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Pissing in the Fountain:
Videogames and Expressive Performance

The drawn-out discussion of videogames as art took a significant step in May last year when the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States added digital games to their list of financially supported art forms. It placed games in the category of Arts in Media among

documentaries and dramatic narratives; media created for theatrical release; performance programs; artistic segments for use within existing series; multi-part webisodes; installations; and short films[1].

This context defines the nature of videogame art – generally thought of in terms of expression through narration and performance – relatively well. While an obvious counter-example would be the so-called "art games," to which some attention has also recently been devoted by the conventional art world, comparing works such as Pippin Barr's *The Artist Is Present* (2011) to mainstream videogames would be like comparing Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) to classic film. These exclusive works of art hardly fit into videogame culture as it is commonly understood, but rather they engage their audiences "in the appreciative and interpretive behaviors associated with the traditional visual arts"[2].

Only two months before the NEA's announcement, the discussion had heated up once more as Brian Moriarty, an acknowledged game developer, took an unexpected stand at the San Francisco Game Developers Conference by defending Roger Ebert's infamous "Video games can never be art" [3] opinion piece. Moriarty made significant notes on the parallels between videogames and popular art, comparing the concepts of kitsch and Fine Arts and even citing philosophers to provide evidence for his advocacy. As he

1.NEA – National Endowment for the Arts (2011). FY 2012 *Arts in Media Guidelines*. Retrieved from http://arts.endow.gov/grants/apply/ AIM-presentation.html

2.Tavinor, G. (2009). *Art of Videogames*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell

plowed through a 700-page anthology on Western art philosophy, including the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Ficino, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Shaftesbury, Croce, Nietzsche, Dewey and Heidegger . . . [He] also read a deadly-boring book on 20th century art definitions, including the writings of Weitz, Dickie and Danto [but nowhere] did [he] find a single author who regarded games or sports as a form of art [4].

While Moriarty's observations concerning the aged masters are somewhat correct, a philosophical debate about sport as art has continued since the 1970s. This writing examines videogames through that debate and suggests that single player videogames involve a distinctive factor of reception, which may allow one to consider their player performances a form of art.

WHY ART?

The fundamental question in discussing sports and videogames as art is the motive. David Best hits the heart of the matter when he does not "understand why it should be thought that sport would somehow be endowed with greater respectability if it could be shown to be art"[5]. One answer is found in expression. If a form is considered art, it establishes a specific relation between the expressive artist and the interpreting audience. This relation, however, requires means by which the expression is conveyed forward.

When it comes to sport, Best constructs his disapproving argument on the basis that "any art form must at least allow for the possibility of the expression of a conception of life-issues such as moral, social, and political issues"[6]. In spite of the fact that sports do not express moral, social or political issues, there are recognized art forms, such as music and dance, which do not lean on that kind of expression either[7]. Expressing life-issues is a significant characteristic of art, but not a compulsory one[8].

The art of dance, for instance, permits the artist to express feelings and emotions through performance. The same feelings and emotions can be expressed within the sport of dance as well. What separates the art of dance from the sport of dance is the latter's competitive aspect, that is, sports are "purposive"[9]. Competitions are held for arts as well, yet competition is essential only to sports. To be considered an art form, sport would have to terminate its competitive aspect, which would cause it to cease to exist as sport.

In this light, videogames stand in a fortunate position. While many of them involve competition between (human and/or non-human) players, most single player videogames are driven by non-competitive performance, which is an element that is found in some sports, such as ultrarunning and mountain climbing, as well. There is usually a purpose for the performance, but the performance is not necessarily purposive in the sense that the player would compete with other players.

WHOSE ART?

From art's point of view, what videogame performances obviously lack is a proper audience. In the manner of usual sporting events, the massive 120,000 person audience in South Korean Starcraft-proleague finals (2005) is more likely a fan gathering than an art show. Even though art shows may share elements with sport events – the social aspect being the most obvious one – art audiences engage with the event with entirely different interests. It is not the audience but its attitude that connects artworks to the art world.

3.Ebert, R. (2010). Video games can never be art. *Chicago Sun Times*. Retrieved from http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html

4.Moriarty, B. (2011). *An Apology for Roger Ebert*. Retrieved from http://www.ludix.com/moriarty/apology.html

5.Best, D. (1980). Art and Sport. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*,14(2), 69–80, p. 69.

6.Best, D. (1980). Art and Sport. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*,14(2), 69–80, p. 79.

7.Music and dance are understood here without lyrics. While folk music and dance, for example, can be said to create statements of national identity without verbal expression, these statements rely on connections external to the work itself and not on the expressive avenues of the art form.

8.cfr. Humble, P. N. (1993). Chess as an art form. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 33(1), 59–66, p. 59.

9.Best, D. (1984). Sport is Not Art, Journal of Philosophy of Sport, 12, pp. 25–40.

10. Wertz, S.K. (1979). Are Sports Art Forms?. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 13(1), 107–109, p. 108.

11. cfr. Diderot, D. (1883). *The Paradox of Acting.* London, UK: Chatto & Windus.

12. cfr. Juul, J. (1999). *A Clash Between Game and Narrative – A Thesis on Computer Games and Interactive Fiction* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://www.jesperjuul.net/thesis/AClashBetweenGameAndNarrative.pdf ; Juul, J. (2001). Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives. *Game Studies, 1.* Retrieved from http:/www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/ ; Juul, J. (2004). *Introduction to Game Time.* In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (pp. 131–142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

13. Eskelinen, M. (2004). *Towards Computer Game Studies.* In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 40.

14. Eskelinen, M. (2005). *Pelit ja pelitutkimus luovassa taloudessa.* Helsinki, Finland: Sitra, p. 64.

15. As regards the significance of interpretation in evaluating art, see e.g. Beardsley, M. (1958). *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism.* New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World; and Goldman, A. (2004). Evaluating Art, in P. Kivy (Ed.), The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

16. cfr. Kirkpatrick, G. (2011). *Aesthetic Theory And the Video Game.* Manchester University Press, pp. 31–34.

17. Arnold, P. (1990). Sport, the Aesthetic And Art: Further Thoughts. *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 38(2), 160–179, p. 160.

18. Kant, I. (1928). *Critique of Judgment.* Oxford, UK: Claredon (Original work published 1790).

Whereas most art performances follow institutional art definitions by finding an art-oriented audience, videogames are typically experienced alone. Yet reading is also a secluded art experience, which may lack the art-oriented audience, and literature, nonetheless, is art. What makes it difficult to consider videogame performances as art is that, so far, performance art has been performed to a predominantly public audience. Videogames are different as they combine the traditional aspect of performance with the less common aspect of secluded reception.

This combination establishes the problematic role of performer/audience. The dilemma of that role's duality is clearly demonstrated by Spencer Wertz as he assumes the player of any game to adopt a contemplative view of an art-oriented audience:

If a participant in a game adopts such a point of view, then he or she becomes a spectator while playing. That has disastrous consequences; the player is out of the game's action and is, mentally, on the sidelines[10].

One cannot adopt two roles at the same time without mistreating one of them[11]. If a player takes the role of the audience, the redirected focus results in an unsuccessful performance. Focusing on the role of the player, in turn, ties one to the moment, the now in Jesper Juul's[12] terms, which leaves no time for interpretation. As Markku Eskelinen puts it:

[I]n art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret, whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation[13].

It appears that players with artistic ambition are left with two options: to interpret outside performance, or not to interpret at all. In other words, whereas traditional forms of art compel the perceiver to constant interpretation, (action-based) videogames drive the player to constantly ignore interpretation[14]. In case one holds that aesthetic value is constructed through interpretation, much of that value is lost as long as players are playing alone[15]. But if player performances are unique in their secluded reception, it is also reasonable to question whether they need to be interpreted in the same way as other performance arts. The aesthetic of videogame performance might be something that is experienced without interpretation at all[16].

HOW ART?

The term "art" is not synonymous with "aesthetic." As Peter Arnold points out, sports "can and do provide … aesthetic moments but these are not necessarily or logically a part of their purpose"[17]. One may enjoy dance or figure skating from an aesthetic point of view, but these cases represent aesthetic experiences in the Kantian sense of beauty – something that pleases apart from any interest in the manner of flowers and sunsets[18]. And not all beauty is art.

Even though sports and games are capable of presenting beauty and arousing aesthetic experiences[19], those factors do not make them art. To be considered a form of art, a medium must have a unique mode of expression. Some contributions have already been made to point out these specific modes in videogame narration[20] as well as in videogame performance[21].

19. cfr. Deen, P.D. (2011). Interactivity, Inhabitation and Pragmatist Aesthetics. *Game Studies, 11(2)*. Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/deen; and Karhulahti, V.-M. (2012). Puzzle Art in Story Worlds: Experience, Expression, Evaluation. *Proceedings of the 6th Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*. Retrieved from http://www.arsgames.net/2012gamephilosophy/en/html/program/papers/46%20-%20Karhulahti.pdf

20. Baker-Gragam, A. (2012). Representation by Regulated Interaction. *Proceedings of the 6th Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*. Madrid. Retrieved from http://www.arsgames.net/2012gamephilosophy/en/html/program/papers/36%20-%20Baker-Graham.pdf ; and Fortugno, N. (2009). Losing Your Grip: Futility and Dramatic Necessity in Shadow of the Colossus. In D. Davison (Ed.), *Well-Played 1.0: Videogames, Value and Meaning* (pp. 171–188). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press.

21. Bogost, I. (2011). *How to Do Things with Videogames*. New London, MN: Univeristy of Minnesota Press; and Fernández-Vara, C. (2009). *Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance. In Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009. London, UK: Brunel University. Retrieved from http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/˜cpearce3/DiGRA09/Friday%204%20September/137%20Play's%20the%20Thing.pdf

22. Firaxis, USA, 2001

23. Squire, K. (2004). *Replaying History: Learning World History through Playing Civilization III* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana University.

24. Arsenault, D. & Bonenfant, M. (2012). Poiesis and Imagination in the Aesthetic Exprerience: The Moment of Grace in Computer Game Play. Proceedings of *The 6thPhilosophy of Computer Games Conference*.

25. Maxis, USA, 2000

26. Quantic Dream, France, 1999

27. I would like to thank Pippin Barr, Graeme Kirkpatrick and Petri Lankoski for our discussions about the article.

Whereas the expressive power of Marcel Duchamp's infamous Fountain (1917) was based on shocking the era's institutional art norms by means of showing, single player videogames encourage players to perform for themselves. This is not to ignore the social aspect of games. In multiplayer games players perform for other players, and single player games are often played in a group or shared as recordings via sites such as YouTube. But next to the social aspect, videogames simultaneously amount to the first significant medium that designs means for individual expression for the individuals themselves.

Role-playing games are systems in which players are able to express their views by making specific choices. Strategy games such as Civilization III[22] afford opportunities for political expression through enacting history[23]. Action-based games can be seen as performance platforms on which a "creative player has the possibility of turning his computer game experience into an aesthetic exploration"[24]. Videogames, as a single player medium, can be seen as an argument against the postmodern culture of showing. Pissing in the urinal in The Sims[25] or The Nomad Soul[26] without anyone noticing is a riposte to how the concept of art is generally understood. A single player game is first and foremost a personal experience, which does not have to be shown[27].