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Video Games and the Philosophy of Art

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The most cursory look at video games raises several interesting issues that have yet to receive any consideration in the philosophy of art, such as: Are videogames art and, if so, what kind of art are they? Are they more closely related to film, or are they similar to performance arts, such as dance? Perhaps they are more akin to competitive sports and games like diving and chess? Can we even define "video game" or "game"? We often say that video games are interactive, but what is interactivity and what are the effects of interactivity on eliciting emotional responses from players?

In some sectors of academia video games have recently become a subject of attention: a few MFA programs exist to train artists in the technology used in game development and Ph.D. programs devoted to the study of video games and interactive media, such as the program at Georgia Tech, are starting to pop up. Within the past few years, a handful of books have been published on video game theory. Although some philosophers have begun writing on issues dealing with video games, philosophers of art have completely ignored the subject.

The primary question for philosophical aesthetics is whether some video games should be considered as art. When looking at recent examples, it is apparent that video games have moved far beyond the primitive state of "Pong." Today, games such as "Halo" and "Max Payne" structure themselves around elaborate narratives that may take upwards of twenty hours to complete. Even if one lacks first-hand experience playing a game, a superficial glance reveals the narrative complexity that would prompt several movies to be made based on video games. Though one may say that many video games lack artistic value, the same can be said for some products of any artform without calling the value of the whole enterprise into question. Perhaps it is best if we approach the medium's current state as similar to that of film in the late 19th century: we can see a continuum from the relatively primitive Lumière actualities such as "Arrival of the Train" to the fully-realized promise of the artform that is obvious only decades later in the works of Fritz Lang.

Unfortunately, there has been no sustained argument on either side of the video games as art debate. An early attempt to defend the notion of games as art can be found in Chris Crawford's book *The Art of Computer Game Design*. Although academics have not sustained the debate, the issue has remained active in court cases involving video games and the First Amendment. For instance, in *American Amusement vs Kendrick*, Richard Posner argues that video games should be given full First Amendment protection partly because they share themes with the history of literature and they often try to evoke

similar emotional responses from their audiences. Although there have also been several journalistic attempts to declare video games outside the realm of art - and a comparable number of court cases in agreement - no one has carefully sorted out the issue. Making matters worse, the caliber of the debate is fairly low: most arguments against the video-games-as-art position merely repeat some form of the primitive entertainment-art distinction.

The most salient feature of the debate is the absence of the most common criticism of mass art – the passivity charge. Given the interactive nature of video games, there is simply no room for the charge of passivity. Video game players are anything but mentally or intellectually passive during typical game play for, as Collingwood might put it, video games are possibly the first concrete, mechanically reproduced form of art: they are mass artworks shaped by audience input. Interactivity marks a crucial distinction between decidedly non-interactive mass art forms such as film, novels, and recorded music and new interactive mass art forms. Sadly, this important distinction has yet to be examined in any satisfactory manner.

As such, perhaps the most interesting and widely discussed questions that video games raise involve the notion of interactivity. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich argues that the notion of interactivity is meaningless and, similarly, Wolf and Perron consciously avoid the term in their introduction to *The Video Game Theory Reader*. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray finds the term too vague, preferring instead the terms "procedural" and "participatory." In contrast, Ryan, in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, accepts an extremely broad notion of what it means to be interactive, so expansive that she even counts TV as an interactive medium. As an initial foray, I would argue that the notion of interactivity can be more precisely defined to closely map our ordinary use of the term. I would suggest that to "interact with" something involves engaging in a mutually responsive form of activity that is neither controlling, nor completely random. In one of the most interesting positions on the subject, Ryan argues that interactivity and narrative immersion work against each other. The soundness of this claim has received little attention. Clearly, there is much more to say about interactivity.

In order to answer the question of whether or not some video games should be considered art, we need to develop a more specific definition of what it is to be a video game. There have been very few attempts to define video game, and none of them have been successful. Salen and Zimmerman, in their new and very useful textbook *Rules of Play*, provide an annotated bibliography and a discussion of a handful of attempts at defining video game. A notable attempt can be found in *The Medium of the Video Game*, where Mark Wolf presents a set of conditions he thinks necessary for something to be a video game: rules, conflict, valued outcome, and player ability. The notion that videogames require rules has become something of a dogma in the literature, but it seems that a complete videogame cannot provide rules proper. Video games require working within a machine – be it a pc or a game console - that lays out iron parameters, and the notion of a rule

that cannot be broken seems incoherent. Again, no one has raised this issue and it remains one of many fresh problems to sort out.

In order to define "video game," one must to confront the problem of defining "game" itself. The two most important modern works on games are Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Callois's *Man, Play, and Games*. Although Callois never provides a definition of "game," his classification of games into four types (games of chance, vertigo, competition, and mimicry) has been extremely influential in the video game literature. Sutton-Smith's work on play and games provides the best starting point for an introduction to the subject. Again, Salen and Zimmerman provide a useful overview of attempts to define game. Their definition, which should raise some eyebrows, is that "a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome." I find every condition of this definition problematic, but there have been no better suggestions. If defining video games requires a general definition of games, it may well be one of the hardest problems facing the philosophy of art.

Although Kantian aesthetics puts play as one of the central features of aesthetic experience, relatively little has been written on the relationship between art, play, and games. As a result, if we were to consider some video games as art, it is not clear just what kind of art they would be. Perhaps, games are more like performative artworks where the artwork is intended for the performers. However, since philosophical aesthetics has almost ignored the aesthetic experience of artists and the performers of artworks, such a classification would shed little light.

It is unfortunate that philosophers of art have neglected this area. Much of the current work on videogames raises problems that have been central to the philosophy of art, but the current discourse fails to achieve the level of argument typical of our discipline. For example, although the editors of *ScreenPlay* provide a good analysis of the significance of videogames as an artform, many of the essays in the volume are preoccupied with "current" Lacanian-Althusserian film theory and its application to the new medium. Manovich's work suffers from similar problems, seldom tackling issues of significance with sustained argumentation. I have tried to point out a few questions that may be of interest to philosophers of art in an attempt to improve the quality of discourse around videogames. Below, I provide a succinct bibliography of current work on video games that may be useful for philosophers interested in the subject.

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