Playable Art: Towards the Legitimization of Videogames as an Art Form

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ABSTRACT

Like other popular art forms before them, videogames have, traditionally, been denied the attention and validation from most artistic practitioners and scholars. This paper discusses the process of legitimization of videogames as a form of art. It explores the characteristics that make videogames unique, as well as those that approximate them to more traditional artistic media. Concurrently to the evolution of commercial and experimental videogames, traditional artists have incorporated videogames into their practice, a development acknowledged by several institutions that have championed the presentation of games as an important part of culture. Through the analysis of several examples, this paper seeks to explore the potential of videogames as a full-fledged, valid artistic medium.

Author Keywords

Videogames; art; computer art; digital art; contemporary art; criticism; legitimization

INTRODUCTION

Like photography, comic books, street art, and other popular art forms before them, videogames have not, up until very recently, been considered an art form, or even worthy of attention by most artistic practitioners and thinkers. Traditionally, videogames have been deemed little more than mindless entertainment [15]; however, recent developments in the medium, as well as the appearance of critical writing and studies about it, have unlocked its potential and possibilities, even if games themselves still straddle an uneasy line between popular and high culture. This exploratory paper intends to identify a relatively new territory that is still very much ignored by mainstream thought currents in contemporary art.

Those who study contemporary game design and popular culture have rarely crossed into the realm of institutions such as galleries, museums, and private collections. However, this situation appears to be changing, as several museums and galleries around the world start to collect and exhibit artist-created computer games, and even to dedicate whole shows to the vast field of Computer art [5].

Games offer a lot of room for artistic creativity, assimilation or adoption. Artists often appropriate games as an "expressive performance genre [that] can allow for a critical take on popular forms of entertainment and propaganda" [5]. It is generally accepted that traditional arts can assimilate or adopt the visual and thematic concerns of videogames, and the technologies of videogames can be used to produce artworks [16]. But, beyond the use of the medium's unique characteristics by artists, can videogames themselves be considered art?

GAMES AND ART

Games have been appropriated by artists of varying disciplines since the beginning of the 20th century. Artists find the "space of games and the game metaphor not only accessible to audiences but also a disciplined frame for creation" [5]. Dadaists and Surrealists used games frequently in their practice. In the 1970s, the New Games Movement "investigated ecological issues, sustainable design, and approaches to peace during the tumultuous Vietnam War era" [5]. They believed that the types of games people play and the way they play them is culturally significant as a translation of political and social intent, and that, through games, artists could produce real behavioural and philosophical change. Indeed, games, as any other media, carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics.

> "Artists using games as a *medium of expression*, then, manipulate elements common to games – representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, context of reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game – for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions." [4]

While videogames may expose ideology unintentionally, there are several games that were created to make explicit claims about the way a material or conceptual system works. They are often called anti-advergames. One example is *McDonald's Videogame* (2006), an online game that satirizes and criticizes the processes employed by the fast food business [10].

There are various forms of game art that derive from videogames. Some genres include machinima (the creation of cinematic narrative from in-game footage), in-game performance, site-specific installations, and mods, among others [6]. These, together with videogames themselves, make up a fertile environment for contemporary critical play. Artists' games often take an "outsider" stance in relation to the more popular, commercial games culture, focusing on themes that traditional games generally avoid [5].

Californian artist Natalie Bookchin uses political and personal stories, humour, low-tech graphic and juxtapositions to immerse the player in difficult, paradoxical situations [5]. In her online project *The Intruder* (1998-1999) [8], the participant is presented with ten arcade-style games, adapted from classic games such as *Pong* (1972) or *Space Invaders* (1978), as a means of interactively conveying the narrative. The story is based on Jorge Luis Borges' short story "La Intrusa". Players interact with the simple arcade puzzles, which act as an aid to advance the plot. The result is a compelling, arcade-style game that blends narrative and interactivity.

Eddo Stern explores the borders between fantasy and reality, physical existence and electronic simulation. He works in various media, including computer software, hardware and game design, kinetic sculpture, performance, and machinima short films. His project *Darkgame 2* (2007/2008) is a sensory deprivation videogame that was presented in E3, one of the most popular videogames conventions in the world. The game dynamically separates the player and the character through a complex head device: as the player loses his or her sensory abilities, the in-game character becomes stronger.

Bill Viola, an artist better-known for working with video, has also produced an experimental videogame called *The Night Journey* (2010). The game, whose visual inspiration is heavily drawn from Viola's previous video work, is based on the universal story of an individual mystic's journey toward enlightenment. According to the artist's statement, "the player's voyage through *The Night Journey* takes them through a poetic landscape, a space that has more reflective and spiritual qualities than geographical ones. The core mechanic in the game is the act of travelling and reflecting rather than reaching certain destinations – the trip along a path of enlightenment" [3].
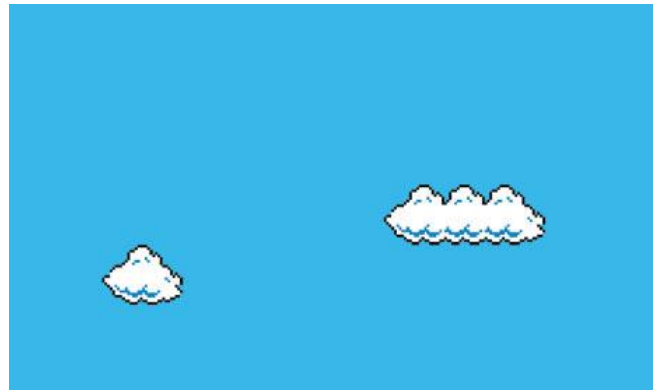

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Super Mario Brothers: Clouds* (2002) by Cory Arcangel.

There have been several exhibitions in arts institutions that have included videogames: the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London was among one of the first institutions to stage a Computer art exhibition, with "Cybernetic Serendipity", curated by Jasia Reichardt in 1969; London's Barbican Centre staged the "Game On" exhibition in 2002; artist Cory Arcangel's games, including *Super Mario Brothers: Clouds* (2002) and *I Shot Andy Warhol* (2002), have been exhibited in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, as well as in several exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and, more recently, at the Herning Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art's exhibition "The Art of Video Games", ongoing since 2012, are among several examples of institutions working to understand and legitimize videogame art.

In July 1999, artist and scholar Anne-Marie Schleiner curated the exhibition "Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art" at San Jose State University in San Jose, California. The exhibition featured artists and game modders and presented artistic modifications of commercial videogames [7]. In the curatorial essay that accompanied the exhibition, Schleiner argues that:

> "Many artists, art critics, new media critics and theoreticians have expressed a disdain for games and game style interactivity, in fact, to describe an interactive computer art piece as 'too game-like' is a common pejorative. But considering the increasing popularity of computer games with younger generations, even at the expense of television, it seems perilous to ignore the spread of gaming culture." [2]

Schleiner is an artist herself: she has modified first-person shooter games such as *Counter-Strike* (2000), itself a *Half-Life* (1998) mod, or *America's Army* (2002) to build projects such as *Operation Urban Terrain (OUT): A Live Action Wireless Gaming Urban Intervention* (2004). Author Mary Flanagan describes the project:

"Choosing not to play the game, but to play *with* the game, Schleiner armed herself with a mobile Internet connection, a bicycle, a battery-powered video projector, a team of players and technicians, and a laptop. Moving from site to site, Schleiner and her team played *America's Army* as a live urban performance, projecting the onscreen action onto the buildings and streets of New York during the 2004 Republican National Convention. The group intervened in the online gatherings of regular *America's Army* players, and discussed antiwar and antimilitary beliefs both in game space and in physical urban space." [5]

Game-related site-specific installations often try to replicate game world environments within an art gallery context, exploring the boundaries between game and non-game spaces [6]. Julian Oliver's *ioq3aPaint* (2003-2010) sought, according to the artist's statement, to "explore the possibilities of using a videogame (in this case *Quake III Arena*) as an automatic painting system. Exploiting a 'redraw' glitch in the game, and introducing a variety of

modified software bots, combat in the arena was transformed into a lush gestural field of painterly brush-strokes and impacting colour" [9].

There is often a performative quality to game artworks, and a game-like quality to performances. Many performative projects "require mass participation, occur in cities, and are designed more or less as games. (…) Play's ability to empower, build community, and foster collaboration and cultural change has been cited as a significant motivating factor in many location-based media projects" [5]. Artists often repurpose locative media such as GPS, communications and mapping technologies to create so-called pervasive games. Within these, players explore the space of the city, the immersion of games in ordinary life, the concepts of participation, mobility, and play. Moreover, play can be an important tool for education by giving participants a sense of engagement and empowerment. By taking play to the streets, "this empowerment can be transformed into a reengagement with the city and thus reclamation of that space" [5].

Figure 2: Screenshots from *I Shot Andy Warhol* (2002) by Cory Arcangel.

PLAYABLE ART

Traditional artists have assimilated the unique characteristics of the videogame medium and used them to further their practices, but the biggest resistance to the legitimisation of videogames as art might be found when it comes to the artistic value of commercial videogames, initially created for their entertainment and financial value.

It is important to consider what makes videogames different from other media, and in what way these differences influence their artistic claims. One unique characteristic of games is their interactivity. Videogames present the player with challenges to be tackled, providing constant feedback between the user and the game itself. Gameplay analysis dominates the criticism of games; in fact, it is often seen as more important than aesthetic qualities. Games are active, participative, and often competitive, and those who play

have an interest in winning, a characteristic which might seem in tension with the nature of art [16].

The resistance to the idea that videogames are art also stems from the fact that they are popular entertainment, an aim considered far too simplistic for traditional conceptions of art. It is also sometimes argued that videogames are "immature, derivative, mass produced, distasteful, and do not afford the sorts of perceptual and cognitive pleasures that proper artworks do" [16]. This idea is informed by the preconceived notion that certain media or genres are inherently better than others. Traditionally, in Western cultures, painting, literature and sculpture are intrinsically considered more dignified than television, comic books and games. This hierarchical notion was put into question by the Pop art movement, which drew upon popular imagery and objects as visual and conceptual inspirations, effectively blurring the boundaries between low and high culture [17].

At the time, this blurring of boundaries proved discordant within the establishment, though it is debatable if such distinctions are or have ever been as important for the public in general [12]. Pop culture is still largely considered a lower form of culture, and games are considered part of pop culture for several reasons: they are an industrial, mass-produced object that is liked and bought by many people, inextricably seen as entertainment, and often considered a form of escapism, a way to avoid facing reality [16].

The definition of art is a complex issue, one that goes beyond the scope of this paper. The question of distinctions between art and non-art often seems arbitrary - whether something is art or not can never be definitively settled through analysis and debate – so this is more a practical question of battling for academic, cultural and political legitimacy. Rather, there are some characteristics that can be considered to approximate something to a work of art. Videogames involve conditions that seem to be outside any conception of the arts, like rules, objectives, and competition, but they also involve "aesthetic pleasure, stylistic richness, emotional saturation, imaginative involvement, criticism, virtuosity, representation, and even special focus and institutional aspects" [13]. Creating videogames requires skill and expertise in various domains such as design, computer science, illustration, animation, physics, architecture, geography, and so on. As an interactive audiovisual medium, videogames rely on the editing of images and sound to achieve their aesthetic possibilities and expressive potential. Moreover, concepts of genre, narrative, emotion, space, time, graphics, style, game design and game play, all have a role in videogame aesthetics. Artistic growth, in videogames, has been driven by technology: as gaming devices become more sophisticated, they are able to recreate more faithfully the intentions of their creators.

Several scholars and gamers underscore the "unfairness of denying the status of art to a form of expression just because it provides entertainment and aspires to a mass market" [17]. In the past, such arguments have been used to describe other forms of popular art, such as film, literature, photography, comic books and music. In fact, not all games can be considered equal in terms of artistic value. The earliest games showed much less potential and aesthetic qualities than more recent games. And it is observable that, even recently, there are many formulaic, banal games that fail to reach any kind of artistic or creative value. However, that is an affirmation that can be applied to any other medium, including painting, music, theater, and literature, all of which produce works that aspire to artistic significance, as well as works that are meant as popular entertainment. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this point is by comparison with film. When it was still a new medium, film faced the same struggle for legitimacy and artistic status, as those involved attempted to create for their work an artistic identity beyond its entertainment value as a mass produced medium [13]. Film makers only started to explore the artistic virtues of cinema after a considerable period of experimentation, during which there was a great deal of scepticism that films could ever be a genuine form of art. But at the present time no one would deny that film has the potential for producing art. The legitimacy that film eventually received as an art form did not undermine its commercial value, as artistic masterpieces continue to be produced alongside movies whose only ambition is to be commercially viable [13]. There are strong reasons to believe this will eventually be the case with videogames, with the co-existence of extremely popular and entertaining franchises, such as *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-present), and more experimental videogames such as *BioShock* (2007), *Braid* (2008), *Flower* (2009), and *Journey* (2012).

The fact that many experimental videogames are being developed by indie companies is an indication of the medium's evolution. To reiterate the comparison, film also became more mature as an art form with the appearance of so-called auteur directors and the subsequent advent of a more unique, less commercially-minded way to produce movies. Many of the first experimental videogames were the result of a single author's vision. This does not mean that classification as art is dependent on a single author's unique perspective, which is another of the common criticisms against the classification of videogames as art. In fact, as author Robert Atkins explains, this criticism can be directed at many traditional forms of art:

> "Most art forms - theater, music, dance, architecture, film - are by nature collaborative, requiring the efforts of more than one creator. The visual arts and literature are unusual in that they are almost invariably the work of one individual." [4]

The concept of the artist as an individual genius appeared during the Renaissance, reaching its peak in the late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century, with the advent of modern art and artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock [4]. Before that, art was generally seen as the collective product of ateliers. More recently, starting with Andy Warhol's Factory in the 1960s, the idea of collective, collaborative art-making has received renewed acceptance. Collaborative art can take many forms: the artists may form a collective and produce art under the collective's name, or the artworks may be produced by a large team in a studio and then signed by a single person. Many of the best-known contemporary artists, like Jeff Koons, Ai Weiwei, among others, have a team of artisans and technicians working for them. Their role is like that of a film director, orchestrating the entire process according to his or her personal vision. As mentioned before, film is an example of collective art-making, with most films being the result of the work of dozens or hundreds of people, with more or less crucial roles. Traditional videogame-making can be considered to be halfway between film-making and the aforementioned

artists' collectives, with different people working under the name of a game development company, contributing varying skills into one final form, which is not necessarily the vision of a single author.

It may also be mentioned that, due to its interactivity, a videogame is unique in that it does not depend solely on the work of its creators, but only comes to life when it is played, implicating the player in the experience and production of meaning. Implying that this fundamental characteristic of videogames negates its artistic value ignores historical and recent developments which have resulted in the appearance of so-called Participatory art. The audience's participation is crucial in widely accepted art forms such as Performance art, an open-ended and interdisciplinary form which exists in the transitory and temporary space between the performer and the live audience [4]. Established artists, such as Robert Morris, create interactive installations that require the audience's involvement: *Bodymotionspacesthings*, which was first presented at the Tate Gallery in London in 1971, is a series of ramps, see-saws and other obstacles to be negotiated by those who visit the exhibition [14]. In a broader interpretation of the audience's role, it could be argued that even the simple act of looking is a kind of participation without which the artwork exists only in an inactive form. Such questions invite a deeper interrogation into the experience and interpretation of art as a negotiation between the artist, the artwork, and the audience, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

GAME CRITICISM
Criticism is an important form of legitimacy for any medium. Contemporary game studies' methods can inform the methods of videogame criticism. A critic of game culture might approach videogames looking for particular elements like the ones mentioned above, analysing their success or failure [11]. An art historical approach would focus on formal and aesthetic criteria in different decades, and how the concept of a "good" game has changed during the years [11]. Games can also be the object of cultural studies, which can examine the context in which games appear, how cultural values are reflected in videogames and their marketing, and the ways people use games, both individually and socially [13].

Art curators wishing to produce exhibitions featuring videogames would do well to expand their knowledge in the history of gaming, as well as develop a sensibility to the best methods of their presentation and preservation. Museums have already started to develop their own videogames, and some have even started to collect them. New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has acquired several games for their design collection. They acquired not only the code, but also a permanent relationship with the game creators, in an effort to preserve the videogames in their original forms and the original gaming platforms for which they were developed. Senior curator Paola Antonelli,

who was responsible for the acquisition, has expressed the hope that the collection will foster debate about the distinction between high and low culture, and defends that MoMA, throughout its history, has always tried to explore an expansive notion of art, blurring the lines between traditional art and other creative practices like design, architecture, cinema, and fashion [1].

CONCLUSION

As the global games industry undergoes its more recent transformations, with casual and indie games changing the landscape of videogames, the possibilities of games as a site for artistic experimentation have blossomed [6]. An increasing technical sophistication leads to the refinement of the art form, and the rapid proliferation of games and the lowering of entry-level barriers to the medium will inevitably lead to more diverse subject matter. However, in order for videogames to achieve a more widespread acceptance as a legitimate art form, there needs to be a strong tradition of serious criticism of videogames, as well as institutional legitimizing in the form of exhibitions, collections, studies and contextual framing. As the practice and its context develops, audiences, both professional and otherwise, will be encouraged to regard videogames at the same level of aesthetic sophistication and cultural value as other, more traditional and widely accepted art forms.

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