here. Several drivers may challenge a vision's performativity, such as organizational cultural change or HR policies among others. However, in the case of CCO, the first clear obstacle to leadership performativity appears to be when the firm grows and introduces distance, whether it is physical, geographical or hierarchical, thus named organizational distance (see Figure 1).

Our study also contributes to the literature on creative industries by showing how a creative vision can become "orphan", when organizational distance creates a decoupling between a creative leader and its followers, as we synthesize in Figure 1. This builds on past works that have focused on the role of particular individuals in creative industries[65] and those

[62] M. Alvesson, A. Spicer, "Critical leadership studies…", *op. cit.*, N. H. Harding *et al*., "Towards a Performative Theory of Resistance", *op. cit.*

[63] G. T. Fairhurst., *Discursive Leadership, op. cit.* ; G. T. Fairhurst, F. Cooren, "Leadership as the Hybrid Production of Presence(s)", *Leadership*, vol. 5, n° 4, 2009, p. 469-490.

[64] R. D. McPhee, P. Zaug "The communicative constitution of organizations", *op. cit.* ; L. L. Putnam, A. M. Nicotera (ed.), *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication*, New York, Routledge, 2009; A. Wright, "Organizational routines as embodied performatives: A communication as constitutive of organization perspective", *Organization*, vol. 23, n° 2, 2014, p. 147-163, *op. cit.*

[65] J. L. Alvarez, C. Mazza, J. S. Pedersen, S. Svejenova, "Shielding Idiosyncrasy from Isomorphic Pressures...", *op. cit.*; M.-.L Gomez, I. Bouty, "The Emergence of an Influential Practice: Food for Thought", *Organization Studies*, vol. 32, n° 7, 2011, p. 921-940; S. Svejenova, C. Mazza , M. Planellas « Cooking up change in haute

that argue that creation is rather a consequence of collective action[66]. We show that performativity of an individual creative vision requires collective translation and deployment through several socio-material devices and trainings that bridge the gap between the individual and the organization.

### 4.3. Devices density and followers' training as conditions for creative leadership's performativity

We have argued that to perform, leadership requires both human and nonhuman interactions, as well as coordination mechanisms. Ultimately, the paper reveals that in a context of high organizational distance, two conditions are necessary for organizing leadership performativity. First, a multi-level socio-material devices density, i.e. an implementation and dissemination of devices at several levels of the organization and of various scope, is necessary (Figure 1).

But density without transmission is not sufficient. Therefore, adoption of vision and of the devices by the followers is crucial, happening through intensive, punctual training (Figure 1). Several actors, "translators" or trainers, participate in this density and adoption, thus enabling translation and deployment of the vision. All these actors, beyond CCO, act as internal knowledge brokers that interact with socio-material devices to enable leadership performativity.

## 5. CONCLUSION, LIMITS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Beyond these theoretical contributions, this case highlights a double pivotal period, on the one hand in the history of the video game, and on the other in that of a creative company. In the history of video games, the moment of the necessary structuring can be seen. After a period where empiricism and intuition prevailed, established companies, such as Ubisoft, began to try to formalize what made a game good, in a general way, and in a more singular way by questioning their identity. It also refers to a moment in the structuring of the industry where training is lagging behind and where companies must ensure it themselves.

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cuisine: Ferran Adrià as an institutional entrepreneur", *op. cit.*; S. Svejenova, M. Planellas, L. Vives, "An Individual Business Model in the Making: a Chef's Quest for Creative Freedom", *op. cit.*

[66] R. E. Caves, *Creative industries: contracts between art and commerce*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000; A. B. Hargadon, B.A. Bechky, "When Collections of Creatives Become Creative Collectives: A Field Study of Problem Solving at Work", *Organization Science*, vol. 17, n° 4, 2006, p. 484-500.

For Ubisoft, this moment in video game history is also a generic moment in the growth of a creative company. When they grow, in order to maintain their creativity in a context of more numerous and more complex projects, companies are led to move from an organization centered on individuals to one in which their skills are diffused throughout the processes and the organization. This is what is at stake with Ubisoft's desire to formalize its vision of what makes a good game.

It also underlines, in hollow, difficulties that account for the specificities of the creative industries vis-à-vis the growth of organizations. We can see how the temptation to rationalize can clash with the very dynamics of creativity, whether it is expressed by the difficulty of locking teams into a framework or the structurally dynamic dimension of the leader's vision. The main limitation of this work derives from the single case study nature of the research. This research reveals the existence of a novel configuration but cannot confirm the extent to which such a configuration exists in other situations. Further research might examine other potentially similar situations, such as the movie industry, where directors work with large production teams. Conducting empirical studies in other industries could challenge or enrich our framework. In this study, we developed an intra-organizational perspective on performativity.

However, we assume that under certain conditions, a performative leader's vision might affect organizations beyond the boundaries of his own organization. Thus, in expanding this notion, an interesting study would involve analyzing the video game industry as whole to assess whether this performative vision at Ubisoft had overflowing effect beyond the organization. Such an analysis would not only require identifying knowledge transfer mechanisms (in the form of boundary spanners) between organizations, but also bottlenecks that prevent a vision from spreading beyond organizational boundaries. Finally, an obvious direction for future research is to measure the effects of this performativity on other types of performance (e.g. financial) of the firm itself.