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# ART, GAUT AND GAMES: THE CASE FOR WHY SOME VIDEO GAMES ARE ART

An Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for Graduation with

Undergraduate Research Honors

Georgia State University

2011

by

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ART, GAUT AND GAMES: THE CASE FOR WHY SOME

VIDEO GAMES ARE ART

by

CHRISTOPHER JAMES FIDALGO

Under the Direction of Dr. Jessica Berry

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that there are some video games which are art. I begin my paper by laying out several objections as to why video games could not be art. After laying out these objections, I present the theory of art I find most persuasive, Berys Gaut's cluster concept of art. Because of the nature of Gaut's cluster concept, I argue that video games, as a medium of expression, do not need to be defended as a whole. Rather, like all other media of expression, only certain works are worthy of the title *art*. I then introduce and defend several games as art. After, I return to the initial objections against video games and respond in light of my defended cases. I conclude that video games, as a medium of expression, are still growing, but every day there are more examples of video games as art.

INDEX WORDS: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Art, Video games, Gaut, Cluster concept

# ART, GAUT AND GAMES: THE CASE FOR WHY SOME VIDEO GAMES ARE ART

by

CHRISTOPHER JAMES FIDALGO

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor's Degree

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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VIDEO GAMES ARE ART

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December 2011

# DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this paper to my family and friends who have always supported me. I'd also like to dedicate this paper to the great and underappreciated video game directors, designers and developers that have inspired me and my paper. Without their work, this paper wouldn't exist.

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I want to thank my Honors Thesis Director, Dr. Jessica Berry, for working with me on this paper. Her guidance vastly improved the quality of my writing and reasoning, and without her, this paper would not have been possible. I also want to thank each professor at Georgia State University that I learned under. Each teacher is an inspiration to me as a thinker and writer. Finally, I want to thank my family and friends. Because of their support, I am the person I am today.

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## I. Introduction

On the morning of November 2, 2010, the United States Supreme Court gathered for the opening arguments of *Schwarzenegger v. Entertainment Merchant Association*. The petition before the court sought a law that would ban the sales of certain violent video games to minors. It also called for federal regulation over the Entertainment Software Rating Board, the ratings board inside the video game industry, which operates voluntarily. If passed, the State would gain the ability to treat violent video games on a par with pornography.

Zachery Morazzini spoke on the behalf of the petitioners: "California asks this Court to adopt a rule of law that permits States to restrict minors' ability to purchase deviant, violent video games that the legislature has determined can be harmful to the development and the upbringing—."[1] Justice Scalia, as he would throughout the deliberations, interrupted Morazzini. "What's a deviant—a deviant, violent video game? As opposed to what? A normal violent video game?" "Yes, Your Honor. Deviant would be departing from established norms." "There are

[1] Official Transcript of the U.S. Supreme Court. 2 November 2010. *Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchant Association*. http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/08-1448.pdf

established norms of violence?" "Well, I think if we look back—." Scalia interrupts again: "I mean, some of Grimms' fairy tales are quite grim, to tell you the truth." The court laughed at this remark.

Later, Scalia would write the affirming opinion for the court, saying, "Like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas—and even social messages—through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialog, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world)".[2] Scalia defended video games as a unique form of free speech covered by the First Amendment. What is most interesting about Scalia's defense of video games is that he sees them as having things in common with accepted forms of expression but also as doing something new. I agree with Scalia that video games express ideas, as do other forms of expression commonly described as "artistic." Granting the expressive similarity Scalia thinks exists between video games and other media, we might ask: Could video games be art? Are they now art?

These two questions are the focus of this paper. In this thesis, I will start by describing how, on some accounts, video games might fail to be art. Since video games are a unique form of

[2] *Edmund G. Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchant Assn*., 564 U.S. 1 (2011).

expression, their acceptance as an art form will face unique hurdles. Some of these hurdles may be unconquerable, thus preventing our accepting all video games, without exception, as art. After explaining some of the problems, I will use Berys Gaut's cluster account of art to show that there are some individual instances of video games that constitute reasonable examples of art. Finally, I will return to the unique problems the video game medium must overcome, using the reasoning from the previous section to formulate solutions. I do believe video games exist that qualify as art; they are a rare and special breed. However, the rarity has more to do with how society currently treats video games than with anything intrinsic about them as a means of expression.

## II. Why Might Video Games Fail to be Art?

The Supreme Court's affirming decision not only defended video games as free speech but also affirmed their status as a unique form of expression. Some used the Court's decision as a means to defend the artistic merit of all video games, or to claim that they are all art. Video games, like other artistic media, express ideas but do so on new grounds, using the concept of *interaction*. However, we need not take the Supreme Court's legal decision as a philosophically valid generalization. It is untenable to think that every time an idea is communicated the means

of communication is therefore art. By that measure, all speech is art, but that rivals most common intuitions about what we call art. Advertisements, entertainment, and non-fiction works such as dictionaries or even philosophical texts are not considered art. Art is more than bare communication.

Later on, I will discuss Berys Gaut's account of art, which has enjoyed a formidable reputation in recent scholarship on aesthetics, but for now, I would like to present some broad problems for video games as an artistic medium based on our intuitions about art. Some of these problems are pragmatic in nature and others are philosophical. Some problems, including one I will later call the *paradigm problem*, arise merely because of the current state of games. Other problems exist because of features fundamental to the form of video games—these are issues all video games will share regardless of their content.

I will begin with problems of content. By content, I mean what is depicted by video games and the problems associated with those depictions. Video games borrow from other media, almost in wholesale with current trends. Video games take cinematic clips, music and sound design, writing, and acting and combine them into a playable experience. Those elements, most would agree, are artistic. If I present a theme song from a video game, play it on its own for

an audience and ask, "Is this art?" I suspect my audience would affirm that it is. This response may rest on false reasons,[3] but it suffices to say that generally speaking, the non-game elements of video games will be more readily accepted as art than the game elements. However, there is no reason why having artistic non-game elements should suffice to make video games art. Video game players themselves even wrongly defend video games as art on this criterion. Many defend *Shadow of the Colossus*[4] as art, for instance, because the scenes portrayed, the colossi (that is, the enemies) your character fights, and the barren landscape in which the action is set all provide a visual style that is sensuously pleasing, but those visual elements, on their own, do not tell us why the *game* is art.

The production of modern video games highlights my concern. Companies continually dedicate more resources to bettering these non-game elements than to improving the game mechanics.[5] Companies spend copious amounts of money to make these non-game aspects as polished as possible. This problem speaks to the failure of video games to connect content to form. A good film entertains, but a great film takes its elements and connects them to the form of

[3] I will argue later on that not everything that is aesthetic is therefore art. For instance, much of pop music is created solely for entertainment purposes. It shares a lot in common with music we would call art, but there is no reason why all music should be blindly accepted as art, particularly if we accept Gaut's definition, which I discuss in the next section.
[4] Fumito Ueda, *Shadow of the Colossus.* DVD. Team Ico/Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005.
[5] I'll reflect more on this later in my conclusion. I do think the business side of video game hinders the flourishing of video games as an artistic medium.

the medium to provide a holistic experience that not only expresses an idea but also does so artfully, on the underlying principle that the form of expression is essential to the way the idea is expressed. And a similar story can be told for literature as for film.

A second problem for the aesthetic standing of video games, in comparison to other media, at least according to critics, is that video games lack depth. Prominent film critic Roger Ebert advanced a version of this claim, saying, "no one in or out of the [aesthetics] field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers."[6] Ebert upholds the position that no paradigm case of video games as art exists. By paradigm, I mean some accepted work of art such that, when a new work is sufficiently similar to it, it validates the new work as a work of art. The notion of being "sufficiently similar" seems hazy, but it is intended to be so. Ludwig Wittgenstein, who introduced the notion of paradigms in the philosophy of language, thought the concept *art* depended on the language revolving around works of art and artistic practices, and that it really focused on these paradigm cases, which allow the term to evolve in the sense that it may pick out different objects at different times. At the end of the day, some things will be art and others will

[6] Roger Ebert. "Answer man." *Sun Times Media* (27 November 2005). http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=ANSWERMAN&date=20051127. Accessed 25 October 2011.

not, but there are hazy borderline cases that reflect the changing nature of our language when speaking about art.[7] By Ebert's account, particularly his later revised one, no video game exists that is a paradigm of art, and, in his words, "no video gamer living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form."[8]

There is another sense is which video games can lack depth: in virtue of their form as games, a subject's experience of them or interaction with them always comes to an end, while the experience of other media may seem "inexhaustible." For instance, a common intuition about art is that it is art continuously rewards the audience on multiple levels of appreciation or satisfaction. I enjoy the sensuous pleasure of a masterpiece of many levels (emotionally, cognitively, with admiration at the skill of the artist, etc.), and I may keep coming back to the work to experience that same pleasure. Most video games have the definite end of *winning*, although not all games work in this way. One might take issue with this idea and say that those video games are not art. Their having a competitive end interferes with depth of sensuous experience so much that their eligibility to be art is lost.

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[7] Entertainment, for instance, will not ever be art.
[8] Roger Ebert. "Video games can never be art." *ROGER EBERT'S JOURNAL*(weblog), 16 April 2010. http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html. Accessed 25 October 2011.

I now move on to problems of form. These problems are universal for all video games and are dependent on their having a particular form as *games*, which separates video games from all other media. There are two main elements that individuate video games from other media: *interactivity* and *rules*. I mean 'interactivity' in a robust sense of the word, as Dominic Lopes does in his book *A Philosophy of Computer Art*: the audience or players must interact with the work in "significant [and] prescribed" ways.[9] By 'significant' I mean that the display is altered by my interaction; by 'prescribed' I mean that the designer must have predetermined the set of input to outputs for all of the player's actions. The rules are the formal declarations of what is or is not possible within the game. Let me use the classic *Super Mario Bros*. for an extended example: If the player finds that Mario, the main character the player controls, can jump only once and never twice, then the player has discovered an implied rule that the character can jump only once.[10] In addition to implicit rules, there are also explicit rules. Mario can be hit by an enemy only once, or he dies. The display will be changed accordingly if Mario collides with an enemy; Mario will "fall" upwards, shrug, fall off screen, and the failure tune will play. If one fails enough, then eventually the game will terminate, resulting in "game over." Rules and

[9] Dominic lopes. *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 42.
[10] Shigeru Miyamoto, *Super Mario Bros.*, Rom Cartridge. Nintendo, 1985.

interaction are fundamental features of all video games, and while rules might provide a novel way to express an idea, they may also prevent the possibility of video games being art because it is not intuitively obvious that formal rules, by themselves, express anything.

With respect to interaction, there are two problems. First, each playing of a game will be unique. Even if the differences among various playings are only marginal, like moving a tad more to the left at time *t* in one playing than in another, this difference suffices to count the playing as unique. Because of these differences, the aesthetic experience of each playing of the game will be unique and therefore incomparable to other playings. This is not a problem for other media. Every play of a recorded song will have the same quality as the last, and every viewing of a movie will be the same. Video games, however, will have something just slightly different in each playing. In light of this peculiarity, one could ask several questions: Is there one true playing of the game, like some platonic form of the game? How do people reasonably discuss their own sensual experience of the same game if each experience is highly idiosyncratic and varied? In open world[11] video games, for instance, the player is allowed to explore the world

[11] An "open world" video game is a game that imposes few limitations on the order of events and experiences to which the player has access. Many video games have explicit objectives, such as, "Go to location X at time T and do action C," but open world games usually have many unrelated objectives accessible at one time. Some objectives are

at his own pace and whichever direction he chooses. If my path is vastly different in direction and pace than another player's, can we discuss the game as the same?

Another problem, also noted by Roger Ebert, is that video games require player choice.[12] The critique from interaction states that because the game developer must give some control of the work, or at least control of experiencing the work, over to the player, there will always be a gap between the director's intentions and the player's experience of the game. For other media, there is an interpretive gap between the audience's experience of the work and the creator's intention for the piece. Video games expand this gap because under certain conditions the player's action can lead to unintended possibilities, stray from what the director planned, and therefore make it impossible for the intended idea to be expressed.

Jonathan Blow, creator of the game *Braid*, spoke about this gap as a fundamental issue for video games at the Montreal International Game Summit in 2008.[13] He highlighted this problem with the example of *Deus Ex*, widely considered a masterpiece of gaming for its

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stated but often there are more unstated objectives available that the player must discover through exploration. These players' experiences, as one would expect, are therefore more highly individuated than in other genres.

[12] Ebert, 2005

[13] Jonathan Blow, "Fundamental Conflicts in Contemporary Game Design." Montreal International Game Summit. Montreal, Canada. 19 November 2008.

innovations in multi-pathed gameplay.[14] *Deus Ex* allowed players to pick how to deal with a situation: charge the main door and kill the terrorists, negotiate your way inside, stealthily break into the building and kill the men, or just knock them out. These paths were not only varied but managed well by the development staff; paths felt meaningful and fully fleshed out, not only with immediate consequences but also with long term story changes influenced by the player's actions. JC Denton, the protagonist, will have his actions and reasons for those actions questioned by non-playable characters (NPCs). Characters ask him about his intentions and the moral standing of his actions. The players are usually given a chance to respond to these NPCs, forcing the player to reflect about his intentions and choices.

Now, Blow's point about *Deus Ex* was that the range of choices allowed for unintended consequences. This is illustrated by a comic Blow presents about *Deus Ex* in his lecture. In the beginning sequence of the game, there's an American flag the player can pick up and carry. In the comic, the player takes the flag and awkwardly places it in each dialog sequence, so that what might have been a normal conversation becomes an awkward conversation with a flag stuck inconveniently between the interlocutors. The player's actions have changed the intention

[14] Warren Spector and Harvey Smith. *Deus Ex*, CD. Ion Storm/Eidos Interactive, 2000.

of the scene—now it is funny and awkward, rather than serious. But there is no rule against player's doing this. This action is allowed and therefore the designer consents, at least implicitly, that this flexibility is part of his intention. Part of creating the game is negotiating between the player's agency and the intention of the work. Blow argues that, as his title, "Fundamental Conflicts in Contemporary Game Design" proclaims, the gap between the two is fundamentally problematic for expressing the intention of the game.

One might think that this is a problem with the *content* of a particular game rather than with the *form* of all games. *Deus Ex* might not have the flag in the game, or the designers could remove the player's ability to move the flag. If all interactive content were removed, or if interaction with the content could be so restricted that it became minimal at best, then it would no longer be the game that it is, or it might not be a game at all. Video games require interactivity, and they require it in the ways mentioned earlier. As long as there is one interactive object in a work, rules that dictate the interaction with that object, *and* the interaction is genuine interaction as described earlier, then the work will be a game, but the gap between interaction and intention will exist solely because interaction exists.

As discussed earlier, rules are an essential part of video games, and they dictate play and interaction. It deserves to be asked, then, whether rules function as defining elements in games. Can having rules make video games a unique form of expression in the way that having line, shape, and color make drawing and painting a unique form of expression? In drawing and painting, it is these basic elements that make expression possible. Intuitively speaking, though, it's not immediately apparent how rules themselves can be used to create sensuous experience or how they can be used creatively. Even if it is allowed that rules express some basic message, like winning is desirable, it is not clear whether being a game limits the scope of messages games can express to just that one, since many games direct the player toward wanting to win. Almost all games are about winning or losing, or at least finishing some experience. Again, video games are oriented toward some particular end. This might not be a problem just of depth but also a problem for the possibility of expression.

There is another problem for appreciating video games. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear what's being appreciated when discussing video games because one's specific playing will be individuated such that one's playing is distinct from any other playing. To really appreciate the game, it appears that the player would have to appreciate not only his individual

playing but also the other possible playings not realized by the player. As a player, one must judge the work based on possibilities to which one does not have direct access. One has to think of the game as a holistic set of *all* possibilities. However, *prima facie*, it is not clear whether one can do that adequately or fairly. One has to appreciate and judge the not-yet-experienced consequents of conditionals.[15] It might be required that for a video game to be fully appreciated, all possibilities must be appreciated. This flips the problem of depth in the other direction: if a game has infinite possible playings, like chess, then it is impossible to fully appreciate and judge the artistic worth of a game because it is impossible for me to appreciate an infinite set of possibilities. If I cannot appreciate or judge the game fully, then it will be impossible for me to justify the claim that it is art.

The last problem for video games involves the notion of *play*. To play is to have fun while interacting with the game. A whole paper could be devoted to the notion of play, but it suffices to say that many of those who think about games from a scholarly point of view see play as something required for a game to be good; i.e., one must have fun while interacting with the game for a game to be good. It might be thought, then, that games are entertaining, but we

[15] This is no easy task: a whole realm of philosophy revolves around the nature of counterfactuals.

typically make a distinction between art and entertainment. Just because something entertains, however, does not mean it fails to be art. Intention and depth both play crucial roles in this distinction. One's intention to create art does matter to whether the resulting product counts as art, and art has a depth beyond recreation.[16] With these two distinctions combined, good games vs. bad games and art vs. entertainment, we might think it is always the case that a good game is fundamentally entertainment rather than art. Oddly enough, then, a bad game, one that neglects the dimension of play, would be art, while a good game, one focused on play and therefore entertainment, would fail to be art. With respect to the modern enterprise of video games, self-labeled "art games" are commonly critiqued as not being very much fun, which some say makes them more like art, but at the cost of their failure as games.

All these are problems video games must overcome to gain the status of art. But there are two large, unanswered questions at this point: What is a game? And what is art? To discuss either notion, we must have some framework within which to reason. In the next section, I'll provide what I find to be the most accurate and modern notion of art, and I will discuss how that

[16] Interesting sidenote: *The Free Dictionary* actually refers to *play* in the definition of *recreation*. *TheFreeDictionary.com*. Huntingdon Valley: Farlex, Inc., 2009. s.v. "recreation." http://www.thefreedictionary.com/recreation (accessed 25 October 2011).

notion can be applied to video games as a form of expression by referring to some specific video games that come closest to merging art and video games.

## III. Gaut and Games

Before addressing the concept of art itself, I would like to discuss the history of attempts to analyze the concept leading up to Berys Gaut's cluster account of art. This history is important, for those unfamiliar with Gaut, because Gaut describes his account as "anti-definitional," and the history helps to explain why traditional definition of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions fails to capture accurately the way we think about art now.

Prior to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, attempts to define 'art' consistently failed. In the modern era especially, art had evolved into something new, and with that evolution came acceptance of new standards and therefore new works. Beauty was no longer the essence of art, as had been thought for centuries; instead, it might be form, emotion, or institutional recognition. Each theory asserted its own version of what was essential to art, and

because of this, each theory accidentally—or purposefully, yet wrongly—excluded accepted works. No theory of art managed to encompass every piece of accepted art.

This failure, as noted by Wittgenstein and later by Morris Weitz,[17] was due to theorists' exclusive focus on what *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions must be fulfilled in order for an object to be a work of art. On Weitz's account, this focus was a mistake. Instead, Weitz asked the reader to look not only at possible art works for insight but particularly at our use of the term 'art'. Weitz reasoned that our use of the term 'art' reveals more about the nature of art because the idea that art has an essence that could be captured in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions was an illusion; by looking at accepted art works with respect to our use of the word 'art', Weitz reasoned that art is the kind of thing that has no essence. To this effect, Weitz writes, "Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call 'art' in virtue of these similarities."[18] If art has no essence, then the focus on necessary and sufficient conditions of "art-hood" is futile. Instead, the use of the word 'art' captures a network of similarities among objects, based on

[17] Morris Weitz. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956), p. 31.
[18] *Ibid.*

accepted paradigms. In that sense, art is an evolutionary kind, starting from simple beginnings but growing to include more things over time.

Influenced by Weitz, but still unsatisfied, Berys Gaut revises Weitz's account to ground art not in terms of an object's resemblance to a paradigm but in terms of an object's instantiation of a sufficient number of characteristics of the paradigm.[19] Gaut's ultimate worry about paradigms is that how to identify a valid paradigm is *prima facie* unclear. Without paradigms, or more importantly, a way to validate paradigms, the entire concept of art becomes baseless. Rather than resign himself to this consequence, Gaut suggests that art is a cluster concept. Gaut says a cluster account is true of a concept "just in case there are properties whose instantiation by an object counts as a matter of conceptual necessity toward its falling under the concept".[20] The criteria for the concept are properties, and "if all the properties are instantiated, then the object falls under the concept."[21] The criteria are disjunctively necessary and jointly sufficient, and application of the concept does not rely on any sole criterion. There is no magic number for when enough criteria have been instantiated, either; rather, we must discuss each case and see

[19] Berys Gaut, "The Cluster Account of Art," in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).
[20] *Ibid.*, 26.
[21] *Ibid.*, 27

whether it reasonably satisfies enough criteria.[22] Gaut suggests ten criteria, the instantiation of a sufficient number of which would allow an object to count as a work of art:

> (1) possessing positive aesthetic properties…(properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging…; (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meaning; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form…; and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art.[23]

Gaut isn't attached to these ten criteria in particular; the reason he chooses these ten is that they correlate well with our use of the word 'art'. When talking about art, these are indicative of the things that come to mind as relevant characteristics. Gaut's approach is flexible but bounded: 'art' can now pick out certain things and omit others, which was Gaut's original problem with Weitz's theory. With Gaut's solution in mind, we have a reasonable framework within which to judge video games.

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[22] For a piece to qualify as a work of art, Gaut does require that it be the product of some human action, whether that is in creation or selection.
[23] *Ibid.* 28

The next logical step might be to try to define 'games' so that we might know, of every member of the class, whether it satisfies or fails to satisfy Gaut's account, but to do so would be certainly unwieldy and possibly unfair. The reason I say "unfair" is that Gaut's criteria are not generally considered to apply to entire media, but to individual objects. It would be irrational to suggest that all music, cinema, or literature were art. After all, some objects with conventional artistic forms are purely for entertainment. For instance, many erotic novels fail to be art, but they are still novels. The existence of these novels does not compromise the aesthetic status of other novels. Therefore, what I must defend are particular cases.

So, what is so important about video games that aestheticians and laymen ought to take notice? What is important about video games is the interaction they allow between the user and the computer. Dominic Lopes' account of interaction is helpful here. As Lopes understands the term, mere interaction is not sufficient to pick out video games as a medium, because we interact with all sorts of things. The interaction needs to be "significant [and] prescribed".[24] Moreover, the interaction should alter the display of the piece.[25] Because we can see these changes

[24] Lopes, 2010, p. 43.
[25] According to Lopes, "The word 'display', borrowed from computers, comes in handy to think about art. ... In general, a work's display is a structure that results from the artist's creativity and that we apprehend in order to grasp a work's meaning and aesthetic qualities" (p. 4).

immediately, video games can act as a mirror for our choices and agency. Moreover, video games provide a constant, digital space for these choices to be reflected upon, observed, and critiqued by the user. The games themselves can be "about" any range of topics, from the simple and childish (e.g., score maximization, winning the game, or killing the enemy) to the adult and complex (e.g., the nature of relationships, documenting war, and revealing truths about video games themselves). Video games not only become a mirror of our choices and agency but also challenge our beliefs about certain subjects in an active way because we must interact with the game and its subject. Interaction is what individuates and establishes the value of video games. Interaction is what makes video games novel and unique art.

If interaction is what matters, then whether a video game fulfills Gaut's criteria should depend on the role interaction plays with respect to those criteria. How does the interaction affect my sensuous experience? How does interaction express emotion? How does the interaction challenge me intellectually? These are the salient questions to ask when deliberating over a particular video game. We must consider the importance of each element with respect to interaction when evaluating a piece. Superfluous elements, as in other media, are at best irrelevant, and at worst, they detract from the possibility of meeting any one criterion. In some

ways, this judging of multiple elements in conjunction with their interaction makes validating the aesthetic status of a particular video game harder than validating particular works in other media. Because video games encompass visual, auditory, cinematic, and literary elements *in relation* to interaction, each of those elements must demonstrate significant quality *and then* be applied in a salient way to how an individual interacts with the game.[26]

Because I am not defending the entire medium, I need only to point out several case studies (particular games) that highlight the points mentioned already. The games must meet at least some of Gaut's ten criteria, with their interactivity playing a significant role in our explanation for why they meet those criteria. All the video games I will defend can be said reasonably to meet Gaut's criteria (1) - (8). The last three case studies also meet (10), meaning that the only criterion not met is (9), since these games are not part of an established art form. I will not defend each of these criteria individually for each game because doing so would require more space than I have. However, while arguing for my selection of these games, many criteria will be implicitly, if not explicitly, defended.

[26] Some game designers reject the idea that any of the elements mentioned (visual, auditory, cinematic or literary) are necessary for a game to be great. I'll discuss Rod Humble's *The Marriage* on this account. I don't think those elements are superfluous to video games as a category; however, game designers need to be more mindful of when they use those elements superfluously.

*Bioshock* is a first-person shooter[27] made by 2K Boston.[28] There are many features that make *Bioshock* stand out, but one of the most important is that *Bioshock* makes gamers question their own activity of playing a game through an element commonly ignored in video games, the story. That is not to say that many games fail to have a story, or an engrossing story for that matter, but many games do fail to connect the user's interaction to the story. *Bioshock*, as a first person shooter, challenges the player's sense of agency within a game. The twist of the story is that the player was hypnotized prior to the action of the game (a circumstance the player does not discover until the end), and therefore all his actions have been orchestrated to bring about his downfall, which they do, through his own illusion of agency. The player is left to question the medium of video games as a whole. When playing a video game, players feel like they have significant choices. However, *Bioshock* is revered because it reveals a truth about many games: much of modern gaming creates the illusion of agency through playing the game, but people playing the game lack true agency, or have it used against them, because so many games are planned out, based on principles of rationality and psychology, to heavily guide the player's

[27] A first person shooter means that the game involves moving around a 3-D space from a first person perspective. The player rarely sees his character and instead operates as the character, through the character's eyes. Usually, these games involve handling guns and shooting them from this first person perspective, but some such games barely use guns, like *Mirror's Edge*. The industry, nevertheless, refers to these games as first person shooters.
[28] Ken Levine, *Bioshock*, DVD. 2K Boston, 2007.

action. Do players decide to go down a particular hallway because they really want to, or because the game tells them to? *Bioshock* argues that games make players believe the first, while the second is really true.

*Catherine* is a puzzle[29] game made by Atlus.[30] It follows the protagonist Vincent through a week-long ordeal in which he is forced to relive the same dream every night. In this dream, he must push and move blocks around to reach the top of a stage. Otherwise, he will fall to his death in the dream and die in real life. *Catherine* is special because the game's elements are tied up with ideas and concepts laid out in the story. *Catherine* deals with a man trying to decide what relationship he wants to be in. In this process, Vincent is constantly worried about different aspects of his relationship with his girl friend Katherine. His psychological worries or "blocks" are represented by actual blocks in the game that he must move around or climb on or over. These blocks are modified to symbolize particular issues. When he worries about marriage, some of the blocks become ice. This conjures up feelings of cold disregard (suggesting that marriage is a social institution that does not reflect romantic sentiments) and frigidity (being locked into a

[29] Puzzle games, historically, are rarely more than a set of rules about how to use a bunch of simple components to some directed end, i.e. a score. Typically, the player is given a simple set of units, like blocks, and then must perform some process with them, like stacking them in order, aligning them in a specific way, etc., to gain points. Puzzle games can also involve spatial reasoning puzzles, like mazes, but until recently, they involved little more than their 'game' aspects; that is, they lacked a story.
[30] Shigenori Soejime, *Catherine*. DVD. Atlus/Deep Silver, 2011.

particular position with no way out). Other blocks fall apart, others explode; some are unmovable or are very difficult to move. These are all symbols of Vincent's psychological worries about relationships.

Instead of a moral system based on good and evil, the game gives the player a "value chart" that reflects his choices through the story. This chart, when first introduced, is not fully explained. Rather, the player must figure out for himself or herself how the chart reflects his or her choices, both in the story and when answering related questions about relationships at the end of each chapter of the game. Ultimately, the chart is revealed to be a scale from chaos to order. This dichotomy also separates the two women between whom Vincent chooses. It is therefore not a *morally* bad choice for Vincent to pick Catherine, the flirtatious bar girl with whom he has been cheating, over his steady, yet demanding, girlfriend, Katherine. Instead, the game asks the player to reflect on the choice amorally, lessening the judgment of the game designer on player agency. With the ambiguity of the chart, players are constantly challenged to think about their choices.[31] If they had been told the chart would reflect their moral goodness or badness, the

[31] Here are a few sample questions from the game, with answers in parentheses, 'order' answers first and 'chaotic' second: Could you show everything in your inbox to your lover? (Of course!; Eh…I don't think so.); How do you make decisions? (My mind; My gut); Which is a better life? (Long and dull; short and full). Some of these questions

players would answer the questions according to which end they desire. Behind a veil of ignorance, the player cannot plan ahead and must answer honestly, which makes the player reflect more on himself than on his desired end. While an old idea, *Catherine*'s choice to label the system as a values system opens the challenge to other games to create a more complex system when it comes to morality and reflective indicators of a player's choice.

*Braid* (2008) is a puzzle platformer[32] made by the independent company Number None, Inc., which is largely run by Jonathan Blow.[33] The story follows Tim in the process of rescuing his girlfriend from a "shady" character. Each stage begins with Tim reading about his background and life and is followed by a traditional platformer stage. *Braid* actively ties its interaction to the themes discussed prior to each chapter of the game. The themes always involve time. *Braid* constantly challenges the player to operate in different "functions of time" in accordance with those themes. When the theme is "desiring to relive the past," the player moves

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don't have moral equivalents, and the values they represent (chaos or order in a relationship) are not apparent on the face.

[32] A platformer is a game that requires the player to traverse platforms, usually while avoiding other obstacles, such as enemies or 'danger zones', places the player can be killed, such as a bottomless pit or spikes below them. Platformers have largely been replaced by the term *action/adventure*. Platformers refer to a historically more classical time for video games, but the reason why *Braid* is a platformer is important. A puzzle platformer combines some aspects of both genres, puzzle games and traditional platformers, typically requiring the player not only to traverse platforms but to also solve logical puzzles involving the environment.

[33] Jonathan Blow, *Braid* (Program), 6 August 2010. Number None Inc. http://marketplace.xbox.com/en-US/Product/Braid/66acd000-77fe-1000-9115-d802584108ce. Accessed 25 October 2011.

"forward" in time while the enemies move in "reverse."[34] As a player, when I move forward, I have to think about the enemies moving in reverse so I can avoid hitting the enemies and dying. When the theme is "marriage," the player must carry a ring and *activate it* at times to create a physical, pink bubble around the ring that has the effect of "slowing" time. Through this mechanic, Blow suggests that married life is comparatively slower than other phases of life. The world around you, for better or worse, runs on "normal" time, but life within marriage feels slower.

The game is also cited for challenging the status quo of accepted mechanics in platformers. This innovation recalls post-modern literature, which challenges the fundamental ways in which we read books, forcing the reader to turn the book itself upside-down or to read backwards. It is an acknowledgement of the standards by actively rejecting them and forcing the reader or player to reevaluate what they are interacting with. By changing the aspect of time, the player of *Braid* must relearn how to play the traditional platformer genre. *Braid*'s ending is also known for having many interpretations, ranging from a lament about missing opportunities to the worries over the birth of the atomic bomb. In summary, *Braid* is worth mentioning for its use of

[34] Other elements, such as background graphics and the music, also move in reverse.

mechanics and symbolism, its unraveling of the nature of simplistic and accepted video game mechanics, and its universal acclaim.

*Gravitation* is another platformer made independently by Jason Rohrer.[35] *Gravitation* opens on a darkened, colorless world with a man lingering in frame. Eventually, a ball enters. If the player touches the ball, it will bounce back to where it came from. More color and vision is added with each bounce. The player will eventually see a small girl throwing the ball on one side of the screen and an oven on the other. The player can jump as far as her vision extends, and if she jumps up to the platforms above, she can see a block. When the player touches the block, it falls to the bottom of the stage where the girl is. At the bottom, the player can push the block into the furnace. This gives the player points; the player must accrue as many points as possible within a time limit.

*Gravitation* was created by Rohrer as a reflection on his life with a daughter and a career. His game constantly pressures the player to find a happy medium between scoring points by completing projects, represented by blocks, and bouncing a ball with a child. The player is able to complete projects only when he spends an adequate amount of time with the child. If he only

[35] Jason Rohrer. *Gravitation* (Program), 3 March 2008. http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/gravitation/. Accessed 25 October 2011.

spends time with the child, then he will not gain points. Spending too much time on projects causes the child to disappear. Without the child, the player cannot reach projects. One must find the balance between the elements to excel at both of them, yielding the most points. Through playing the game, this message of balance is revealed, since it yields the most points, although each player is invited to explore what child-to-work interaction ratio works best.

*The Marriage* is an abstract, score-based game made by Rod Humble.[36] *The Marriage* does something few games do: it rejects everything that is not a game. Humble's game is minimalist, focusing on the relation between two squares, one pink and one blue. The point of the game is to have the two squares last for as long as possible. Certain things can cause the squares either to fade out of existence or to become too small. When one of the squares disappears, the game ends. The rules are not explained to players; they must be intuited through trial and error. Much of the behavior controlling the growth of the squares requires some resource, either a green circle or having the squares touch. The player can place the mouse over either of the squares, causing the pink one to grow, the blue one to shrink, and both squares to slowly move toward one another. To grow the blue square, the player can either collect green

[36] Rod Humble. *The Marriage* (Program). 2007. http://www.rodvik.com/rodgames/marriage.html. Accessed 25 October 2011.

circles, by placing the mouse over them, or direct the blue square to run into them when the player commands the squares to come together (as previously mentioned). To grow the pink square, the two squares must touch, but the blue one will shrink slightly upon touching. By balancing between the actions of touching and collecting resources, both squares are able to grow and sustain—but only through each other.

Humble rejected auditory, literary, and cinematic elements entirely and opted for minimal visuals because he wanted to communicate his message solely through the rules and how the player interacts with them. This game speaks to the core of this paper: games stripped down to their most basic elements can convey complex meanings, ideas, and emotions and can cause us to reflect on the medium itself and its possibilities. *The Marriage* uses nothing but very abstract visuals to convey the idea, but one can reasonably understand the message of the game through interacting with its components. If any game stands as a testament to the artistic potential of games on their own grounds, *The Marriage* is certainly in the running, if not at the head of the pack.

In this section, I have argued for each of these case studies as important and artful video games on the basis of how some component of the game and its relation to interaction conveys

the intentions of the author. However, there may still be certain objections to video games, fundamentally and beyond their individual candidates. In the next section, I will address those concerns.

**IV. Rejoinders**

Having elucidated the notion of art and games, I believe I can now answer the objections from Section II. The first objection was the problem of borrowing, or better put, the problem of subtraction. One major challenge to the aesthetic standing of video games is that when all non-game elements are removed, what is left is not aesthetically substantive. This is a stronger objection than the one voiced in the second section of my paper, but purposefully so. I would rather defend against this stronger claim than the mere claim that video games borrow many elements to compose an aesthetic experience, since cinema borrows for its aesthetic experience many elements from other media (such as narrative structure from literature). This borrowing does not detract from the possibility of cinema's being art, so it should not detract from the possibility of video games' being art. In this case, the objector wants to argue that video games, without the elements of other media, are aesthetically vacuous.

In response, I would say that the potential for a game's being art does not depend on how much it borrows from other media; rather, its potential status depends on its essential characteristics of interaction, the rules of the game, and how the content is integrated into and reflexive of those two aspects and the director's intention. More simply put, a video game will be art when the content of the game reflects the form of the video game. It does not matter then if the content is "borrowed," although arbitrary content could certainly disqualify a game as art. For instance, excessive gore, when not reflexive of the form, does more to push a game towards entertainment and away from art.

This is not unlike other forms of expression. Take music for example: not every piece of music is art. Most, if not all, advertising jingles, for instance, would fail to meet a sufficient number of criteria under Gaut's definition.[37] However, the existence of these jingles does not preclude the possibility that some music is art. There are forms of expression, and some instances of those forms are art. It would be absurd, though, to think that just because all works of music share one property (their being music) they necessarily share another, more complex

[37] Jingles, I would argue, reasonably meet criteria 1, 7, 8, 9. They certainly don't (2) express emotion, (3 & 5) attempt to be intellectually challenging or contain complex meaning, (6) exhibit an individual viewpoint, (10) attempt to be art, and are (4) simple in nature. Jingles, nonetheless, are (1) aesthetic in nature, (7) creative, (8) require skill, and (9) belong to an established art form, but that is on a charitable account of jingles. I think one could argue that jingles, by and large, even *lack* many of *those* positive criteria, *but* jingles could not be said to have *more* positive criteria.

property (that of being art). There may come a day when a jingle is accepted as art, but being art is largely not the point of jingles. Jingles are music, but not all music is art. I believe the same is true of video games. Some games are art, and some are not. There is no reason blindly to accept everything in the category as art.

Earlier, I said that a video game will be art just in case the content of the game connects to its form. By connecting the form to the content of a game, I mean connecting the *type* of game (its genre) to the *content* (its subject matter or what is being portrayed) within it. Video game genres are, on average, interestingly unique. A first person shooter's conventions are vastly different than a puzzle game's conventions—not only are the interior experiences different, by which I mean to say that the mental process of playing each genre *feels* different, but the basic controls will be different. How the player interacts physically with the game is different from genre to genre. The most artful games take notice of this and use it to their benefit. Their content and intention will be mindful of the genre.

Video games are like other media in this respect. Most masterpieces in other media will have this same connection between content and form, although that connection may not be predicated on genre. Critics and artists pay attention to issues like why particular brush strokes

(in terms of length, width, pressure, frequency, etc.) are used to represent a subject, or why a particular mode is chosen for creating a certain sensuous reaction. They pay attention to choice of shot in cinema, the frequency of cuts, and the mise-en-scène all *in relation* to the content of what is being portrayed. These elements (strokes, modes, cinematic choices) are all how the content relates to the form.

With video games, we have several examples that make this connection meaningfully. *Catherine*, for instance, seeks to make the player aware of the complex nature of life, so the director chose a puzzle game. His intention is to say that the concept itself works like the game does; love is a puzzle. Likewise, *Bioshock* intends for the player to wonder about *his own actions*, so the director chose a *first person* shooter. The player's experience of the events is the same as the protagonist's; the player's actions are the protagonist's actions. When the villain explains the twist of the game (that, really, the protagonist's perceived agency was a preplanned illusion), the player will feel like his own agency is also an illusion, particularly in the context of playing a game. If *Bioshock* had been a third person shooter, a game in which the player has a "bird's eye view" of the scene and protagonist, the content would be disconnected from the form. The game could show only that the protagonist's agency was an illusion, not that the player's

own agency is an illusion. That *Bioshock* is a masterpiece has to do with its being in the genre it is and with its having the message it has, both of which were intended by Ken Levine, the game's director. *Bioshock* is layered with other messages, such as its presentation of Ayn Rand's Objectivism actualized, but its core message is a message about the entire medium. When we play video games, we perceive ourselves as operating in a space freely because we are in control of the character, but our desires and means of attaining those desires within the game are inextricably directed in the way the game's designer intended. By playing a game, we surrender part of our agency. This message goes against what many people believed was a truism about video games, that they are, at their base, about my freely chosen interaction with the game. *Bioshock* challenged that idea, and its success depended on its being the game it was (a first-person game) rather than its being something else (a third-person game).

The second objection we encountered above is the problem of the missing paradigm. The claim here is that no video game exists that compares to a masterpiece in any other recognized art form. Roger Ebert notably made this claim several years ago, stating that "no one in or out of the [aesthetic] field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great

dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers."[38] If video games are worthy of the status of art, then experts should be aware of these masterpieces, or, put into earlier terms, the paradigm cases for video games should be apparent and close enough to existing paradigms in other media to warrant classifying a game as art. However, Ebert charges, they are not, and informed critics see video games in such a light.

First, I find myself confused by this claim because, as established in my last rejoinder, I fail to see what notion of comparison or similarly Ebert is appealing to. His original claim was that no one within the aesthetic field would defend a video game as historic or important on a par with a masterpiece in some other medium. Going back to Gaut's issue with Weitz's theory, what counts as a masterpiece is problematic under Weitz's system because there was no clear way to identify a paradigm. For example, there are many great works, but do we consider them all as masterpieces? How much must we agree upon a work for it to be dubbed a masterpiece? Can dissention affect a work's status as a masterpiece? These questions and others are partly why I appeal to Gaut, who gives us a clear way to make judgments about what counts as art. If one were to appeal just to "agreed-upon status," one would have to defend a position about who is

[38] Ebert, *loc. cit.*

qualified enough, when consensus has been reached, and so on. The justification problem would be made worse by appealing to seemingly arbitrary standards, the say-so of the established aesthetic community or some particular sect of it, which is exactly why I believe Gaut's theory helps us to address Ebert's concerns.[39] Second, I do not find that what seems to Ebert to be historic or important now is truly relevant both now and in the future.

As defended in my last rejoinder, I think there are numerous video games that have the relevant similarity to existing paradigms from other media, simply because they meet many of Gaut's criteria and they relate their content to their form. Great film does this; great music does this; great painting does this. There are video games that are doing this, as I argued earlier. There are good grounds in that respect for thinking that there are paradigms that exist now.

Whether a video game exists that is historic or important, under a charitable account of either of those concepts,[40] is a moot point. Ebert wants to appeal to what the aesthetic community currently says is important and historic. My paper is arguing that the aesthetic community is, at least, missing the importance of this budding medium and is, at worst, wrong about the nature of video games. With respect to Ebert, at the time of his writing, there weren't many *Bioshocks* or

[39] Ebert's concerns come from what I believe is an institutional account of art, made famous by George Dickie.
[40] I say 'charitable' because I could easily exploit the vagueness of "historic" and "important" further.

*Catherines*. That is why I emphasize the word *budding*. Video games belong to a growing, and more importantly, *maturing* enterprise that will only strengthen in time. While at the time of his writing his claim was more defensible, it no longer is.

The third problem is the problem of appreciation. Interactivity is an essential characteristic of video games, and because of interactivity, the aesthetic experience of one game will vary from one playing to another such that, because of the variance, it is unclear whether there is a single object of aesthetic evaluation. If playing *A* and playing *B* of game *X* are significantly different in terms of experience, because of interactivity, then it is not clear whether playing *A* and playing *B* can be discussed in terms of their pertaining to the same game. This leads to a question about how one can be reasonably justified in judging a game as a worthy representation of its kind when no two players ever experience "the same game." If I want to argue that some video game is art, then, it is worth wondering how my claim is justified, given the nature of video games. It seems I can only ever discuss my experience of a game (a token) and never the game itself (a type).

Because games and the experience of them are distinct entities, games are interestingly unique, since for all other art forms, the experiences of some work of art will be the same for all

viewers. With video games, however, every playing will undoubtedly be unique, primarily due to the idiosyncrasies of the players (for example, my reaction time is a millisecond different from yours, making our interactions different by one millisecond, although the overall experience would be pragmatically the same). I have two replies to this objection.

First, I'm not sure whether one experience of a work is enough for an agent to be justified in aesthetic judgments. For instance, one viewing of a painting might not be enough to appreciate it fully, and paintings do not even require the rigorous interaction video games do. To be fully justified in one's opinion about any work, one must spend some time with it. I do not think the multiple possibilities video games afford create an impossible gap, even though there are infinite possibilities for the experience of almost every game. However, more time might be needed to justify fully the claim that a particular video game is art than a particular song or movie, merely because those objects—on average—take less time to experience. Video games, in this way, are at least as deep as other media.

Second, while games have infinite *trivial* possibilities, their *non-trivial* possibilities are all that should be of concern regarding aesthetic judgments. A trivial possibility is any possibility dependent on the idiosyncrasies of the player, such as a difference in reaction time from another

player. But many other possibilities were created by the designer intentionally to be critiqued and examined, which is exactly what we would want when judging a work. We want to judge the things created by human skill or selection rather than possibilities created by player happenstance. This means the player must come to understand fully her choice as one among many possible choices, a process that would take multiple playings of a game. In addition, she must contemplate where the possibility comes from: Is it the result of her individual experience, or is it a creation of the designer? Neither process is easy or shallow.

Good games will also use these intended possibilities to their advantage. Video games allow designers to explore their subject matter in various possible situations and contexts. For instance, a designer could take a famous philosophical thought experiment and bring it to life. Through our experience of the game, we could test our philosophically significant intuitions. If the designer does this in a creative and aesthetically skillful way, then most likely he or she will have a good candidate for a video game that counts as a work of art. There are other creative ways games could use their possibilities, but it suffices to say that the many possibilities video games afford turn out to be more of an asset rather than a liability.

Next is the problem of control. The interactivity characteristic of games creates a larger gap between the director's intention and his ability to realize that intention than in other media. A player can exploit this gap and create "silly" or unintended playings of a game, as mentioned by Jonathan Blow, the creator of *Braid*. A player can even create these "mis-playings" unintentionally; by happenstance or through experimentation, a player might do something silly or unintended by the director. Because this possibility exists, the player's "reading" of the game might lead the player to believe something wholly different from the director's intention, or it might make the intention of the creator unreadable or unintelligible. While the interpretation of a work of any other art form always admits of similar gaps, the gap for video games is a formal problem, a problem endemic to the entire form, due to the very interactivity characteristic of the form.

However, I think the fact that Blow suggests that he can differentiate between what was and was not intended by a game designer is a good sign that this problem, while it does exist, is not a definitively damaging problem. First, this objection assumes, wrongly, that the player has no responsibility for reflecting on the work. The player needs to look at what was reasonably intended, not just what is possible within the game, unless the game is intended to be more of an

exploratory work.[41] Even then, certain things, like bugs,[42] stand out as unintended consequences, and the mere fact that we discuss them *qua* mistakes shows that the possibility of bugs does not create a problem for interpretation so long as we are rational creatures. Likewise, a typo in a book can change the meaning of a sentence, but what matters is whether the author intended the sentence construction or not.

Second, part of some games is the ability to explore and try things out. In response to Blow's example about the player's ability to place the flag in unusual ways, the designers of *Deus Ex* wanted the player to explore and find different ways to solve the game's obstacles, but there is no intention about the flag's being in dialog sequences—otherwise, the flag would be in the dialog sequences. In Blow's example, the playing described earlier is clearly an unintended possibility of the designer's desire to create a realistic world, one in which players have the ability to move and pick up objects freely. I think this case, if it indicates a problem at all, speaks more to a problem for *Deus Ex* than to some sweeping problem for all games. A good game will

[41] See *The Path*, Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, Tale of Tales, 2009, for a great example of this.
[42] A bug, in technical terms, is an error in the programming. Bugs are not intended and are, rather, flaws or mistakes in the coding. Due to the volume of coding required to produce any one video game, bugs are usually expected, although they are always tested for and usually are "patched" as soon as possible. ('Patching' is another technical term; it means to update or fix the game.)

align its possibilities with the director's intention without needing to reduce its content in any significant way.

The second to last problem is the problem of rules and meaning. Interaction within a video game is dictated by the rules. The director cannot control the player's choice because the game would not be a game otherwise.[43] Instead, the director fully controls the rules of interaction. It is worth asking how a director can convey a message or intention solely through a set of rules. The person who is skeptical about whether rules can convey messages or ideas artistically or creatively (as opposed to purely semantically ) might ask, "How can the rule 'Shoot the enemies to score points' convey some artistic message? Moreover, how can one use rules creatively to go beyond the trivial messages of games, such a 'win the game or game over'?"

I want to defend the claim that the rules, when combined with the content, create value and meaning through the objects in the game, the "space" of the player's interaction with those objects, and the possible actions involved in a game. That idea requires some unpacking, so I will elucidate with an example. Take chess, for example. In chess, a piece of wood "becomes" a

[43] The director can control the player's *choices*, the set of things to choose from, but *not* the player's choice.

knight in virtue of rules that stipulate what that means. The relative value of the game piece and the actions that are possible for the knight are also imparted through the rules. The knight is more valuable than a pawn partly because it can move in ways the pawn cannot. Rules dictate the possibilities for action, which in turn dictate the value of the various game pieces, and even the name given to the piece invites a particular perspective.

To return to my example in the objection, shooting the enemies might be "meaningful" if the enemies were once the player's allies. Now the player might be in a moral quandary: Should I shoot because the game incentivizes me through points to shoot, or may I resist? Now the simple rule forces the player to reflect on larger problems about the nature of authority, which action would be morally correct, what are our duties to former allies, and other associated questions.

As shown in the examples, rules provide a great way for value and symbolism to be instilled in a game by the director. A director can make certain obstacles and situations particularly difficult in order to give the player a sense of struggle.[44] An object can even have more value than the player, such as in an escort mission, where the player must protect an object

[44] Notably, some *Final Fantasy* battles are intentionally unwinnable, to make the gamer feel weak in comparison to the villain whom they will—of course—defeat in other iterations or playings of the game.

to fulfill a mission. This consideration covers at least how rules can convey meaning and how they can do it creatively.

Moreover, games are not limited to terms of *winning* or *losing* only. For instance, *Gravitation* does not involve notions of winning and losing. It still conveys struggle and competition, but those elements are tools the director uses to express a deeper message. In *Gravitation*, most desire to attain a higher score. There is a competition between the player and the game because most players will desire a higher score, but the director is only using that desire to get the player to care about his larger subject matter, the struggles of being a working parent. If your score is higher, then you (within the context of the game) manage work and your child well. This is why competition is not the *only* focus of a game, and in fact, *Gravitation* takes a common mechanic within a game and uses it creatively and artistically. Other games, such as *Minecraft*, contain no score or explicit goals and instead encourage the player to create their own rules, essentially creating a game within a game. Rules do not limit the ability of games to produce messages, nor do rules limit the scope of possible messages.

The last problem concerns the relationship between art and entertainment and the notion of play. Laypersons and academics alike call interacting with a game "playing" the game. The

concept of play has the notion of fun and amusement built into it. There is a common assumption that for a game to be good *qua* game, the player has to have fun or be amused while interacting. It is also commonly said that the essence of entertainment is amusement. If entertainment and art are mutually exclusive, as many intuitively believe, and if a good game is essentially amusing interaction, then a good game can never be art.[45] After all, other media do not have this boundary. A painting's being good *qua* painting is partly what makes it art. Why should games work otherwise? We should note, first, that art and entertainment are not exclusive. Art can be entertaining and entertainment can be aesthetically beautiful. What this objection targets is the fundamental nature of games. If the fundamental nature of the game is entertainment, the objection goes, then it cannot be art.

First, even if games are intended to be fun, on Gaut's cluster account of art, this is not a problem in itself. After all, intending to be art is only one of the criteria. Something could still be art without its having been intended to be art. Second, the notion that entertainment captures the fundamental nature of games is suspicious to me. One could say that the ultimate aim of cinema, or its fundamental concern, is its ability to control the nature of time through the sequences of

[45] A bad game, one that was not fun, could be art under this objection, but if true, this inverse relation does not bode well for games because the common assumption is that a good artwork is also a good one of its kind (its medium).

scenes, cinematography, blocking, and so on. Even if that were the case, that kind of control does not always need to be coherent or conventional. Take French New Wave films, for instance: they challenged many normative aspects of storytelling within cinema. "Play" might therefore be some fundamental characteristic of video games, but that does not mean a designer is *required* to make a game fun. A director might forcibly make something *not* fun in order to cause a certain reaction in the player or to challenge some convention of the genre.

This choice to go against fun actually happened recently with the game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*'s famous "No Russian" scene.[46] In the scene, the player is an undercover agent for the United States. The player is tagging along with Vladimir Makarov, a Russian terrorist, and several Russian men. The group plans to pose as foreigners and massacre the civilians in Zakhaev International Airport. Before starting the mission, in an elevator, Makarov warns the group to not speak Russian—hence, the name of the scene. Once the men exit the elevator, they walk through the airport, shooting any innocent civilian in sight. The player's character is given a gun and forced to walk at a slow pace through the scene, though the character is not forced to shoot; nevertheless, they must experience the scene. I would find

[46] Keith Arem, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, DVD. Infinity Ward, 2009.

anyone who thinks the scene is meant to be enjoyable or amusing questionable in moral character. The scene is at least supposed to promote reflection, as we can see from its slow pace, and I would argue that it is meant to be horrifying and disgusting. Moreover, I believe the directors intended for this scene to not be fun so as to instill in the player a desire for retribution against Makarov and his cohort, whom the player chases during the rest of the game. Here, what is important about the scene is not only its content but also the fact that it is *not* fun, and intentionally so. As long as the director is conscious of the notion of play and how he or she can use it to convey different messages and feelings, then I do not think it is a problem that the game is not fun.

Finally, the notion of play might itself need to be explained. Instead of thinking of play as equivalent to pure enjoyment or amusement, I think it is more accurate to think about the notion of play as curious inspection. When we play a game, we try different things, toy with the concepts, and examine the possibilities. None of that can be reduced to mere entertainment or is fundamentally opposed to art. In fact, some masterpieces of art play with the concept of art itself, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*. Play is a larger concept than just amusement.

## V. Conclusion

As I have argued, then, there should be some video games that are recognized as art. While I think the medium does have some shining examples, I still think it has much work ahead of it. For example, in comparison to other forms of expression, video games have proportionally fewer examples of art. In response, one might say video games are significantly younger than other forms of expression. This is true, but I think the money involved with the production and consumption of video games and the business side of video games do more to hinder its growth than its age.

Why might this be the case? Take a novice director who approaches an important company in the video game industry. She says to the head of the production company, "I need you to invest $1M into this idea for a game I have. This game will revolutionize the market by breaking some of the expected rules. This is a risky endeavor but well worth it." Few multi-billion dollar company investors would support such a project. Why risk money in possible innovation when safe bets continue to cash out?[47] Only directors who have already proved

[47] Many believe this mentality plagues the FPS genre.

themselves can promise to make good on such risk.[48] The profit motive has limited games creatively.

However, as technology becomes inexpensive, producing games becomes easier. Part of the reason why there are now more examples of art in video games is the budding "indie game" market. The last three examples I discussed—*Braid, Gravitation,* and *The Marriage*—are all indie games. In each case, a person wanted to express something, and they felt the best way to express themselves was through a video game. Without the aid of a big-time video game company, and on a relatively small budget, each produced a game that communicated something creatively. While in the past, games were physically distributed on cartridges and disks, games can now be downloaded over the internet. This innovation has lowered the cost and commitment needed to make a game.

I believe as it gets easier to produce games, more examples of art will come to the foreground, but I also believe the way we view and what we expect from video games changes the market. The more innovation and art people demand from video games, the more innovation

[48] I believe some have, including, but not limited to: Kev Levine, Will Wright, Todd Howard, Shigenori Soejima, Fumito Ueda, and Shigeru Miyamoto. All these men revolutionized the gaming market through "triple AAA," big industry game development companies.

and art will be produced. A modern example of this change is the emerging casual market.[49] Shigeru Miyamoto believed Nintendo games should be for everyone, and he started to produce games for everyone. The market reacted, and soon, Sony and Microsoft[50] produced more video games for everyone. To the extent that the market demands creativity, innovation and art, I believe we will see more art.

[49] The casual market refers to video games aimed more at family friendly content and easier games, as opposed to the "hardcore" games. Hardcore games tend to require more dexterity and "video game literacy" to complete. They also address adult themes.

[50] These three companies—Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo—produce video game consoles and therefore control much of how the video game market grows. While Sony and Microsoft were not the only companies to react to this change, they are the most prominent.

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