[1]Legitimizing Video Games as an Art-Medium

Introduction

Are video games Art? Should a Video Game be considered a work of Art? In his book on game theory and design, Richard Rouse seems to have made the decision in his statement: "Of course video games are art, could anything be more obvious?" (2005: 532). There is certainly much creativity in the medium but few end products are considered Fine Art as they are commercially focused. The width and depth of the majority of video games is reflected in the rise of the behemoth video game corporations whose eyes are fixed firmly on the profitability of titles. As such, much is known of the history and business models of the industry but there has been little discourse on the practicalities of legitimizing this new medium as an avenue for Art creation. Although artists have begun to use the culture of the video game as a field of experimentation, it remains under-explored when compared to film or other Art media. This is in part due to the complexity, wide-range of skill-sets, the lack of available hardware and the size of teams involved in producing a video game that, in effect, excludes many outsiders from participation and creation of new works. This paper serves as a call to arms for artists and those within the video games industry to begin to explore the collaborative possibilities of creating Art within the videogame medium. There are many benefits in advancing and expanding our understanding of what a video game is and could be. Artists wishing to exploit this new medium have the potential to create massive interactive worlds and also to gain a foothold in non-gallery settings. The video game producers can, through working in collaboration with artists and dreamers, look towards creating products that are less mired in the current morass of filmic genres and sequel after sequel with little conceptual innovation or depth. The video game platform is the newest field for interactive art exploration; as such we need to focus on how we can look towards creating art within this medium.

Lack of Academic Scrutiny

The first step towards exploring the possibilities of video games as art and legitimatizing them as an Art medium is a thorough examination of the category 'video game'. From both artists and art historians, video games suffer from lack of scrutiny. It would seem that more is known about art from three hundred years ago than the potentiality and positioning of a new media form that is in millions of homes across the world today. As Rebecca Tews states: "understanding and explaining the impact of video game experiences is essential to understanding the cultural experience" (2001: 169). The interactive phenomenon is gaining some ground but has been consistently marginalized by journalistic media's reactionary response to issues of sex and violence. As succinctly put by Kurt Squire in his paper on video game culture: "such extreme cultural reactions to technological and cultural innovations are hardly new; mid twentieth-century critics

---

[1] This paper was presented at the REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center sept 29-oct 4 2005 and co sponsored by the Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.

feared that television watchers would become addicted to television, never leaving their homes, and critics before them feared that film would pervert viewers" (2002), the recent focus on certain game titles is common of the doomsayers reacting to any new cultural form. Although to most people video games would seem to concentrate on vicarious thrills, sexism, racism and violence as the main content of videogames, this assumption is completely false. The best selling games of 2004-5 counted many violent and M-Rated titles, but the vast majority of sales continue to be those rated E (E-for everyone) or Teen, games that have mild violence and are more akin to interactive cartoons or primetime television. Not to mention that games such as Tetris, one of (if not the) most popular video games of all time has very little to do with any of the main reactionary vitriol poured on by certain media.

"What's missing from contemporary debate on gaming and culture is any naturalistic study of what game-playing experiences are like, how gaming fits into people's lives, and the kinds of practices people are engaged in while gaming" (ibid, 2002).

2004 Computer and Video Game Sales By Rating

BY UNITS SOLD
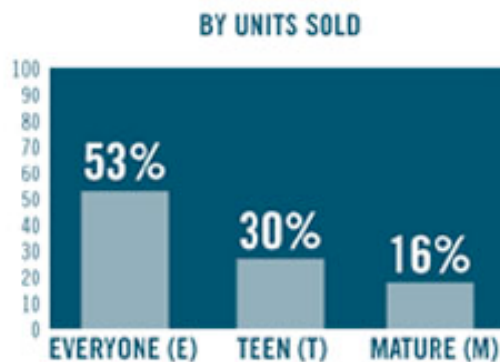
Source: The NPD Group / NPD Funworld® / TRSTS® and NPD Techworld℠

(Source: Entertainment Software Association)

The growing academic discourse surrounding video game culture and aesthetics has begun, but focuses almost entirely on narrative structures and redundant theory formally applied towards websites and hypertext new media forms. During the 1980's many discourses on branching narrative and interactive media ended with compartmentalization and omission. In much the same way, the video game is coming close to a similar subjugation and fate. To begin with there is no one object that defines a 'video game'. Although websites have to conform to certain technologies and rule sets based on browsers and plug-ins, video games span multiple hardware and can be console based, computer based, on mobile phones or on other portable media. The definition of a video game is based far more around content than platform. The range of subject matter and contextual output of video games is vast, the genres themselves having multiple sub-genres, and with recent developments the hybridization of the genres occurring now means that even these well-defined genres are open for redundancy. Video game developers are always looking for opportunities to bring a new experience or new 'hook'

to their products. Along with marketing crossovers and multiple platforms, video games are a force to be reckoned with and yet still seem to be dismissed as something that only young (mostly male) children play with: "Frequently, video games were dismissed in the early literature as a fad and a passing fancy played by only a few advantaged children" (Tews, 2001: 170). This audience stereotype is changing, indeed has already changed, as those of us who grew up with Nintendo and Sega mature so do our tastes, our enthusiasm for the gaming experience does not wane however. More and more gamers are female, the ethnic diversity of gamers is also increasing – and this is also reflected somewhat in the development teams. Once we establish the video games have a mature audience, and one who takes their media very seriously, we can assert that perhaps it is time that the art world caught up.

(Source: Entertainment Software Association)

The State of Video Game Art
There have been some game related art shows and projects, few and far between but they do exist. Although many of the exhibitions and shows focus on the 'neat' or 'zeitgeist' nature of the artist's work, as with new media, it is hard to find much critical attention that does not dismiss these works as flippant. Artists such as Paul Johnson, Brody Condon, Paul Catanese, Feng Mengbo, Eddo Stern, Anne-Marie Schleiner to name a few - most of whom were featured in New York city's New Museum show "killer Instinct" in 2004. In many works you have to be of the gamer culture to understand the play, the irony or the humor certainly, but this is purely a new form of elitism in a medium that isn't a stranger to the phenomenon. Most of the work that appears nationally and internationally seems very much situated in the modification or 'mod' culture allowed by a few (mostly PC) games. Creating a video game from scratch is, as one would imagine, a daunting task. The variety of skill sets, from programming to two-dimensional and three-dimensional artworks along with sound, interaction and so on really forces any artist to work in collaboration or on existing intellectual property. This does allow the artist to move around within an already established visual culture but is problematic when faced with issues based on the originality of the work or the attitude of some that the craft must require a total mastery of your chosen medium. Most art that is created in the video game medium has to be viewed from a different perspective than that of painting, sculpture or even perhaps other forms of new media. The potential bridge and placement of video games as an art form lies in the growing acceptance of new media and interactive media as a true art medium. As Richard Rouse states in his book 'Game Design Theory and Practice':

> "The question must be asked 'Would you do anything differently if computer games were or were not art?' Surely the best way to convince the public that we are legitimate is to act like it by producing works as compelling as those found in any other media" (2005: 532).

The potential for expression and depth or transcendence in a video game environment is enormous, however as stated earlier apart from a few artists, the industry seems fairly closed to interlopers from the visual arts.

Over time video games have proven to be as headline grabbing as any art work in their ability to shock. Although art has tended to be something that when gallery based is viewed only by a few, certain game titles have found their way into homes across the world and are subtly subverting social norms. This subversion is rarely positive, often being realized in the form of male fantasy or adolescent vitriolic environments and actions. What these games have done is brought about a discourse into the ethics of these games, and indeed of the duplicity of other media such as television, print and film. In this regard some video games could be seen to have the same 'shock value' in their reinterpretation or questioning nature as that of many video or performance artists. However, it's not always the intent of the game producers to create 'art' or a product that asks moralistic or societal questions, more often the backlash is seen as positive from a purely marketing point of view, rather than a treatise on new social mores. Ethics have become ever more the topic of discussion within the industry and outside. Most recently there have been several commercial games dealing with issues of morals and ethics and most importantly the gray areas in-between: how your actions as player effect your on-screen avatar or persona and the world it inhabits. However, the most popular games still deal in visceral entertainment and escapist fantasies. Stereotypes are relied upon far too often and minorities are marginalized time and again.

> "When it comes to the ethical choices that game developers make when they decide what to put into their creations, they face the same moral issues that artists in any other communications medium face. They must struggle with balancing their rights to free expression with the tastes of consumers and be concerned about the effects their content has on their audience. While it's easy for games to enlighten and enliven the human experience, they are still a form of media and expression, and thus possessed of the ability to influence those that play them." (Takahashi, 2004).

Where commercial video games have failed us is in their lack of edgy subject matter and risk-taking when it comes to subverting social norms and types. Commercial video games are created to make money - art based video games would serve a completely different intent. It is this purpose that would cause a shift in not just the art world but also the video game industry. The game industry is beginning to stagnate as sequel after sequel is produced with little attention towards innovation or experimentation. Truly unique titles are increasingly rare as the risk is seen as too great financially and the audience as often too small.

Art in the Gallery

Gallery based video game art is a strange beast and is often treated in a very dismissive manner. One issue with interactive work of any kind in a gallery space is in having to push the audience into participation. However, a video game cannot work without input from others, it is this raison d'etre that makes video games a participatory art medium. The uncommon nature of seeing a video game or interactive controller in a gallery is somewhat diminishing, but even so there is a form of coercion involved in getting audiences to participate. In the gallery 'mode' we are so often complicit in the sacred nature of the art object that we can look at but not touch. In this way perhaps the gallery is the wrong setting for any form of interactive art. Although in our society currently the gallery acts as a legitimization conduit for whatever constitutes art, in the realm of gaming and interactive art the works are often best experienced in their own environment. In opposition to this, video game art can often be seen as a part of the spectacle associated with video installations, performance or theatrical art. Galleries allow for space, for a meditative environment and for a particular mindset and approach to whatever is being experienced. Video game art just happens to sit well (as do many examples of art works) in both environments and can be experienced socially, personally or as a shared (networked) experienced internationally.

One of my earlier art works dealing with the subject and content matter of video games was the interactive gallery installation 'video game'. In this piece the player is immersed emotionally and physically within a familiar game environment. The intention of the game was to introduce an interactive, projected experience which would ask the audience to think ethically about their actions within the video game environment. The focus in this work is on ethical choice within a visceral 'shooter' environment. For the art to work the audience or participant must understand implicitly the genre of First Person Shooters. The work relies heavily on this learnt language and behavior. Once inside this simulation the complicity of the game space would lead them to make typical game choices: that is to have fun with no consequences. What occurs in the game when 'wrong' choices are made is non-subtle enforcement of dominant ethical reasoning; in effect the player is chastised verbally but rewarded visually. The game space will encourage a player to make ethical choices and at game end the player is faced with the consequences of their actions. Within the framework of the simulation the player will not necessarily care as to their conduct, they will at least be forced to question the decisions made whilst in the game
Although simplistic in tone and execution, at its heart the work 'video game' reflects much of the current criticism and social outcry centered on game culture. The only question here is whether or not people, in a known non-threatening and safe environment still feel compelled to make the same ethical and humane choices they would in the 'real world' situation. If they are acting differently this must nullify the argument (somewhat at least) against violence in games as those playing are aware of their role as gamer.
        "That's where I am comfortable with violence. That's where I think most players are comfortable: when the violence is presented in a way that it clearly is done for fun and visceral impact. It's when you start getting to the real dark stuff, and the ripped-from-the-headline scenarios, that people start either tuning out or getting upset" (Jaffe, 2004).

Machinima, Mods and New Mediums

One arena that is sporting a freedom of expression from within the video game medium is the practice of making films using the video game environment, characters and culture. This usually non-interactive form of film-making is known as Machinima, a mash-up of Machine and cinema. Already websites such as machinima.com and rooster teeth productions are spawning many short and fairly lengthy videos using video games as a backdrop. Many PC-based video games have built in editors and recording devices that allow gamers to create their own interactive environments and sometimes characters. The films are usually made by recording (either through a PC video capture card or VHS/DVR) on-screen events, editing them down and so on, much in the same way that any film would be shot. The difference here is that it's far cheaper, the actors are virtual and the setting can be incredibly detailed (for more information on making Machinima see "The Art of Machinima" by Paul Marino Paraglyph Press 2004).

> "While many of the Machinima people talk about it as a new way to make films, I think there's something very prescient about it. It's telling us what films in the future might be like. The camera is reduced to a construct, to one's perspective onscreen rather than a physical object. It's truer to the notion of digital cinema than using digital cameras" (Goodman, 2005: 70).

The downside to this is the lack of control and the easily recognizable environments and characters that can distract from the finished work. Talented Machinima artists who have developed incredibly abstract or immersive environments using game engines have made some advancement. Those who got in on the ground floor of Machinima are already being picked up by major media companies to produce programming for their networks. The thorny issue of copyright does enter the fray at times; after all if you make money using a game engine that is not yours or characters you did not create, who owns the intellectual property? At the moment the owners of the video games, by allowing modifications built into their software releases, seem to be benevolent towards the practitioners of Machinima. An obvious motivation for this is the potential for Machinina to be used as a marketing tool. The irony of Machinima is that while it is an expression, in many ways it is also in direct opposition to what video games are all about – the interaction. Making linear narrative or music-based works is certainly a part of the video game experience, as in the in-game 'cut scene' that is often used to introduce characters or to move the narrative structure along. But the language of both Machinima and the cut-scene is entirely cinematic in nature. What is 'new' is the interaction of a player in the game world.

Machinima can be viewed as an expressive off-shoot of video game culture: it's predominantly fan-based and much of the subject matter revolves around in-game jokes and the wider cultural sphere of video games. The products themselves are experimental and often push the games themselves in ways that the designers had never originally planned or dreamed of, in this regard we cannot and should not dismiss Machinima as a copy-cat to other film-making genres, perhaps even to suggest that it will eventually become one in its own right. Film shorts such as 'Anna' from Fountainhead Entertainment offer a meditative experience for the viewer that makes it hard to believe the environment is actually a usually gory-filled first person shooter game. Another example is the abstract work of Friedrich 'fiezi' Kirschner and his short "The Journey".

The aesthetic is far more in keeping with eastern European animation or artistic practice, and again Kirchner has used the video game 'UnReal' to create his work – a game that is violent and visceral and adrenalin fueled. Although the narrative structures, storylines and environments are taken very much from any film script or animation one can imagine, this is a democratization of three-dimensional story telling. Anyone with the appropriate technology (the technology you need to play games for the most part as well as some often free additions of software) can become a director of an engaging work or film. In creating potentially as a new underground sub-genre for film makers, Machinima can be seen as paving the way for those who wish to legitimize video games as an art form. By projecting work from video game space into the linear film space that most are aware of and feel safest with, Machinima offers a bridge from the video game world to a wider audience. As Paul Marino, writing about the accessibility of Machinima, states: "Experiential simulation and interactive entertainment have introduced a chaos factor to art unlike any seen before it" (Gaeta, 2004).

'Mods' as previously stated are more integral to the art practice of experiment and ownership of a final work. Modifying (or 'modding' as it is most commonly known) a video game usually on a PC has been a part of the gamer community since the earliest days of the three-dimensional (3d) first person-shooter (FPS), in early iterations games such as Doom from Id software allowed users to 'hack' their own levels and using a software development kit (SDK) Id allowed users for the first time to really go wild with a commercial video game product. At first the mods were simple, overlays of contemporary cinema scenes or characters onto the game environment. Aliens and the Simpson's were some of the very first game mods. By allowing their fan and player base to modify their own games, this grew into a completely separate community of 'modders' some of whom managed to create completely separate games from within a commercial product by simply turning the perspective of the point of view of the game around. Counter-strike (which is now a game in its own right) was born from the game Half-life and in the narrative of the Half Life game you fought your way out of 'Black Mesa" against both mutated creatures form another dimension (or experiments gone awry with mutated results) and also against government troops who were trying to cover up the situation. With counter-strike you took on the 'bad guy' role and were in effect fighting form the outside and traveling inwards. So popular were the innovations and storyline that Counter-Strike quickly collected a strong and large fan and player base.

> "'It extends the life of a game,' says Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Association. 'If I know I can buy, say, *Quake* and get 20 hours of play, but I know that the developer has provided tools for the mod community to work with, and it encourages mod development, then I know I can look forward to unlimited hours of game-play with extra levels and new tools,' he says" (Goodale: 2005).

Player customization of the game space is unique to PC-based gaming and has allowed for a free flow of talented adherents to create games or environments in their own right without necessarily the need for a large programming and design team. Within the world of modding artists have lurked and created interesting works, some commenting on the gender-specific activities, some commenting on the "war simulation" aspect of many FPS

games (Velvet Strike being one of these) and some artists have taken to modifying an entire level of a game and repositioning it to question the role of video games in society (Waco Resurrection). Games like 'Waco' begin to ask the player what underpins these simulacra, these simulations of a hyperrealistic environment that is both familiar and fantastic at once. What subject matter could art videos games take on? What subjects would or could work in a modified game and what subjects are still taboo? Although there has been much argument on the lack of ethics in many video games produced to date, there is also a sense that the medium is wide open for exploitation form artists. One issue is that many gamers hold their medium in such high esteem and are so dedicated to it that many artists are treated like unwanted tourists in the realms of game space.

Video Games in Curriculum

In order to further legitimize the video game as an art medium, academia is increasingly taking up the banner of game studies in departments such as computer science, social sciences and media studies. Although there are many who would caution the use of games in the curriculum as potentially removing the rigor of 'standard' education practice there is a resolved move towards investigating the potential as Kurt Squires muses: "Despite these cautions about the potential of games to support learning, games may be the most fully realized educational technology produced to date" (2002). Within the Fine Arts the impact is slightly lessened, as the vocational aspects of game design appear to make many faculty cautious. Engaging young artists in a medium that they inherently understand and were raised on, can do much to promote the legitimization process and extend ways of creating new forms of Art for new generations. My research and artistic explorations have led towards shifting the concentration of video games towards a maturated art genre. As a further part to my enactment of video games as artistic medium I have developed and taught video game Art courses at the University of South Florida and Elon University. These courses are focused on the exploration of the theoretical, sociological, aesthetic and artistic applications of the video game medium. These courses are focused on the exploration of the theoretical, sociological, aesthetic and artistic applications of the video game medium. Through contextualization within the socialized norms of a broadcast media-saturated society, we are able to investigate the future for expression of video games and by focusing on their increasing influence on our societies.

Students are asked to investigate themes based around the question: 'Is it possible to make a contemporary electronic game with artistic sensibilities and notions?' The course purpose is to suggest strategies and concepts for an interactive game that would push the boundaries of what we understand an electronic game to be. Following the practice of the games industry, students act as a concept designer and develop ideas for a new game to be presented as if to the Managing Director of a games company. By pulling together a wide-range of materials, digitally-based or not, the final piece is a substantial presentation/proposal for a Fine Art Video Game. Through engaging students in deconstructing what a video game is and exploring the potential of the medium, we separate the entertainment focus of the video game and cross over into artistic models and output. By exploring video game aesthetics and culture in academic discourse and practice we can alter the paradigms of the current industry model, and move towards a

future of video game genres that encompass more than just mass entertainment. Students raised with video games have the potential to push the limits of expression in the medium transcending existing technical limitations.

Conclusions
There is no doubt that this new medium, one that we must recall is less than thirty years old, has gone from strength to strength in a short space of time. What we lack now is a deeper understanding of its situation within our cultural lexicon, of how video games effect and affect our societies and populace. Video games fit well into any digital or electronic media curriculum as well as having the potential for hybridized cross-disciplinary communication with computer and social sciences. Although many academies are still trying to situate digital media into their curriculums, the video game is already becoming a serious part of the learning process for many students in education practice. As such the video game, its language, its social underpinnings and its increasingly mobile nature is already part of the technologically extended landscape. With the advent of ubiquitous computing and always on, accessible computer networks, the consoles and games themselves have broken out of the home space and into the social and urban space around us. How artists approach this new medium and help us to understand it is critically important in the near and far future. Art and academia suffer from a slowness of adoption as well as a frantic zeitgeist acceptance of new technologies and expression, it is within this dichotomous discourse that video games find themselves being embraced and ignored in almost equal amounts. By further analyzing the language, immediateness and technology inherent to the video game, artists and educators will have to continue to work within the increasingly hybridized and socialized world of the video game. The legitimization process is essential, it cannot be ignored. Much as we continue to herald the arrival and legitimization of 'new' media (just as it becomes old media) so the next generation will inherently 'get' video games as a delivery medium for expression, meditation and art.

Bibliography:

Counter-Strike Half Life Mod, 2000: Publisher Sierra Entertainment

Doom, 1993: Id Software

Gaeta, John, 2004: Foreword from Paul Marino, "The Art of Machinima". Paraglyph Press.

Goodale, Gloria, 2005, USA Today 18/7/2005, accessed online:
 http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-07-18-gta-hidden-content_x.htm

Goodman, Carl, 2005, quoted in "Machinima', Matt Kelland, Dave Morris, Dave Lloyd, Ilex Press Limited.

Half Life, 1998: Valve Software, Publisher Sierra Entertainment

Jaffe, David, 2004, quoted in "Manhunt to Mortal Kombat: _The Use and Future Use_of Violence in Games" Stephen L. Kent. Gamasutra Sept 3rd
http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20040903/kent_01.shtml

Marino, Paul, 2004: 3-D Game Hyphen-Based Film Making: The Art of Machinima", Paraglyph Press.

Quake, 1996: Id Software

Rouse, Richard, 2005: "Game Design Theory and Practice". Wordware Publishing Ltd.

Squire, Kurt, 2002: "Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games", *Game Studies Journal* accessed online: http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/

Takahashi, Dean, 2004:_Gamasutra_December 27,
http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20041227/takahashi_01.shtml

Tews Rebecca R., 2001: "Archetypes on acid – video games and culture" essay in The Medium of the Video Game, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf, University of Texas Press.

UnReal, 1998: Epic Games, Publisher GT Interactive