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OLDENBOURG

Frank G. Bosman, Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen

VIDEO GAMES AS ART

A COMMUNICATION-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GAMING AND THE ART

VIDEO GAMES AND THE HUMANITIES

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Volume 12

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Tilburg, on the Feast of St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, December 9, 2021
Frank and Archibald

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Introduction

Have you heard of Roger Ebert? Your answer will probably tell you how involved you are in the games-as-art discourse. If you have any knowledge of Ebert, it is probably because of his film criticism. Ebert (1942–2013) was one of North America's most well-known, feared and loved film critics of all time. Working for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, he rose to national and even international fame when he became the first film critic to win the Pulitzer Price for Criticism (1975).[1] In 2010, Ebert's weblog (RogerEbert.com) received a "Person of the Year" Webby Award: "Roger Ebert has raised the bar for online journalism and writing through his poignant and wildly popular blog (. . .) Ebert has found a powerful new voice and attracted an audience that thrives on vigorous debate and conversation."[2] *Forbes*' journalist Tom Van Riper summarised Ebert's status as: "[Ebert] is the most powerful pundit in America[,] (. . .) viewed by the public as intelligent, experienced and articulate."[3] When he died, in 2013, *Los Angeles Times*' critic Kenneth Turan noted: "[Ebert] was the best known film critic in America."[4]

However, some of you will probably associate Ebert's name and fame instantly with his involvement in the ongoing and often fiercely fought discussion on the artistic status of digital games. If so, you are an insider in the game-debate. The mentioning of his name in this specific debate can cause strong reactions: Ebert is a man you love to hate if you are an artistic game enthusiast.[5] But at the same time, there is probably no better place to start any discussion on video games and art, including this present one, than with a summary of Ebert's strong and critical approach to the subject matter. And we warn all enthusiasts, Ebert is not a lover of video games.

On October 20, 2005, Ebert published a one-star review of the game series-inspired film *Doom* (Andrzej Barkowiak, 2005). The film was poorly received by both fans and critics, in sharp contrast to the continuing success of the game series itself. Ebert gave it one star, the lowest possible score, criticising the

1 Steinberg, "Roger Ebert Dead," accessed June 16, 2021.

2 "Winners of the 14th Annual Webby Awards," accessed June 16, 2021. Ebert's original weblog http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/ is not active anymore due to his death in 2013, but its content has been conserved at https://www.rogerebert.com/.

3 Van Riper, "The Top Pundits in America," accessed June 16, 2021.

4 Turan, "Remembrance," accessed June 16, 2021.

5 See for example: Mecheri, *The Works of Fumito Ueda* [no page numbers available]; Juul, *Handmade Pixels*, 190; Tavinor, "Videogames," 566; Parker, "Roger Ebert," 77–100, accessed June 16, 2021.

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film's choice of locations and bad character-development (or the lack thereof).[6] At the beginning of his review, Ebert confesses his unfamiliarity with the movie's source material – "No I haven't played it, and I never will." – adding the very remarkable comment: "*Doom* is like some kid came over and is using your computer and won't let you play." It is both a qualification of games as children's play, and a comment on the relationship between the mediums of video game and film, the former "bullying" or "preying upon" the latter.

Fans of *Doom*, either the film and/or the game versions, wrote back. On October 30, a *Chicago Sun-Times* reader by the name of Vikram Keskar argued that the film *Doom* "works as a tribute because it fails so utterly as a movie" and that film and game series are "fundamentally different forms of representation (. . .) piss[ing] off the critic and pleas[ing] the gamer."[7] Ebert, however, was (maybe understandably) unimpressed: "With friends like you, what does *Doom* need with critics?" The film critic continues: "I am a believer in the *value-added concept* of filmmaking, in which a movie supplies something that a video game does not. (. . .) As long as there is a great movie unseen or a great book unread, I will continue to be unable to find the time to play video games" [italics by fgb/avw].

Ebert criticises games as not being films, and therefore as inadequate to add value to the product itself, even though the critic refrains from explaining what he exactly means. Next, he suggests that reading books and watching films are a decidedly superior way of spending one's time. Fans, however, were not silenced so soon. On November 13, *Chicago* reader Josh Fishburn asked Ebert if his words were to be taken as him thinking books and films to be superior, as a medium, to video games?[8] The critic's answer was a clear and definite "yes":

> I believe books and films are better mediums, and better uses of my time. But how can I say that when I admit I am unfamiliar with video games? Because I have recently seen classic films by Fassbinder, Ozu, Herzog, Scorsese and Kurosawa, and have recently read novels by Dickens, Cormac McCarthy, Bellow, Nabokov and Hugo, and if there were video games in *the same league*, someone somewhere who was familiar with the best work in all three mediums would have made a convincing argument in their defense.
>
> [italics by fgb/avw]

On November 27, another *Chicago* reader, Andrew Davis, politely formulated the same sentiments as Fishburn. Calling out Ebert's self-confessed lack of medium

6 Ebert, "Doom Movie Review," accessed June 16, 2021.

7 Ebert, "Critics vs. Gamers on Doom," accessed June 16, 2021.

8 Ebert, "A Buddhist walks into a chat room . . .," accessed June 16, 2021.

experience, he argued that even Ebert's beloved cinema was "maligned" by critics.[9] Ebert, however, wasn't prepared to yield, at least not yet. He replied:

> Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires *authorial control*. I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game *worthy of comparison* with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent *a loss of those preci*ous hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.
>
> [italics by fgb/avw]

Again, Ebert argues that a civilised person has other, more important things to appreciate than video games, which lack the capacity to be art, not only in practical terms – there are no artistic games yet – but also in theoretical ones – the medium itself is incapable of being artistic – mainly because games lack "authorial control," e.g. the reader-player controls the story through his/her interactions with the game and not the author-developer.

When in 2007, English playwright, novelist and film director Clive Barker (*1952) replied publicly in defence of games-as-art, Ebert couldn't resist taking up the gauntlet.[10] In a predominantly mockingly versed article, he claimed that games "tend to involve point and shoot in many variations and plotlines, treasure or scavenger hunts (. . .), and player control of the outcome."[11] These three elements, according to the critic, have more in common with sports than art.

In 2010, three years later, Ebert posted a blog with the provocative title "Video games can never be art."[12] The blog is a reaction to a TED talk by independent game developer Kellee Santiago, who mentioned the games *Flower* (Thatgamecompany, 2009), *Braid* (Number None, 2009) and *Waco Resurrection* (Eddo Stern, 2004) as examples of the artistic possibilities of the medium.[13] New and old arguments were presented by Ebert:

> I tend to think of art as usually the creation of one artist. Yet a cathedral is the work of many, and is it not art? One could think of it as countless individual works of art unified by a common purpose. Is not a tribal dance an artwork, yet the collaboration of a community? Yes, but it reflects the work of individual choreographers. Everybody didn't start

9 Ebert, "Why did the chicken cross the genders?," accessed June 16, 2021.
10 Androvich, "Games Are Indeed Art," accessed June 16, 2021.
11 Ebert, "Games vs. Art," accessed June 16, 2021.
12 Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," accessed June 16, 2021.
13 Santiago, "An Argument for Game Artistry," accessed June 16, 2021.

> dancing all at once. (. . .) One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome. Santiago might cite a[n] immersive game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film. Those are things you cannot win; you can only experience them.

All of Ebert's comments taken together form a pretty concise summary of arguments critics have posited against the identification of games-as-art.

(1) Games are a lower form of culture, incomparable with "true art" like classical paintings, novels, or films. They are for children's entertainment rather than for adults, who have – or should have – better things to do than playing games, that is, appreciating the finer arts. Games are – to say it bluntly – a waste of precious free time.
(2) Games lack a "value adding" capacity. Even though Ebert is a bit vague on this point, it is not hard to imagine what he means: video games cannot convey ethically, existentially and/or aesthetically imbued narratives. People become better people when contemplating real art, not when playing games.
(3) Video games are closer to sports than to art, since they necessarily involve points and point systems, rules, win/lose conditions and objectives to be met. True art, on the contrary, lacks all these elements; one can "only experience" it, as Ebert formulated.
(4) Video games, like sports, lack "authorial control," meaning that games are under the control of the player-reader instead of the developer-author, rendering them unable to pass as art.

Three months later, Ebert posted another blog in which he – quite surprisingly – conceded to his critics' argument that one cannot have an opinion on something one hasn't experienced oneself:

> I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place. I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself. (. . .) I should not have written that entry without being more familiar with the actual experience of video games. (. . .) I had to be prepared to agree that gamers can have *an experience* that, for them, is Art.[14]

The excuse sounds somewhat half-hearted. Yes, Ebert agrees it shows bad professionalism to review something you do not have first-hand experience of, but at the same time he appears to still stand by his earlier disqualification, simply exchanging "art" for "experience of art." For Ebert, the artistic aspirations of

14 Ebert, "Okay, Kids," accessed June 16, 2021.

games can, at the most, be located in the playing-experience of individual games, but not – even though he refrains from expressing so – in the games themselves, like with cinema or literature.

Interestingly enough, however, some game developers have actually agreed with Ebert's arguments, like for example Lucasfilm Games/Lucas Art Entertainment veteran Brian Moriarty (*1956), *Metal Gear* series (Konami, 1987–2018) and *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) developer Hideo Kojima (*1963) and Tale of Tales founder Michaël Samyn (*1968).[15] Moriarty said: "When I feel the need for reflection, for insight, wisdom or consolation, I turn my computers off. These needs are the ambit of the sublime arts, which are inspired and informed by philosophy, and by faith."

A game developer does not automatically self-identify as an artist, that is for sure.

Writing on Games and Art

These "Ebert files," as one could call them, illustrate the fiercely fought debate between artists, art critics, scholars, game developers and game players on games-as-art. Type "games" and "art" into an internet search engine and be prepared for an avalanche of blogs, articles, books and interviews by scholars, professionals and amateurs alike. Some of these voices have already been heard above, others will be discussed later on in this monograph. Some argue in favour of games-as-art (yes, games are art), others follow the Ebert line of reasoning (no, games are not art and never will be), while most adopt a middle-of-the-road approach (games could be art, but are not yet such).[16]

It is not a simple task to add yet another article or monograph to this still fast-growing forest of critical publications arguing for or against games-as-art. All the same, that is exactly what we will try to achieve. However, we will not try to toss our own personal coin into the pond. We do not want to provide yet another plea in favour of "real art" and why games are never going to be just

15 Moriarty, "An Apology for Roger Ebert," accessed June 16, 2021; Gibson, "Games Aren't Art," accessed June 16, 2021; Westbrook, "Games Not Art Yet," accessed June 16, 2021.

16 Scholarly examples include: Mitchell and Clarke, *Videogames and Art*; Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*; Melissinos and O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*; Thi Nguyen, *Games*; Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*; Sharp, *Works of Game*. Popular examples include: Deardorff, "An Argument that Video Games Are, Indeed, High Art," accessed June 16, 2021; Skiles, "Games as Art," accessed June 16, 2021; Harvey, "The Debate Is Over," accessed June 16, 2021; Stuart, "Are Video Games Art," accessed June 16, 2021; Helgeson, "The Great Debate," accessed June 16, 2021.

that. Neither will we argue in favour of games as the "ninth art."[17] In this monograph, we will answer the question "whether games can be art" with the – initially rather disappointing – reply that "it depends."

The answer to our Big Question indeed depends on what perspective you take. It depends on your definition of what a video game actually is: is it more play than narrative or vice versa? It depends on your definition of "art," an ever-lasting dispute of its own. It depends on whether you walk through museums where games are displayed as part of the regular collection or as special expositions, and smile or shudder. It depends on if you are an artist creating by means of the new medium, or a game developer being inspired by the artistic grand masters of our civilisation. It depends on if you are a law-maker having to decide whether game developers have the same claim to freedom of speech as poets, comedians and essayists. And so on and so forth.

In fact, the discussions on the relationship between art and video games take place across four domains. In our monograph, we wish to deal with the Big Question (on the artistic value of digital gaming) according to these four domains. Firstly, the utilitarian-inspirational domain focuses on the interaction between game developers and "traditional" artists, the former being implicitly or explicitly inspired by preexisting (visual) art and art techniques to develop their games, and the latter utilising the creative novelty of the video game medium to create new (forms of) art.

Secondly, the practical-consensual domain is the one of museal reality: digital games as part of museums' art collections, and the curators' arguments regarding this.

Thirdly, the juridical-political domain concentrates on the changing position of games in law and legislation, positioning them in the direct vicinity of, or identifying them directly as, "regular" examples of art.

Lastly, there is the theoretical-conceptual domain. This domain includes the criticisms focussing on the idea that the fact that games supposedly have more than one author disqualifies them as art. Also, besides their supposed inability to convey existential notions, the interactive and non-linearity of games would be reason to disqualify them. The fact that games are goal-driven and rule-based is given as yet another reason for disqualification. And finally, games are commonly associated with commercialism on the one hand and with children's play on the other, including the accompanying moral panic.

This monograph will not decide if games are, or will ever be, art or not, but in discussing these four domains we will offer a carefully construed toolbox of

17 Anonymous, "Extremely Beautiful But Not Fun?," accessed June 16, 2021.

notions, discussions and perspectives for other participants in this discourse, may they be a game developer, a game artist, a game scholar, or a game enthusiast. Before discussing the four domains, we first have to spend some words on defining the two main notions "video game" and "art" and on explaining our methodological approach for discussing the Big Question within the aforementioned four domains.

Video Games: Play versus Narrative

If one wishes to discuss the relationship between two notions, it seems obvious to define these two up-front. For this monograph, the constitutive elements of its primary analysis are video games and art. So, shouldn't we first start with defining games and art? Well, yes and no. We will define the first, but leave out defining the second. The reason for doing so, we will explain a little bit further down the line.

The thing we conveniently and naïvely call "video game" is quite well capable of resisting any improvised or unprepared attempt to define it.[18] After all, we are looking for a definition that incorporates such widely diverse products as the original *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov and Vladimir Pokhilko 1984) or *The Day of the Tentacle* (Lucasfilm Games, 1987) and modern-day hits like *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2011), *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), or *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017).

One cannot discuss the definition of games without referring to the once roaring debate between ludologists and narratologists, the first perceiving games as play (*ludus*) wrapped up in a largely or entirely insignificant story and the second – as the exact opposite – as a story (*narratio*) in the accidental form of a plaything. The high tides of the debate took place during the end of the 1990s and although both ludologists and narratologists have explicitly buried the hatchet, we believe the points of the debate are still relevant for any discussion on the definition of games in general, and for the discussion of games-as-art in particular.[19]

Ebert, for example, appears to be – unknowingly – on the side of the ludologists, arguing that games are more akin to sport than art, since they have rules, end goals and win conditions. The film critic – *mutatis mutandis* – disqualifies

18 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 37–56.

19 Frasca, "Ludologists Love Stories"; Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture"; Simons, "Narrative, Games, and Theory"; Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology Versus Narratology," accessed June 16, 2021.

games-as-art because of their – alleged – incapability of conveying a real story, something that "real" art like literature or cinema can unquestionably do. And for better or for worse, Ebert has a point to make. Even though some games are relatively heavily story-driven, like the aforementioned *Horizon Zero Dawn*, other games seem to lack any narrative capacity, like *Chess* or *Tetris*.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that even games like *Tetris* or any ordinary game – digital or not – can be narratologically analysed. Janet Murray, for example, interprets *Tetris* as an enactment of laborers in capitalist societies: "the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught."[20] And Marie-Laure Ryan, to give yet another example, distinguishes between three different dimensions of a baseball game, traditionally perceived as more *ludus* than *narratio*: the chronicle, the mimesis and the employment of events, focussing respectively on the what, how and why of the game in question.[21]

Every definition of video games should therefore include both ludic and narrative dimensions, as well as some indication as to the digital nature of video games, the latter to distinguish them from their table-top counterparts like *Colonists of Catan* or *Dungeons and Dragons* or from traditional games such as football or basketball (although all these games can also be played in their digital versions). To put it in layman's terms: video games have to be played on a computer, whether that be a personal computer, handheld, mobile or dedicated game console.

The equilibrium between *ludus* and *narratio*, which every video game must achieve in one form or another – inclining more to the one or the other –, also means that the two should, ideally, be in resonance with one another. To put it differently: the game play of any given game should *a priori* be assumed to communicate the same principles as its narrative is doing. If the game's story implies that its protagonist is a versatile plumber, Mario's capacity to travel through large, green pipes is in sync (*Super Mario Bros.*). And if the game's story presents zombies as a lethal threat to the game's protagonist, it is apparent that these zombies should not be dealt with too complacently (*Dying Light*, Techland, 2015).

However, the opposite is also highly plausible, causing what is known in the industry as a ludo-narrative dissonance.[22] This phenomenon happens when the gameplay and the game's story conflict with one another. This can be illustrated with the help of two examples. In the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft,

20 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 178.

21 Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 80–93.

22 Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," accessed June 16, 2021; Toh, *A Multimodial Approach to Video Games*, chapter "Ludonarrative Dissonance" [e-book].

2007–2020), the titular Assassin Brotherhood operates under a creed stating – among other things – to "stay your blade for the flesh of an innocent."[23] The series' narrative tries to build up the idea that the Assassins only take those lives that are deserving of such a punishment, refraining from slaying innocent bystanders or lower rank accessories. However, to reach their high-profile targets, the players have to kill a host of those lesser enemies, the majority of which do not have anything to do with their masters' evil schemes.[24]

Another example is found in the *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios, 2012–2017). In this game series, protagonist Corvo Attano falls from grace when he is falsely accused of staging the assassination of the reigning queen. During his attempts to win back his honour, Corvo can proceed along two different paths (and all stages in-between): he can kill everything that comes into his power, increasing the amount of chaos in the world, and resulting in a slightly more difficult game play later on, or Corvo can go out of his way to remain unseen and refrain from killing even a single adversary, resulting in a lesser degree of chaos and an easier game to play.[25]

But, and here the dissonance kicks in, the non-lethal options presented to Corvo to dispose of his adversaries are usually just as morally dubious as plainly assassinating them right away. For example, Corvo marks high-overseer Thaddeus Campbell's face with the so-called Heretic's Brand, making him an outcast of the system he himself upheld for so long. Lady Boyle, another of Corvo's targets, can be kidnapped and delivered to Lord Brisby, who clearly has very creepy intentions with her. And master inventor Kirin Jindosh can be subjected to intense electrotherapy, depriving him of his former genius.

In short, video games are digital ludo-narrative texts. They are digital because they need a digital medium to function as an instrument of communication. They are a combination of (possibly quantitative and/or qualitatively different degrees of) ludic and narrative elements, either in resonance or dissonance with one another.

What Art is (Not)?

After having established something of a working definition of what a video game is (and is not), it seems to be the right time and place to do the same in

23 Bosman, "Never Compromise the Brotherhood."
24 Sab, "Ludonarrative Dissonance," accessed June 16, 2021.
25 Bosman, "Fittingly Violent."

regard to the notion of art, the second constitutive element of this monograph. However, as we have already indicated earlier, we will refrain from doing so, and – we dare say – with good arguments.

First, producing a well-established, universally accepted, and more or less objective definition of what art is, appears to be utterly impossible.[26] Every qualification, or disqualification for that matter, of an object or performance as "art" immediately comes down to its definition. While the majority of people will deem the Sistine Chapel's *The Last Judgement* by Michelangelo as art, opinions begin to diffuse rapidly when turning to modern-day art like Gustave's Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866) or Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), let alone the outrage produced by objects like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) or Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007).

Secondly, much of the discussion on the artistic quality of video games is closely connected to the "players' intimate aesthetic involvement with the medium."[27] As famous game scholar Jesper Juul, godfather of the ludologists, formulated: 'The defence of video games (as of most things) tends to grow from personal fascination. *I* enjoy video games; *I* feel that they give me important experiences; *I* associate them with wide-ranging thoughts about life, the universe, and so on. This is valuable to *me*, and *I* want to understand and share it."[28]

In a nutshell: if you are enthusiastic about something, you will probably value it immensely, and if you value something that much, you will be inclined to elevate it to the highest aesthetic and cultural domain known in our society, that of "art."[29] On the other hand, since the 1950s, new forms of popular culture – comics, films, games – have been introduced, legitimised and canonized by scholars and critics, who are themselves usually fans of the medium.[30]

Other legitimation strategies involve opportunistic definitions of "art" sufficient to qualify a specific game as "artistic," suggesting this argument has a universal ruling. Aaron Smuts, for example, tries to argue in favour of games as possibly artistic on the argument that *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft, 2002) would qualify as such "according to most major theories of art."[31] Interesting as these

26 Somaini, "Art History"; Adajin, "The Definition of Art," accessed June 16, 2021; Clowney, "Definitions of Art."

27 Parker, "Roger Ebert," 89.

28 Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 23. Emphasis by Juul himself.

29 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, viii–x, makes clear that he was a game enthusiast even before he became a video game scholar.

30 Beaty, *Comic Versus Art*, 84.

31 Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?".

kinds of arguments may be, we should question their defenders as to the artistic state of more exclusively ludic games like *Tetris* or simulated traditional sport games like *Chess*.[32]

Yet other scholars seek legitimacy in cluster theories on art. Based on Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblances," cluster theories of art do not present a set list of characteristics an object should all meet in order to be qualified as "art," but rather a set of criteria that an object may meet in a number of ways.[33] Game scholars like Dominic Lopes, Zach Jurgensen and Grant Tavinor have actually tried to apply cluster theories of art, especially of Gaut and Dutton, to the digital domain.[34]

Lopes argues that games have aesthetic properties (being beautiful, graceful and/or elegant), are expressive of emotions, intellectually challenging, formally complex and coherent; they convey complex meanings and exhibit an individual point of view; they are an exercise in creative imagination (being original), the products of a high degree of skill, belong to an established artistic form and have been made with the intention to be a work of art. Some of these qualities of art are problematic (if not unpassable) when it comes to games, like being an original, belonging to an established form, or possessing the necessary artistic intentions of the real author. Trevinor's use of Dutton paints a similar picture.

Cluster theories, however, have been criticised for (wrongly) suggesting an ahistorical perspective, or for the arbitrary number of criteria an object has to meet in order to still qualify as art.[35] The most important criticism, however, is that an object could indeed be identified as art by means of a cluster theory, while it is obviously not such in the eyes of the layman, art critics and scholars. The application of cluster characteristics eventually boils down to the interpretation of the object by the one using the theory. Whether Duchamp's famous ready-mades, especially his *Fountain* (1917), are indeed art or not, according to the cluster theories, depends on – for example – the interpretation of the artist's intention: either making art of playing a prank.[36] The same applies to the

32 Parker, "Roger Ebert," 90.

33 Gaut, "Art as a Cluster Concept."

34 Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* applying Gaut, "'Art as a Cluster Concept," 28; Tavinor, *Videogames* applying Dutton, "A Naturalist Definition of Art"; Jurgensen, "Appreciating Videogames."

35 Fokt, "The Cluster Account of Art"; Davies, "The Cluster Theory of Art"; Meskin, "The Cluster Account of Art"; Carroll, "Art in an Expanded Field."

36 Robinson, *Philosophy and Mystification*, 267; Gayford, "Duchamp's Fountain," accessed June 16, 2021.

criterium of evoking emotions. Does the object in question have to evoke emotions in the critic using the theory, or in a specified audience? And if indeed the latter, how large should that group be? And so on.

So, for the time being, we will refrain from providing a universal definition of "art," in general as well as in connection to our discussion on games-as-art. What we will see is that the definition of what art is, and of what it is not, is highly contextual. All the four domains we will discuss provide their own – mostly implicit – idea of what qualifies art as art, and why. When we reach our conclusions at the end our deliberations, we will return to this issue in more detail, including its ramifications for the games-as-art discussion at a whole.

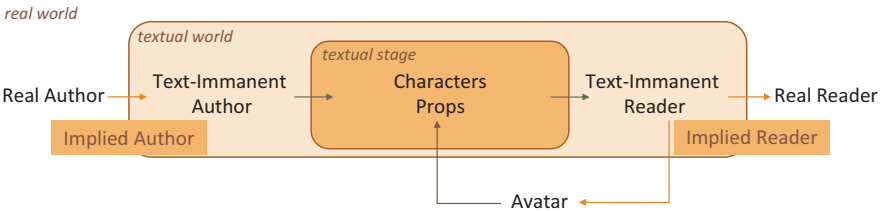
Communication-Oriented Analysis: The Entanglement of Player and Character

In order to discuss the Big Question about video games and art, related to the four domains outlined above, we need to use a methodological approach that not only makes this discussion possible, but also fits the two core notions "video game" and "art." We will make use of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, because it does justice to the notion of "text" in the broadest sense of the word. With "text," we understand not only a written text, such as a novel or a poem, but any form of expression in which a message is communicated from a sender-entity to a receiver-entity. A painting, a statue, a drama in a theatre, an architectural building, they can all be understood as a communicative "text." This also applies to video games.

Due to its ludic and narrative character, a video game has a special communicative property: the entanglement of player and avatar (see Scheme 1). The Communication-Oriented Analysis distinguishes – in principle – between the text-immanent communication (= the communication in the textual world) on the one hand, and the text-external communication (= the communication in the real world) on the other.[37] This results in a strict distinction between the characters (and the accompanying props) on the textual stage and a text-immanent author (TIA) directing these characters and communicating the narrative to a text-immanent reader (TIR).

Outside the text, the real author (RA) and the real reader (RR) exist: the first communicates to the second by means of the text "between them." In the case of video games, the real author is the game developer and/or the game developing

37 Van Wieringen, "Methodological Developments in Biblical Exegesis."



Scheme 1: Entanglements games. The unique property of video games in terms of their communication: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader and its in-game character (avatar).

team, and the real reader the actual player behind his PC or console playing the actual game. All five communication entities (real author, real reader, text-immanent author, text-immanent reader, characters) can be the object of scholarly research. One could ask a developer (RA) what his or her intention was when designing the game (text), one could interview one or more players (RR) on their experiences when playing a specific game or game scenes, one could determine the communication between the (idealised) text-immanent author and reader (TIA-TIR), or one could analyse the narrative patterns or dramaturgy of the characters on the stage.

Usually, the text-immanent reader of a given text can be spoken to – either directly by the text-immanent author ("Let me tell you, dear listeners, a story about . . ") or through one of the characters ("If I ever gonna meet the one putting me in this miserable film, I . . .")[38] – but he cannot answer or intervene. The only agency that (real or text-immanent) readers (of books), listeners (to music), or viewers (of films) have is to passively witness the story unfold before their eyes and ears. A (real) reader can identify strongly with a certain character in a book or a film, but he/she cannot control that character.

In video games, however, players can and even must intervene in the story (in fact, this essential property of video games was the reason Ebert concluded that video games are not art). Without the player's input, the game will not commence, both in its ludic and narrative capacities. Even if one could theoretically argue that a book or a film that is read or seen by literally no one does not exist as such, the involvement of the reader in a video game is of a different (much more practical) category. If seen from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, what happens in a video game is the entanglement of

38 The phenomenon of a character directly addressing the text-immanent reader is also known as "breaking the fourth wall"; see: Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 22.

the position of the text-immanent reader/player with that of a character on the stage, that is, the game's protagonist (narrative)/ player's avatar (ludic). Via the TIR, the player (RR) has access to the game by being present on stage in the TIR's avatar. In other words: the text-immanent player is the one the story is told to (by the TIA to the TIR), the one the story is – partially – told by (the TIR as far as is allowed by the TIA) and the one the story is told about (the TIR's in-game character/avatar).

In the *Assassin's Creed* series, the text-immanent player (the TIR) is simultaneously the one whom the story of the games is told to, as well as the one intervening in the unfolding of the story by means of his character-avatar (either a contemporary or historical member of the fictional Assassin Brotherhood), while at the same time the story is – for an important part – about the adventures of that specific Assassin member as one of the characters on stage. In *Dishonored*, the text-immanent player is – again – the one listening to and watching the story as it is told by the text-immanent author about the adventures of Corvo (= one of the characters) and his struggle to clear his name of regicide, while at the same time controlling Corvo and influencing the flow and (partially the) content of that same story.

Why is this difference between the real author/game developer and the real reader/player (i.e. the real world) and the text-immanent author and reader/player (i.e. the textual world) so important, also for our discussion on the artistic quality of art? First of all, it is important to identify the different communicative entities in the "text" to understand the perspective from which critics argue. Ebert and others argue from the perspective of the real author, that is, the artist, while others will focus on the experience of the real reader when confronted with art, for example when walking through a museum. This distinction will help clarify part of the principal opposing arguments in the discussions on art and video games.

Secondly, a communication-oriented analysis of texts allows video games to – partially – "escape" the hermeneutical confinements of (real) author and reader perspective. A text-immanent reader/player, as a theoretical entity, has a perceived perfect knowledge of the communication of the (also text-immanent) author, and will – therefore – refrain from any normative evaluation of that communication. For a scholar or critic, both text-immanent entities are, at least theoretically, in his or her grasp: the text is the one and only lens through which the communication is analysed, and this text is – exceptions aside – readily available and perfectly accessible.

Thirdly, gaining "access" to a real author/game developer proves to be problematic, both theoretically and practically. On the one hand, game developers are not always prepared to be interviewed about themselves, or about specific

elements of their product (owing to an array of reasons, ranging from the fear of jeopardising maximal commercial appeal and success to conscious mystification and even problematic gaming communities).[39] And on the other hand, as is the case with all authors, maybe the author is not the best entity to approach for the interpretation of a given text, as Roland Barthes already explained in 1967.[40] In other words, from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, the real author never coincides with the text-immanent author, and neither does the real reader ever coincide with the text-immanent reader.

Although the real author, who belongs to the real word, never coincides with the text-immanent author, who belongs to the textual world, and the real reader, who belongs to the real world, never coincides with the text-immanent reader, who belongs to the textual world, they are all nevertheless related. This relationship is mediated by the set of socio-historical data that makes the existence of both the text-immanent author and the real author on the one hand and the text-immanent reader and the real reader plausible. We name these entities "implied author" and "implied reader."

For example, for most video games, if not all, the English language is part of the shared socio-historical data present at the level of the implied author-reader. If, however, a real player, the RR, does not know English, it might be hard for this RR to play the video game, but not for the text-immanent player, the TIR. Of course, some games do not have this problem: especially the older games and games from the shooter genres do not rely heavily on rhetoric or linguistic communication (for example the "golden oldies" *Doom* or *Quake*), or refrain from language as a deliberate design choice (for example *Journey*). Other genres, especially Role Playing Games or Interactive Novels, do rely greatly on written and/or spoken communication (for example *Planescape. Torment* or *Skyrim*).

In short, games are texts, meaning that they can be analysed using the same scholarly methodologies and instruments as other "conventional" texts, such as novels, paintings and films. And even besides that, they are imbued with the unique communicative property that entangles the text-immanent reader/player with its character/avatar. Based on these characteristics of video games, especially the entanglement of player and character, we will use the communication-oriented method of analysing texts to discuss the Big Question, that is, whether video games are or are not art.

39 de Wildt, *Playing at Religion*, accessed June 16, 2021; Hayes, "Why Developers Don't Open to Us," accessed June 16, 2021; Schreier, "Some Reasons Why the Games Industry Is So Secretive," accessed June 16, 2021.

40 Seymour, *An Analysis of Roland Barthes's The Death of the Author*, 2018.

Some Remarks on Other Terminology

The jargon connected to the discussions about art and video games can quite rapidly become confusing since both constitutive elements can be used in combination with one another in more than one way. Therefore, some vocabulary rules are needed. "Art" and "video games" we have already defined (or refused to define) above. Other terms used in this discussion are "game art" and "art game."

"Game art" denotes either the cumulation of all the creative processes utilised in the development of a given game, or just the aesthetic part of that process. The first use is more an equivalent of the word "craft": games are very difficult to make and their production requires a high level of skills. The second is indicative of "the visuals" of the game: how the game looks (pleasing or otherwise).

An "art game," on the other hand, is a game considered having "artistic" qualities, either made by a (self-identified) artist (= RA) or by a "regular" developer (= RA), allegedly achieving the paramount of his or her craft. Furthermore, we will use "video games," "games" and "digital games" as equivalents.

When discussing video games, we use the terms "text-immanent reader and "text-immanent player" on the one hand, and "real reader" and "real player" on the other, interchangeably.

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1 Artists and Developers: The Utilitarian-Inspirational Domain

In Walt Disney's interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Little Mermaid* (1989 and 1837 respectively), the red-headed and hot-tempered Ariel inspects her secret collection of objects from the world above water. She has apparently combed these from the ocean's bottom. Her collection includes cutlery, jewellery and (quite surprisingly) a classical painting. It only appears for a second or two, so you have got to have a quick eye and some basic knowledge of Western art history to recognize it.

The painting Ariel shows to her companion fish-friend is *Magdalen with the Smoking Flame* by Georges de La Tour (c. 1640, see Figure 1).[41] As the title suggests, it shows Mary Magdalen, the woman from the New Testament, conferred with a plethora of titles and surrounded by numerous legends during two thousand years of Christian history: apostle of the apostles (*apostola apostolorum*), converted prostitute, witness to the resurrection, Jesus' lover and bearer of his child (as made popular by Dan Brown's bestseller and its subsequent film version, both called *The Da Vinci Code*, respectively 2003 and 2006).[42]

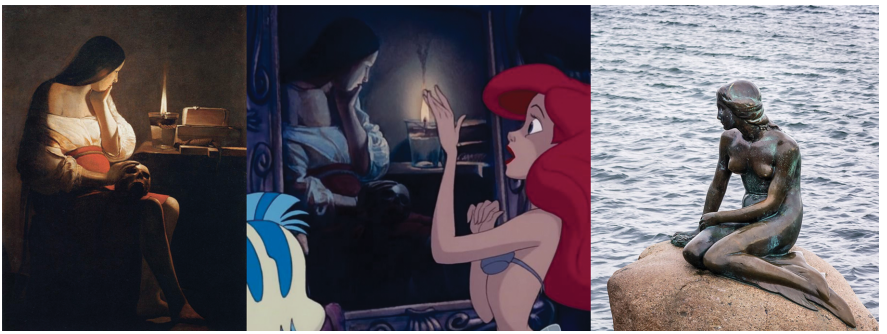


Figure 1: From left to right: *Magdalen with the Smoking Flame* (George de la Tour, c. 1640, © Louvre), a scene from *The Little Mermaid* (© Disney, 1989) and *The Little Mermaid* statue in Copenhagen, Denmark (Edward Eriksen, 1913).

41 Lindsay, "What's That Mystery Painting," accessed on September 9, 2021.
42 Atwood, *Mary Magdalene in the New Testament Gospels*; Erhardt and Morris, *Mary Magdalene*.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731019-002

In La Tour's painting of Mary Magdalen, we see her staring into the flame of an oil lamp that is standing on a table next to her. Mary Magdalen is sitting, supporting her head with her left hand, while holding her right hand over a skull lying on her right knee. Her shoulders are naked, her hair long and loose, and a cord – by way of a rope – is visible around her belly. All in all, it is a representation of Mary Magdalen's supposed identity as a sex worker-turned-saint, who is, after the crucifixion and resurrection of her lord, contemplating her erstwhile sins.

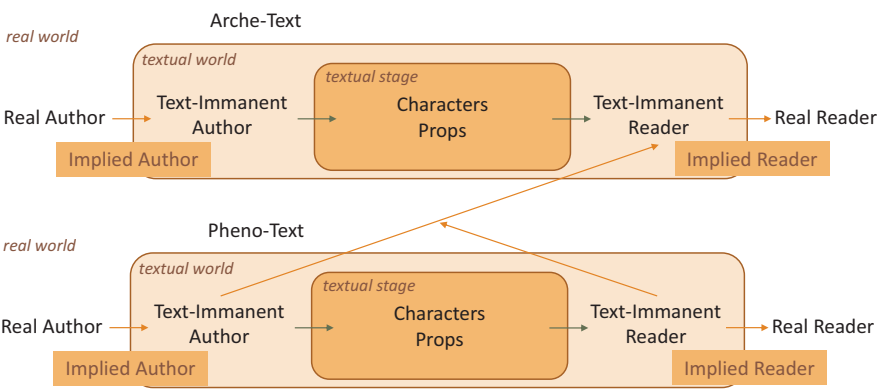
In the Disney film, the painting is shown when Ariel is halfway through her song *Part of Your World*, in which she expresses her longing to experience the "other world" that she only knows from the scattered artefacts she finds in ships lost at sea. Ariel sings: "What's a fire, and why does it – what's the word? – burn?" And when singing this line, she follows the shape of the painted flame as if she is trying to experience its burning sensation. This little scene expresses the fundamental idea that water and fire are mutually exclusive: you cannot have both, because fire will evaporate water, while water will extinguish fire.

The positioning of La Tour's painting within the context of the film is therefore significant. If both "texts" are "thought together" a common theme will emerge, namely that of forbidden and/or impossible love. *The Little Mermaid*, in the Disney version as well as in the original one, is essentially such a story. A beautiful mermaid falls in love with a landlubber and because of her love she calls in the help of a witch to give her legs. In exchange for her legs, the mermaid loses her voice, severely hampering her abilities to communicate with her loved one. Where Disney could not help itself in creating a happy ending for the odd couple, Andersen's version is grimmer: the little mermaid changes into the foam of the sea when her lover is no longer interested in her.

Seen from the perspective of the Disney film, the painting of Mary Magdalen appears to have the same kind of message, namely, that of the forbidden love between the saint and Jesus of Nazareth. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence for any erotic and/or romantic relationship between Jesus and the Magdalene – the non-canonical Gospels of Philip and of Mary Magdalen are, at best, inconclusive – the postmodern narrative, made popular but not invented by Dan Brown, all the same proposes both a carnal and a spiritual union between the two. It is not difficult to view the supposed "marriage" between Jesus and Mary Magdalen as forbidden or impossible love, may it be for historical or religious reasons. Both women – Ariel and Mary Magdalen – share a common characteristic: they love the one they cannot love. They and their love-interests are indeed water and fire, as Ariel's song suggests.

From the perspective of our Communication-Oriented Analysis, the "quotation" of one text within/by the other "text" is called intertextuality (see

Scheme 2).[43] Intertextuality occurs when the text-immanent author of a certain text – in our example the TIA of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* – synchronises with the text-immanent reader of another text – in our example the TIR of La Tour's painting. The TIA reuses in his own text, the pheno-text, the TIR's position in the other text, the arche-text. The exact relationship between the two texts (seen from the perspective of the pheno-text) is left up to the pheno-text's text-immanent reader to "know" (since the knowledge of the text-immanent reader is always supposed to be perfect). Roughly three possibilities in such a relationship can be found: 1) it is constructive if the TIA of the pheno-text "quotes" (implicitly or explicitly, verbatim or paraphrasing) the arche-text because both have a similar meaning in the eyes of the pheno-text's TIR; 2) it is destructive if the quotation is made because, in the eye of the pheno-text's TIR, both texts counter, criticise, or mock each other; and 3) it is deconstructive if, in the eyes of the pheno-text's TIR, both texts open up new mutual interpretations.



Scheme 2: Intertextuality. Scheme of intertextuality, distinguishing between Arche-Text and Pheno-Text.

In the case of La Tour's "quotation" in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, the intertextual relationship between the two can be qualified, from the perspective of the

43 Kristeva, *Desire in Language*. In a way, all texts can be considered as a "quotation" from some other text. This means that each text is part of a complex network of intertextuality. For the French deconstructionalist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), this implies that there is no *hors-texte* at all. In fact, he thus seems to be in danger of cancelling out the real author and real reader of a text. For a detailed discussion see also Max Deutscher, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," *Symposium: Canadian journal of continental philosophy* 18 (2014): 98–124.

pheno-text's TIR, as constructive. It is only when Mary Magdalen's life is portrayed as a troublesome love story that the connection with Ariel's story makes sense.

However, it is very important to understand that the text-immanent reader of the pheno-text is not the same as that of the arche-text. Since the immanent reader of the pheno-text has only "access" to the arche-text through the pheno-text, his interpretation is directed in a certain direction by the text-immanent author of the pheno-text. The text-immanent reader of La Tour's painting can – at least potentially – and has – at least probably – a different understanding of the painting's communication. The symbols of the flame, the Bible (on the table) and the skull, in addition to Mary Magdalen's specific posture, suggest a story of the contemplation of life and death, and the connection between this world and the next. Both the text-immanent reader and real reader of the pheno-text could very possibly agree on this interpretation, based on the historical-social paradigm shared by the implied author and implied reader, enabling both text-immanent author and reader of the pheno-text to position this "text" within a much broader set of similar paintings and other texts belonging to the Western history of art and literature.

The same kind of intertextual relationships are found in video games. In *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017), game protagonist and player avatar Bayek travels through the Egyptian desert at the time of Julius Caesar and Queen Cleopatra. And whilst traveling around midday, the heat produces what appears to be a fata morgana, showing Bayek a flapping fish and a burning bush, both references to the book of Exodus (respectively 14:15–30 and 3:1–15). In *Metal Gear Solid V. The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015), game antagonist and charming villain Skull Face quotes John 1:1 ("the word has become flesh") when he shows a vial containing a deadly vocal-cord parasite.[44] And in *Child of Light* (Ubisoft, 2014), the whole narrative is a modern interpretation of the *descensus Christi ad inferos* (in English also known as the harrowing of hell).[45]

Video games also refer to classical paintings, like Disney's *The Little Mermaid* referred to La Tour's *Magdalen with the Smoking Flame*. A comprehensive example is the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft) and then especially the so-called "Ezio saga," comprised of *Assassin's Creed 2* (2009), *Assassin's Creed. Brotherhood* (2010) and *Assassin's Creed. Revelations* (2011). The metanarrative of the series consists of an alternative version of humankind's history. In ages long forgotten, an Earth-based, technologically advanced civilisation (the Isu) created humankind as a form of cheap labour. However, a cosmic event killed all of the Isu, leaving

44 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 48.
45 Bosman, "The Bell Tolled Six."

humankind to itself. All religions and mythologies are nothing but vague and distorted echoes of the Isu's involvement in human history.[46]

In the series, both the Assassin Brotherhood and Knights Templar, respectively based on the historical Nizari Isma'ilites and the Knights of the Temple, fight among one another for the possession of powerful Isu artifacts, called *Pieces of Eden*.[47] Clues to the former owners of these artifacts are found, according to the series' lore, in classical paintings. In *Assassin's Creed 2* (Ubisoft, 2010), for example, the player is given riddles, called "glyphs" throughout the game, in which he has to identify the *Pieces of Eden* hidden in paintings. In one instance (see Figure 2), he is offered four renderings of the famous biblical story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4): *Cain slaying his Brother Abel* by Peter Paul Rubens (1608/9), *The Murder of Abel* by Tintoretto (1551/2), *Cain's Murder of Abel* by Bartolomeo Manfredi (c. 1600) and *Cain Killing Abel* by Albrecht Dürer (1511).

Figure 2: A still from the game *Assassin's Creed. Brotherhood* (© Ubisoft, 2009) depicting four images of Cain killing his brother Abel (from left to right): *Cain slaying his Brother Abel* by Peter Paul Rubens (1608/9, on display in Courtauld Institute of Art, London), *The Murder of Abel* by Tintoretto (1551/2, on display in Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice), *Cain's Murder of Abel* by Bartolomeo Manfredi (c. 1600, currently not on display) and *Cain Killing Abel* by Albrecht Dürer (1511, on display in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

46 Bosman, "The Poor Carpenter."

47 Bosman, "Nothing is True"; Bosman, "Never Compromise the Brotherhood."

The four paintings are accompanied by four quotations from the revision of the Bible by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), made in 1805–1844, more or less correlating with Genesis 4:

> And Satan said unto Cain: Swear unto me by thy throat, and if thou tell it thou shalt die (. . .) And all these things were done in secret. (. . .) And Cain said: Truly I am Mahan, the master of this great secret (. . .) Wherefore Cain was called Master Mahan, and he gloried in his wickedness. (Moses 5:29; 30b; 31a; 31b)

"Master Mahan" is a title reserved in the LDS for Cain and later for his descendant Lamech. In the LDS, this title refers to the pact Cain and Lamech made with the devil. Secular scholars have argued that the term is a reference to "Master Mason," the highest degree in the Blue Lodge of Freemasonry (Smith being very much opposed to Freemasonry), or to "Mahoun," a pejorative medieval reference to Muhammad.[48]

In all four paintings, the pheno-text's TIA depicts Abel holding a *Piece of Eden* in his hand, while Cain is supposedly trying to get hold of it, killing his brother in the process. Cain is also portrayed, when "scanned" in-game, as possessing a secret Templar's cross, a reference to Genesis 4:15's "mark" that God put upon Cain to prevent him from being killed. Within the game lore of the *Assassin's Creed* series, this moment in time marks the parting of the ways between the Assassin Brotherhood, symbolised by Abel, and the Templar Order, symbolised by Cain.

Multiple layers of intertextual relationships can be traced here. First, we have the Genesis text on Cain and Abel (arche-text 1) reimagined in the four paintings (pheno-text 1), but in their turn the paintings (arche-text 2 = pheno-text 1) are reused in the game series (pheno-text 2). The interpretation of the Genesis text, from the perspective of the text immanent reader of pheno-text 2, has to be viewed as an archetypical story about humans intrinsically inclined to be jealous of one another and perfectly able and willing to kill from that motivation.[49] However, when Genesis is seen from the perspective of the text-immanent reader of the four classical paintings, the interpretation shifts somewhat towards the confrontation between an innocent and righteous man versus a wicked and evil one. Cain is portrayed as overpowering Abel, and positions the second as the victim and the first as the perpetrator.

Now, from the perspective of the text-immanent reader of the *Assassins' Creed* series, the interpretation is again shifted. Abel and Cain now seem to be fighting over the possession of a powerful artifact, unconsciously starting a millennia-old feud between two powerful and secret organisations. And beyond

48 Brown, "Girded about with a Lambskin," 146–147.
49 Toohey, *Jealously*, 141.

this, Abel – and thus the Assassin Brotherhood – is suggested as representing "the good guys," while at the same time the Templar Order is morally disqualified. This kind of "Matryoska of intertextual relationships" can be potentially endless, leading Julia Kristeva – among others – to argue that "we" as humankind exist in an endless web of texts quoting texts that are quoting texts.[50]

Another example of intertextual usage of art in video games is found in *Metro. Last Light* (4A Games, 2013).[51] This game tells the story of our near future, in which the world has apparently been destroyed by nuclear warfare. Only a few inhabitants of Moscow, where the game's narrative is situated, have survived this destruction by seeking refuge in the subway tunnels below the Russian capital. There, a Hobbesian *homo homini lupus* has materialised: everyone is fighting everyone for resources and raw power. In this game, Artyom, the player avatar, has to discover a way to find redemption for himself and his world.

The game is accompanied by an alternative trailer called *The Genesis Trailer* in which an English-speaking voice-over (although with an audibly Russian accent) retells the creation story from Genesis 1:1–2:3. The beauty of the creation story (rhetoric) is sharply contrasted with several images of the post-nuclear holocaust world, torn apart by fearsome weather and inhabited by gruesome mutants (aesthetics). What God created as good, humankind has turned into evil. In other words: while the text-immanent reader of the biblical Genesis story is taught that God created as "good" (1:2, 10, 12, 18, 21, 24), even as "very good" (1:31), when humankind is created, the text-immanent reader of *The Genesis Trailer* gets the message that humankind has turned all the good into evil. The voice-over hesitates when describing the seventh day of creation, suggesting that God did not rest, as the biblical Genesis narrates, but "left, or even died." He continues: "Judgement Day came and he abandons us."

The trailer invokes the theme of the classic theodicy: God, as an all-powerful and all-benevolent entity, cannot exist in the face of such a catastrophe, and, therefore, alters (the seventh) Creation Day into Judgement Day. In other words: the text-immanent author of *The Genesis Trailer* reads the biblical Genesis text and, being aware of the positive attitude of the text-immanent reader of the biblical Genesis text to the seventh day of God's creation, reuses this day as a negative Judgement Day for his own text-immanent reader.[52]

The intermedial relationship between the trailer and the actual game suggests that Artyom finds himself in a literally atheist world: a world in which God

50 Prud'homme and Légaré, "A Semiology of Paragrams," accessed September 2, 2021.
51 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 88–92.
52 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 125–149; Hick, *Evil*.

can (no longer) exist. And indeed, nowhere in the game is there any trace of God or religion to be found. The exception is the Mother of God Cathedral in Moscow, which has been reduced to a semi-ruined state and plundered of all religious artifacts except for some candles and prayer stools. However, it is in this cathedral that Artyom encounters his evil archenemy, sitting against a cupboard, wearing a gas mask without a proper filter. Doing nothing will lead to his death, but the player can choose to supply him with a new filter, thus saving his life.

It is only the keen-eyed player, being an RR, who sees the vague icon hanging tilted on the wall above the archenemy's head (see Figure 3). The framed picture shows the Mandylion, the iconic Christ icon from the Eastern Orthodox traditions, identified in both Western and Eastern traditions with and/or linked to the "Image of Edessa," the "Shroud of Turin" and ultimately with the legend of Saint Veronica.[53] What this icon signifies depends greatly on the moral choice the text-immanent reader in his capacity as the avatar makes in regard to its archnemesis' ultimate fate. If the player-as-Artyom lets him die, the icon "watches" (as Orthodox theology puts it) the player disapprovingly. But if the player-as-Artyom helps its nemesis, the icon looks approvingly at Artyom. The significance of the Christ icon's expression is – quite correctly – in the eye of the beholder.

Figure 3: A still from the game *Metro. Last Light* (© 4A Games, 2013), depicting the Christ icon on the wall of the Mother of God Cathedral.

53 Guscin, *The Image of Edessa*; Nicolotti, *From the Mandylion of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin*.

The intermedial relationship between the game and the trailer renders the world atheist, while the intertextual relationship between the game and the icon challenges that identification. If the text-immanent player (TIR) in its capacity as the avatar chooses to behave "christophorically" – that is, to act like Christ himself, mercifully and forgivingly – the text-immanent player itself becomes the incarnation of divinity within the game world. Specific real gamers (RR) of *Metro. Last Light* may or may not be able to understand this complex intertextual and intermedial communication, but the text-immanent player (TIR) being the ideal player – necessarily – does.[54]

Game Art

These and other examples form a first category in the utilitarian-inspirational domain on games-as-art: traditional art – texts, paintings, icons, films – is often reused in video games, its original message often changing because of the ensuing intertextual relationships between them. Besides this, two other categories in this domain can be identified: first, "game art," when video games are inspired – usually aesthetically – by traditional art; and second, "art games," when traditional artists use the video game medium as a way of expression.

To start with the category of "game art," game developers can pick and choose individual paintings or other forms of already existing art objects to put into their games as discussed above. But developers can also base the entire aesthetics of their games upon an artist or an artistic style or movement. The aesthetics of the puzzle game *Thomas Was Alone* (Mike Bithell, 2012), for example, seems to be inspired by cubist artists like Piet Mondriaan.[55] The simple primary-coloured rectangles and squares work their way around grid-like mazes, almost exactly how the famous Dutch painter drew his images.[56]

The game *The Bridge* (The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild, 2013), on the other hand, is clearly inspired by M.C. Escher's famous mathematically inspired and often optically paradoxical woodcuts, lithographs and mezzotints. As reviewer C. Schilling has observed: "Its monochromatic pencil-drawn look hews closely to Escher's work, while the puzzles themselves share similar themes and

54 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 76–100.

55 Barsody, "Thomas Was Alone," accessed September 2, 2021.

56 Edge Staff, "The Making of: Thomas Was Alone," accessed September 2, 2021.

concepts: mirrors, spirals and impossible structures."[57] Other critics have recognised influences from "Dali-esque surrealism" in the indie puzzle game.[58]

The game series *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios), comprised of *Dishonored* (2012), *Dishonored 2* (2016) and *Dishonored. Death of the Outsider* (2017), takes its aesthetics from a plethora of artists: Canaletto's seventeenth century landscape art, Gustave Doré's Black Death sketches and Victorian painter John Atkinson Grimshaw's city night-scenes, Jean-Eugène Buland's industrial paintings and Dagnan-Bouveret's portrayal of poverty, but also from works by Polish painter Jacek Malczewski and German Romanticist Carl Spitzweig.[59]

Transistor (Supergiant Games, 2014), an isometric, turn-based combat game with a strong emphasis on storytelling, uses paintings by Austrian symbolist painter Gustav Klimt. Critic Nick Wanserski argues that *Transistor* "blends Gustav Klimt's severe figures and cascading textures with floral art-nouveau elements on a Tron-like circuit board landscape."[60] Carlyn Hill, another critic, puts it even more poetically: the game's aesthetics is "what would happen if a cyberpunk anime style, Gustav Klimt's "Woman in Gold," and *Kingdom Hearts* all had an orgy-lovechild. A beautiful, beautiful orgy-lovechild."[61]

Ori and the Blind Forest (Moon Studios, 2015) is inspired by Japanese animator and manga artist Hayao Miyazaki, *Ico* (Japan Studios/Team Ico, 2001) by Italian artist and writer Giorgio de Chirico and *Ōkami* (Clover Studio, 2006) by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai, while 2017 super hit *Cuphead* (Studio MDHR) looks exactly like the old cartoons by Walt Disney and Fleisher Studios.[62] *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* (2K Boston/2k Australia, 2007 and 2010) both feature an underwater dystopia constructed in a distinct Art Deco style.[63] *Braid* (Number None, 2008) is inspired by impressionists like Vincent van Gogh, while *Child of Light* (Ubisoft, 2014) takes its inspiration from classic nineteenth century fairy tale books.[64]

Most of these examples concern aesthetic inspiration alone, but some of them give a distinct ludological and/or narratological significance to the artwork

57 Schilling, "The Bridge Review," accessed September 2, 2021.

58 Brearton, "The Bridge," accessed September 2, 2021.

59 Peel, "Dishonored Began Life As a Game Set in Medieval Japan," accessed September 2, 2021; Anonymous, "Dishonored," accessed September 2, 2021.

60 Wanserski, "The Diverse Artistic Influences," accessed September 2, 2021.

61 Hill, "Mind-Blowing Transistor Video Game Artwork," accessed September 2, 2021. *Kingdom Hearts* is an action role-playing game series published by Square Enix (2002–2020).

62 Yarwood, "The Most Beautiful Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021; Anonymous, "7 Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.

63 Elliott, "From Poirot to Bioshock"; Lucas, El Kanafi and Courcier, *BioShock*.

64 Martinez, "Braid," accessed September 2, 2021; McElroy, "Ubisoft's Child of Light," accessed September 2, 2021.

that inspired them. *The Bridge*, for example, constructs its levels in the form of the mathematically and geometrically impossible drawings of Escher. By adding a gravitational pull downwards, several objects and the player's avatar behave in initially unpredictable ways, depending on the developers' choices in either drawing something as part of the background or as a front piece interacting with the game play.

Another example of the ludological implications of a chosen inspirational artistic style is found in *Thomas Was Alone*. The seven differently shaped geometrical forms – the various player's avatars – fit perfectly into the grid-based game world. Playing *Thomas* is like a child playing with pegs and holes, trying to figure out the one and only combination of form and object in order to solve the puzzle it is offered. The geometrical art of Mondriaan is perfectly adjusted to this kind of thinking: the abstract aesthetics brings the puzzles back to their core mechanics: fitting things through holes and passages. In other words: the artistic background creates a communicative relationship between the TIA and the TIR that matches the ludic puzzles of the games.

Other games integrate their artistic inspiration with its narrative. In the case of *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*, the distinct Art Deco architecture of the ruined underwater world of Rapture perfectly ties in with the game's criticism of capitalism and unbridled trust in technology and progression.[65] Art Deco, as an art form, represents the human triumph over nature and an optimism in regard to the future, a kind of mindset the game actually criticises by hypothesising how such a world would work out. Here, the artistic background also creates a communication between the TIA and the TIR that matches the narrative of the games.

From the point of view of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, we can determine this specific usage of art in video games – the narratological and/or ludological resonance with the art forms they quote – in more detail. Not only are the text-immanent author and reader involved, but this specific usage of art is also to be found at the level of the implied author and reader. Both share the same socio-historical paradigm, and therefore enable the text-immanent author and reader to understand what is communicated with the invocation of a specific art style. This is not the same as intertextuality – as was the case with the paintings in *Assassin's Creed 2* – since this form of interrelationship can only exist between individual texts (and not between a text on the one hand and a notion or art style on the other). The text-immanent player of *Bioshock* understands what the aesthetic philosophy of Art Deco signifies in the context of the socio-political

65 Bosman, "Jesus Loves Me"; Nichol, "Art Perspective," accessed September 2, 2021.

commentary the game features (or rather the text-immanent author communicates) by means of the implied reader and author.

Art Games

In 1983, the supposedly first "art game" was released, the first one "with the distinct purpose of being a piece of art rather than a video game."[66] The game in question was *Moondust*, created by virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier for the Commodore 64. It has been featured at important game exhibitions (see Chapter 2) like the 1983 "ARTcade" (Corcoran Gallery of Arts, Washington) and the 2012 "The art of video games" (Smithsonian, also in Washington). *Moondust* is especially known for its bizarre graphics and procedurally generated sound track.

Since 1983, a larger number of artists have manifested themselves, all utilising the game medium as their new "canvas."[67] The reason was simple, according to Vera Mevorah: they were "getting the opportunity to engage the viewer in a truly active manner and at the same time controlling their experience."[68] This observation is closely familiar to the previously discussed necessary characteristic of the video game as a genre, namely, the entanglement between the text-immanent reader of the game and its character-avatar. Video games allow artists to force, stimulate, dare, or nudge their audiences to not only passively appreciate their art, but to actively engage with it.

A famous example of a game designer-turned-artist is Mark Essen, better known by his handle Messhof. Essen's work has been exhibited in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the New York New Museum, the Toronto Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art and the Liverpool Foundation for Art and Creative Technology. Jen Schiller, a *Kotaku* game critic, even connects his name to the 2011 National Endowment for the Arts' decision to include video games as eligible for its grants, scolding Roger Ebert's earlier scepticism in the title of the article in question: "National Endowment for the Arts makes Roger Ebert eat his words."[69]

Among Essen's works are *Punishment* (2005), *Randy Balma. Municipal Abortionist* (2008), *Pipedreamz* (2010), *Nidhogg* (Messhof, 2014), *Flywrench* (Messhof, 2015) and *Nidhogg 2* (Messhof, 2017). Both *Nidhoggs* are two-player, two-dimensional fencing games with retro-esque pixelated aesthetics, while *Flywrench* consists of

66 The Creators Project, "A Brief History of Video Game Art," accessed September 2, 2021.
67 Flavorwire Staff, "10 Artists Who Use Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.
68 Mevorah, "The Rise of Video Game Art," accessed September 2, 2021.
69 Schiller, "National Endowment for the Arts," accessed September 2, 2021.

colour-coded mazes that have to be traversed at great speeds. In a 2014 interview with MOCAtv (from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles), Essen is asked if he identifies more as a game developer or an artist, to which he answers "both."[70] His favourite tools for creating these games, *MS Paint* and *Game Maker*, are "purposely low-tech" and reminiscent of the older Atatri and Comodore 64 hits.[71]

Essen's games take inspiration from the old arcade games, not only aesthetically but also ludologically: most of his games are very hard, even at lower difficulty settings, and punish the player for failing much more harshly than the modern-day "safety nets" that games provide for their players in the form of save games, auto saves, respawning or fast travel mechanics. Essen admits he designs his games more for gallery settings than for commercial PC or console use. For this, Essen makes strategic design decisions: "They're able to be played without a lot of introductory levels and clicking around." He even suggests turning museums into "new arcade[s]," blurring the lines not only between these two types of buildings, but also between traditional art and video games[72] (for the issue of video game exhibits in traditional art museums, see Chapter 2).

Another example of a developer frequently labelled as an "artist" by the critics (though not by himself) is Greg Wohlwend. His portfolio consists of: *Solipskier* (Mikengreg, 2010), *Gasketball* (Mikengreg, 2012), *Puzzlejuice* (Sirvo, 2012), *Hundreds* (Semi Secret, 2013), *Ridiculous Fishing* (Vlambeer, 2013), *Threes* (Sirvo, 2014), *TouchTone* (Mikengreg, 2015) and *TumbleSeed* (Benedict Fritz and Greg Wohlwend, 2017). He is named in the *Business Insider* "30 under 30" list, ranking the best young app developers in 2013.[73] In contrast to Mark Essen, Wohlwend's art has not been exhibited in traditional art museums. Wohlwend is a classic example of an "indie developer," a category of game creators frequently identified as "artistic" by default, and he is surrounded by a shroud of Romanticism.[74] While every individual game developer seems to have his or her own definition of their product, this is usually conceived as a game produced by a small team (or individual), more focussed on innovation and quality, than on imitating earlier success productions.[75] Games like *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2011) or *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen, 20211) are famous examples of such games.

70 MOCAtv, "Mark Essen," accessed September 2, 2021.
71 Anonymous, "Mark Essen," accessed September 2, 2021.
72 Adkins, "mEssen With Your Head," accessed September 2, 2021.
73 D'Onfro, "The Creators of these Awesome Apps," accessed September 2, 2021.
74 Byver, "Lessons Learned from Reviewing Indie Games," accessed September 2, 2021; Byver, "The Importance of Humility," accessed September 2, 2021.
75 Stern, "What Makes a Game Indie," accessed September 2, 2021.

The identification of indie games with artistic quality is rooted in the ideal of the "lonely, unrecognized genius" in Romanticism. The Romantic (not "romantic") artist is a lonely and unrecognised genius, struggling against the conventions of society to achieve his or her vision.[76] This idea was translated to the twenty-first century game industry, idealising a lonely, often young and troubled, individual genius, who – preferably from the basement of his (not her) parents' basement – works in silence, unrecognised by the world outside, on a project of pure beauty and true art.

The actual situation is – often – quite contrary to this ideal. Wohlwend himself cautions indie developers that this way of life is not all roses and moonshine (to quote yet another ideal from the Romantic era). In a blog post, he describes the sense of "depression that won't let you fix anything in your life other than your game (. . .) an immortal solitude that's safe yet destructive (. . .) [and] the constant worry that the game isn't fun enough."[77]

Interestingly enough, the Romantic era is also the moment in history when literary criticism was focussing on the role of the – to use the terms of our Communication-Oriented Analysis – real author: he/she was the lonely genius, in whose hands and mind lay the ultimate meaning and definite interpretation of his/her own creative works.[78] Asking a game developer what he/she intended with his/her game – as is often thought of by scholars, critics and fans alike – is in fact a Romantic inclination we have inherited from that period. It would take up to the twentieth century before structuralism and post-structuralism would proclaim the "death of the author," allowing for a principial distinction between text-immanent author and reader on the one hand, and the real, i.e. text-external, authors and readers on the other hand.[79]

Art games – like all kinds of art – can also be politically critical. The Chinese game artist Feng Mengbo, for example, created the game *Long March. Restart* (2008). The game is based on a series of earlier oil paintings, also created by Mengbo, called *Long March: Game over*. Both titles are a reference to the historical "Long March," a series of military retreats undertaken by the Mao Zedong-led Red Army between 1934 and 1935. The Long March is one of the cornerstones of Chinese communist propaganda; it has been the subject of hundreds of Chinese songs, plays, novels and films.[80]

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76 Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 283; Benyahia and Mortimer, *Doing Film Studies*, 20.

77 Quoted by: Lien, "Greg Wohlwend Cautions Indies," accessed September 2, 2021.

78 Golban, "The Romantic Critical Thinking."

79 Golban, "Romantics."

80 Chen, *Staging Chinese Revolution*, 101–164.

Mengo's game is a side-scroller ludologically, as well as aesthetically clearly inspired by classic Super Nintendo games such as *Contra III: The Alien Wars (Konami, 1992)*, *Street Fighter II (Capcom, 1991)* and *Super Mario World (Nintendo, 1990)*, and features as a protagonist a pixelized version of a standard Red Army soldier. This soldier has to fight off his enemies by throwing Coca Cola cans at them, while trying to avoid – among other things – American soldiers shooting laser beams from the Moon, as well as Soviet satellites.[81]

The game *Long March. Restart* portrays a complex story of Western and Chinese interrelationships and mutual stereotyping. The Coca Cola cans and Americans-on-the-Moon are references to the American dream, and the games quoted are of Japanese origin, while the historical event that the game is loosely inspired by is Chinese. Both East and West are fascinated by each other, while at the same time they are fearful of that same otherness.[82] As Kevin Holmes concludes: "In marrying the iconography of Communism and Capitalism, Mengbo is jabbing at both ideologies and their tendency to use the 'hero' as a means of promoting their propagandist agendas."[83]

From the point of view of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, we can determine this (potential) politically critical aspect of video games in more detail. Not only are the TIA and TIR involved, but this aspect is also to be found at the level of the implied author and reader. The Long March is not only a historical fact, but in its evaluation is also present in a socio-historical paradigm shared by the implied author and reader, which connect the text-immanent author and reader to the historical extra-textual real author and readers. In other words, the TIR of the game *Long March* can only see the political criticism that the TIA of the game provides, by means of the paradigm shared by the implied author and reader.

Game Art Revised

Game developers can quote individual pieces of art or be inspired by artists or artistic movements and styles. *Mutatis mutandis*, artists can use video games as a new medium to express themselves in new ways. But what happens if a developer creates a game that (almost explicitly) contemplates the question of whether games are art or not, e.g. whether the game he has created can be classified as art? The developer in question is Davey Wreden, who created *The Stanley Parable*

81 Capon, "Long, March, Restart," accessed September 2, 2021.
82 Neri, "Is the Long March a Dream?".
83 Holmes, "The Long March," accessed September 2, 2021.

(Galactic Café) in 2011, together with William Pugh. The game in question is *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015), a curious mixture of incomplete and abstract game creations supposedly created by a developer simply called Coda, and played univocally from a first person perspective.

The *Guide* stands somewhere between a (fictional) biographical documentary and a developers' commentary. Liz England, designer at Insomniac Games described the game as follows:

> You can approach [the game] as a series of art games, as a master class in level design, as a metaphor for the creative process, as a work blurring the line between fiction and reality, as a discussion of the relationship between a creator and its audience and who really owns creative work once you released it in the wild – all wrapped up into one short, two hour game.[84]

The game tells the story of Coda, a mysterious but very creative indie game developer. The player can experience 16 of Coda's games, all in a very early stage of development, by means of the *The Beginner's Guide*'s narrator, who identifies himself as Davey Wreden, the real-life developer of both *The Stanley Parable* and the *Guide*. In-game, the narrator explains to the player that he was (and still is) a major admirer of Coda, who refrained from completing any of his game ideas, as well as from showing these rough ideas to anyone but Davey Wreden. Davey Wreden now, as he continues to explain, has gradually got the feeling that Coda is mentally unstable and in need of reassurance. To help him, Davey Wreden has copied and modified Coda's games so that other people are able to play these games for themselves, and therefore can offer Coda the appraisal he seems to be missing so desperately (the game indirectly presents itself as the result of Davey Wreden's efforts, breaking the game-internal chronology).

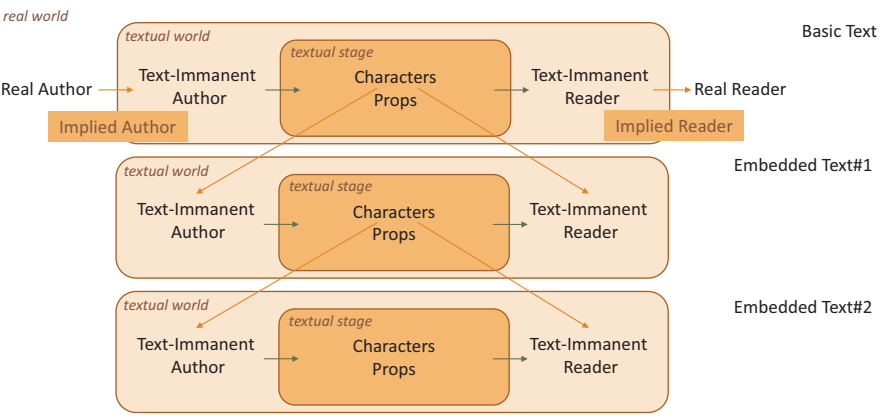
At the end of the *Guide*, Davey Wreden is confronted by a couple of messages tucked away in a game Coda sent to him. In these messages, Coda chastises Davey Wreden for tampering with his creations, for distributing and modifying them without consent, and for compromising their original intentions (indeed, Davey Wreden tells the player, he did tinker with some of Coda's games to make the player's experience easier). Davey Wreden then confesses to the player that he only presented Coda's game as his own, because he himself would like to receive the appraisal he said he wished for Coda. Coda ceases all form of communication and Davey Wreden laments that publishing this game (or collection of games) was (at least partially) motivated by his wish to talk to Coda once more (apparently in vain).

84 Graft, "The Gam Dev Letters," accessed September 2, 2021.

From the point of view of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, this game is actually quite complex. Not only does it establish an intertextual relationship between two (fictional) texts – the Coda games as they were intended by Coda and the modifications of Coda's game by Davey Wreden – it also embeds Coda's texts within the larger narrative of Davey Wreden about Coda and – ultimately – about himself. The last issue is not about intertextuality, one text quoting another text, but about the embedding of texts within each other.

The embedding of texts is actually nothing else than the old story-within-a-story concept, most famously utilised in the stories of the *Arabian Nights*. In the "frame story" of the *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade saves her own life (and that of all the other girls of the land) by telling stories to her sadistic bridegroom. This King originally plans to kill her the next morning, as he did with all his earlier brides, but he suspends his decision because he wants to hear the end of her story. But also, within Scheherazade's stories, new stories are told, embedding the one within the other.

In terms of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, this kind of embedding of stories within one another forms a kind of "Matryoshka," named after the famous Russian dolls (see Scheme 3). A Matryoshka occurs when one or more characters from the first story start to tell a second story of his, her or their own, usually to one or more other characters from the same original story. The first character of the A-story becomes the text-immanent author of the B-story, while the second character of the A-story identifies with the text-immanent reader of the B-story. And just like the famous Russian dolls, this process of embedding stories within stories can continue potentially indefinitely.



Scheme 3: Matryoshka. Scheme of a textual "Matryoshka," or embeddings of texts within each other.

The Beginner's Guide, as already suggested, combines both intertextuality and embedding to convey its puzzling narrative. At the level of Embedded Text #2, we find the original games as Coda created them, with Coda being the text-immanent author and Davey Wreden being the text-immanent reader. The text genre is, of course, that of a video game.

At a level higher, embedded text #1, we find Davey Wreden's modifications of Coda's original games, with Davey Wreden as the new text-immanent author, and the player (of the *Guide*) as the new text-immanent reader. It is up to the text-immanent reader of the basic text to understand the nature of the intertextual relationship between Coda's original games (Embedded Text #2) and Davey Wreden's modifications (Embedded Text #1). This nature of the intertextual relationship changes over the course of the game: initially, the text-immanent reader will be sympathetic towards Davey Wreden's modifications, because of his supposedly noble intentions. But nearing the end, the text-immanent reader will grow more critical of Davey Wreden's modifications, which appear more and more to be motivated from personal interests. This text genre is also a video game.

At the level of the basic text, we find Davey Wreden's "director's commentary" on Coda's games in combination with his own observations and – ultimately – his confessions. Here the texts change genre: the commentary is not a game-text, but a sound-text (and possibly also a conventional text, if subtitles are enabled). Here Davey Wreden is again the text-immanent author, but he is also a character in his own story (like Coda is too), and once again the player shares the role of the text-immanent reader to whom the story is told. The relation between the two embedded text levels is not one of intertextuality, due to its embedding: the Davey Wreden-character of Embedded Text #2 becomes the text-immanent author of the "modification" in Embedded Text #1. The positions of the text-immanent-reader-cum-player-avatar at both levels are theoretically distinguishable, but in the case of this game, they remain the same: in both the "modification layer" (Embedded Text #1) and the "commentary layer" (Basic Text), the player is both the text-immanent reader to whom the story is told, as well as the one who interacts with the unfolding of the story.

Of course, at all three levels of the narrative (Coda's games, Davey Wreden's modifications and the commentary), the real author and real reader do not change. Davey Wreden is the author of Coda's games, Davey Wreden's modifications and Davey Wreden's commentary. And the individual real player of the three levels is – necessarily – also the same, because the three are played "through" one another. The real reader of the *Guide* may or may not understand the complexity of the narrative, communicative embeddings and relationships.

The game is, not surprisingly, open to interpretation: an implicit invitation by the game that has not gone unnoticed. Some have argued that it is a criticism

of the role of game critics, others that the game is a reflection on the creative process of game development itself.[85] Some other critics interpret the game as a reflection on the nature of art, or even as a secretly feminist protest.[86] Of course, for our present project, the interpretation of the *Guide* as a reflection on art is very interesting. At level 8, called "Notes," the player comes across a large area in which blue notes with three black dots float through the air. All of these objects contain small notes, initially presented by the game as actual messages left there by other players, but all too readily identified by the narrator as written by Coda himself. The text-immanent author of Embedded Text #1 interprets these supposedly interactive messages as a sign of Coda's longing for human interaction and of his diminishing mental state.

In the middle of the room, a gigantic oblong painting is hanging on the wall, featuring red, blue, purple, white and orange circles of different sizes. A couple of the "notes" found in this specific room are concerned with the interpretation of this painting:

> Whoever made this has issues.
> PAINTING. WHAT DOES IT MEAN!!
> I think it's about how things look messy from up close and perfect from far away.
> Spoilers: it doesn't mean anything.
> It's about how this game is pretentious and you all suck.
> Art.

All of these are typical (and stereotypical) reactions to modern abstract painting. The painter is mentally unstable. Nobody can identify the painting's true meaning because there is not any. It is pretentious. As well as the idea that "art" is just that, and nothing more: a kind of variation on the old adage *l'art pour l'art*. Interestingly enough, all these statements could also be directed at the *Guide* itself: Davey Wreden, either as the real author or the text-immanent author, and/or Coda have mental problems, either from coping with the enormous fame generated by *Stanley*, or from not being able to connect to other people. But it could also be the voice of a video game critic trying to make sense of the *Guide*, and failing miserably, while trying to hide this by denigrating it altogether.[87]

At level 16, the last game supposedly developed by Coda, the player is confronted with two novelties. First, this game was explicitly made by Coda for

85 Hanson, "I Wrote this So You'd Know I'm Smart," accessed September 2, 2021; Meszaros, "The Beginner's Guide," accessed September 2, 2021.
86 Byrd, "The Beginner's Guide," accessed September 2, 2021; Mandanas, "The Beginner's Guide Is Brilliant," accessed September 2, 2021.
87 Solberg, "The Beginner's Guide," accessed September 2, 2021.

Davey Wreden and is literally unplayable if not modified by Davey Wreden. This is in fact Coda's major criticism of Davey Wreden: he tinkered with Coda's original games, potentially changing their meaning. Secondly, we see messages floating through the rooms, all by Coda and directed at Davey Wreden. One of them reads: "I wonder at times whether you think I am making these games for you," to which Davey Wreden reacts by saying: "I don't think I ever told you this, but when I took your work and I was showing it to people, it actually felt . . . It felt as though I were responsible for something important and valuable." YouTuber Big Joel commented on this specific instance: the game is "a rebellion against the idea that artists make their work for the purpose of scholarly investigation."[88] Joel is but all too ready to admit this also applies to his own commentary of the *Guide*, just as it also applies to this very monograph on games and art.

Leaving aside the abundance of other interpretation possibilities, narrative layers and highly complex communication analyses, *The Beginner's Guide* is one of the few games – maybe even the only one – that is not so much trying to be, imitate, or simulate art, but is discussing the notion of art itself, as well as the interrelationship (and interdependency) between artists and critics, whether within the field of the traditional arts or within that of video games. At the very least, it shows the possibility of video games discussing the concept of art, if not the possibility of games being art.

The *Guide* tries to do two things simultaneously: to contemplate what art is, and whether that is applicable to a game. We will return to *The Beginner's Guide* in the fourth chapter of this monograph, when discussing the theoretical-conceptual domain on art and games.

⁂

In the utilitarian-inspirational domain, games and art can be engaged with one another in three relationships. Game developers can quote existing, established pieces of art (intertextuality at the level of the text-immanent author and reader); game developers can utilise artists or artistic traditions within their game aesthetics (intertextuality at the level of implied author and reader); and artists can use the video game medium as a new vehicle of artistic expression (real author).

In this domain, the question of whether games are art (or not) receives a mixed answer. In the case of the intertextual "quotation" of established forms of art by game designers, the question of games-as-art does not appear at all: the quoted objects are already considered to be art (problematic as that may be in itself), but the quoting developers do not suggest their own work to be or not to be art. The same applies in the case of the invocation of artists and/or artistic

88 Joel, "The Beginner's Guide," accessed September 2, 2021.

traditions by game developers for aesthetic use in the development of their game worlds, either ludologically, narratologically, or both. Again, the question of whether these games are art or not is not raised by any party involved.

In the utilitarian-inspirational domain, the only instances where the question about games-as-art is raised are: when the creator (RA) identifies himself or herself as being an artist and/or regards his or her own work as art, and/or when others (RR) identify him or her as being an artist and/or regard his or her work as art.

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2 Curators and Visitors: The Practical-Consensual Domain

Depending on your definition of "exhibition," the first one containing a video game could have been as early as 1958. In the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual public exhibition in that year, *Tennis for Two* was presented, a very primitive digital form of tennis created by William Higinbotham, and arguably the first "real" video game.[89] Some months later, in 1959, the exhibition was closed and the game's massive set-up was dismantled so components could be used elsewhere, in retrospect a rather unfortunate, and for some game enthusiasts an iconoclastic, decision.[90]

If, within the context of this monograph, we apply a stricter definition of the word "exhibition," we are then looking at a collection of more than one game, brought together in a context that is usually strictly reserved for upcoming or well-established objects of art. In short, we are looking at games presented in a museum, either as a part of the museum's fixed collection or as a temporary exhibition within its walls. One, if not the earliest, example of such an exhibition was the 1983 "ARTcade" organised by the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Not only was its name a wordplay on the then-popular video game-arcades, but it also aimed to raise money for the Corcoran School of Art scholarship fund.[91] Games featured were – among others – *Pole Position* (Namco, 1982), *Joust* (Williams Electronics, 1982) and *Moondust* (Jaron Lanier, 1983).

While the atmosphere at the Corcoran was one of light-heartedness and the exhibition's aim was not exactly to address the topic of the artistic qualities of the displayed games, other ones would soon follow and it heralded a radical change of tune. In 2020, the new MassArt Art Museum – NAAM – opened its doors, featuring a special exhibition on video games called "Game Changers: Video Games and Contemporary Art."[92] On display were games like *Hair Nah* (Momo Pixel, 2020), a retro-style pixelated game on black women's experiences, and *Semblance* (Nyamakop, 2018), allegedly the first South African-developed game making its way to a Nintendo platform (the Switch that is).[93]

89 Hoffin and DeVos, "A Chronology of Video Game Deviance," 53.
90 Smith, *They Create Worlds*, 39–42.
91 Trebbe, "Corcoran's Video ARTcade," accessed June 16, 2021.
92 Guerra, "MassArt Opens a New Contemporary Art Museum," accessed June 16, 2021.
93 Yeh, "The 8-bit Viral Game Designer," accessed June 16, 2021; Conditt, "'Semblance' Makes History," accessed June 16, 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731019-003

In this second domain regarding the artistic status of video games, we turn our attention to the world of museums and exhibitions, and to their curators and visitors. Because, while art theorists, scholars and critics are fiercely debating the artistic value of video games, they are, one could argue, already art because they are displayed in the context of a museum. The context of a museum either confirms their preexisting status as art, or transforms them into art.[94]

Usually, the curator is the one who makes such decisions: he or she is thought of as a "connoisseur" of (a certain branch of) art and therefore capable of making such a decision – consciously or not – based on and/or influenced by cultural, financial, social and political particularities.[95] But the opposite is also arguable: the curator does not recognise art, but creates it: by putting it into a museum. The context of a museum itself, at the very least, enhances the artistic quality of the exhibits shown, simply because what is displayed in a museum is regarded as art.[96]

From the perspective of our Communication-Oriented Analysis, displaying games in a museum is a form of recontextualisation: a particular real reader takes a text from its original context and places it in another, without altering its text-internal communication, but with very real interpretational consequences for the new real readers (see Scheme 4a). While Mozart's *Requiem* consists of the same notes and rhythms when conducted in a church during a Roman Catholic mass for the dead as when performed by a professional orchestra in a concert-hall, for the actual real readers, or in this case listeners, it will – very probably – differ quite a bit in terms of experience. As E.T.A. Hoffmann aptly, though somewhat bombastically, formulated: "The *Requiem* performed in a concert-hall is not the same music; it is like a saint appearing at a ball!"[97]

Another example would be the famous Isenheimer Altar, originally located at the church or monastery of the Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony in Isenheim, near Colmar (presently part of France), but currently displayed in the Unterdenlinden Museum, also in Colmar.[98] Its suffering Christ would probably induce other feelings in the medieval sick experiencing all kinds of skin diseases, and visiting the hospital church in search of some kind of salvation in this or the next life, than it would in the contemporary art-loving tourists

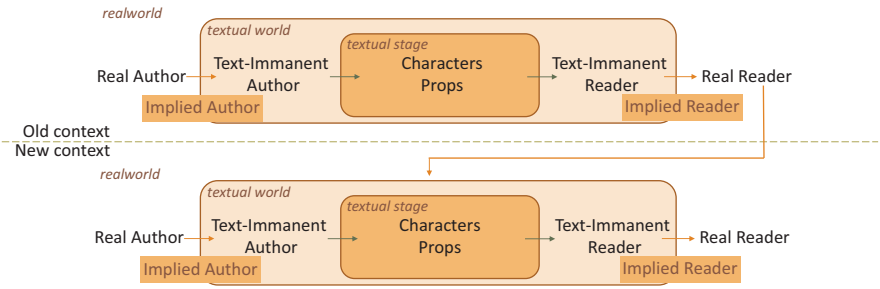
94 Kincheloe and Rose, *Art, Culture, and Education*, 49–104.

95 Miller, *The Anatomy of a Museum*, 45–64.

96 Brieber, Nadal and Leder, "In the White Cube"; Sullivan, "A Museum's Seal," accessed June 16, 2021.

97 Quoted in Corneilson, "Mozart as a Vocal Composer," 128.

98 Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*.



Scheme 4a: Recontextualisation. Recontextualisation from a communication perspective.

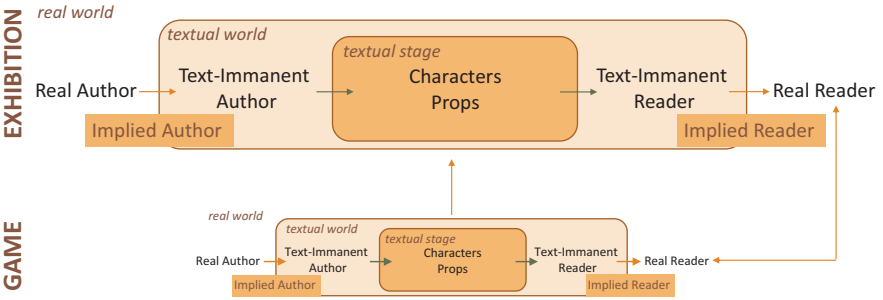
visiting the museum, even though not a single brush stroke or hue of paint has been altered.[99]

The same (text-external) communication shift occurs when a curator decides to take a video game from its original context (may it be an arcade hall, your house's game room, or any other "native" place where games "naturally" belong) to place it in a museum's exhibition. Not a bit of coding is changed when transporting it from your home to the museum, that is the text-immanent communication remains unchanged, but for the experience of those interacting with it, both contexts provide a very different experience.

It matters to your experience if you play *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) with your friends or solo in the confinement of your own private house, or if you see it displayed in one of the great museums of a country's capital. The first will induce experiences of relaxation, leisure and fun, while the second will imbue you with either polite interest as is so commonly found in the experienced museum visitor's frame of mind, or with surprise and possible abhorrence that such a "thing" has found its place into the realms of "high art."

The "museification" of games – the praxis of exhibiting digital games in contemporary museums and galleries as artistic objects/performances (see later in this chapter) – is actually a merger of three kinds of communication relationships (which we have already discussed in the course of this monograph): museification is a form of intertextuality (the exhibition "quoting" the games) and of recontextualisation (from the private home to the museum), and a form of Matryoshka (the game as a "story" within that of the "story" of the exhibition), with consequences for both the text-immanent reader and the real reader of (either) the game and (or) the exhibition (see Scheme 4b).

99 Bosman, "When Art Is Religion."



Scheme 4b: Museification. The complex communication of the museification of digital games.

This is especially complex for the real reader of both the games and the museum's exhibition. Seasoned gamers may find the museum context unfamiliar, uncomfortable or even disturbing, while experienced museum visitors may or may not like the idea of games exhibited as pieces of art in a traditional museum. What is actually happening in the case of game museification is an entanglement between the two real reader positions. The real reader of the exhibition is not necessarily the real reader of the exhibited games (that is, when a visitor does not interact with the games themself). The other way around is a necessity: every real reader of an exhibited game is also a real reader of the exhibition. Let us see how this works out within the discussion on the artistic status of digital games. That does not have to be a problem, as long as the implied reader/implied author are properly understood by the real reader of the exhibition.

To the Museums

When browsing through the dozens of game exhibitions, temporary or permanent, held since 1983, we come across an abundance of differing considerations that curators have reported for opting to include video games in their museums' collection and for the selection of the specific games incorporated in them. In this section, we will discuss some famous examples of game exhibitions through the years. This is by no means a complete overview, but is only an attempt at identifying key elements relating to our question surrounding the artistic quality of games.

In this section, we will disregard specialised computer game museums like the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin (1997–2000 offline; 2000–2011 online; from 2011 offline again), the Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines in Moscow (since 2007) or the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester (since 1982), even though the existence of such institutions in and of itself proves that games *sont*

arrivés as true art, because for our discussion it is vital to see games "function" amidst other, traditional (that is, accepted) forms of art in order to be able to contrast the two properly.

In 1989, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York presented the – now permanent – exhibition "Hot circuits. A video arcade," featuring among others *Astroids* (Atari, 1979), *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979), *Q*bert* (Gottlieb, 1982) and *Out Run* (Sega, 1986). Visitors were given five free tokens to play the arcade games lined up against the walls and the possibility to purchase more, hence the exhibition's subtitle. Afterwards, the show travelled to 10 science centres across the country, from 1990 to 1993. The museum continued to display games as a part of their collection: "Hot Circuits II" in 1993, "Computer Space" in 1995, "Expanded Entertainment" in 1996 and "Computer Space 98" in 1998. The set of games was selected by Roger Scharpe, game reviewer for *Play Meter* magazine and personally accredited with saving pinball from categorisation as a gambling game (which would have seriously crippled its general availability, both as a physical machine and as a video game, as well as its social acceptance).[100] Next, Sharon Blume, deputy director of the museum, and David Draigh, the publications editor, began to search for the 47 games on Sharpe's list, a major task that took them six months.

The museum's founding director, Rochelle Slovin, looked back on this exhibition in a 2001 anthology, edited by the famous game scholar Mark Wolf.[101] In her reflection, she relates the pixely style of the early arcade games to "early black-and-white films before sound," suggesting that art is "defined by its limitation." Slovin approvingly quotes Jessie Herz's description of his own experience when visiting the exhibition, contrasting arcade hall and museum:

> Yes, you get to play with all the old machines, and they're aligned almost the same way they were when you were a teenager. (. . .) They are privileged with space, like statues or really expensive clothing, and thus become Design Objects. (. . .) Playing a 1980s video game on an arcade machine is like viewing a 1930s Hollywood extravaganza on the silver screen rather than watching it at home on a VCR. It's a public rather than private experience.[102]

Additionally, the director recounts her observation that the exhibition attracted an unusually large number of "older visitors" without any prior experience with the medium. Slovin argues that this was due to the fact that the exhibition was "the first time they had felt socially sanctioned to enter a video game space."

100 McKay, "The Man Who Saved Pinball," accessed June 16, 2021.
101 Slovin, "Hot Circuits," 137–154.
102 Herz, *Joystick nation*, 61–62.

"The art of video games" was another famous exhibition by the prestigious Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC, running from March 16 through September 30, 2012. Up until 2016, the exhibition toured, stopping at numerous locations in the United States, among which the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona (2013), the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia (2015), and the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum at Florida International University in Miami, Florida (2015–2016). Chris Melissinos, Chief Gaming Officer at Sun, founder of Past Pixels, and the exhibition's curator asked the general public to help him select 240 different games, ranging from 1977 to 2010.[103] Reportedly, 3.7 million votes from 119,000 people in 175 countries were registered.[104]

The exhibition was divided into five chronological eras, showing games from all major platforms, like: *Space Invaders* on the Atari VCS (Taito, 1980), *Metroid* on the NES (Nintendo, 1986), *Earthworm Jim* on the Sega Genesis (Shiny Entertainment, 1994), *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* on the N64 (Nintendo, 1998) and *Fable* on Xbox (Big Blue Box Studios, 2004). Five games could be played at the exhibition: *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990), *Myst* (Cyan, 1993) and *Flower* (Thatgamecompany, 2009).

Elizabeth Broun, the Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian, argues in the first sentence of the exhibition's companion book that "video games are a pervasive and exciting new medium that attracts exceptional and diverse artistic talent."[105] She compares games with other formerly "new" forms of art like photography, film and "many other types of art" – presumably because these forms initially experienced the same problem of not being taken seriously by the art world. Significant is that she uses three different words for the game's developers interchangeably: "creators", "designers" and "artists."

Chris Melissinos himself notes that even though "many games never aspire[d] to be anything more than an adrenaline pump, where high scores rule," there is "a wealth of examples" of games that "force players into uncomfortable moral quandaries, makes statements about the act of war, and profoundly affect the player."[106] According to the exhibition's guest curator, games "are an amalgam of art disciplines whose sum is typically greater than its parts." This brings him to conclude that the "new medium (. . .) is beyond traditional definitions used in the fine art world." And while Melissinos makes a reservation that he leaves it to the

103 Melissinos and O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*.
104 Georgina, "The Art of Video Games," accessed June 16, 2021.
105 Broun, "Foreword."
106 Melissinos, "Preface."

visitors of the exhibition "to determine whether the material on display are indeed worthy of the title 'art'," he ends with a rhetorical "[t]hey may even be art."

Mike Mika, then chief creative officer for Other Ocean Interactive – known for among others *Spider-Man. Edge of time* (Nintendo, 2011) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Nintendo, 2012) – does not beat around the bush and opens his "introduction" forcefully: "I never doubted that one day video games would be recognized as art. For me, they've been art all along. (. . .) It [is] a new art form."[107] Mika is not hindered by too much modesty for his own profession:

> Game designers are (. . .) [l]ike modern-day da Vincis, they stand at the creative intersection of mathematics, science, writing, music, and art. Games are the aggregate of these disciplines, plus one key element: none of it matters without the player. (. . .) Video games are like poetry under our control; they are not complete without that symbiotic connection.

Yet another exhibition on games was held in The Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2018–2019). Independent curator Marie Foulston and the museum's own curator Kristian Volsing divided the exhibition into four sections: New Designers, Disruptors, Players_Online, and Players_Offline. The exhibition adopted an intentionalist approach, focussing on the designers' intentions when creating the games. Interviews with designers were displayed, as well as all kinds of different documentation involving the design process (prototypes, tests, notes and so forth). In her review, art historian Kelli Wood applauded the presentation of the game: "With its dim lighting, dark gray walls and permeable mesh dividers, fluorescent text, and video projections on LCD screens, the show's inventive design immersed viewers and guided them through a space that felt like a virtual world."[108]

The first part of the exhibition, "New Designs," showed games like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games, 2016) and *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer, 2013). The visitors of the second part, "Disruptors," physically separated from the first section, were warned about "nudity, fantasy violence, and adult themes." In 2021 terms, this section questioned the white, Western, male, heterosexual domination of the game industry, by – for example – criticising individual "AAA" games like *Battlefield 3* or *Call of Duty. Modern Warfare 2* for stereotyping Arabs as the self-explanatory evil "other."[109] The third part focussed on players interacting with one another in (massive) multiplayer online (role-playing) games,

107 Mika, "Introduction."
108 Wood, "Videogames," accessed June 16, 2021.
109 Šisler, "Digital Arabs."

which feature – as a genre – quite a unique communication pattern that we will address in the next section in more detail. The fourth part occupied itself with inviting visitors to themselves play with a number of video games, a practice having become a standard feature of almost all game exhibitions (and for good reasons, as we will explain in the next sections).

Exhibiting Interactive Performances

Almost all exhibitions featuring video games, either mentioned above or not, give the museums' visitors a chance to play, at least a selection of, the presented games. Except for the obvious fact that game exhibition visitors would probably expect this, and enthusiastic gamers visiting would be gravely disappointed if this were not offered, the actual possibility to interact with the exhibited objects is an integral part of the double problem curators face when accepting games into their collection: they have both performance and interactive qualities, and as such they challenge the traditional ways and methods of a "standard" museum.

However, first some clarification is in order: what do we mean by "standard museum"? Since we are discussing the matter of video games and/as art, the museums displaying video games-as-art should themselves be (self-identifying) art museums. This may sound as stating the obvious, but let us not forget that there are a vast number of different kinds of museums that exhibit something other than "raw art": natural history and anthropology museums, science museums, memorial museums, botanical gardens and zoos for example.[110]

Art museums have a long history of displaying equally traditional objects of artistic value, like paintings, sculptures and artistically decorated artifacts and utensils.[111] These objects are relatively easy to exhibit since they consist of two or three-dimensional objects that only require – in order for their artistic value to be appreciated – to be looked at by the museum's visitors. The same applies for the relatively new form of "art installations."

Photography as a museum-worthy art form has been around since at least the 1858 exhibition of the Photographic Society of London. The museum's official photographer, Charles Thurston Thompson, captured the 1858 display with his camera, creating the earliest known photograph of a photographic exhibition.[112]

110 Alexander, Alexander and Decker, *Museums in Motion*, especially 1–18.

111 Simmons, *Museums*.

112 Anonymous, "1858 Exhibition of the Photographic Society of London," accessed June 16, 2021.

Film would soon follow suit.[113] Both photos and films are also relatively easy to display in the context of an art museum, since they are objects that have to be heard and/or looked at in order to be appreciated. Photos can be hung on walls, and films can be shown on screens or projected onto walls.[114]

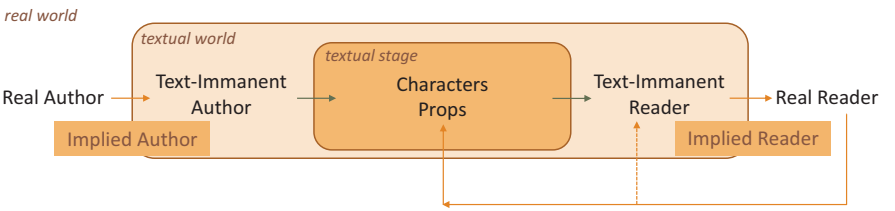
Other forms of art are much harder to exhibit in a traditional art museum, especially forms that involve performance, like musical performances, dance and theatre productions. Performance art is almost antithetical to the preservation, documentation and exhibiting process of any given museum. As Linda Burnham summarised in the first issue of *High Performance*: "Great performance art, created live before your eyes, with the added element of chance, can be remarkably intense. Documentation of these events is almost antithetical to that ideal."[115]

How to conserve and display such art forms in museums is still a matter of discussion, but "simply" showing recordings of (musical) performances on video screens robs the performance of its unique feature.[116] Chance and change are the two words describing the unique properties of performance, distinguishing it from its neighbouring art form, cinema. But while a film can no longer change its appearance once it has been published – just like a book or a painting – a musical performance of Mozart's *Requiem* will sound differently – sometimes more so, sometimes less so – according to the interpretation of the musicians under the guidance of their conductor.

Video games (and interactive theatre for that matter) contribute yet another challenge to the mix. Besides the fact that video games combine characteristics of both film (a sequence of images in combination with sound) and performance (the same game never plays the same twice), they are also interactive in nature, and even by necessity, as we have already argued earlier. From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, in contrast to interactive art, all other kinds of art attain and maintain a strict separation between characters and text-immanent reader. Viewing a painting by Picasso, watching *Himmel über Berlin* (Wim Wenders, 1978), or listening to Mozart's *Requiem* all render the text-immanent reader passive, and allow only a real reader to formulate his or her own opinion. Video games on their part feature the unique quality of entangling the game-immanent player and its in-game avatar (see the introduction for more details). The text-immanent reader of any given game is given the capacity, by the text-immanent author, to intervene in the unfolding of the game's story and to actively engage in the performance offered to them.

113 Bottomore, "Film Museums."
114 Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms*.
115 Burnham, "Editor's Note."
116 Clausen, "Performing the Archive."

On a side note, games are not the only (possible) art form that incorporates a kind of entanglement. The same applies, although slightly differently, in the case of interactive theatre (see Scheme 1 [p. 13] versus Scheme 5). Interactive theatre differs from traditional theatre in the sense that the latter has an "actor perform[ing] for a relatively passive audience, memoriz[ing] a script, and rehears[ing] their parts."[117] Interactive or improvisational forms of theatre – stand-up comedians are a well-known example – involve an actively engaging audience, only a loose script, and as many rehearsals as try-outs.



Scheme 5: Interactive theatre. Entanglement between real reader and his/her in-performance character through identification with the text-immanent reader.

Interactive theatre combines the chance element of every performance with the interactivity of video games. But, where video games feature the entanglement of text-immanent player and character-avatar, interactive theatre does the same with its real readers. Comedians and improvising actors engage with individual members of the audience, humans of flesh and blood, asking them implicitly two things: to act as a character under the direction of the show's performer (simultaneously acting as both the real and the text-immanent author) and to identify themselves, as real readers of the performance, with the position of the performance's text-immanent reader.

This is why video games cannot "fail" communicatively: the game-immanent player (TIR), as itself and as a character, cannot act in any other way than the text-immanent author allows, while in the case of interactive theatre, individual engaged and engaging members of the audience (RR) can be very disruptive and/or annoying by implicitly refusing to take on their role in the communication process. If they refuse to interact with the show, they refuse their position as a character; and if they refuse to identify with the show's text-immanent reader, they "break" the show. Interactive theatre can fail communicatively; a game cannot.

117 Blatner, *Interactive and Improvisational Drama*.

One more side note. Games can of course also be "broken": either a game has a fatal design flaw (a so-called "game-breaking bug") or individual gamers can tinker with the game's code in order to do things the game was never designed for. This can take the form of modding, cheating, hacking, or exploiting.[118] Modding is the process in which a game's fan changes some elements of the original game to create a variation of that game. Cheating occurs when (usually secret) parts of the original coding of a certain game enable individual players to make the playing of the game easier (for example infinite lives or skipping levels). Hacks occur when an individual gamer changes a (small) part of the original programme to – again – make the game easier to play. Exploiting is somewhat halfway between cheating and hacking, and occurs when an individual player exploits a particular situation or mechanics in the game in a way that was not intended by the designer, but – again – makes game life easier.

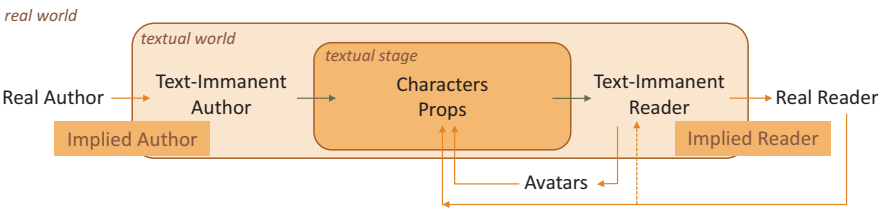
In the case of a design flaw, both the text-immanent and real reader of the game suffer equally. In the case of tinkering with the game, this is something only a real reader can do. Just as the text-immanent reader of a book cannot read the book in any other way than intended by the text-immanent author, a game-immanent reader cannot play the game in any different way than allowed by the game-immanent author. Real book readers can read their book backwards, can tear pages out of it, skip sections, or never finish the thing. The same applies to a game's real players: they can tinker with it.

All this modding, hacking, cheating and exploiting takes place at the level of the games' real reader; a text-immanent reader would never undertake or even contemplate these kinds of actions since these are certainly not "allowed" under the directorship of the game's text-immanent author. Real reader can choose to "disrupt" the text-immanent story-telling, text-immanent readers does not have this option.

To complicate things even more, (massive) multiplayer online (role-playing) games (MMORPGs) like *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *Call of Duty. Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019), or *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) have a communication structure that is a combination of "traditional" video games, in the sense of single players, and interactive theatre (see Scheme 6). In MMORPGs, the text-immanent reader is still entangled with a character on the stage via whom the player is interacting with the game's narrative, but the unfolding of that narrative is only very loosely governed by a text-immanent author (still asserting the limits of possibilities within the game world), but more by all the real readers of a specific session of said game, who can or cannot identify with the position of the text-

118 Gilad, "What's the Difference," accessed June 16, 2021.

immanent reader and/or character. That is why things like trolling or cyber bullying are only possible in multiplayer contexts.[119] Only real players can undermine and ruin each other's pleasure in playing the game, by displaying violent, highly unpleasant or intimidating in-game behaviour. Text-immanent players cannot choose to do so, but only when it is "ordered" by the text-immanent author of the game.



Scheme 6: Multiplayer games. Multiplayer games as a communicative combination between interactive theatre and "traditional" (single-player) games.

Living museums are a very interesting phenomenon in this context.[120] While living museums have been criticised for "beautifying" historical periods, focusing more on an aesthetically pleasing, "Romantic" experience than the harsh reality of our past, and suffer from the problem of accuracy with regard to the representation of historical realities, they form – maybe surprisingly – a form of interactive theatre, as we have described above. In this case, visitors of living museums like the Dutch Open Air Museum (Arnhem, the Netherlands), the Highland Folk Museum (Newtonmore, Scotland) or the Amish Acres Historic Farm & Heritage Resort (Nappanee, Indiana, USA) are implicitly given the task, as real readers of this performance, to interact with the performance as a (guest) character and/or to identify themselves with the performance's text-immanent reader. If a visitor fails one or both of these tasks, the whole endeavour fails, resulting in either embarrassment or even disturbances in the performance itself.

All these considerations contextualise the need, already felt and acted upon by video game museums and exhibitions, to not only show video games to visitors in the form of "Let's Plays" or "Walkthroughs" of any given game, but to enable and even encourage the visitors to actively interact with the games. A "Let's Play" is either a video or a text accompanied by screenshots, documenting the experience of a certain player (RR) of a particular video game. A "Walkthrough"

119 Ratan, "Toxicity in Gaming is Dangerous," accessed June 16, 2021.
120 Magelssen, *Living History Museums*.

is also either a video or a text-and-screenshot of a game, but this time aimed at guiding an individual gamer (RR) through the game.[121] Games are both performance and interactive: playing them is the only true form in which they can be appreciated.

But this conclusion also poses a new challenge for art museums: letting visitors, even stimulating them actively, to interact with the games exhibited, means allowing them to touch keyboards, joysticks and gamepads, a not small part of these being old, very rare and probably very expensive equipment. Of course, games could be emulated with modern software on modern hardware, but that would ruin the genuine experience. Playing *Galaxian* (Namco, 1979) on an arcade machine is a different experience than playing the same game on a modern Windows PC.

Facilitating the steady flow of visitors in a museum full of games is also different from doing this in a "traditional" art museum. Where appreciating a painting or sculpture can require, at least theoretically, a massive amount of time, the average visitor will browse more quickly past canvasses and vases than playing a video game. Appreciating a game, at least in practical terms, takes, generally speaking and on average, more time than studying a painting or a photograph.

Another practical consideration for museums in facilitating the artistic appreciation of video games is the amount of "craftmanship" necessary to even begin this process. In other words: looking at a painting, watching a movie or looking at a richly-decorated manuscript is an act that requires no special training or craftmanship. Of course, an expert or enthusiast will see and hear more than a random visitor, but the appreciation of the exhibited artifact is, in principle, open to every visitor who has been culturally adapted. Playing a video game – and this will perhaps surprise the non-initiated – requires a remarkable amount of effort and training. It is actually quite possible to be bad at playing games. In other words: as a visitor of a game art museum, you must have certain skills to be able to appreciate the games completely. Jesse Schell distinguishes physical (dexterity, reflexes), mental (memory, problem solving) and social skills (team coordination, guessing the opponent's strategy).[122] In other words: not every visitor, i.e. every RR, will be able to play the games exhibited.

121 Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 50–51.
122 Schell, *The Art of Game Design*, 151–152.

Preserving Video Gaming

Museums have not one, but several (self-identified) goals: to collect, conserve, exhibit, interpret and to serve.[123] Museums collect "because of the belief that objects are important and evocative survivals of human civilization worthy of careful study and with powerful educational impact." They are also concerned with conserving "their collections in pristine condition to succeeding generations." Exhibiting, interpreting and serving are concerned with the question of how museums convey their messages to the public: by selecting what to show (and what not), by offering context to what is exhibited (the famous "labels" and other meta-texts present in a museum) and by offering an array of educational programmes to various target groups.

In the context of our research into games-as-art, we have already discussed the necessity of allowing visitors to interact with the games exhibited in order for them to be fully appreciated as interactive performances. But this insight also has severe implications for the collection and preserving of games, either in hardware or software form.[124] The task of a gaming museum, or any museum interested in dealing with digital gaming as a medium, seems rather easy at first sight: select your games (and their appropriate console and/or operating system), procure both and put them in a safe place, only moving them from that place when exhibited.

However, this is not so simple. Mike Mika, in his introduction to the Smithsonian "The Art of Video Games" exhibition, already pointed out the problem of game preservation: "Unlike paintings or sculptures, digital art isn't tangible."[125] Some (older) games were erased to make room for others, storage units did not last for long and (older) consoles were not made for eternity. Mika makes a comparison with old movies from an era when cinema wasn't considered artistic: "I realized that we were still at the dawn of gaming and that the same was happening to this new medium." Rinella Cere talks about the early efforts to found specialised film museums about cinema as "a fragile art"; the same applies to video games.[126]

Leaving out the question as to what criteria should be used to select which games to preserve and which not to (tied to the question of what art actually is and what it constitutes), leaving aside the practical difficulties associated with actually acquiring old and rare software and hardware (not to speak of the technical state they are in) and, finally, excluding the phenomenon that games nowadays

123 Alexander, Alexander and Decker, *Museums in Motion*, 187–303.
124 Noordegraaf, Saba, Le Maître and Hediger, *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art*.
125 Mika, "Introduction."
126 Cere, *An International Study of Film Museums*.

are more and more exclusively published "in the cloud" instead of on physical discs, cassettes, or cartridges, we all the same wish to raise the more conceptual issue of how to preserve an interactive performance.

Preserving art usually means that the object alone has to be saved for future generations, and in doing so also preserving the intertextual communication between the text-immanent author and reader. But in the case of video game preservation, the necessary entanglement between the text-immanent reader and its in-game avatar involves having (at least theoretically) a real reader to operate the communication "system." Even though one could argue that a book is not "a book" if nobody has ever read it, and that a film cannot be called such if no one has ever watched it, a video game needs more than the "passive interaction" of a person reading, watching, or listening: it requires the active involvement of a player that transcends the (possible) emotional identification between a real reader and a character.

We have seen that almost all game exhibits allow visitors to actually play the games themselves – which is necessary to appreciate their value to the fullest as interactive performances – but to preserve them, museums should incorporate the interaction itself in the process. While this process may be a difficult one, there are some initiatives endeavouring to do just this. The University of Leiden (the Netherlands), for example, has started a project called "The Past at Play" and encourages volunteers to come to the campus and play actual board games from (the ancient) past, while they are recorded by the researchers. This does not only help the scholars to understand how these games would have worked in the past, but also what kind of interaction or communication they trigger in their players.[127]

It is these kinds of experiences that are part of the "essence" of (digital) gaming, and they should be a part – in whatever shape or form possible – of any attempt to conserve them. We have not only lost games over the course of time – the *Lost Media Archive* has more than 900 of them listed – but also the experiences of arcade hall enthusiasts from the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century have been lost beyond recovery.[128]

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From the perspective of the museum world (the practical-consensual domain), games are – and have been already for quite some time – considered to be "art." Not only specialised game museums, but also "traditional" art museums have

127 Nationale Wetenschapsagenda, "Games kunnen een tijdmachine naar het verleden worden," accessed August 23, 2021.

128 See: https://lostmediaarchive.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Lost_Video_Games, accessed August 23, 2021.

dedicated exhibitions to digital gaming, including the possibility for visitors to interact – one way or the other – with the games displayed. Curators do not go into many theoretical considerations, but cite popularity and pleasing aesthetics, often implicitly, as reasons for exhibiting games in their museums.

From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, this means that the "decision" about the artistic quality of video games lies with the real authors and real readers of the expositions themselves, that is, the exhibitions' curators and visitors. Curators "decide" a game is art when they put it on display in their museum, supported or not by (their interpretation of) the developers' intentions when creating the games (intentionalism), conjoined with the approval (or disapproval) of the exhibitions' visitors and/or exhibition reviewers, who either embrace or dismiss the curators' artistic suggestions. The artistic quality of games, therefore, is the consequence not of their inherent identity, but is the result of the contextualisation by the museums' curators (see Scheme 4a and 4b), repositioning them from their original context of the private living room to the public place of the museum.

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3 Legislators and Politicians: The Juridical-Political Domain

In 2011, game magazines were over the moon. Supposedly, the US government had officially declared that games were also to be considered as art. Roaring headlines appeared, such as: "Games now legally considered an art form (in the USA)" (*The Escapist*), "Video games are 'art' eligible for your tax dollars" (*Cnet*), "Government considers games art" (*IGN*) and "It's official. Video games are art" (*Fast Company*).[129] The tendency is best captured by *The Escapist*, writing: "The US National Endowment for the Arts now considers video games eligible for artistic funding, legally recognizing them as an art form."

The origin of all the buzz was the 2012 "Arts is media guidelines" issued by the American National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).[130] The NEA is an independent agency of the US federal government offering support and funding for (public) art and its creators. In May of 2011 it replaced its old "The arts on radio and television" guidelines with the new "The arts in media":

> The Arts in Media builds on the success of The Arts on Radio and Television. All project types that were previously eligible remain eligible. In addition, the expanded category now includes: [a]ll available media platforms such as the Internet, interactive and mobile technologies, *digital games* [italics by fgb/avw], arts content delivered via satellite, as well as on radio and television.

Ian Bogost, game designer, game critic and game researcher, warned against over-enthusiastic interpretations of the NEA's statement. In the aforementioned article in *Fast Company*, he stipulated that the NEA was just recovering from defunding policies by the Bush administration, and that applicants of the NEA's game grant have to be non-profit organizations, not small indie developers, as some sites had suggested. But Bogost's most important contribution was the warning he gave to those who were celebrating the supposed legitimacy the new designation conferred on games: "The way that art and culture develops is messy and weird, and shouldn't come down to the funding decisions of a few government bureaucrats."

129 Funk, "Games Now Legally Considered an Art Form," *The Escapist*, May 6, 2011; Clements, "Government considers games art"; Mack, "Video Games Are 'Art'"; Zax, "It's Official"; all sites accessed September 2, 2021.

130 See: https://web.archive.org/web/20110524033744/http://arts.endow.gov/grants/apply/AIM-presentation.html, accessed September 2, 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731019-004

Eventually game developers did appeal for and were given grants, like for example Tracy Fullerton's *Walden. A Game* (USC Games, 2017), based on the book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) by the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.[131] Another successful application was for the *Facebook* game *Half the Sky* (Frima Studio, 2013). The game is based on the book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* by Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas Kristof (2009), and both the book and the game promote awareness of women's rights worldwide in order to empower women and girls everywhere.[132]

Earlier, on March 13, 2006, the French minister of culture, Renaus Donnedieu de Vabres, decorated three video game veterans with the distinction of *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.[133] The laureates in question were two French and one Japanese game designers: Michel Ancel, the creator of the *Rayman* series (Ubisoft, 1995–2019), Frédérick Raynal, the creator of *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) and Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of several iconic Nintendo games, like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986). The *Ordre* was established in 1963 by French president Charles de Gaulle to promote and recognise significant contributions to the arts and literature, as the name already suggests.

Ancel, Raynal and Miyamoto now belong to the distinguished circle that includes famous names like the pop artists Tina Turner (1996) and Kylie Minogue (2008), director Tim Burton (2010), actress Cate Blanchett (2012) and folk singer Loreena McKennitt (2013). *Fable* (Big Blue Box Studios, 2004) and *Black and White* (Lionhead Studios, 2001) creator Peter Molyneux was also named a *chevalier* in 2007.[134]

"Call me the minister of video games if you want – I am proud of this," the enthusiastic minister told the press.[135] "People have looked down on video games for far too long, overlooking their great creativity and cultural value." He told the press that video game developers should receive a tax break of 20 percent: they "are not a mere commercial product," but "are a form of artistic expression involving creation from script writers, designers and directors."

Some months later, on September 11, Donnedieu issued a statement before the National Assembly in which he defended his tax propositions. He said:

131 Pearce, "Independent and Art Games," 274.

132 Carless, "NEA Awards Grants to Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.

133 Staff, "From Paris With Love," accessed September 2, 2021.

134 GamesIndustry International, "Molyneux Receives French Honour," accessed September 2, 2021.

135 Quoted in: Crampton, "For France, Video Games Are as Artful as Cinema," accessed September 2, 2021.

"Video games are an integral part of our culture, they call on particularly inventive talents, both technologically and artistically. They relate to both industry and creation."[136] In December 2007, Donnedieu got what he wanted: the European Union sanctioned his ideas for aiding the French video game industry.[137] The United Kingdom and Belgium would follow later with comparable plans.[138]

These examples show that the discussion on the artistic quality of video games is also being played out in the juridical-political domain, in the sense that governing bodies sometimes literally decide whether something – a video game – is either art or not (even if this is actually for economic reasons). Such "decisions" come in the form of laws and regulations, like the ones by the NEA and the French government as discussed above. But, as Bogost already argued, concluding that two things – a video game and a traditional piece of art – are the same because they share one characteristic – its creators being able to apply for financial benefits – is logically untenable. Nevertheless, in the eye of the common people, the grants and tax breaks given to the game developers being the same as granted to traditional art objects suggests an intimate similarity, elevating video games to newly established heights.

Forbidden Games

The opposite also occurs: not only can games and their creators be assisted by legal protection and political favouritism, both have also been (and are still) suppressed by lawmakers.

We distinguish three forms of suppression, ascending in severity. Games can be rated by age-accessibility, which implies that, for instance, some games are only permitted to be played by adults. This rating system can be compared with the rating system for films. Secondly, games can be censored, which implies that parts of the games are not permitted, or should be presented in another way in order to be accepted. This censorship can be compared with what

136 "Les jeux vidéo font pleinement partie de notre culture, ils font appel à des talents particulièrement inventifs, tant sur le plan technologique qu'artistique. Ils relèvent à la fois de l'industrie et de la création." See: "Déclaration de M. Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication," accessed September 2, 2021.

137 European Commission, "The Commission Authorises French Aid Scheme for Video Game Creation," accessed September 2, 2021.

138 European Commission, "Commission Approves UK Video Games Tax Relief Plan," accessed September 2, 2021; Anonymous, "Video Games: Commission Investigates Belgian Aid Scheme," accessed September 2, 2021.

also applies to films. Some films have an uncensored version, allowing an AO-rating (Adults Only), as well as a censored version. A good example is *Sebastiane* (Derek Jarman, 1976), of which only the censored version, not showing an erected penis for a couple of seconds, is found on archive.org.[139] Games can also be banned. They are not permitted, even for adults. This ban can also be compared to that pertaining to films. For example, the film *Ken Park* (Lary Clark, 2002) was banned in Australia due to its graphic content of underage sexual activity.[140]

Wikipedia has an overview of games banned in one or more countries.[141] Besides dictatorial countries one would expect to be listed, like China, Saudi Arabia and the United Emirates, democracies like Australia, Germany and New Zealand also rate among the most mentioned countries. Until 2011, Australia's strictest classification of films and video games was "15+," leading to the censorship of many games freely available in the rest of the (Western) world, like for example *South Park. The Tick of Truth* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2013) and *The Witcher 2. Assassins of Kings* (CD Project Red, 2011). Under strict German youth protection laws, games like *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000–2012) and *Wolfenstein. The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) are required to be censored in order to pass classification. In New Zealand, games like *Postal 2* (Running with Scissors, 2003) and *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar London, 2007) are banned because of "objectionable content."

Some games and game series pop up regularly when discussing game censorship (we will discuss the phenomenon of "moral panic" in regard to games in the next chapter of this monograph; here we confine ourselves to the juridical domain). *Carmageddon* is definitely one of these games: in 1997, it was the first to be refused by the British Board of Film Classification.[142] The game is a very violent take on the racing game genre, in which players indeed do drive race-cars, but are rewarded not so much for finishing first, but for running over as many innocent pedestrians as possible. The publishers of the game, and its successor *Carmageddon II. Carpocalypse Now* (Stainless Games/Software Creations, 1998), circumvented the ban in the United Kingdom (and other countries) by changing the colour of the pedestrians' blood from red to green, or by exchanging the human victims for zombies.[143]

Manhunt 2 is also frequently quoted in this regard. The game follows the successful attempt by the player-avatar, an inmate at a mental asylum, to escape his confinement by murdering and slaughtering everyone and everything that comes

139 See: https://archive.org/details/Sebastiane, accessed October 26, 2021.
140 Carstair, "The 'Banning' of Ken Park," accessed October 26, 2021.
141 See: "List of Banned Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.
142 Reynolds, "Play Britannia."
143 Karlsen, "Analyzing Game Controversies," 21.

in his way. The game was banned in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Italy.[144] Rockstar Games reacted through the voice of Take-Two (Rockstar's parent company) chairman Strauss Zelnick: "The Rockstar team has come up with a game that fits squarely within the horror genre and was intended to do so. (. . .) It brings a unique, formerly unheard of cinematic quality to interactive entertainment, and is also a fine piece of art."[145] Rockstar successfully dodged the AO-rating in the United States (effectually banning it from Sony and Nintendo machines) by editing the game: the screen is blurred during the game's executions and Rockstar removed the controversial execution scoring system.[146]

A special place among the censored games is held by the *Wolfenstein* series (1981–2019). Its instalments follow the adventures of all-American hero-soldier William B.J. Blazkowicz, who single-handily decimates the Nazi armies in a wide variety of (fictional) settings. In *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992), B.J. personally kills a demon-possessed Hitler, while in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Interactive, 2001) B.J.'s prime antagonist is the SS Paranormal Division. *Wolfenstein. The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) and *Wolfenstein. The Old Blood* (MachineGames, 2015) introduce a more varied narrative and lore, even incorporating Jewish characters and theological concepts.[147]

Incidentally, the *Wolfenstein* series has been accused of Nazi glorification, especially in Germany.[148] Game critic James Cullinane, reviewing an earlier instalment of the series *Wolfenstein* (Raven Software, 2009), asked the following rhetorical question: "Where would popular culture be without Nazis?"[149] According to this critic, Wolfenstein is a "game conduit" for "our bottomless appetite for scything down satanic Nazi henchmen." It is all, Cullinane continues, "about indulging in simple pleasures." Nazis are the self-explanatory face of unspeakable evil, easy to use as typical villains of whom you don't have to know anything to feel at ease killing them on the spot, without mercy or second thoughts, but who are at the same time strangely attractive in aesthetics and power. It is not hard feeling a bit guilty when "enjoying" the Nazi regime, knowing about the monstrosities they committed against humanity.

Modern-day Germany has – of course – a troubled relationship with its own Nazi history, something that is very tangible in the context of German

144 Turow, *Media Today*, 579.
145 Quoted in: Hillis, "Maker of Banned Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.
146 Arendt, "Revised Manhunt 2," accessed September 2, 2021.
147 Bosman and Mock, "We Do Not Pray, We Invent."
148 Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play"; Abbenhuis and Buttsworth, "The Mundanity of Evil."
149 Cullinane, "Review. Wolfenstein," accessed September 2, 2021.

criminal law, which forbids "glorification" of the Nazi regime. In the legal sense, Nazi glorification is understood as depicting the Nazi regime as "something great, impressive, or heroic," or as "highly valuing principal actors or symbolic figures of the Nazi regime by emphasizing them in a special way."[150] It is not difficult to perceive that the entire *Wolfenstein* franchise is vulnerable to this criticism and has, therefore, been censored severely in Germany.[151]

The German *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* ("Federal Department for Media Harmful to Minors"), the organisation in charge of "indexing" harmful media, severely blocking their sales and advertising, only lifted the ban on *Wolfenstein 3D* after 20 years (in 2019).[152] The ban was lifted because one year earlier the *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* ("Entertainment Software Self-Regulation"), the organisation responsible for video game ratings in Germany, officially decided that *Wolfenstein II. The New Colossus* (MachineGames, 2017) would not have to be censored in order to be sold and advertised in Germany.[153] Interestingly enough, Elisabeth Secker, *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle*'s managing director, argued that games are now given the same rights as films in regard to the freedom of the arts: "Through the change in the interpretation of the law, games that critically look at current affairs can for the first time be given a USK age rating. (. . .) This has long been the case for films and with regards to the freedom of the arts, this is now rightly also the case with computer and video games."[154]

Even though a careful reader of her words will not see an equation between games and art, and neither an identification of games as art, a lot of media, nevertheless, still suggested both.[155] They may or may not be right in doing so, because behind this lifting of the ban lies a decision by the Attorney General of Stuttgart to allow Swastikas and such in video games not as much because they are art, but when and if they are art. As specialist Baker McKenzie explained:

> [T]he Attorney General's Decision also clearly shows that the exemption of art applies to video games and that there is no general prohibition of Swastikas etc. in video games in Germany, provided the relevant game constitutes art. The latter – in my opinion – applies

150 Schäfke-Zell, "Localization as Adaptation," 222.

151 Boxer, "Wolfenstein," accessed September 2, 2021.

152 Zwingman, "Wolfenstein 3D," accessed September 2, 2021.

153 Raymond, "Germany Will Not Allow Some Nazi Symbols in Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.

154 Staff, "Germany Lifts Ban on Nazi Symbols in Video Games," accessed September 2, 2021.

155 Grisar, "Nazi Symbols in Video Games?"; Anonymous, "Germany Lifts Ban on Swastika"; Grosso, "Wolfenstein 3D"; Anonymous, "Wolfenstein 2"; all pages accessed September 2, 2021.

> to every video game which does not follow unconstitutional purposes and which involves serious development efforts.[156]

McKenzie argues that games may feature explicit Nazi aesthetics if they constitute art. This, however, only complicates the matter, at least theoretically. McKenzie allows for a very broad definition of "artistic" games consisting of two elements: games that do "not follow unconstitutional purposes" and that "involve serious development efforts." The problem with this definition is double: on the one hand, it could be argued that most, if not all, video games could qualify as art under this definition and, on the other, that its two elements alone cannot bear the weight of constituting a definition of art. There are many things that do not have unconstitutional purposes and are also a serious developmental effort, while still not being art. In practice, the ban on Nazi depictions in games is lifted if the developers refrain – at least somewhat –from suggesting outright support for the Nazi regime.

Developer MachineGames and publisher Bethesda Softworks included a disclaimer in the reboot of the series (from *The New Order* onwards), dealing exactly with this kind of criticism. A disclaimer is a message shown before the beginning of the actual book, film, or game, in which the creators and/or publishers of the medium in question renounce their responsibility in order to prevent legal action for libel by individuals or organizations who could be offended by the object's content. The disclaimer is often found in a "semi-space," somewhere between legal texts and an ethical statement: it is also a "moment" for the creators to position themselves and their product on the "right side of history."

The *Wolfenstein* disclaimer comes in two designs, one at the beginning of the games ("smaller disclaimer") and one included in the press release of *The New Order* ("bigger disclaimer," see Figure 4). Both disclaimers read, in an intriguing mixture of references to the old film disclaimer and the German legislation, as follows:

> *Wolfenstein: The New Order* is a fictional story set in an alternate universe in the 1960's. Names, characters, organizations, locations and events are either imaginary or depicted in a fictionalized manner. The story and content of this game are not intended to and should not be construed in any way to condone, glorify or endorse the beliefs, ideologies, events, actions, persons or behavior of the Nazi regime or to trivialize its war crimes, genocide, and other crimes against humanity.

156 McKenzie, "German Attorney General," accessed September 2, 2021.

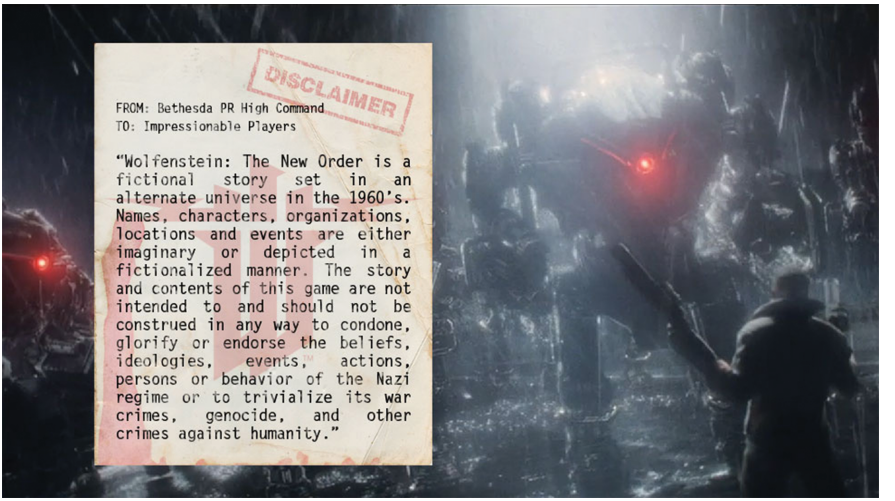

Figure 4: The bigger disclaimer of *Wolfenstein. The New Order* as it was included in the official press release (© MachineGames, 2014).

From the perspective of our Communication-Oriented Analysis, this (and all) disclaimer(s) is (are) paradoxical in nature: it sheds light onto what is wished to be hidden. Bethesda's disclaimer is a perfect illustration of this.

If we start with the smaller version, the real author of this disclaimer is some anonymous writer employed at either MachineGames or Bethesda. The real player is, of course, the one playing the actual game in real-life. The text-immanent author of the smaller disclaimer is a nameless "director" communicating its message with the text-immanent player, who is evoked by the text-immanent author due to the use of a passive grammatical form: "should not be construed."

The bigger disclaimer, included in the press release of the game, is more complicated especially since this version of the disclaimer does not only have a verbal form, like the smaller one, but also a visual one. To start with the verbal form, the real author and reader are the same for both the bigger and the smaller disclaimer. The text-immanent author of the bigger disclaimer is, however, not a nameless "director" but is identified by the text as "Bethesda PR High Command." And where the text-immanent player of the smaller version was evoked only implicitly by the passive form, in the case of the bigger disclaimer, he is now identified as "impressionable players" (third person, plural). The fact that the disclaimer is contextualised, both visually and verbally as a letter or email, featuring "from" and "to" makes this even more clear.

The visual form of the bigger disclaimer makes the transition of the text-immanent reader of the disclaimer to the text-immanent reader of the game even

easier than in the smaller version. Because of the visual context of the bigger disclaimer, the two text-immanent readers "merge" into one, making this the first example of a disclaimer crossing the boundary of the game it is featured in. Disclaimer and game are part of the same narrative world, sharing its communicative forms at an intertextual and intermedial level. Again, this causes a communicative paradox, in which the text-immanent reader of the *Wolfenstein* games will seek the "unproblematic" which he is guided towards by the text-immanent author of the disclaimer.

Degenerate Video Games

Censorship of art is as old as art itself.[157] Famous examples include the adding of loin cloths to otherwise nude people in Michelangelo's famous painting *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel in Rome by one of his own pupils.[158] Gustave Courbet's famous close-up of a woman's vulva, under the title *The Origin of the World*, was created in 1866, but only displayed as late as 1988. The painting has had a dazzling journey through the hands of private owners (along with Jacques Lacan himself), who frequently kept the painting away from any public viewings.[159]

Sexuality is a somewhat recurring theme in art censorship.[160] Dorothy Iannone's *Ecstatic Unity*, to give yet another example, a combination of comics, illustrations and pornography, was removed from a 1969 exposition in the Kunsthalle in Berne (Switzerland), because the museum director demanded the nudity to be covered, something the artist objected fiercely against. Iannone's colleague and lover Dieter Roth withdrew his work from the exhibition, and the museum's director was forced to resign.[161]

An interesting example is the *Gabinetto Segreto* ("Secret Cabinet") belonging to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.[162] This section shows objects from Pompeii that are considered offensive, that is, erotic, even pornographic. Only male scholars in good standing were allowed access to the collection. Sometimes accessibility was even more limited: in 1849 the entrance door was bricked up. At the end of the 1960s, the collection became accessible to everyone, but at

157 Jones, "Art."
158 Forcellino, *Michelangelo*, 333–334.
159 Savatier, *L'Origine du monde*.
160 Harcourt, *The Artist, the Censor, and the Nude*.
161 Anonymous, "Dorothy Iannone," accessed September 2, 2021.
162 Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*.

an additional entrance fee. Only from 2000 onwards has the entrance become freely accessible, albeit stipulating that children are only allowed to enter under supervision. One of the objects is a famous plaque, depicting a phallus with the text *hic habitat felicitas* (happiness lives here).

From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, regarding this plaque, there is communication from the text-immanent author to the text-immanent reader about happiness for everyone (both men and women) who lives in the house, expressed in word and image. The link with the real author and real reader is made possible by the then shared socio-historical paradigm that a phallus is a symbol of happiness and prosperity. But this socio-historical paradigm was no longer shared by the real reader of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The phallus had become an erotic image, perhaps even a pornographic one, making the position of the TIR for the nineteenth to the twentieth century RR incomprehensible. Moreover, because a gender distinction belonged to the socio-historical paradigm of this RR, a distinction was made between men and women regarding the accessibility of the exhibition.

When discussing the history of censorship, one case quite frequently comes up: the 1937 Munich *Entartete Kunst* exhibition.[163] The term *Entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art," or more literally "corrupted art") was used by the Nazi Party from the 1920s onwards to describe, or rather disqualify, all kinds of "modern" art often created by internationally renowned artists. In 1937, Joseph Goebbels, the German propaganda minister, installed the *Reichskammer der Bildenden Künste* ("State Chamber of Visual Art"), a six-man commission dedicated to the identification and confiscation of every piece of art deemed "degenerate." In the same year, the Nazis assembled 650 pieces of this art in one exhibition with the same title, *Entartete Kunst*. Peter Jelavich summarises:

> That term was applied especially to the modernist art of the Weimar era, which, Schultze-Naumburg contended, was inordinately dominated by Jews, suffused with Marxist values, and inspired by 'Negro' art, as seen in jazz, as well as in the African-inspired aesthetics of some expressionist and cubist works. Indeed, the cultural and intellectual leaders of Hitler's party used the words 'decadent', 'Jewish', 'Bolshevik', and 'Negro' interchangeably, and applied them indiscriminately to writers and artists who were not Jewish, Marxist or black.[164]

Famous artists were targeted: Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky, to name just a few.

163 Barron, "*Degenerate Art*."
164 Jelavich, "Nazi Germany," 927.

Now, from a communicative standpoint, the whole idea of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition is somewhat paradoxical.[165] The condemned pieces of art were initially displayed in the Munich Institute of Archaeology in the Hofgarten, but later also in Berlin, Leipzig, Düsseldorf, Weimar, Halle, Vienna and Salzburg. Usually, the location for the exhibition was – unsurprisingly at first perhaps – a museum or exhibition hall, since they were very apt for displaying art. But displaying pieces of art in a museum to communicate the idea that these pieces are not really art, but "degenerate" forms of art, is paradoxical.

It is interesting, or even ironic, to conclude that it is precisely in Germany, the country with a history of art censorship in relatively recent times, that the censoring of games is such a big focus point. On the one hand it is understandable, since post-war Germany has tried, quite successfully, to overcome its own tainted past through – amongst other things – a strict disqualification of any glorification of that past. On the other hand, what is and what is not "art" or "appropriate art" is usually only able to be decided from a retrospective point of view. From the twenty-first century's perspective, deeming art by Picasso and Kandinsky as unworthy of that title is now unthinkable. Will the same perhaps apply to *Wolfenstein* when viewed from 2090?

To summarise, could the history of the censorship of video games be an argument pro or contra its identification as art? Well, both video games and traditional pieces of art have been censored through time, usually ending up victorious, in the sense that their initial bans were eventually lifted. But two things sharing one characteristic does not make them equal to one another. Their shared history of censorship does not necessarily mean that games are also art, notwithstanding the suggestions made by some media quoted above.

Juridical rules are not sufficient or adequate tools to discuss the artistic quality of the video game medium in itself, or any medium for that matter. A law or regulation does not make something into art beyond all doubt, just as the opinion of museums' conservators or museums' visitors also do not. However, the existence of juridical rules concerning video games and, together with this existence, the underlying fact that they have been given the same "rights" as traditional forms of art do say something about the artistic status as perceived by major players in the art scene, whether they be developers, conservators or legislators.

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In the domain of lawmakers and politicians, the decision whether games are art or not is actually a secondary one. In the examples discussed above, it becomes

165 Barron, "1937 Modern Art and Politics," 20.

clear that politicians want to give some particular rights to games and game developers that were initially already applicable to objects and creators traditionally established as "art" and "artists." The suggestion that these kinds of laws and regulations make games into art themselves is suggestive, but not conclusive.

From the perspective of our Communication-Oriented Analysis, this means that – if we take the performative power of legislation seriously for a moment – the decision on the artistic nature of art lies in the hands – again – of real authors and/or real readers, respectively real game developers who identify their own work as such in order to benefit from the new legislation and offered art grants, and real individual politicians, who "equate" games (if that is what they actually do) with established forms of art that are already benefitting from the identification as being art.

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4 Thinkers and Doubters: The Theoretical-Conceptual Domain

Back we go to Roger Ebert. In the introduction of this monograph, we have already shown what kind of arguments our game critic formulated to argue against the identification of games-as-art. These arguments differ from one another and include objections like: games are for playful children, not for serious adults; art has a distinct value-added concept, while games do not; games cannot stand any comparison with great works of the established arts; games require player choice, which conflicts in principle with the authorial control over real art; games are more like sports than real art, because of their inherent rules, points and win-or-lose conclusion; real art has only one author, games have multiple; and educated and cultivated people are better off reading a good book or watching a good film than wasting precious hours playing games.

What we will not do here is provide a point-by-point commentary on Ebert's arguments; others have already done so, as we have shown in the introduction. But what we will do now is try to categorise the theoretical and conceptual arguments against games-as-art that have been formulated by Egbert and other critics, and to analyse the sustainability of these arguments.[166] In order to do so, we have identified six groups of arguments, each of which we will discuss in more detail.

(1) Games are dismissed as art because of their (supposed) inherent lack of one specific "author." (2) Games are dismissed as art because their inherent capacity and necessity of interactivity (supposedly) intervenes with the author's/creator's artistic control over the consumer's experience(s). (3) Games are dismissed as art because of their (supposed) inability to transfer existential notions to their players. (4) Games are dismissed as art because they are inherently competitive, goal-driven and rule-based. (5) Games are dismissed as art because they are created to serve as large an audience as possible (mass production), and are (supposedly) designed exclusively or primarily as "fun" or mere "entertainment." (6) And games are dismissed as art because they are regarded as nothing more than children's toys.

166 Parker, "Roger Ebert"; Mitchell and Clarke, *Videogames and Art*; Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*; Melissinos and O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*; Thi Nguyen, *Games*; Tavinor, *Videogames*; Jayemanne, *Performativity in Art*; Mortensen, *Perceiving Play*; Ryan, *Are Video Games Art?*; Zagalo, Veloso, Costa and Mealha, *Videogame Sciences*; Ferrari and Traini, *Art and Videogames*.

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First, we will argue that any of these specific critiques regarding games can also be applied to traditional forms of art, without disqualifying them as art. Secondly, and more importantly, we will argue that the specific critique on games is not valid in and of itself. Again, the Communication-Oriented Analysis provides us with a methodological framework to deal with the pros and cons of the arguments used in the discussion surrounding video games and art.

Artist Theory Versus Intentional Fallacy

Gethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke, in their introduction to *Videogames and Art*, argue that "it is easy to regard the early video games-as-art (or as the work of an artist) as they were clearly the vision of a single person or a small team."[167] Quoting the example of *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), the two state that Japanese creator Toru Iwatani had total control over the development process, in contrast "with the generally anonymous and team-based mode of production in [the] modern video game." The argument is clear: a video game cannot be a genuine form of art, because a game is almost always a team effort. Or, put the other way round: a video game can only be considered to be art if one creative author is identified. Leaving aside the arcade classics, like *Pac-Man*, and contemporary one-man-shows, like *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen, 2011) or *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2011), the majority of games are developed by a larger team of writers, programmers, designers, animators, external advisors and so forth. However, art, apparently, must have one clearly distinguishable creator in order to qualify as such.

The same objection, of course, could be made against films-as-art, being also the result of a team effort, including script writers, director, actors, stage builders, camera personnel and so forth. Nevertheless, Mitchell and Clarke argue that there is still an important difference between team-based film and team-based games: "[M]ainstream (Hollywood) cinema exists alongside other forms of practice music video, art movies, experimental film and video, television, and documentary – and there is a clearly identifiable crossover of ideas, techniques, and personnel from one area to another."[168]

Mainstream games, their reasoning continues, are "dominated by franchise titles, spin-offs and genre titles to an even greater extent than mainstream cinema," reducing "the need to be innovative." According to Mitchell and Clarke,

167 Mitchell and Clarke, *Videogames and Art*, 14.
168 Mitchell and Clarke, *Videogames and Art*, 15.

the advances in technological possibilities have only brought forth an increase in "graphic and animated photorealism," but no "new and genuinely innovative" ideas. Even "the so-called independent game industry" does not have the same role as art-house films, since the producers of such indie-games are the same as for the commercial ones, according to Mitchell and Clarke.

We, however, do not think the distinction between games as a lesser form of teamwork vis-à-vis films as a better form can hold up. There are many works of traditional art that are the result of people working together. Consider operas, which usually consist of first-level collaboration between composer (music), author (text) and director (performance), and of second-level collaboration between actual musicians and their director on the one hand, and actual actors and their director and choreographer on the other hand, working with their "source material."[169] And famous painters, like Rembrandt van Rijn, frequently made use of their pupils to do preparatory work to a painting, or left them to finish off what the master had started.[170]

If one, nevertheless, wants to argue that such a piece of work is ultimately the result of one mind orchestrating all these creative efforts by so many people – the genius behind the opera, the master guaranteeing the quality of the paintings – then the same argument can be made in favour of games, since every game, even one developed by a team of hundreds of individuals, has one "director" coordinating all those efforts. By all means, he/she could be regarded with every right to be the "author" of such a game.

The discussion on the artistic value of an object, like a video game, based on the single authorship of the object, reveals an "author-centred" approach to the matter, or from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, an exaggerated preference for the real author (RA) of an object as a point of interpretation and evaluation. We believe that this kind of objection to games-as-art is an echo of the old Romantic ideal of the "lonely" genius, "set above the rules of the rest of society."[171] Art was then believed to be the product of that lonely genius – cut off from society and therefore almost inevitably misunderstood.[172] The idea that "real art" has one "divinely inspired" author still lingers on in our collective memory, disqualifying every team effort as more prosaic than the work of a single brilliant mind.

In fact, this Romantic view is not a new scientific issue. The same discussion has been going on for a long time in, for example, the theological discipline of

169 Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Opera."
170 Tummers, "By His Hand."
171 Björkegren, "Management of Cultural Innovations," 156.
172 Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers*, 26; McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 113–150.

Old Testament exegesis.[173] When, in the eighteenth century, Old Testament exegesis arose as a critical science, focussing on the historical author (RA) of the first five books of the Bible, the Old Testament exegetes concluded that Moses could not be seen as the real author. Instead, they postulated anonymous authors, conventionally four. However anonymous these four authors were, they were held to be unique and creative authors; four "lonely" geniuses. However, when genre criticism arose, biblical exegesis was from then on no longer about linking unique creativity to one single person as a real author, but texts turned out to be literary thoughts, such as flood narratives, shared throughout the Ancient Near East. A shock went through the theological world of the Old Testament scholars. This shock was not formulated in terms of "art," but of "revelation." If there is no unique genius, is there still revelation, still literary uniqueness – or still art? In fact, this new discussion, now being held in the study of video games, is parallel to the much older discussion found in Old Testament research.

In fact, this one-dimensional focus on the genius of the one single real author leads to what is known as the intentional fallacy, which is the idea that the text represents one-on-one the intentions of the genius who is the real author of the text. However, from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, it is clear that the postulated equalisation of the real author and text-immanent author is not tenable and, subsequently, cannot function in the discussion of whether video games are art.

Interactivity and Player Agency versus Narrativity

In 2005, Roger Ebert, our favourite criticaster of games-as-art, formulated the next objection we will deal with: "Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control."[174] Others echo the same sentiment. Reacting to the decision of the Museum of Modern Art in New York to collect and exhibit games as part of their collection and permanent exhibition (see Chapter 3 on the practical-consensual domain), Jonathan Jones remarks:

> The worlds created by electronic games are more like playgrounds where experience is created by the interaction between a player and a programme. The player cannot claim to

173 Van Wieringen, "Methodological Developments in Biblical Exegesis," 28–29.
174 Ebert, "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?," accessed June 16, 2021.

> impose a personal vision of life on the game, while the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one 'owns' the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art.[175]

As Felan Parker summarises in his discussion of Ebert's and Jones' objections, the inherent nonlinearity and interactivity of video games, enabling player input and agency, "informs most discourse on games-as-art, exacerbating and reinforcing the other objections."[176] For example, the criterion of single authorship, as discussed above, intertwines with the criterion of authorial control, since both suggest that the "real" creator of the object in question should be in absolute control of the artistic event at all times. "If the viewer starts to interfere," as a gamer typically and necessarily does, "the message is lost," as Ernest Adams suggests.[177] Thi Nguyen, on the other hand, praises games-as-art explicitly because games "engage with human practicality."[178]

In our opinion, this objection is not very convincing either, and for two reasons: 1) other forms of art are also (and always have been) interactive in their nature, and 2) interactivity does not exclude authorial control. As we have already explained in detail in our chapter on the practical-consensual domain (Chapter 2 on curators and visitors), (interactive) theatre, participatory dance performances and numerous other (modern) art movements necessarily incorporate not only the passive involvement of their audiences in the sense of their attention to what is being performed, but also an active involvement in the unfolding of the performance itself.

From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, in the case of interactive theatre and improv theatre, the real readers of a given show are invited by the text-immanent author to voluntarily identify with the text-immanent reader to perform purposefully as a character on the stage, and "instructed" by the shared implied author and reader how to act and how not to act. Even in the case of more traditional performance arts, like a classical concert or ballet, the audience (RR) is actively involved in the performance by means of its verbal and non-verbal reaction to what is happening on stage by means of applauding (when pleased) or booing (when displeased).

Secondly, interactivity is deemed to be a factor disqualifying games as a potential art form, because interactivity is supposed to exclude authorial control. This is, as we will argue, also not true. Yes, it is indeed true that the text-

175 Jones, "Sorry MoMA," accessed June 16, 2021.
176 Parker, "Roger Ebert," 88.
177 Adams, "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?," 421.
178 Thi Nguyen, *Games*, 4.

immanent player of a given game has a certain amount of freedom to choose its course through the story the immanent author is telling, but this freedom is limited at two levels. Firstly, not all games offer the same amount of player freedom. First-person action/adventure games like *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004) or *Spec Ops. The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) are "on rails": they are like a train stuck on a track, and the player has only so much freedom to handle the situation. Other games, often dubbed "sandbox games," provide the player with a relatively large amount of freedom to choose where to go, like *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) or *Mad Max* (Avalanche Studios, 2015), and/or how to handle situations, like *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios, 2016) or *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* (38 Studios/Big Huge Games, 2012).

But besides these differences in player freedom, even in extremely free sandbox games, the number of options available to the text-immanent player (TIR) is still very much confined by what the text-immanent author (TIA) allows the player to do. If a game does not allow the text-immanent player to fly or walk on water, the amount of player freedom may be enormous, but flying and water-walking remain impossible to do. The player has a theoretically calculable and practically containable number of options of how to approach a certain in-game problem. Even though the game seems to suggest absolute player freedom, the practicality of the medium prescribes that absolute freedom is impossible: only relative freedom exists within the limits of the available technology and – more importantly – within the authorial control of the text-immanent author.

In a certain narratological way, video games are not very unlike interactive novels, also known as the "Choose Your Own Adventure-styled book." This type of novel or comic lets the immanent reader of the story choose – at certain points in the story – in what direction it will unfold, thus changing the flow of the story and (possibly) its outcome. Nobody would argue that the immanent author has no control over the story, since all possibilities included in the interactive novel are laid down by the immanent author. The immanent reader has to choose a couple of times, but they can only do so as far as they are allowed.[179]

A real reader of a Choose Your Own Adventure-book can decide to read the whole book integrally, ignoring the instructions by the immanent author to go to a certain page to continue the story. A text-immanent reader cannot do so, because it is always in perfect harmony with the immanent author's wishes and intentions. A text-immanent player cannot choose to ignore the author's control;

179 Reid-Walsh, *Interactive Books*.

only a real player can do so by, for example, modding, cheating or exploiting (parts of) the game's software.

In other words, from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, it is clear that "control" lies not with the text-external entity, the real author (RA), but at the text-internal level of the text-immanent author (TIA). The TIA gives the text-immanent reader (TIR) the free space to read the text, but this space is always restricted. The free space a text-immanent reader has is determined by the type of text. A written text, like a book, has a linear order. The text-immanent reader has to start on the first page and read forward to the last one. A real reader can cheat by reading the last page first, but a text-immanent reader cannot do so. A painting has no reading order (except for the conventional rule that you should read the front of a painting, not the back, although there are exceptions to that too). The text-immanent reader is not obliged to start reading at the top left and end at the bottom right.

The arrangement of what is depicted in a painting, for example the diagonal arrangement, i.e. the diagonal "control" given by the text-immanent author, directs the text-immanent reader. But a real reader can read paintings in his or her own way, from the top left to the bottom right. The interactivity of the real reader is only possible via the text-immanent reader, i.e. the textual entity that is controlled by the text-immanent author.

In conclusion we should say that all types of texts (written texts, paintings, films, video games, etc.) guarantee controlled interactivity. So, interactivity as such does not disqualify texts, in our discussion video games, as being art, but rather the opposite: without (some form of) interactivity, a text cannot exist, and therefore cannot be art.

Conveying Existential Notions

Ebert voiced, as we have discussed before, yet another aspect of games (supposedly) disqualifying them as art: their incapacity to convey existential notions. Connected to the points of authorship and authorial control discussed above, critics insist that games – unlike traditional forms of art – are incapable of communicating anything "thematic," as Adams put it.[180] This is – also – simply and factually not true, certainly not if we focus on the narrative part of what constitutes a game (for a discussion on the ludic part, see the next section).

180 Adams, "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?," 422.

Individual games have given rise to an enormous number of different interpretations. *Bioshock* (2K Boston/2K Australia, 2007) has been discussed in the context of its critique on capitalism, government propaganda, Art Deco and the philosopher Ayn Rand.[181] The *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare, 2007–2012) has been analysed regarding utilitarianism and Nietzsche's "will to power," personal identity and genocide, the insignificance of humankind vis-à-vis the greater universe and the player's immersion in a religious conversation the game series communicates.[182] The *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios, 2012–2017) has been discussed as being highly critical of (organised) religion.[183]

Many monographs and edited volumes have been published in the course of the last decades on video games from different perspectives of the humanities, and video games and philosophy, for example, examining topics like dualism, personal identity, artificial intelligence, philosophy of the mind and the morality of games with the help of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) and *Rome. Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2004).[184] Another example is video games and theology, focussing on themes like creation and salvation, and morality and eschatology, but also on notions like the "christophoric player" or "secondary creation."[185]

Besides these examples, which are mostly from a text-immanent perspective, real readers also report all kinds of existential, emotional and/or spiritual experiences while playing video games.[186] Games like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), *Braid* (Number None, 2008), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) and *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) are connected to spiritual or mindfulness experiences in players.[187]

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181 Parker, "Canonizing Bioshock"; Bosman, "Jesus Loves Me"; Lizardi, "Bioshock"; Reblin-Renshaw, *Ludonarrative Synchronicity*; Jackson, *Bioshock*.

182 Aristidou and Basallo, "Philosophical Themes in Mass Effect"; Hamer, "Mass Effect," accessed June 16, 2021; Munkittrick, "Why Mass Effect is the Most Important Science Fiction Universe," accessed June 16, 2021; Irizarry and Irizarry, "The Lord is My Shepard."

183 Bosman, "The Lamb of Comstock"; Šimonová, "Black-Eyed Bastard."

184 Cogburn and Silcox, *Philosophy through Video Games*. Cf. Gladden, *Phenomenology of the Gameworld*; Gunkel, *Gaming the System*; Webber and Griliopoulos, *Ten Things Video Games Can Teach Us*.

185 Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*; Detweiler, *Halos & Avatars*; Wagner, *Godwired*; Bainbridge, *eGods*; Schut, *Of Games and God*; Campbell and Grieve, *Playing with Religion*; Šisler, Radde-Antweier and Zeiler, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*.

186 Hayse, "Spirituality"; Callaway, "Wii Are Inspirited"; Hayse, "Transcendence"; Murray, *God, Games and my Neighbour*; Leibovitz, *God in the Machine*.

187 Stuart, "10 Great Video Games," accessed June 16, 2021; Cruea, "Gaming in the Mind and Minding the Game".

Games have already proven that they are indeed capable of "adding value" (Ebert), conveying existential notions and imbuing spiritual, emotional and/or spiritual experiences in those playing them. That this makes games into art is too quick a conclusion to draw, but the opposite is falsified: games cannot be disqualified as art because they cannot have "meaning": they have, both at the level of the immanent player and of the real players.

More *Ludus* than *Narratio*

Brett Martin argues that games "have little purpose, aside from testing our reflexes or stroking our egos."[188] Even though Martin finds this characteristic of games – strangely enough – favourable in regard to games-as-art, since "art forms have no purpose," the sentiment underlying this suggestion is that games are more *ludus* than *narratio*. Echoing the old ludology-narratology debate (see our Introduction), these kinds of arguments dismiss games-as-art because they are inherently competitive, goal-driven and rule-based. As Ebert stated: "One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome."[189] In our introduction, we already argued in favour of a definition of video games that incorporate both ludic and narrative properties, ending up with games as "digital ludo-narrative texts." The narrative part of this definition is not at issue here (as it was in the previous section), but the ludic part is. Does the ludic characteristic of video games disqualify them as art?

First of all, not all games are equally competitive, even though the majority are. Many games involve a form of competition, but certainly not equally. We distinguish four levels of competitiveness in games: 1) games with live competition (PvP); 2) games with emulated competition (PvE); 3) games with implicit competition; and 4) games without competition.

The games with live competition are the ones that probably spring directly to the mind of some critics. In multiplayer games like *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *Call of Duty*. *Warzone* (Infinity Ward, 2020) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) thousands of people join together on servers to battle against one another, or more exactly, against each other's avatar, hence the much-used acronym PvP, "player versus player." Some of these games place one player versus another one, others one place one player versus the rest of the competitors,

188 Martin, "Should Videogames Be Viewed as Art?," 352.
189 Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," accessed June 16, 2021.

and again other games divide players into two groups battling each other for victory.

From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, multiplayer games lie somewhere between interactive theatre and "regular" (single player) games, as discussed earlier in our Chapter 2 on museums and visitors. Real players identify with the text-immanent reader to act out as characters on the stage (knowing what to do because they are "instructed" by the shared implied author and implied reader), ruled by a (very distant) text-immanent author, who furnishes the stage with the decor, characters and props and determines the rules of the game-text. The amount of freedom for real readers to identify with the text-immanent reader, or not, is more limited in the case of multiplayer games, because of the technical and ludic limitations of the game itself. In the case of interactive theatre, real readers can hinder or even sabotage the text by neglecting (or explicitly acting against) the "instructions" (socio-historical paradigm) shared by the implied author/implied reader. In the case of multiplayer games, this kind of "abuse" is only possible by modding, hacking, or exploiting the game itself.

Other multiplayer games involve a different kind of competition: players have to cooperate to overcome usually massive numbers of in-game enemies, hence the well-known acronym PvE, "player versus environment." Examples of such games are *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), *Path of Exile* (Grinding Gear Games, 2013), *Destiny 2* (Bungle, 2017) and *Left 4 Dead 2* (Valve, 2009). The competition is "emulated," rather than "live," because the adversaries are controlled not by real players-identifying-as-immanent-readers-cum-characters/avatars but by the immanent author in a much more direct sense than in the case of the PvP's.

Now, also single player games (vis-à-vis multiplayer games) have forms of competition, but again in a different, more implicit form. In single player games, the text-immanent player-as-character is tasked by the text-immanent author to overcome certain obstacles and barriers: solving puzzles, platforming, fighting off enemies, sneaking through crowded areas, persuading or threatening NPCs ("non-playable characters"). Overcoming these obstacles could be regarded as a form of competition. One has to "beat the game," as the old expression still holds. But from a communication-oriented perspective, "beating" is not the right expression, since no one is beating anything: the text-immanent player reaches the end of the text-immanent author's story that includes – since it is a video game story – some predetermined interaction by the text-immanent player.

Finally, we have games without any form of competition, that is, games that are definitely not in the form of PvPs or PvEs, and that only very slightly include competition in the sense of implicit competition. These games are dubbed "artistic" or "mindful" (see the previous section) by their players. The

genre of the walking simulators, also known under the more exact notion of "environmental narrative games," provide an experience focussed on gradual exploration of the game world, and gradual discovery of the game's story, with little or no "action" other than walking around and interacting with objects and/or NPCs to reveal their true identities.[190] Examples of such games are: *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *The Unfinished Swan* (Giant Sparrow/Santa Monica Studios, 2012), *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2011), *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), *Firewatch* (Camp Santo, 2016), *What Remains of Edith Flinch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015).

The second element of the ludic disqualification of games-as-art, is – besides competition – their characteristic of being goal-driven. And indeed, almost (if not) all games have goals that the player has to achieve. From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, the game's text-immanent author tasks its text-immanent player to – as a character (i.e. its avatar) – reach certain "goals" in order to proceed through or eventually conclude the story. These goals can be microgoals, like jumping over a certain obstacle to proceed to the next section, or finding a key to open a door. Goals can also be at a mesolevel, usually in the form of main and/or side missions: segmented parts of a larger narrative told by the text-immanent author to/through/by the text-immanent player, either leading up to the end of the story or to subplots within that story. The macrogoal of every game is to reach the "end," whatever the form that end takes. One wants to "play through" the game, as the old expression says.

Not ending the game, abandoning it mid-play, is like not completing a book one has started to read. Again, from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, only real readers of books, paintings, films and games have the possibility to just stop "reading" by putting the book back in the cabinet, to walk past the painting in a museum without really having "read" it, switch off the television before the end of the film, or simply close down the game software program before the end has been reached. A text-immanent reader does not have that possibility: because of its inherent perfectness, it will complete everything it has started exactly like the text-immanent author wants it to do.

Besides their competitiveness and being goal-driven, games are also excluded from being art because of their set of rules a player has to obey. By this it is meant that the text-immanent player has to "read" the game through a specific

190 Kill Screen Staff, "Is It Time to Stop Using the Term 'Walking Simulator'?," accessed June 16, 2021; Habgood, Moore, Alapont, Ferguson and Van Oostendorp, "The REVEAL Educational Environmental Narrative Framework," 176.

set of rules under the command of the text-immanent author, who either explicitly communicates these rules – in the form of in-game tutorials – or implicitly – through the game conventions anchored in the shared paradigm of the implied author/reader. These rules are part of the winning-conditions of the game, that is, what kind of input the player has to provide in order to proceed through the game and reach its end. If a real player fails, the game communicates the text-immanent player's inability to play by the rules by providing ludic and/or narrative feedback to the text-immanent player, not infrequently by giving some sort of "death" or "game over" message.[191]

However, being goal-driven and rule-based does not *a priori* disqualify games-as-art, simply because other forms of (traditional) art also feature these elements, even though these characteristics are much more implicit than in the case of video games. If, from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, we consider the aspect of being "goal-driven" as the text-immanent author tasking the text-immanent player (as character = its avatar) to reach certain "places" in the narrative in order to proceed in the same narrative, then other forms of art do exactly the same, only much more simply and implicitly. In the case of a game, the complex communication structure – the entanglement of immanent player and avatar/character – makes this general characteristic more explicit.

If we take the example of a literary novel, the text-immanent author also tasks the text-immanent reader to reach certain goals: the end of the sentence, the end of a chapter, the end of the book. And in the case of an open ending to a story, a literary technique that is used very often in written texts, the TIA gives the TIR a lot of work to do to fill in the closing gap of the text, which the TIR is only able to do because of the TIA's being "goal-driven." Of course, a real reader can choose to stop reading mid-way through the novel, only browse through the book, or read the end before the beginning. A text-immanent reader, however, will not. The same goes for a game: a real gamer can choose to abandon the game, to manipulate the game (modding, hacking, exploiting), or can fail the challenges the text-immanent author poses to them. In contrast, a text-immanent player cannot fail to play the game "correctly."

Of course, in the case of games, their necessary ludic interactivity is an aspect distinguishing them from established forms of art. The text-immanent player has to interact like a character on the stage with the narrative in order to unfold it – but having different characteristics than art does not necessarily mean disqualification as art. Novels have very different characteristics than a

191 Bosman, "Death Narratives."

film or a musical performance: still they are all equally considered to be art. So ludic interactivity does not disqualify games-as-art (see previous section), and neither does being goal-driven, since all "texts" – including the artistic ones – have goals the text-immanent reader is tasked to fulfil.

The same applies to video games' quality of being rule-driven. Being rule-driven, part of the necessary interactive nature of games, does not disqualify them as art *per se*, since the interactivity of the medium does not do so either (see previous section). And being rule-driven as part of the narrative told by the text-immanent author to the text-immanent reader does not disqualify either. If we define being rule-driven in games as the text-immanent player having to "read" the game through a specific set of rules under the command of the text-immanent author, anchored in the shared paradigm of the implied author and reader, then all texts have these kinds of rules, even though they are usually a lot more implicit and taken for granted than traditional art texts.

The most obvious aspect of being driven by rules for texts can be found in written texts. In fact, the syntax is a set of rules (shared by the implied author and implied reader) according to which not only the text-immanent author creates the text, but the text-immanent reader must read it.

A painting, to mention another example, also has a set of rules, anchored in the implied reader, by which the text-immanent reader has to "read" its. But these sets of rules are much more complicated than syntax. In the case of a classical, realistic painting, the rules for "reading" the text are so unobtrusive and simple, that no real reader will notice whether he or she is following them. But in the case of abstract paintings, like Malevitch's *Black Square* (1915) for example (see Figure 5), the real reader will experience problems reading this specific text because of its unconventional nature. The text-immanent reader of the *Black Square*, however, does not have these problems, since it is informed by the implied reader of the "rules" it needs to operate to interpret it correctly and sensibly. Through the implied reader, which shares the socio-historical paradigm with the implied author and the real author, the text-immanent reader knows that he has to interpret the *Black Square* from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox iconography, and the place these objects have in (folk) religion in Eastern Europe.

Is there really that much difference between the text-immanent author of a game presenting the text-immanent player with rules it has to follow in order to "read", that is to understand the text-internal communication, and a text-immanent author of an abstract painting presenting the text-immanent beholder with rules it has to follow in order to "read" its own text-immanent communication? No, there is not. The reading process – the set of rules– is in both cases communicated and anchored by the implied author and implied reader

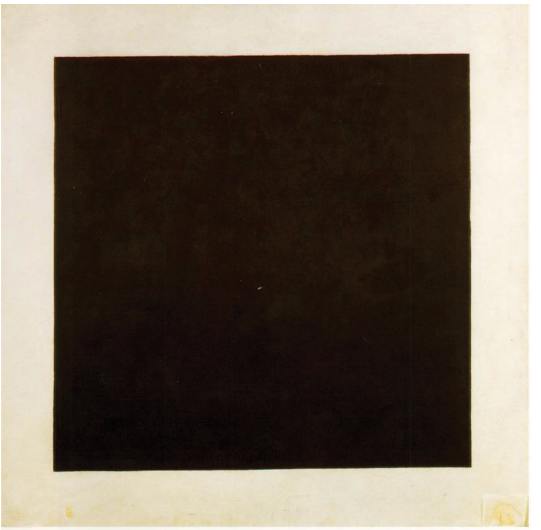

Figure 5: *Black Square*, Malevitch (1915, © Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).

of the painting and the game, and these rules exist to guide the text-immanent reader of the painting and the game to understand the text's communication.

The only real difference between a painting and a game is that regarding the latter the "rules of reading" are far more explicit than in the former. Because of the game's necessary ludic interactive nature, following the text-internal "rules" is part of the "reading" process, and doing so, at least from the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, in principle erases the conceptual difference between supposedly "ruleless" traditional artwork and games that use rules.

Reading-rules for paintings are explicitly visible in *trompe l'oeil*. Without the reading rules, the TIR cannot read what the TIA is communicating.

The painting *De heilige Hiëronymus* (Saint Jerome) by the Dutch painter Matthias Stom (c. 1600 – c. 1645) is an interesting example. The painting is not readable for the text-immanent reader without correctly using the text-immanent author's rules for reading a *trompe l'oeil*. A mirror cylinder functions as the key rule for reading the painting, as can be seen in Figure 6. There is only one correct place for the mirror cylinder. The TIR can only place the mirror cylinder on one proper spot in order to read the painting. The real reader may ignore this rule and place the mirror cylinder anywhere – or even not play this painting game in refusing to use a mirror cylinder.

Figure 6: *De heilige Hiëronymus* (Saint Jerome), Matthias Stom (c. 1635, © Centraal Museum, Utrecht / Ernst Moritz, photographer).

The only quality of video games that does not seem to have an equivalent in (other) forms of art, is being competitive. But not all games necessarily feature competition, and even if they do, the narrative mode of competitiveness is different from one game to the other. Being rule-based and goal-driven, however, do not *a priori* exclude games from being regarded as art.

Commercialism or *L'art pour l'art*

Yet another possible ground for the disqualification of games-as-art is the commercialism attached to the video game industry. How can something as commercial as a video game be regarded as art?

In fact, this question is not new at all. Our forms of commerce are indeed new, but because artists (whether from the present or the past) have to live, they also make art on order. For example, Michelangelo's famous statue *Moses* (1475–1564) from c. 1513–1515 is art that was commissioned. Pope Julius II

placed the order for the statue for his funerary monument in St. Peter's Basilica; but both the statue and his tomb ended up in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli (Saint Peter in Chains). The fact that it was commissioned art, however, did not mean that Michelangelo was dissatisfied with it. The story goes that when Michelangelo finished sculpting Moses' right knee, he was so pleased with it that he said to the statue "Perché non parli?" ("Why do you not talk?").[192]

Another example is the famous chair designed by Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) in 1925–1927. From the 1920s until the Second World War, this so-called Wassily Chair was produced by the German-Austrian company Thonet. After the war, the Italian Gavina started producing the Wassily Chair. In 1968 the American Knoll bought Gavina, and so the production passed on to Knoll. There are many Wassily Chairs, "mass produced," but that does not make the Wassily Chair a lesser form of art.

In the discussion on commercialism and art regarding video games, Mitchell and Clarke formulate their view as follows:

> We, personally, do not subscribe to the view that commercial games cannot be art. We do feel, however, that there are very few of these games which can be regarded, in their entirety, as art – there may be interesting aesthetic elements within certain games, and artists working in certain fields of game design and production, but it is rare for one game to be successful in all respects and be sufficiently commercial to be released. (. . .) For instance, an artwork will often exist only in a single version or a strictly limited edition (though this is not always the case), whereas there will be many copies of an art game[193]

Being an artist and a commercial success at the same time is an almost impossible task, Mitchell and Clarke argue. And both point to the fact that an art work is a one-of-a-kind, a piece that exists in its solitary uniqueness, while games – but not only games of course – exist in as many copies as possible, since every sold copy makes a profit. "Real" art does not want to make profit, the argument seems to conclude. Ernest Adams is even more stern: "Art is purchased in art galleries by art connoisseurs, it is criticized by art critics, it is conserved in art museums. It is not sold in toy shops. (. . .) Most movies are not art, but popular culture. And there is no question that the vast majority of games are not art either."[194]

Unfortunately for Adams and – to a lesser degree – for Mitchell and Clarke, these arguments do not hold up for very long. From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, as we have already argued in our Chapter 2 on

192 Wallace, *Michelangelo, God's Architect*, 9.
193 Mitchell and Clarke, "Introduction," 14, 15.
194 Adams, "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?," 421.

curators and visitors, the fact that art is purchased in galleries by art lovers and is criticised by critics, betrays a real reader perspective: sellers, buyers, lovers and critics are all real readers. But deciding what art is and what is not can be the privilege of some elite circles, or not. At least it is very susceptible to subjectivity, even though the art scene desperately wants to avoid this identification.

The disqualification that art is not "sold in a toy stop," implicitly arguing that the text-immanent reader of a game is necessarily a child, or grown-ups who have not outgrown their adolescent phase, will be discussed in the next section, below.

Many critics voice a tension between commercialism and art. But this dichotomy is also a false one, as Lopes summarises:

> This argument taps into a cherished ideal of art as free of commercial interests, but it's unsound. To begin with, not all video games are commercial products. Dramatic evidence of this is the thousands of freeware games people have created. More importantly, a great deal of traditional art, including some of the very best art, is commercial. This includes most contemporary prose literature, popular music, feature-length movies, and mainstream dance and theatre.[195]

Lopes points to the fact that not all games are commercial, being either distributed for free or not intended for mass consumption, and that "a great deal" of traditional art is very commercial in nature. Art in all its forms is and has always been connected to a "market" where artists and craftsmen on the one hand and wealthy art lovers and enthusiasts on the other have traded with one another, not infrequently for astronomical amounts of money. The art section thrives on commercial success, simply because artists have to make a living too. The idea of the lone genius, living his or her life in extreme poverty and anxiety, who creates art for its own sake (*L'art pour l'art*) is – again – a very persistent echo of a Romantic ideal.

The disdain for "mass culture" vis-à-vis "real art" also has its roots in Adorno's and Horkeimer's Marx-inspired criticism of the culture industry, framing the consumption of mass culture commodities being a tool of the oppression of the common people by the elites.[196] However, as Parker rightfully argues: "Of course, as Bourdieu demonstrates, the purported distinction between commercial or technological art and 'sublime art' is tied to the historically low status of folk and mass culture, and it has as much to do with class and cultural hierarchies as it does with aesthetics."[197]

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195 Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 119.
196 Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry."
197 Parker, "Roger Ebert," 85–86.

Games cannot be disqualified as art based on any of these arguments, simply because such a disqualification would do the same with traditional forms of art. From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, the argument fails due to its giving (only) the real reader the decisive role in defining what art is.

Children's Toys and Moral Panic

In the previous section, we already saw Ernest Adams argue that video games cannot be art since art "is not sold in toy shops."[198] In fact, this argument can be heard regarding other forms of artistic expression as well, for example: are children's books art? If not, Roald Dahl is not an artist.

The association between games and children is and always has been a strong one, starting from the children and adolescents playing the arcade halls of the seventies and eighties to the "juvenile inclination" still attributed to those enjoying games at an older age. Interestingly enough, the supposed connection between children and games also produces widespread moral panic exactly because people establish the fact that the majority of games is not suited for (young) children, precisely, because they are not designed to be played by children in the first place. As Parker says:

> Digital games have paradoxically faced widespread moral panic over their purported negative effects on children in terms of cognitive development, violent behavior, morals, and physical health. This contradiction – that games are both childish and dangerous to children – situates digital games firmly as a 'bad object' and is a recurring theme in discourse against games as art.[199]

All different kinds of negative effects of video games on children have been formulated, all supposedly being very dangerous to youngsters. As Lopes sums up: "The worry is that they're addictive, they take up time that should go to learning, and they keep children glued to the screen, thereby causing obesity and other health problems."[200] In this section, we will not venture into the discussion on the psychological well-being of children playing all kinds of video games, since it is not directly connected to our question regarding the artistic

198 Adams, "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?," 421.
199 Parker, "Roger Ebert and the Games-As-Art Debate," 87.
200 Lopes, *A philosophy of Computer Art*, 119.

qualification of games. However, within the scholarly debate, a careful rehabilitation for games seems to have been emerging over the last decade.[201]

The first question is: are games in some form, shape or capacity "children's toys"? From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, we could diversify this question in the direction of the text-immanent player on the one hand and the real player on the other. To start with the latter, even if games were initially played by older children and adolescents in the arcades, the gaming industry long ago outgrew that scenario. In 2019, only 18% of US gamers were 18 or younger of age, while the other 80% were older.[202] Game commercials, game conventions and game reviews are not directed at children, certainly not exclusively, with the exception of games especially designed for a lower age group, like many games by Nintendo (which is proud of its family-friendly image).

Besides the real gamers of video games, the text-immanent players are also not to be exclusively identified as children, on the contrary. The majority of game-immanent readers are older than 15. Children as player's avatars also occur, like in *A Plague Tale. Innocence* (Asobo Studio, 2019), *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen, 2011) or *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver, 2006), but these games clearly form a small minority. And even if games feature a "young" text-immanent reader, that does not necessarily mean that only real readers of the same age group can identify with their text-immanent counterparts, let alone must be identified that way. The same applies to children's books and films, which are equally appreciated by adults and children alike.

The second question is, do these games "teach our children unsatisfactory moral codes"?[203] We would argue that games on the whole teach (text-immanent) players both socially desirable as well as undesirable moral codes. But even if they were to teach (text-immanent) players to behave badly morally, that would not automatically disqualify them as art, since established art can also do so. Indeed, games feature socially, morally and religiously distasteful content (see Chapter 3 regarding our earlier discussion on banned and censored games), but the same applies to Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child (Divided)* (1993), Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995) or Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998).

201 Karlsen, "Analyzing Game Controversies."
202 Clement, "Average Age of U.S. Video Game Players," accessed September 7, 2021.
203 Martin, "Should Videogames Be Viewed as Art?," 353.

However, normative qualifications like "distasteful," "blasphemous" or even "dangerous" are always at the level of the real reader, not at the level of the text-immanent reader, who is automatically in total agreement with the text-immanent author and lacks any capacity to pass moral judgement on what is communicated to it. So, the whole discussion on games teaching children bad things takes place outside the game text itself, not to mention that a text-immanent author can also use bad or shocking examples to teach good things to its text-immanent reader – a phenomenon that occurs frequently in biblical texts. Genesis 34, for example, describes Dinah being raped by Hamor and how Dinah's brothers take revenge on not only Hamor, but on all his fellow citizens, when a marriage is urgently arranged between Hamor and Dinah. Jacob is very unhappy about it, but the brothers defend themselves with the question: should he have treated our sister like a prostitute? And when the story ends, the text-immanent author leaves the text-immanent reader without an answer in a story full of evil, where God does not appear.[204]

On the other hand, if games can be moral pitfalls, they also can be moral training grounds.[205] Games like *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), *Metro Exodus* (4A Games, 2019) or *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007) can position (text-immanent) players in such a way that they have to reflect on their in-game moral behaviour, forcing them to choose between ludic-strategical and narrative-ethical modes of operating. Games have multiple methods of giving moral feedback by the (text-immanent) player, either by deploying an implicit or an explicit morality system that passes moral judgement on the player's actions, altering parts and/or the ending of the game's narrative accordingly.

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From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, the various objections against games-as-art as discussed in this chapter can be placed with several entities in the communication process. The objection concerning the supposed single-authorship of games is located at the level of the real author and his or her acclaimed genius, while the objection concerning interactivity is found at the level of the "power" of the text-immanent author. Games being capable of "discussing" existential notions and/or emotions (or not) are spoken of in respect to the text-immanent reader or real reader. The *ludus* versus *narratio* discussion is fought out within the communication taking place between the text-immanent author and text-immanent reader, while the one on commercialism versus art-for

204 See e.g. Blyth, "Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence."
205 Bosman, "There is No Solution."

-its-own-sake takes place at the level of the real author and real reader. The accusation of video games being "mere" children's toys is debated within the tension existing between the text-immanent reader and the real reader. This "confusion" so to say, or rather its communicative complexity, is indeed responsible, at least for a significant part, for the conceptual labyrinth that the games-as-art discussion has ventured into.

At the same time, our investigation into the six most common conceptual objections against games-as-art has not procured, nor was ever intended to procure, a positive answer. We have established that these objections can in and of themselves not disqualify games-as-art, because traditional, established art forms would be the object of exactly the same kind of objections without disqualification (apparently), and/or because these objections are not valid in themselves to begin with.

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Conclusions

To order the discussion on the artistic quality of games, we have utilised the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, clearly distinguishing between real author and real reader on the one hand and text-immanent author and immanent reader on the other, as well as the paradigm-constituting implied author and implied reader located in-between those two communication levels.

Communicating Games

In our first chapter, on artists and developers (the utilitarian-inspirational domain), we have shown that the identification of games-as-art is anchored in either the (self-)identification of the game developers (developers making "art") and/or game artists (artists making "games"), or the identification as such by individual game players and/or art "consumers." These anchors coincide with the position of the real author on the one hand and of the real reader on the other hand, while disregarding the text-immanent communication, whether it pleads either for or against games-as-art. This brings a fair amount of subjectivity to the table: developers, artists and their "consumers" apparently decide what art is (and what it is not) and whether games can be considered as such (or not). To put it simply, something is only art if someone calls it art. This can, as we have seen, include games as well.

The same applies to the practical-consensual domain, as we have discussed in our second chapter. Curators of museums and exhibitions "create" art by choosing objects, including video games, to be included in their collections and/or museum displays. This choice is either embraced or rejected by the museums' visitors, who agree or disagree with the curators' identification of certain objects as art. Simply put: if it is "hanging" in a museum, it is probably art. Why would it otherwise be hanging in a museum? From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, this locates the "decision" regarding games-as-art with the same communication entity as the one on art in general: the real authors of those exhibitions (i.e. the curators) and their real readers (i.e. the visitors).

Again, and we see a pattern arising here, the same applies to the juridical-political domain, discussed in our third chapter. Politicians and lawmakers "make" games into art by including them within a broader set of cultural objects that have already been qualified as art, and that share certain rights (freedom of speech for example) and benefits (tax exemptions for example). Even though these politicians may or may not understand the performative quality of

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their words, the fact is that – at least in the eye of the people – by including video games in the group of established art forms, they "create" the artistic quality of video games as such. From the perspective of the Communication-Oriented Analysis, the decisive moment for games-as-art lies – again – in the hands of real authors and real readers, in this case real developers who qualify themselves as artists and/or their work as art in order to benefit from certain benefits attributed to certain art forms, and real politicians who decide what cultural objects may or may not be classified as art, entailing legal protection and/or benefits or not.

The only exceptions to the rule that the entities of real author and/or real reader are the decisive factor regarding games-as-art are found in the theoretical-conceptual domain, our fourth chapter, at least partially. Two out of six conceptual objections against the identification of games-as-art – the artist's intention and the commercialism in relation to *l'art pour l'art* – can be located with the text-external communication entities of real author and real reader. The first one poses the real author – the game developer – as the source of his/her work's identification as art, while the second does the same with game developers and game players, who decide when an object is a unique artistic object or a mass-produced, general one.

However, the next two objections are located within the game-text itself: the problem of the games' interactive narrativity and the *ludus* versus *narratio* discussion. Both objections occur at the level of the communication between the text-immanent author and text-immanent reader. The text-immanent reader/player is free to choose its own path through the text-immanent author's story, but only as far as that freedom is permitted by that text-immanent author. The ludic quality, so characteristic of the video game as a genre, is also situated within the text itself, as a part of the communication process between implied author and implied reader, that is, the set of rules by which the (text-immanent) reader has to read the text in order to understand the (text-immanent) author's communication.

The last two objections against games-as-art – the possibility of conveying existential notions and the assertion that games are children's toys – are located at the communicative level of the real author and real reader, but within the tension between the text-immanent reader on the one hand and the text-external real reader on the other. The identification of games as children's toys belongs to their real authors (but game developers do not generally identify their games as targeted at children), or real readers who associate games with the domain of child's play.

Of course, there are games that are identified by text-internal communication as "child's play": the text-immanent reader is identified as a child or the game contains a character especially suitable for children, in the sense that the identification by a young real reader with the text-immanent reader is stimulated as much as possible. But then again, it is up to the real reader, adult or

child, whether he or she identifies himself or herself with this "childish" text-immanent reader. The question of whether games can convey existential notions can be located either with the text-immanent reader or with the real reader. In the first case, the existential quality of games is identified as a part of the text-internal communication. In the second one, the existential "moment" is located with real readers who experience a spiritual and/or emotional "flow" when playing certain games.

From a bird's eye view, in the majority of cases the classification (or disqualification) of games-as-art lies in the hands of text-external communication entities, the real author and the real reader, who identify themselves or others as "artists" and thereby their products as "art." This implies a subjective and normative analysis of "texts" in general and of "art texts" and "game texts" specifically.

This separation between author and text does not only prevent the interpretation of a text by author-related data alone, but also protects that same text from disqualification-by-author. In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of a phenomenon tentatively called "cancel culture."[206] This concept and its designation are by no means normatively neutral, but try to problematise the idea that (contemporary and historical) cultural texts or objects, ranging from literature to paintings, are no longer suitable for (previously given) appraisal and/or study because of the moral circumstances of their creators.

Recent examples include various controversies, which can lead to cancelling of either the real author or the text. For example, J.K. Rowling, the real author of *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), is in danger of being cancelled for her alleged "push" against transgenders, whereas the older Walt Disney Company films like *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953) and *The Aristocats* (1970) and the famous "The Germans" episode of *Fawlty Towers* (1975) are also in danger of being cancelled, the first three texts due to alleged racism and the last one due to offending Germans.[207] A Communication-Oriented Analysis distinguishes between describing the text-internal communication on the one hand and the (possibly very normative) evaluation of the real author and/or the text itself by real readers on the other.

206 Law, "The War on Words," accessed June 16, 2021; Waldman, "In Y.A., Where Is the Line Between Criticism and Cancel Culture," accessed June 16, 2021; Taylor Shute, "Writing in the Age of Cancel Culture," accessed June 16, 2021; Dershowitz, *Cancel Culture*.

207 Sadler, "Top 10 Recent Examples of Cancel Culture," accessed June 16, 2021; Edwards, "Which Disney Movies Are Cancelled?," accessed June 16, 2021; Ross, "Cancel Culture Takes the Fun Out of Life," accessed June 16, 2021.

(Dis)qualifying Art

On the flip side, we have also seen that all arguments against video games-as-art can be applied to all other forms of (traditional) art as well. This means that an argument against games-as-art can also be used to disqualify an established form of art.

If the identification as an artist or the intentions of the real author of any given piece of art is sufficient to qualify that piece as such, then the same applies to video games. If a game developer self-identifies as an artist, his or her games have to be art too. Nevertheless, we have tried to argue in our fourth chapter that such a method of identification of art cannot stand alone philosophically. The "mind" of any real author is inaccessible to the artistic judge, because of the contingency of the real author's life and the circumstantial relation between what any real author thinks and what he or she communicates about his or her thoughts, either accidentally or because of some predetermined commercial, ideological, or other (un)conscious purpose.

If games disqualify as art because they lack a single, identifiable, unique and distinguished author, other art forms, already firmly established as art in themselves, would be disqualified too. Film is the art form that immediately springs to mind, being the product of an entire team of director(s), script writers, actors and the like. If films can have more than one "author," so can video games.

Both sentiments have been identified by us as remnants or echoes of the Romantic imagination: the lonely and brilliant, if utterly under-appreciated and often misunderstood, artist working his artistic magic in solitary confinement, directly "tapping into" the spiritual or divine realm for inspiration. If an artist had to be such, the majority of games would fall off the artistic bandwagon, and a lot of other established art forms would perish as well.

Precisely because of these considerations, the argument against games-as-art in terms of commercialism vis-à-vis art for its own sake has been disproven. On the one hand, we have games that could easily be considered to have equal or even more artistic aspirations than commercial ones, while on the other hand – historically and contemporarily – artists have produced, and always will continue to produce, objects, pieces and products on commission. Museums, art enthusiasts, collectors and investors will continue to create a "market," the laws of which also govern the artistic realm. If games are disqualified as art because of their commercialism, the argument would rob museums and collections of considerable amounts of established art.

Interactivity and player agency are also disproven as an argument against games-as-art, since the (immanent) player's freedom to do as they like within the game-narrative is confined by the control of the text-immanent author. And

even without this contra-argument, other forms of interactive art would also be targeted by such a disqualification, like Jazz, improv, or interactive theatre. Interactivity is simply not maintainable as a ground for the disqualification of video games as being forms of art.

In the wake of the above, the same kind of reasoning has been applied to the "more *ludus* than *narratio*" argument against games-as-art. Indeed, in the case of video games, the ludic quality – the set of rules by which the text-immanent player has to "read" the game-text – is far more present and apparent than in other forms of established art. But actually, the clear ludic element of games only makes more visible what other "texts" also possess: every text – artistic or not – is bound by rules, objects and outcomes. With this we mean: if the immanent reader of a text – a painting, a film, or a game – wants to read that text correctly – that is, to reach the end of the text and its communication – this reader has to perform its reading act by following a set of rules and objects, ranging from turning pages to pressing the correct buttons.

The immanent reader "knows" these rules because of the shared socio-historical paradigm of the implied author and implied reader. Real readers, as usual, always utilise these reading rules, if not unconsciously, since the rules are so well known to all readers. This knowledge of the rules become apparent when one is confronted with a text from long ago or from a different cultural *Umwelt*, with – probably – different and unknown reading rules. If reading rules belonging to other forms of established art do not disqualify them as art, neither do they do so for video games.

Disqualifying games-as-art because of the supposed childish nature of these games also does not hold any ground when scrutinised. Complaining that games are merely children's toys is the twenty-first century equivalent of the common reaction to Avant Garde art in the twentieth century: "my three years old child can do that too, even better."[208] Even though the text-immanent player can be identified as a child, this does not mean that a real reader has to automatically drop his or her identification. If otherwise, this argument would disqualify all artistic forms that are associated with children, including A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, the works of Roald Dahl, or the greater part of Jules Verne's oeuvre.

208 Cf. e.g. Laan, "The Making of a Reputation," 95–99.

(Re)defining Art

As we have already stated in our Introduction, any conclusive definition of art is doomed to fail, as it always has. As we have said, the definition "depends." What art is depends on who you ask: the artists and game developers themselves, the museum curators and visitors, politicians and lawmakers, literary critics and scholars of humanities. We have shown that all these groups have their own definition of art, all completely understandable from their own respective domains, but outside of these domains they are subjective at best. So, the question of whether games are or are not to be considered art is equally unable to be answered in a satisfactory way. It, again, "depends."

Some artists will say "yes," especially if they are using the genre for their own work. "Sometimes," game developers will say, especially if they want to use the term for their own work. A careful "yes" will be proposed by the museum curators, cautiously weighing the amount of room they have to incorporate games within the conservative context of the established museum world. And probably a mixed bag when the museum visitors are asked, depending on their own particular vision on art and games. "Yes," the politician and the lawmaker will answer, because they want to stimulate the game industry's economical potential and/or protect game developers under the freedom of speech, whether or not out of opportunistic or electoral motives. "No," the art critic is perhaps inclined to say, only to start wondering if he or she is right, after carefully examining the arguments pro and contra.

In conclusion, we can say that in all the four domains we have discussed, valuable issues have been formulated, but reaching a "perfect" definition of art in general and games-as-art specifically has been in vain. In our view, arriving at such an ambitious definition is actually not at all possible. But there is more to it than meets the eye. Although a "perfect" definition of art might be unattainable, we can, nevertheless, argue that any definition of art should include a thorough consideration of the communication of the "text"-as-art. That means we believe that any attempt to define, or even to describe, art (and thus also games-as-art) must involve a negotiation of the communicative process of the object, performance, or other art form in question.

This implies that when you describe a "text"-as-art, any text at all, you have to say something about all the communicative levels involved. Art, whatever you wish to say about it, has to relate to the object's or performance's characters (even if they are – seemingly – completely missing), to the text-immanent author and text-immanent reader between which the actual communication within the object or performance takes place, to the implied author and implied reader that instruct the text-immanent ones how to "read" the artistic text, and ultimately to

the real author and real readers with their (self-)identification and (subjective) positive or negative appreciation.

(Re)playing Art

Now, for a last and final time, let us turn the tables once again. We have thought about whether games can be art, but can we also think the opposite: can art be a game? Yes, it can. On June 6, 2017, Flamebait Games published a little game called *Passpartout. The Starving Artist*. It features a French artist as the protagonist, who starts painting from his garage box, somewhere in the backstreets of Paris. The player, controlling this promising young guy, has to make actual drawings in a very crude and rudimentary image editor, and set them on display in front of the protagonist's garage in the hope of earning more money than he is spending on his French "wine and baguettes."

The game does not explicitly communicate to the player which paintings will do well or badly, or how the prices for the artworks are determined. However, frequently a bunch of spectacles-wearing nerds, beret-carrying art critics, and purple punks will visit the artist's exhibition in order to buy a drawing (sometimes) or to criticise the art mercilessly. They argue that the artist – and thus the player – has no taste, has made a painting but not art, is being basic, has to put in more effort, is lacking in emotion, or simply does not at all know what art is. The paintings are disqualified due to lack of emotion, for having too "radical" a use of colour, having no originality, being too minimalistic or too shallow. Other critics phrase themselves slightly more elaborately: "those pesky expressionists like poorly thought-out paintings, they would love this one"; "I want paintings that shout, this painting doesn't even whisper"; "subtraction is often better than addition"; "I am confused by this"; "I prefer real art"; and "I bet minimalists would love this."

Eventually the Parisian art scene picks up the scent of our nameless artist: he is discussed in art groups, semi-famous critics visit him incognito and his name is whispered by important people. And, depending on the kind of art he is making, the poor artist is invited to walk one of two paths – provided his paintings sell at all, and in that case "you are forgotten." The first path brings you to a semi-demolished building and eventually an art gallery (the "Passion path"), the other through an art studio to a castle tower (the "Craft path"), where the artist is in the employ of an aristocratic lady. The first path is given, if the artist – and thus the player – sells to punkers and nerds, avoids commercial success and focusses on either expressionist or minimalist paintings (see Figure 7). The second path is given if the artist/player paints more figuratively,

Figure 7: A scene from Act 2 of *Passpartout. The Starving Artist* (© Flamebait AB, 2017).

leading to a "sell-out ending" in which the artist has great success but is haunted by voices in his head who criticise him for choosing money over art.

The game actually makes fun of the whole art scene and of the concepts of artist and art themselves, and therefore of everything we have discussed in this monograph. From a real author perspective, it mocks the Romantic-inspired dichotomy between the brilliant but lonely genius (the "starving artist" from the subtitle) and the commercial "sell-out" by an artist, as if being successful and being a "real artist" were mutually exclusive. Art is what the artist calls art, even if no one recognises him (yet). Also, the conflict between "art" and "craft" is problematised, the first apparently standing for "real" art, and the second one for commercialism.

From a real reader perspective, the game criticizes the overall subjectivity by which the general population, the specialised art critics and museums' conservators discriminate between good/real and bad/unreal art. Any real reader of this game will be confused about the criteria used by the game to determine the quality of the art works made: it all seems utterly coincidental, subjective, and random. The one critic disqualifies the art because the player/artist has used too much colour, the next because it lacks colour, and so forth.

From the perspective of the implied author/implied reader, it becomes clear – after much trial and error in the gameplay – that some art critics and buyers like certain styles of painting better than others: figurative, minimalist or expressionist. The text-immanent reader of this game can understand these

styles because of the shared socio-historical paradigm. Any real readers who lack this kind of knowledge will have a harder time understanding the game – i.e. its text-immanent author – and how to proceed through it.

The same text-immanent author grants a great deal of freedom to the text-immanent reader, who takes his role as the lead character on the textual stage of the game almost literally in this case since he is the one doing all the painting for which it is lauded or dismissed. The freedom of the text-immanent reader is, on the other hand, also limited, both in terms of available paintbrushes, canvas and colours and in terms of the possible routes opened up to the player/reader depending on the clients' appreciation of the paintings.

The game has rules, competition and goals, but they are the same as in "real" or traditional art. Any artist has to follow certain rules in order for his art to be appreciated, even if the specific artist wants to break all rules and boundaries. By breaking these boundaries and rules, this artistic rebel nevertheless confirms the existence of what he wants to break. And yes, there is competition in the art scene too: many artists have to compete with one another within the limited space of museum walls and critics' attention in order to survive as an artist. Art, just like a game, has goals: it wants to be seen, to be played, its wants to communicate, it wants not to be ignored, to be thrown onto the fire, just like the "fail ending" of *Passpartout* shows.

Passpartout. The Starving Artist does not so much demonstrate that games can be art or not, but illustrates that art is a game too, with the artists as its players, competing with one another and with oneself. Are games art? Maybe they are, maybe not. So far, it remains undecided. But is art a game? Yes, it is.

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