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► To cite this version:

Hélène Sellier. Sketching the relation between the worlds of contemporary art and video games: Game art, art game, indie game. First Person Scholar, 2020. halshs-04613880

HAL Id: halshs-04613880

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04613880>

Submitted on 17 Jun 2024

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Title: Sketching the relation between the worlds of contemporary art and video games: Game art, art game, indie game

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Bio: I am a video game researcher and writer. I wrote a PhD thesis about the relationships between literature and video games, studying the diverse forms of frictions and hybridizations between the two media cultures. In parallel, I am a freelance Narrative Designer and I mainly worked on the otome game *Moonlight Lovers* (Beemoov Studios, 2019). I also teach Interactive Fiction Writing and Media Cultures in various universities, in France and in the UK.

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Rather than reviving the popular debate regarding the intrinsic artistic value of video games, crystallised in the Rogert Ebert controversy (Parker, 2018), in this essay I will consider the different ways that two separate “art worlds” (Becker, 1982) engage with this medium: the video game industry and the field of contemporary art. Art worlds should in fact be understood “in relation to each other, despite their specificities ” (Parker, 2013) since they are constantly changing (De Landa, 2009) and defined by their links with other systems. Parker (2013) thus explains that art games are a crucial element in the formation of the video game art world and scholars have argued that the video game industry is not a closed environment but is in fact participating in a vast ecosystem (Grandadam, Cohendet & Simon, 2013; Keogh, 2019). This essay considers the visual avant-garde as an adjacent field to new media production and aims to sketch the evolution of the relationship between the two art worlds by studying the different ways they engage in artistic appropriation (De Certeau, 1980) of video game culture.

The interaction between art and video games might seem obvious since popular video games now have dedicated exhibitions in museums, as in the case of “Game Story” on display at the Grand Palais in 2011 or “Design / Play / Disrupt” showcased at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2019. However, before this wave of institutional recognition during the 2010s (Ter Minassian, 2012; Colville, 2016), there were already connections between artistic practices and popular entertainment. Even if contemporary art is a multifaceted movement and difficult to define, the concept of experimentation, the aestheticization of everyday life, and the use of new materials are prevalent components (Millet, 2009). The works which will be considered here are art pieces that encompass those features, and are presented by authors or critics as contemporary art. Rather than questioning the “categorical impulse” of video game culture (Bailey, 2019) or the general human tendency to create aesthetic types, I explore the different concepts of indie games, art games, avant-garde, and contemporary art as the discursive result of a socio-cultural context. I therefore find these concepts fruitful objects of study for understanding how the meaning of a work of art is conditional to the context of production and reception. The examples I discuss here demonstrate an evolution of the artistic uses of video game elements over time and show an

increased porosity between the artistic avant-garde field and the video game industry. My goal is thus to reposition the discussion about art and video games in view of the contexts of their production and reception.

Part I : Video games as base material for artistic practice

The first period of artistic appropriation of video games that can be distinguished is characterised by the “détournement” of this medium and the transgression of the codes of video game culture, such as the importance of interactive entertainment and the sense of community, by self-proclaimed contemporary artists. Using Debord’s philosophical concept (2006) to study contemporary participative culture, Fanny Barnabé defines “détournement” as a kind of hijacking consisting of the successive gestures of appropriating existing content, extracting and reconfiguring existing elements, and finally creating a new work (2017: 6). At the turn of the century, when the social discourse about the artistic value of video games first arose (Lalu, 2018), some contemporary art works used game elements but diverted or misrepresented their function or meaning. Game art uses game engines to create fixed images, screenshots of games to put together a new visual object, modifications of existing games, or artistic enactments of games. For example, [dead-in-iraq](#) is an online performance by Joseph DeLappe that took place from 2006 to 2011 in the first person shooter recruiting game *America’s Army*. Wanting to create “a fleeting, online memorial” according to DeLappe’s description of the game, the artist wrote the name, age, service branch, and date of death of deceased soldiers. Rather than engaging in combat, his avatar was standing still and the artist continued to type new identities after elimination. DeLappe refused to adopt a playful attitude and to participate in the game as well as denied answering other players’ questions. Because of this cryptic political engagement, the very nature of the experience separates the art piece from the original game. The same observation can be made about art works which use video games as the foundation to generate experimental aesthetic experiences. For example, [Super Mario Clouds](#) is a 2002 video installation displaying only the clouds of Nintendo’s 1985 hit *Super Mario Brothers*. Creator Cory Archangel modified the original cartridge, using the video game as an instrument in order to create a synaesthetic, contemplative, and abstract work. Magarita Balzerani thus argues that video games are a means for artists to create synaesthetic experiences. In that respect, video games are anchored in the tradition of the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” a concept developed by Richard Wagner designating a total and universal work of art blending different artistic traditions and using several artistic means (Balzerani, 2006). This approach of hijacking video games for artistic purposes continues to be used by artists to this day: for example, from 2012-2014 Harun Faroki created the installation [Parallel I-IV](#) which consists of screens showing extracts of video games.

[Image1 : Photograph of the exhibition Parallel by Harun Faroki taken from the artist’s website]

The aim of Faroki’s installations is to question the construction of video game worlds, including a reflection on their visual realism and the rules that underline the actions of the characters. However, the images shown to the spectator are deprived of the context of play and thus lose part of their meaning. Using games as a topic to tackle and a source material to shape, what DeLappe, Archangel, and Faroki’s art pieces have in common is the fact that they divorce themselves from the culture of video game production and consumption. The artists are selecting from the medium what they are interested in and twisting it to fit their needs without taking into account the cultural logics of mainstream productions.

Part II : Video games as the result of artistic experiments

A contrasting trend called “art games” mushroomed in the 2010s. In this movement, video games are not used as the base material for the creation of other works anymore; on the contrary, they are the result of the creative process. In 2003, Tiffany Holmes gave the first definition of art games, stating they were “an interactive work, usually humorous, by a visual artist that does one or more of the following: challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner” (Holmes, 2003). Rooting her own creative practice within an established artistic world, she presented the game *In a_maze@getty.edu*, which deals with the high-tech surveillance technologies funded by the J. Paul Getty Research Institute in 2001. Like Holmes’ work, many art games are produced in a process of research-creation outside of the industry. For example, in France, Thierry Serdane (2014) and Claire Siegiel (2015) aimed to create games that are not influenced by neoliberal values, but rather used an artistic approach to encourage the rebirth of counterculture. As Philipa Jane Stalker underlines, art games are strongly linked with the contemporary art world (2006) and the works are displayed in museums rather than distributed via the different platforms used in the video game industry. For example, [*Jeff Koons must die*](#) is an installation by Hunter Jonakin that looks like an ‘80s arcade console with which the spectator can interact.

[Image 2 : Photograph of the installation Jeff Koons must die by Hunter Jonakin taken from the artist’s website]

The cabinet contains a standard first-person shooting game made in the game engine UDK. The aim is to destroy Koons’ most famous pieces while avoiding security guards, curators, and lawyers. As opposed to the previous examples, these works of art build ludic experiences gamers can relate to in order to critique and question the very value and definition of art. The codes of video game culture, such as gameplay genres, are not discarded as irrelevant but used as part of the designing frame.

Part III : Video games as a language mastered by the artists

The piece by Jonakin exemplifies what can be identified as a new turn in the relationship between contemporary art and video game worlds. In this trend, video games are not only the material for artistic experimentations or the result of the creative process, but also part of a culture that the spectator needs to be familiar with to fully understand the work produced. For Sophie Daste (2013), the multi-layered knowledge that those works of art need to be fully understood create a new kind of elitism. These pieces are indeed at the crossroads of several orders of legitimacy (Glevarec, 2013): they belong to both the video game world and the contemporary art world. For example, [*Game Jockey*](#) by Rémy Sohier is an installation which allows a jockey to mix samples of existing video games in front of a crowd.

[Image 3 : Photograph of the installation Game Jockey by Rémi Sohier taken from the artist’s website]

The jockey/player needs to draw from their knowledge of video game culture while being able to perform in public. Art works like this one, which rely on an expert knowledge of popular culture, are not only part of the contemporary art world but have also strong links with the indie game scene: John Sharp (2015) identifies “artists’ games” such as [*giantJoystick*](#) by Mary Flanagan. This 2006 installation consists of a giant joystick that looks like an Atari 2600 controller which is used by a

group of players to collectively and collaboratively experience arcade games like *Asteroids* (Atari, 1979).

Part IV : Contemporary art values in the video games world

If the contemporary art world is becoming more and more permeable to video game culture, reciprocally, the media industry is increasingly influenced by the artistic sphere. So when artists are using game engines in a way which was not planned, selecting what they are interested in and twisting the program, then they are misappropriating the tools created for the industry. This trend is exemplified by the “innovation in game design” award attributed to *Braid* in 2008 or the development of cultural products which claim the label “Games for change.” Thus a new set of values has emerged, very different from the norms of mainstream video game culture, with which critics are now encouraged to judge the aesthetics of video games, namely: the aim to give players an original experience, to deconstruct preexisting models, to breach the horizon of player expectations, and to become a unique artistic work. A part of the indie game *The Stanley Parable* questions this change of paradigm. In the “baby ending,” the player is supposed to press a button to prevent a baby from reaching a fire.

[Image4 : Screenshot of Stanley Parable (Galatic Café, 2013)]

Not only is the interaction minimal, the gameplay repetitive, and the graphics and sound design made to be unnerving, but the narrator comments on the gameplay, explicitly questioning the emotional value of the experience. Echoing the recurring criticism found in video game communities that art games are not *fun*, this excerpt speaks to the vacuity of contemporary art using that field’s same artistic tools. The dialogue, sometimes conflictual, between the video game industry and the contemporary art world participates in establishing “the terms and stakes of cultural and aesthetic legitimacy for digital games, and continue to shape the ways in which games are engaged and judged” (Parker, 2018).

Conclusion

This essay urges a consideration of the video game industry that takes into account the other art worlds that communicate and engage with it. Focusing on contemporary art, I suggest that there is not a linear evolution from the absolute rejection of video game culture to the appreciation of the media as an art form, but that we can still identify different trends, anchored in time periods and resonant with different cultural discourses. I distinguished three types of appropriation of video game culture by artists: the use of the video game as a material for other experimentations; the creative experimentation resulting in a video game, with the adoption of the cultural codes and the language of the medium within the production of an art piece; and finally, the influence of contemporary art on the video game industry. Given the impact that video games have had on contemporary art and vice versa, the future development of both the indie scene and mainstream games will be interesting to watch from an artistic perspective.

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