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Press Start: Video Games as Art

Throughout the history of art, there have been numerous times when a new artistic medium has struggled to be recognized as an art form. Mediums such as photography, which was not considered an art until almost one hundred years after its creation, were eventually accepted into the art world. In the past forty years a new medium has been introduced and is increasingly becoming more integrated into the arts. Video games, and their rapid development, provide all new opportunities for artists to convey a message, immersing the player in their artwork. However, video games have yet to be recognized as an artistic medium, and there is much debate as to whether or not they should be.

Before getting into video games influences on the art world, one question should be answered: What is art? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, art is defined as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.” If this definition were the only criteria, then video games most certainly fall under the category of “art.” It is not so simple, however. In modern times, the definition of art has become somewhat muddled. Many of today’s popular video games are most certainly not art, just as not every painting in existence is considered great art. There are certain games that are held at a higher regard than others. There is also the problem of who defines works as art. Many gamers will consider certain games as works of art, while the average person, might not believe so. What is considered artistic is a matter of opinion, and therein lies the problem of defining video games as art. A restriction of video games is the limitations of technology. In earlier games, the technology simply was not there to develop complex and deep games. It can be

argued that these limitations made think in new, artistic ways in order to create the experience they wanted (Martin 206-207). Since the medium is quickly advancing technologically, there are more and more possibilities for the creation of art.

Another argument for the inclusion of video games as an art form is the fact that they are an amalgam of numerous different types of art forms. Video games “compile all of the art world’s tools into one medium; drawing, painting, sculpting, design, architecture, creative writing, computer and video art and acting all come together to create videogames.” (Martin 205) The designers draw inspiration from film, poetry, drama, music and art, and take advantage of using these different mediums all within video games (Bachus 66). Game designer Jesse Schell states that:

Video games are the medium that subsumes all others. Ultimately, they will become the ubermedium. You can put everything into a video game. You can put a movie in, a book in, music in. You can put just about anything, and video games are big enough to hold it all. (176)

Video games include a vast array of mediums in their design, from the storywriter, to the graphic artists and animators, who “paint” and “sculpt” in three dimensions on a computer. All of the different artists involved in the development of a video game also make them a collaborative art. It would be somewhat difficult for a single person to design and create a significant video game without the help of a team of various artists. This argument is particularly true for commercial games, as they are developed on such a scale that it would be impossible for one person to do. The creation of a video game involves input from many different types of artists who must communicate to make the game work (Hunicke 194). The player can even be included as part of this collaboration, as it is the interaction of the player that makes it all work. Game designer Mike Mika sums up all of the above points very nicely:

Game designers are communicators, inventors, and dreamers. Like modern-day da Vincis, they stand at the creative intersection of mathematics, science, writing, music,

and art. Games are the aggregate of these disciplines, plus one key element: none of it matters without the player. [...] Ultimately it is the element of human interaction that makes video game creation one of the most complex forms of art [...] they are not complete without that symbiotic connection. This is what sets games apart from other mediums. Games *evolve* with us.” (11)

It is the combination of multiple different art forms, the collaboration of many different artists, and the vital role of the player that makes video games art.

One of the arguments against video games as art is the problem with displaying them in museums, and the stigma against showing them alongside “high art.” Many people believe that something is not art until it has been displayed as such. Right up until this year, commercial games had no place in the galleries of art museums. This changed with the exhibition of *The Art of Video Games*, which opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum on March 16th of this year, and is now traveling to other art museums across the United States. Does this mean that commercial video games can finally be recognized as an art form? If not, then the medium is certainly gaining traction in the art world. This exhibition showcases the evolution of video games, presenting examples of games from different eras of the development of gaming in chronological order.

Two of the main forms in which the medium of video games is very much a part of the art world are Art games and Game Art. These do not have to be two distinct categories, as there are most certainly crossovers. A true argument for video games as an artistic medium, an Art game can be defined as:

an independent or commercial game which expresses its ‘artness’ through its play mechanics, narrative strategies or visual language. An Art game may employ novel interfaces, non-mainstream narratives, retro visual language, experimental gameplay and other strategies. An Art game may be any interactive experience that draws on game tropes (Morgana 9-10).

Although commercial games are included in this definition, most Art games are created by independent artists. Arguments for commercial games as art will be presented later in this paper.

While independent artists do not have the budget of commercial game studios, the freedom from commercial constraints allow them to innovate, experiment, and play with genre and media (Morgana 10). Just as with the definition of art, the definition of what makes an Art game is mutable as well. Many Art games play with and go against traditional gaming ideas. By intentionally challenge the norms of gaming, Art games and their audiences explore the underlying structures, mechanisms and narratives of video games (Morgana 11). There are a surprising number of independently developed Art games that are well known within this particular community of artists.

A good example of an Art game is *The Path*, released in 2009 by the independent game company Tale of Tales, founded by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn. This game is a gothic horror game, retelling the classic fairy tale of growing up, Little Red Riding Hood. The player controls six sisters in turn, with the goal of interacting with their respective wolves, which ultimately leads to their death. This fact alone goes against classic video game principles. In order to “win” the game, the player must lead the characters to their deaths. Just as with the fairy tale, this game addresses the passage from childhood into adulthood. This is accomplished by the emphasis of each sister’s death, which call up memories of stages of childhood necessarily lost over the passage of time. *The Path* also goes against traditional video game mechanics as it regularly takes control of the character from the player, which gives the game a voyeuristic pace of play. The ethereal artistic design of the game and the attention to detail adds to the mood of the game, creating a beautiful world in which the story takes place (Westecott 78-81). *The Path* addresses an issue that has been around for hundreds of years, and retells it for the gaming generation, using its unique style of play and art.

Another Art game at the opposite end of the spectrum from *The Path* is a work called *CarnageHug*, created by Corrado Morgana in 2007. The game takes all control from the player, except for a simple start command, which then runs the game in auto-execution. Morgana appropriates the game engine from *Unreal Tournament 2004* for his artwork. The characters attack each other in a ludicrous massacre without player-based gameplay objectives or other human-player interaction. By denying the player the pleasure of man-machine interaction, he has created a “zero interface” that mocks interactivity (Fuchs 57-58). *CarnageHug* becomes a work of art in its disinterest in the winning or losing of the game. It also is artistic in the fact that it mocks the very thing that makes a video game entertaining, its interactive feature.

Intertwined with the development of video games is the creation of Game Art, which is defined by Corrado Morgana as:

Game Art does exactly what it says on the tin: it is art the uses, abuses and misuses the materials and language of games, whether real world, electronic/digital or both. The imagery, the aesthetics, the systems, the software and the engines of games can be appropriated or the language of games approximated for creative commentary (12). This basically means that Game Art is any sort of artistic work that uses the style of video games or modifies an already existing game for the artist’s purposes. The video game provides inspiration for the artwork, and the artists appropriate and/or approximates many different aspects of the games and gaming culture. An example of a type of Game Art called “art mods,” which will be discussed later.

One of the simplest forms of Game Art is artwork that uses the artistic style and culture of video games the artist’s own purpose. These artworks are generally done in the traditional mediums, such as painting, drawing, photography, film or video. An example of an artist who has appropriated the gaming culture is Miltos Manetas, a painter and media artist. He has created two distinct sets of work related to video games. Manetas created a series of paintings that depict

people playing video games, as well as paintings of various controllers, cables, and other components required to play video games. Of more significance is his series of short videos that are recordings of his gaming sessions, which he has not altered. These videos depict elements of the game, and “have titles that enhance the ironic distance to the depicted action” (Stockburger 30). For example, one of his videos, entitled *Super Mario Sleeping*, is a two-minute video of the character Mario sleeping under a tree in the game *Super Mario 64*. These video works are intended more for video gamers, who would have actually played these games. Only those who have played the game would understand the ironic humor, because if they would recognize the situation from the game. This presents an interesting problem, as the videos require an audience that has played the games before, but the way they are presented removes an important part of the games, the gamer’s choice of what to experience (Stockburger 30-31). This may also be part of the intention of the artist, to present an unusual situation. Manetas appropriates the gaming culture for his artwork, which could be why a person would have to be a part of that culture to understand.

Another example of the influence of video games on artists is the work *Super Ichthyologist Advanced*, by Paul Catanese, created in 2003. In this and some of his other works, he has appropriated gaming technology in the form of the Game Boy Advanced, a handheld gaming device created by Nintendo. His use of the Game Boy came from his desire to have a compact device that could play video loops on a small screen, which was not complicated to set up in a gallery space. Using the GBA was a far more practical idea than attempting to develop something himself, and the low cost of the system was a benefit that allowed him to experiment with it (Catanese 128). His use of the Game Boy for this project has inadvertently provided him with a source of inspiration for other projects. He states that:

What began as a solution for multi-channel video installations has grown into a wellspring of inspiration whereupon I find myself imagining galleries that fit in your pocket, personal hand-held theatres, digital Cornell boxes and electronic books imbued with the intimacy of Chinese scroll paintings. (129).

Catanese has since used the Game Boy Advanced system for two other projects he has done, achieving his goal of “galleries in your pocket,” and digital Cornell boxes. He also accomplished this back in 2004, when the technology of smart phones and such was still new.

One of the most common forms of art in video games is something called “art modding” or hacker art. Art modding is when an artist uses existing game software and changes the code and otherwise appropriates the game engine for their own use, usually to convey some sort of message.

One example of an art mod is titled *Velvet-Strike*, created by Anne Marie Schleiner. *Velvet-Strike* modified the popular game *Counter-Strike*, and was developed during the beginning of former President Bush’s War on Terrorism, and is an anti-war protest. *Counter-Strike* itself was a war game about eliminating terrorists, which prompted the artists to create *Velvet-Strike*. *Velvet-Strike* consists of anti-war images that can be downloaded, and players can spray them onto walls in the game *Counter-Strike*, like graffiti. The point of this is to allow “conscientious players with the opportunity to publicly express, through internetnetworked games, their dual love of fantastic violence and abhorrence of real violence” (Cannon 11). This modification of providing alternative graffiti sprays conveys the anti-war message, and also shows that players can still enjoy the artificially created violence of video games, but still be against violence in the real world, like war.

Another example of an art mod is called *Adam Killer*, a modification of the game *Half-Life*, created by Brody Condon in 1999. In this work, multiple replicas of the same figure, dubbed “Adam,” stand inactive in a room, dressed all in white. The point of the mod is just as the

title suggests; the player can kill all of these Adams. Condon explains that the choice of white was for aesthetic reasons;

I felt it contrasted well with blood. As the characters were shot and bludgeoned with various weapons, an exploited glitch in the game's level editing software created a harsh trailing effect. This turned the environment into a chaotic mess of bloody, fractured textures (Cannon 16).

For the player, Condon's work explores the recreational attraction of murder, as well as the distinction between real violence and violence in media. The game also provides a release of stress for people, as it is a far better way to release pent up anger and frustration on something that does not actually exist, than repressing those feelings and perhaps eventually causing real violence. The game questions whether people innately have the desire to kill. (Cannon 17) This game expresses its message by offering the player the opportunity to commit mindless murder, with no actual goal to the game.

Because of the stigma associated with the commercialism of video games, it is even harder for them to be considered art. This is understandable, as most commercially successful games would not be called art, such as games like *Madden*. This fact can be compared to paintings, in the fact that a Monet painting will be much more respected than one by Bob Ross. (Martin 205) The rapidly improving technology of the gaming industry has also allowed for more artistic expression in recent games. There are a few commercially successful games, created within the past decade or so, that many people do consider works of art, and great video games. Commercial games can be art, as long as companies are willing to take risks and develop them.

Rez, a game created in 2001 by United Game Artists for the SEGA Dreamcast, is a unique targeting game that stands apart from other games in its genre. In this game, an Artificial Intelligence being called Eden has become self-aware and is trying to shut down the global

information network that it controls. The player takes on the role of an avatar placed in the system by a hacker, and their job is to rid Eden of viruses before it shuts down and causes a total global information meltdown. The works of Wassily Kandinsky inspired the graphics of this game, portraying an abstract picture of what life in a computer system might resemble. The game uses simple shapes and lines to represent the abstractions of a digital existence, which is similar to the abstract paintings of Kandinsky. By using simple shapes and a humanlike shape for the avatar, the game is grounded in the familiar. Besides the abstract aesthetic, *Rez* also makes use of sound to add to its artistic nature. The game starts with no sound, but as the player eliminates more viruses, the soundtrack starts to develop and becomes richer with the higher number of enemies eliminated. The combination of the audio and visuals “achieves the goal of synesthesia...to merge two senses and overpower the user.” (Melissinos 125) *Rez* provides a unique, almost meta experience to the player, with its abstract representation of the technology they are using to play the game itself.

Another game that has been regarded as a work of art is the 2005 game created by Team ICO, is *Shadow of the Colossus* on the Playstation 2. In this game, the player takes control of a young man named Wander, who seeks to bring his girlfriend, Mono, back to life. He makes a deal with a god known as Dormin, who will revive Mono if Wander manages to defeat sixteen monstrous creatures called colossi, whose souls contain part of Dormin’s essence. This game takes place in a “forbidden land,” and the time period is unclear, which is most likely intentional. The forbidden land is littered with ancient ruins, and is devoid of any life besides the colossi, Wander, Mono, and Wander’s horse, Agro. The player must traverse this desolate land to find the colossi and defeat them one by one. The colossi are designed to awe the player with their size and unique character designs, which make them believable as living beings from another world.

Besides the unique design of the land and colossi, *Shadow of the Colossus* also comments on the rift between the player's intentions and the consequences of their actions. While the goal of the game is to defeat these colossi, there is a sense of loss with the death of something so wondrous, especially in such an empty and haunting landscape (Melissinos 200). *Shadow of the Colossus* is a distinctive game with a subtle message conveyed through unique character design and clean graphics.

An innovative game that takes a unique approach to the graphic art in the game is *Okami*, created in 2006 by Clover Studio. Described as “one of the purest examples of traditional art and storytelling in a modern video game,” (Melissinos 203) *Okami*'s art style mimics the traditional Japanese art of sumi-e, a type of ink wash painting, and has a woodcut aesthetic. In this game, the player controls the goddess Amaterasu, in the form of a white wolf, on a quest to rid a fictionalized historical Japan of evil, and restore life to the land. The game uses an innovative play mechanic dubbed the “Celestial Brush,” which is used in combat and to interact with the play environment. The player uses this brush to draw specific symbols that activate the different powers that Amaterasu possesses. This play mechanic fits well with the artistic style of the game. (Melissinos 203) This game offers the classic story of good versus evil in an all new way, which is unique and beautiful. In this game, art is the weapon.

A game that is perhaps closer to the dramatic arts is *Heavy Rain*, created in 2010 by studio Quantic Dream for the Playstation 3. The player alternates between controlling four different characters, which are all linked to the “Origami Killer,” a serial killer who leaves his victims, all young boys, holding an origami figure, with a single orchid placed over their hearts. The title of the game comes from the Origami Killer's method, drowning from a deluge of rainfall, hence *Heavy Rain*. The director of the game, David Cage, wanted to force the player to

“play the story.” He wanted the story to be the main focus of the game, not something that simply justified the action of the game. With the focus on the narration, the motivation for the player revolves around “the perceptions of the main characters’ actions and the moral choices the player has to make.” (Melissinos 207) The player must find a balance between good and bad actions. The game settings were influenced by the real world, such as poorer areas of Philadelphia, where the development team took photographs to use in creating the environments. The artists were also able to render photorealistic characters because of the power of the Playstation 3’s technology, allowing them to use great detail, such as reflections in the character’s eyes. This also aided them in creating more believable and relatable digital actors not seen before in video games. The art in this game comes from the focus on the narrative, and the artists’ attention to detail in rendering the characters and environments. *Heavy Rain* also poses the question of how far will the player go to save someone they love, and shows the consequences of those actions, which are sometimes hard to handle. (Melissinos 207)

Similar to *Heavy Rain*, the *Uncharted* games, created by Naughty Dog studio, have often been called “interactive movies.” Focusing on *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, for the Playstation 3, the player takes on the role of treasure hunter Nathan Drake on an adventure around the world centered on Marco Polo’s failed voyage of 1292. The developers designed Drake to be “the ultimate everyman,” a strong and relatable character. In creating this game, there was a great deal of attention to detail in the character’s acting. The creators wanted a cinematic quality to the dialogue and action, so the voice actors rehearsed together before recording to get a more natural flow of speech. This may not seem like a major event, but in most games before *Uncharted*, the actors all recorded their dialogues separately, most times not interacting with one another. This game also used motion capture technology in order to achieve accurate facial movements on the

characters. This focus on acting was relatively uncommon in the gaming world. Again, the superior technology of the Playstation 3 allowed for spectacular, detailed rendering of the real world locations explored in the game. “*Uncharted 2* breaks new ground in art, animation, and acting, effectively bringing the player into an interactive movie instead of just an action game.” (Melissinos 205) *Uncharted 2* is an excellent example of the combination of cinematic art and visual art.

While all of these games are good examples of games that have made advances for the medium as art, there is one company that is at the forefront of developing artistic commercial art games. Up and coming gaming company thatgamecompany has developed games that most people will agree are art. This company, founded in 2006 by Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen, has created three very unique, artistic, and critically acclaimed games in their short existence. The company’s focus is to not only make games that entertain, but also ones that cause the player to think, and have an emotional experience. The designs of their games are simple and elegant, and often convey some sort of message for the player to reflect on. It has been said that thatgamecompany created the first “art house” games. (Melissinos 168) The company’s mission is to “create timeless interactive entertainment that makes positive change to the human psyche worldwide.” (thatgamecompany) The three games developed by thatgamecompany, *Flow*, *Flower*, and *Journey*, may well be the bridge that is needed for video games to be recognized as an art form.

The first game created by thatgamecompany, *Flow* is game composed of little more than simple, glowing shapes on a single color background. The designer, Jenova Chen’s goal was to make a game that would dynamically change with the player’s skill. Because of this constant changing, each player’s experience is unique. The player controls a segmented, aquatic-based

life form that can move about an ocean environment as desired. This life form can eat smaller organisms that appear, causing the player's creature to grow and evolve. Chen based the gameplay design on the concept of "flow," an idea proposed by psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1960s. "Flow" is described as when gives all of their concentration to an activity, they become one with the system and perform at a higher degree of skill. The simple design, soundscape, and point-and-click gameplay of *Flow* tests this idea. "Balancing the psychology of interaction, an elegance in form, and a soothing soundscape, *Flow* provides players with an experience that transcends the term 'game.'" (Melissinos 168) *Flow* is a game that allows a player to immerse themselves in the game because the design leads to a natural concentration, perhaps even almost a meditative state.

Flower, the second game created by thatgamecompany in 2009 for the Playstation 3, is very different from almost all of the contemporary games at the time. The protagonist of the game is the wind, and the goal is to bring life back to the world. The player guides the wind using a feature unique to Playstation 3, called six axis control, where the player tilts the entire controller in order to guide the wind. As the wind, the player seeks flowers that are found across the environment, and as more petals are released to join the wind, the world around heals. Chen describes the game as an "interactive poem exploring the tension between urbanity and nature." (Melissinos 212) The game allows players to bring nature into their homes in a way never experienced before. Each blade of grass is animated, and the way the wind affects it is accurate. *Flower* also makes use of a musical score that is built upon the different petals collected, similar to how the music developed in *Rez*. The combination of the beautiful, colorful graphics, the music, and the gameplay all serve to develop an emotional arc, rather than a narrative one. (212) *Flower* provides players with an intensely emotional experience, making it a true work of art.

The culmination of the work of thatgamecompany is realized in their 2012 game *Journey*, for the Playstation 3. This game is truly artistic, from the graphic style to its emotional message. A figure in a red robe is the protagonist, who wakes up in a vast, almost endless desert littered with ruins and, by visual cues only, is directed towards the goal, a mountain off in the distance. The player traverses the desert, the story of a fallen civilization being revealed in the form of hieroglyphic-like scenes. It is unclear why the character is on this journey, perhaps as a form of self discovery. The design of the main character was inspired by many different sources, such as Native American rugs and symbols, Japanese kites, and Egyptian hieroglyphs. The development also traveled to Pismo Beach in California to research the dunes and the way sand moves, in order to replicate it accurately in the game. The imagery of *Journey* has a painterly quality, giving it a unique art style. The company had to develop a new graphics system that gives the game its rich, bright color palette. (Moltenbrey 40-42) One of the main features of the game is the online multiplayer aspect, wherein the player can randomly meet another player while on their journey. They can choose to interact with each other or not. What is interesting is that the only way to communicate with each other is through a musical call and a glowing icon above the player. There is no text or voice communication, causing the players to figure out new ways to interact. One of the designers of the game, Robin Hunicke, states that *Journey* “is inspired by the idea that we want humans to connect and feel awe toward one another, to feel that they’re small, but part of something bigger.” (194) The art of this game comes from its vast, and beautiful game design, as well as the idea of a brief connection with another person without communication. The core idea of *Journey*, going on a journey of self-discovery, also lends to the message the game conveys. It is safe to say that *Journey* is truly a modern art game, and may be one of the games that propel video games to an art form.

Video games have clearly become engrained in the modern culture, and with the technological advances made are well on their way to being considered an art form. Their influence on the art world is indisputable, and it is very likely that they will be considered art in the very near future, as they are the ultimate combination of the dramatic arts, such as cinema, and the physical arts, evident in the painstaking animation processes involved in the creation process.

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