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Video Games as an Art Form

by Michael Robles

(English 1102)

Every form of art originates from entertainment. Paintings were meant to decorate a room, music filled the void with appealing melodies, literature engaged readers intellectually, and movies turn what lies in our imagination into a tangible reality. Of course, there are a plethora of variations on each of these categories, but all of these mediums have been solidified throughout the ages as forms of artistic expression. However, a relative newcomer to the world of entertainment, the video game, has not yet been recognized as worthy enough to take its place in the world of art. The problem arises when video game developers try to express their artistic vision, but the general public remains almost completely oblivious to their existence. In essence, video games cannot prove themselves because no one is listening.

Nevertheless, video games should be promoted as a valid form of artistic expression because of the potential they have to creatively express an idea that no other form of media can claim to accomplish. This uniqueness is found in the video game's direct interaction with the observer. If academically studied, games can be as intellectually beneficial as the analysis of a renowned movie or a legendary piece of literature. A way to promote video games as art is to have increased positive coverage of video games by the public. A possible method of doing so could include introducing games in libraries, or perhaps even having interactive exhibits at museums dedicated to artistry. In essence, the only way to experience a game is to become directly involved with it. The more people that can experience what video games have to offer, the more they can understand their artistic value.

Unfortunately, the virtual world of video games is only a reality to a few. In his article titled "Is it Art?", John Lanchester states that "books, films, TV, dance, theatre, music, painting, photography...are all part of our current cultural discourse. Video games aren't" (18). Even if a person does not partake in or even enjoy one of these artistic subjects, at least he or she knows that the artistic medium exists. Lanchester explains this situation as the "cultural segregation" of video games which have such a "clean-cut division between the audience and non-audience" (18). As one might expect, it will prove difficult for someone to value something that is unknown to him or her. Additionally, the public's exposure to video games in the media often only involve a connection between violent video games and various shooting tragedies that occur throughout a nation. If this is a person's only knowledge of video games, it becomes very easy to dismiss video games as a negative influence and a waste of time.

Beyond the separation between those who do and do not play video games, the different types of games available even divide the gaming populace. There are games that are made to capitalize on its "fun factor," where most of the developer's effort is concentrated on the gameplay mechanics. Other developers sacrifice gameplay to provide a graphically impressive experience, but at the cost of its classification as a "video game." To address this problem, it must be made clear that not all video games should be considered as art. Ernest W. Adams, in his article titled "Will Computer Games Ever be a Legitimate Art Form?," is quick to state that "the vast majority of what the game industry does is not art, but popular culture" (69) and that most games are created for pure entertainment. However, Adams qualifies his statement by explaining that film, which is a recognized art form, is also usually not art. He claims that the video game medium as a whole, just like film, has the ability to be an art form due to the qualities it shares with other forms of art (70).

Before video games can be promoted as art, the argument must be made that video games

have the attributes to qualify them as an art form. However, the difficulty arises in finding succinct definition of art. To obtain a greater understanding of art itself, Adams offers a description of the evolution of art. He proposes that art was initially meant to “portray a person or scene or object” but in this current generation, art serves “as an expression of the artist’s thoughts” (68). While video games are certainly not a product of one person, much like movies, there are “directors” of games that oversee a game’s development. Relatively famous developers in the gaming world would include Ken Levine (*Bioshock*), Peter Molyneux (*Fable*), and Jade Raymond (*Assassin’s Creed*). In an article published in the journal *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries*, Jef Folkerts suggests a distinction between what is truly artistic and what is simply aesthetic. The aesthetic quality of something only involves its outward experience, while an object’s artistic properties involve its content (103). Folkerts’ asserts that while all art has an aesthetic component, “art does not have to be beautiful” (102), but that it is the content of a medium that makes it art. It is the content that distinguishes video games from other games such as football or blackjack, as video games actually have the potential for literary content.

While video games of the current-generation boast life-like graphical engines that often surpass any visual effects present in movies, it is not the only aspect of games that define them as an artistic medium. Most, if not all video games have music uniquely orchestrated for them and could be analyzed completely on its own as a form of musical art. What differentiates a game from its closest relation, film, and other forms of art is its completely interactive form of narrative. When we are truly part of the “artistic experience” in film or literature we constantly associate meaning to what is presented in the movie or book. A film or piece of literature ceases to become art when “what we see is what we get” (Folkerts 103) where there is no substance beyond the medium’s outward appearance. By making the player directly involved with the narrative, even to the point where the player has the ability to shape it into his or her own unique experience, the video game effectively evokes this meta-reflexive nature of our minds. This ability of the video game to allow us to constantly interpret in-game events and associate meaning to them is what can define it as art, and the distinguishing factor of video games is that the observer has direct influence over the narrative. This level of interactivity would ultimately lead to a greater understanding of any artistic message that is present in the video game.

The ambiguity of art has also caused some to believe that the original purpose of a game undermines it as a literary art form. Acclaimed film critic Roger Ebert claims that game cease to become art because “one obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game”. Commenting on the state of narrative of video games Ebert continues with the claim that video games currently “exhibit prose on the level of a wordy fortune cookie.” However, when he addresses a counterargument made in a presentation, he clearly states that “the three games she chooses as examples do not raise my hopes for a video game that will deserve my attention long enough to play it.” Unfortunately, Ebert falls into the same logical trap as many critics of video games do. According to Lanchester, “The other way in which games might converge on art is through the beauty and detail of their imagined worlds, combined with the freedom they give the player to wander around in them” (20). In essence, video games must be played to realize the potential of the medium. Games cannot be simply “observed” like a film or a sculpture or painting.

An observation Lanchester makes is that what undermines the validity of video games to non-gamers is the difficulty of learning the game mechanics. He proposes that “the whole package of conventions and codes and how-tos which become second nature to video-game players, but which strike non-gamers as arbitrary and confining and a little bit stupid” (19). It is important to point out that artistry is often accompanied by difficulty. The various works of Shakespeare are often off-putting to students because of the difficulty of the language. It takes time and patience to understand how Shakespeare is read before one can understand his literary meaning. The same can be said of a video game, once the gamer can figure out how the game is played, then he or she will be able to

delve deeper into any meaning present in either the gameplay or narrative.

One common theme among all of the articles reviewed for this essay is that the current development of video games makes it difficult for anyone to consider them an art form. The most popular games focus almost purely on the aesthetic qualities, making sacrifices in story and narrative for improvements in graphics and gameplay instead of finding the perfect balance between them. Like almost everything in society, the video games industry is a business first, and the games that sell the most are those based purely on fun. According to sales statistics provided by VG Charts, the top fifty of the best-video games of all time are all multiplayer-centric, including games such as *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Super Smash Bros* (Database). That is not to say that these games such as *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto* have no place in society, but if the general public can start recognizing games as an art form, then the developers that do try to focus on the balance between gameplay and narrative will be rewarded. As a result, the games industry may shift towards providing an enriching experience to the player because the balance will prove to be much more satisfying for those looking to find an alternate means of deriving meaning in society.

Nevertheless, there are games out there that are worthy enough to earn the distinction of being art, and as technology advances, developers are able to create richly detailed creative worlds that can further immerse the player. However, these games are virtually nonexistent to the average citizen. Consequently, it is imperative that video games be promoted as a form of artistic expression because if the immeasurable benefits it could bring to our society. Even now, there are many connections between games and literature. *Spec Ops: the Line*, for example, is a third-person shooter which involves a three-man squad infiltrating a conflict somewhere in the Middle-East. However, *Spec Ops* does not fall into the trap of the glorifying of war as many shooters do. Instead it focuses on the brutality that arises and lets the player choose whether or not to violently engage in certain situations, dismissing any notion of a “black and white” morality system that games so often implement. The game also shares strong connections with the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad by its narrative and resounding themes. Another example would be Valve’s *Half-Life 2* which is clearly inspired by George Orwell’s *1984* setting of an overwhelmingly oppressive central government. If educators had a chance of recognizing the literary elements of games, they could provide connections to the texts that they are teaching students. The interactivity level will let students develop a greater understanding of difficult themes since they are directly involved in how the story progresses. This interactive experience could be applied to a more general audience, and it could improve society as we have the potential to learn very complex themes in a relatively simple manner. Perhaps most importantly, games with an “artistic experience” will provoke thought, much like the literary and cinematic masterpieces throughout history, but it will do so using its unique quality of interactivity.

It will take an undoubted lengthy amount of time to change the mindset of any culture, but a greater amount of exposure is needed before any significant change can occur. A possible method in doing this is to make video games free and accessible. Libraries are a great resource of free knowledge, and introducing certain video games in this system will expose this medium to a greater amount of people who could not financially afford video games. Currently “...15% of all libraries now check out video games to anyone with a library card” and in those libraries even “books are being checked out at a rate that exceeds what it was before gamers arrived” (Navarrette). This could be attributed to the fact that gamers could find literary connections to games present in the library and it piques their interest in a multitude of related subjects. Additionally, there could be interactive exhibits that focus on a video game’s artistic significance along with their technological prowess.

The idea of art is an indispensable aspect of our society. It allows the general public to grow intellectually as we strive to make sense of life and all of its facets. If video games were to be promoted as an art form, then the public will only stand to reap its aforementioned artistic benefits. After we can establish that video games are art, we can see unique aspect of interactivity that it

brings to the artistic table. Should this happen, all that remains to be done is the positive exposure of the medium. With enough time and exposure to this new medium, there may be a day when Bioware, a video game developer whose games focus on the element of choice, will take its place among Bach, Benigni, Byron, and Bacon. Perhaps the day video games become truly significant in society is when it is acceptable for students to cite them.

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