

Game Art

(This is not) A Manifesto

(This is) A Disclaimer

by Matteo Bittanti

(*GameScenes* is not about) **Videogames as art.** We candidly take for granted that videogames are a form of art. After all, the debate was settled by Henry Jenkins (2005),¹ who convincingly argued that: «Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible. And games have been embraced by a public that has otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art».² Similarly, James Paul Gee (2006) argues that games' distinct artistic status require us to develop unique interpretative frameworks:³ «Videogames are a new art form. That is one reason why now is the right time for game studies [...]. The importance of this claim is this: As a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, videogames will challenge us to develop new analytical tools

and will become a new type of "equipment for living", to use Kenneth Burke's (1973) phrase for the role of literature».⁴

(*GameScenes* is not about) **Art as a game.** Somehow, naively, we take for granted that art is a game. Howard S. Becker's (1982) description of the inner and outer workings of art in *Art Worlds* reads like the instruction manual of a complex MMOG. According to Becker, an art world is «the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is noted for».⁵ Artworks, Becker suggests, are shaped by the whole system that produces them, not just by the people we regard as artists. Like *World of Warcraft*, art worlds are intricate webs of social, cultural, technical, and economic interactions between different subjects. Among others, there are creators, technicians, players and spectators. An art world, like a game world, is a collective activity. The

rules of this particular game are called "conventions" and they «cover all the decisions that must be made with respect to works produced».⁶

(*GameScenes* is not about) **game art.** There is a difference between a game artist and a Game Artist. The former is a professional role which operates in the game industry. A game artist creates graphics for one or more types of games. He is responsible for all of the aspects of game development that call for *visual art*. There is a high demand for game artists. Conversely, there is an extremely low demand for Game Artists. Likewise, there are many books that focus on game art.⁷ This is not one of them.

(*GameScenes* is not about) **Art Games.** Art Games are videogames specifically created for artistic (i.e., not commercial) purposes. According to Tiffany Holmes (2003), an art game is «an interactive work, usually humorous, by a visual artist that does one or more of the fol-

lowing: challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner».⁸ She further elaborates: «To be more specific Art Games contain at least two of the following: a defined way to win or experience success in a mental challenge, passage through a series of levels (that may or may not be hierarchical), or a central character or icon that represents the player».⁹ Rebecca Cannon (2003) provides another definition: «Art Games may be made in a variety of media, sometimes from scratch without the use of a prior existing game. They always comprise an entire, (to some degree) playable game... Art Games are always interactive – and that interactivity is based on the needs of competing... Although both forms follow the lineage of Fine Art and computer games, Art Games explore the game *format* primarily as a new mode for structuring narrative, cultural critique. Challenges, levels and the central character are all employed as tools for exploring the game theme within the context of competition-based play».¹⁰

We can ask ourselves at least two key questions regarding Art Games. The first is: “What makes them art and not just games?” Kristine Ploug (2005) suggests that «For some, the fact that they were made as art, for others the fact that they are exhibited as art – it can all be boiled

down to the *intention* behind them, originating from either the curator or the artist».¹¹ Ploug adds that «In most cases the Art Games are neither addictive nor meant to be played over and over, but merely shorter comments [...] The games always have interaction, but this interaction doesn’t always have an effect on what goes on in the game».¹² Most Art Games can be played online, on a personal computer, and feature a single player mode. Examples include Mongrel and Richard Pierre-Davis’ BlackLash (1998), Thomson & Craighead’s Trigerhappy (1998), Natalie Bookchin’s The Intruder (1999), Prize Budget for Boys’ Pac Mondrian (2002), Gonzalo Frasca’s September 12 (2001), Carlo Zanni’s Average Shoveler (2004), and many more.¹³ **Although Art Games may be considered an expression of Game Art, we decided – for a variety of reasons – not to include them in *GameScenes* (with a few notable exceptions, such as Eddo Stern’s unclassifiable *Cockfight Arena*).** The second key question is: “Can commercial games be considered Art Games as well?” Personally, I would say yes. There are several examples of games – ICO by Fumito Ueda, Electropunk by Toshio Iwaii, Rez by Tetsuya Mizuguchi, Okami by Clover Studio and many more – that blur the boundaries between what is commonly regarded as “game” and “art”. The relationship be-

tween commercial games and game art is not without problems. As Janine Fron, Ellen Sandor & (art)ⁿ wrote: «While the arts community continues to explore games as art, and artistic statements may emerge from game players, it is important to acknowledge that there are fundamental differences between both industries. The art world seeks to find new voices, explore new ways of making art, and also includes a large number of people dedicated to education, criticism and preservation of what has been made to date. Innovation through social discourse and examining public issues are a major driving force in the art community. The game industry is mostly composed of pioneering male programmers and animators, and exists to attract an audience for the sake of commercialized entertainment. Games are big business, with products produced as unlimited editions, in which the initial monetary value of the best selling game is higher than the value of the most successful, editioned, contemporary artwork sold today. The size of the audience is significantly larger for one game than for the edition of one artwork. Yet the diversity of people working in the art world and studying art as a profession is larger than those in the game industry. There are a number of dedicated educators working to implement formal education programs for games, which may invigorate

the community as a whole with fresh ideas, interest in other art forms, respect for history, and awareness of social responsibility».¹⁴

(*GameScenes* is about) **Game Art.** Game Art¹⁵ is any art in which digital games played a significant role in the creation, production, and/or display of the artwork.¹⁶ The resulting artwork can exist as a game, painting, photograph, sound, animation, video, performance or gallery installation. In Game Art, games can be used both as tools and/or themes.¹⁷ For instance, to create *Unreal Art* (2005), Alison Mealey used game tools (e.g. Unreal game engine), games (Unreal Tournament), and gameplay (thirty minutes of players’ recorded activity within the game) to create digital drawings that can be subsequently printed and hung on a wall. By looking at the “unreal” painting, a viewer – even a player of Unreal Tournament – would probably fail to notice any relationship with the source test. In contrast, to create his *SolidLandscapes* series (2004), Mauro Ceolin used games as a source of inspiration and as a subject. Here, a digital game screenshot is reinterpreted and transformed aesthetically by traditional means (painting, brushes, canvases). The finished artwork can also be hung on a wall. Identifying the relationship between the painting

and the “source code” is not as difficult as in the previous example. However, even avid gamers of Grand Theft Auto would probably not notice at first glance the connection between Ceolin’s artwork and Rockstar Game’s title. Game Art can be analog or digital. “Analog” Game Art demonstrates how traditional arts (such as painting, sculpture, photography etc.) can coexist with new media, by a process of emulation, remediation or incorporation. Consider, for instance, the artist’s fascination for vintage games. One of the best examples can be found in *i am 8-bit: Art Inspired by Classic Videogames of the Eighties*, a recent exhibition that includes illustrations, posters and paintings by Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, and Ashley Wood, just to name a few.¹⁷ “Digital” Game Art, on the other hand, can be considered a subset of digital new media art. In many cases, game artists use digital tools to create ultimately analog artworks. This shows, once again, that the dichotomy between “digital” and “analog” is as feeble and ineffective as the opposition of the “real” versus the virtual. However, it cannot be denied that a significant portion of Game Art is entirely digital. This is the case of computer game modifications. An artistic computer game modification requires the use of a computer game for the creation of a digital artwork. It is also often referred

to as art modding, game modding and patching. As Alessandro Ludovico (2004) notes: «More and more artists are hacking into games’ codes in order to deconstruct the entertainment paradigm by adding social values, decontextualizing lead characters and their actions, and subverting the usual rules of contraposition. In this way, the meanings are definitively changed and the digital landscape is clearly manipulated».¹⁸ Art mods and Art Games share some similarities, but they are not equivalent. As Rebecca Cannon writes, unlike art games, «Art mods on the other hand, always modify or reuse an existing computer game. They rarely result in a playable game... Many art mods are not interactive, and those that are often employ interactivity for non-competitive means... [They] employ game *media* attributes, such as game engines, maps, code, hardware, interfaces etc, for a very broad range of artistic expressions – abstract, formal and narrative, as well as cultural, political and social. Art mods do not necessarily have anything to do with the competitive theme of games».¹⁹ Examples of computer game modification include²⁰ machinima (screen-based narratives made using pre-existing, often modded, computer games),²¹ sonichima,²² generative art mods,²³ performative interventions,²⁴ and site-specific installations²⁵ and site-relative

mods. *GameScenes* includes several examples of computer game modification. Some forms of Game Art as artistic computer game modification have an algorithmic nature, a term used to define visual art explicitly generated by an algorithm.²⁶ Since algorithmic art is a subset of generative art, and is practically always executed by a computer, it follows that some forms of Game Art are also examples of Generative Art, a term used to define art or design that has been generated, composed, or constructed in a semi-random manner through the use of computer software algorithms, or similar mathematical or mechanical or randomized autonomous processes. Since Generative Art is a subset of computer art, some forms of Game Art can be considered a sub-category of computer art. Computer art is any art in which computers played a role in production or display of the artwork. Russian Dolls. Game Art has yet to gain the acceptance, attention, and consideration reserved for “serious” art forms such as sculpture, painting and photography, perhaps due to the flawed impression of many that the source material, i.e. games are an inferior form of human expression or by the equally erroneous assumption that the computer is the only originator/author of the artwork, and that the resulting artifact – in most cases, an image or a video – could be (potentially) infinitely

repeatable. Moreover, Game Art is often interactive, participatory, and dynamic, and some believe that “true art” is passive, exclusionary, and static/fixed. For better or worse, most Game Art tends to be parasitic, to borrow a term from Anne-Marie Schleiner, as it appropriates and repurposes existing technology for its own goals. It also elevates that appropriation to the status of a radical gesture. As Milto Manetas writes: «An artist who works with videogames, doesn’t create or change anything himself. He/she just extracts the hidden notion by looking carefully the parade of symbols the game is offering already. [...] A videogame “artist” is not the one who creates a videogame, but someone who “copies” it. As well as a painter is not the guy who eats a piece of bread, but the one who “paints” it, a videogame “artist” doesn’t even play a videogame but he just extracts stuff from it. It’s easy and beautiful. The coolest thing to do!».²⁷

(Random disruptive quote) «Modern computer games might offer a different and freer approach to responsive media. But my experiences in computer games are virtually nonexistent. And I have no children to show me how to use them.»²⁸

(Games are a popular art). **Game Art is not very popular.** Although some Game Artists can be considered the Art world

equivalents of rock stars (e.g. Milto Manetas), most practitioners in the field remain (deliberately) removed from mainstream culture. Their works are considered cryptic, esoteric, or plainly bizarre by the hoi polloi. Game Art is far removed from the mass-produced games that can be found in shops. For this reason, Game Art is not particularly loved or understood by gamers.²⁹ Even paladins of videogames such as Henry Jenkins do not seem to be particularly impressed. In the preface to Nick Kelman’s *Video Game Art*, he writes: «A few of those art critics have been prepared to defend videogames as art when they are created by artists already recognized for their accomplishments in other media – so we are seeing a range of artists worldwide stage political conflicts or erotic fantasies through pretty simplistic game interfaces. As these works take their place in the Whitney Biennial, the curators are not so much conceding that videogames are art as they are proclaiming that “even videogames can be used to make art in the hands of real artists”. Of course, the fact that highbrow artists are starting to tap game-like interfaces speaks to the impact this medium has on our visual culture. But if games are going to be thought as art, let it be because of what Shigeru Miyamoto (Super Mario Brothers) does again and again and not because of what some pedigreed artist

does once on a lark. Calling videogames art matters because it helps expand our notion of art and not because it allows curators to colonize some new space».³⁰

Although Jenkins’s main goal is to support the notion that videogames medium is a form of art, he is not shy about communicating his diffidence for Game Art. In his argument, Jenkins is clearly establishing an antinomy between games (= a popular, lively art) and Game Art (= highbrow, colonizing, and snooty activity). According to Jenkins, videogames occupy a space outside the official art world but, nonetheless (or because of that) they touch the lives of ordinary people, unlike Game Artworks. Jenkins goes even further, suggesting that «Some gamers and game designers still want to deny that videogames can be art because of the low (or lofty, depending on your perspective) reputation art has in contemporary culture».³¹ Julian Stallabrass reminds us that «Art at all levels defines itself against mass culture. In doing so, it regularly uses complex references to art history that require specialist knowledge of its viewers».³² As a *non sequitur*, consider the following passage from Peter Lunenfeld’s essay GameBoy: «Artists have long been open to games, play, and even sport: think of Marcel Duchamp’s obsession with chess; the Surrealists’ Exquisite Corpse;

the extruded board games that were the Situationist’ psycho-geographic mappings of Paris; the algorithmic play of *Oupeinpo* [...] Today when an artist like Chris Finley creates suites of paintings with titles referencing LEVEL THREE and WARP ZONE you could say that he’s taking the classic – and now classically suspected – high road, trying to revitalize or radicalize painting or sculpture with the importation of pop cult tropes».³³ It is true that Game Art often defines itself against commercial games. Its ambivalent nature lies in the fact that it both celebrates and condemns its source material.³⁴ (Meanwhile...) «Art was trying to make reality play a game which was different to the game that art itself was playing. In other words, there was a time indeed when art was always trying to force reality ... today this is no longer the great game that art is playing. All the art forms are now playing the game at the level of the simulation of reality».³⁵

(*GameScenes* is not an encyclopedia of) **Game Art.** While arcades might be dead, museums are full of game-related artworks. One might say that museums are the new arcades.³⁶ The amount of remarkable game artifacts available online and offline is overwhelming.³⁷ This book only reflects a tiny portion of it. I must confess that the selection

process has been extremely complex. Moreover, the technical limitations of the print medium forced us to trim down considerably our original ambitions. Some of the criteria that we adopted are highly subjective, thus, questionable. We wanted diversity but also consistency. We wanted to include milestones but also new entries in the short-but-intense history of Game Art. We gave a preference to technically accomplished works that were also aesthetically striking. Above all, *GameScenes* will not provide answers about Game Art. Rather, it will raise more questions.

As I said, this is not a manifesto. This is a disclaimer.

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Notes

- 1 The essay, originally written in 2002, was later included [in abridged form] in J. Hartley (2005) (ed.), *Creative Industries*, Blackwell Publishing, London and [unabridged] in J. Goldstein (2005) (ed.) *Handbook for Video Game Studies*, MIT Press, Cambridge. It is also available online at: <http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/GamesNewLively.html>.
- 2 H. Jenkins, (2005), p. 313. A similar argument was reiterated and expanded, somehow less convincingly, by N. Kelman (2006) in *Video Game Art*, Assouline, New York.
- 3 See also S. Poole (2000), who eloquently explains in the now classic *Trigger Happy* why game development itself is art, an art that

does not fit into existing categories.

4 K. Burke's (1973), p. 58. For a more cautious approach, see E. Adams, "Will computer games ever be a legitimate art form?", *Journal of Media Practice*, vol. 7, n° 1.

5 H.S. Becker (1982), p. X.

6 *Ivi*, p. 29.

7 For example, L. Hartas (2005), *The Art of Game Characters*, Collins Design, New York; M. Omernick (2004), *Creating the Art of the Game*, New Riders Games, San Diego, Ca.; Works Corporation (2004) (ed.), *Japanese Game Graphics: Behind the Scenes of Your Favorite Games*, Collins Design, New York; D. Morris, L. Hartas (2004), *The Art of Game Worlds*, Collins Design, New York; T. Kusano, N. Sagara, and K. Iida (2004) (eds.), *I Love Game Graphics*, AllRightsReserved, L. Hartas and D. Morris (2003), *Game Art: The Graphic Art of Computer Games*, Watson-Guptill Publications, New York; Liz Faber (1998), *Computer Game Graphics*, Watson-Guptill Publications, New York.

8 T. Holmes (2003), p. 46

9 *Ibidem*.

10 R. Cannon (2003).

11 K. P.Loug (2005), § 5.

12 *Ivi*, § 7.

13 S. Fron, (*art*)" (2001), p. 9. For more information on Art Games, see, for instance, T. Baumgärtel (2004), *On a Number of Aspects of Artistic Computer Games*, or L. Baigorri (2005), *Game as critic as art 2.0*, and the excellent research report by P.J. Stalker (2005), *Gaming in Art: A Case Study of Two Examples of the Artistic Appropriation of Computer Games and The Map-*

ping of Historical Trajectories of "Art Games" Versus Mainstream Computer Games.

14 S. Fron, *op. cit.*, p. 9. A very similar argument is put forward by M. Fuchs (2005) in *From an Artist's Perspective*, Artificial.dk, available online: www.artificial.dk/articles/fromanartist.htm.

15 I used the term "Game Art" in my essay [*Fuori Gioco*] *Sconfinamenti videoludici* in 2002, but I am quite sure it had been used many times before. The reason why I'm mentioning this is because my own definition of Game Art is broader than the ones formulated by many other critics, as it encompasses traditional artifacts such as painting, sculpture, and photography, and not only digital works.

16 The term "Game Art", however, is not equivalent to "game aesthetics". Also, the "game" in Game Art only refers to digital games, not traditional, analog games and toys. For example, Zbigniew Libera's Correcting Device: LEGO Concentration Camp (1997) cannot be considered Game Art even if it uses a toy/game (LEGO) as a theme/tool.

17 The artworks were collected in the homonymous book edited by J.M. Gibson (2006).

18 A. Ludovico (2004), § 2.

19 R. Cannon (2003), § 5. See also R. Cannon, "Meltdown", *Journal of Media Practice*, vol. 7, n° 1.

20 Note: for some of these definitions I relied on Wikipedia, which is both a blessing and a curse, since they seem to change on a daily basis.

21 What does "significant" mean here? Unlike artists whose production tangentially relates

to games, game artists explicitly incorporate games in their artworks. An example might come at handy at this point. Although it can be forcibly argued that many Julian Opie's paintings and installations appear to be inspired by game aesthetics, one might make an equally convincing argument that comic-book conventions are at work as well. Thus, Julian Opie does not qualify as a game artist. Miltos Manetas, on the other hand, explicitly acknowledges the relevance of digital games in his works.

22 The term was coined by Victor Todorović (<http://t-o-d-o-r-o-v-i-c.org/>) who created various modifications for Unreal Tournaments 2003 and 2004 that allow users to import their own samples into the game in order to compose unique pieces. More information can be found at: <http://tadar.net/>.

23 For some of these definitions I relied on Wikipedia, which is both a blessing and a curse, since they seem to change on a daily basis.

24 Such as mods that disrupt in-game norms to expose underlying functions of game play.

25 They both compare similarities and differences between real and virtual worlds, drawing the viewer further into a reality of fantasy.

26 For more information, see B. Wands (2006), *Art of the Digital Age*, Thames & Hudson, London, and A.R. Galloway (2006), *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

27 M. Manetas (1996), § 8.

28 M. Jacobson, in M. Sondegaard (2005), p. 111.

29 This is hardly surprising. I doubt that many

(even among the movie buffs crowd) would find Gordon's video installation *24-Hour Psycho* (1993) – in which the artist slows down Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), allowing the viewers to see it in slow motion – particularly appealing. The fact that Gordon's version of *Psycho* lasts twenty three hours does not help either.

30 H. Jenkins, in N. Kelman (2006), p. 10.

31 *Ibidem*.

32 J. Stallabrass (2000), p. 179.

33 P. Lunenfeld (2005), pp. 59-60.

34 This is why I personally did not agree on the editorial decision made by Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito of juxtaposing Art Games and commercial games in the otherwise superb *At the Edge of Art* (2006).

35 J. Baudrillard, "The Work of Art in the Electronic Age", in M. Gane (1993), p. 144.

36 J. Fron, E. Sandor & (art)" discuss the rise of Game Art in the last few years, noting that «In recent years, games have caught the eye of the art community at large, opening a new channel for the future of games in art, as presented by artists using new media and museums». They quote, among the other, "Game Show" presented at mass MoCA in 2001, "Bitstreams" and "Play's the Thing: Critical and Transgressive Practices in Contemporary Art" presented by The Whitney Museum of American Art in 2001, "ArtCade: Exploring the Relationship Between Videogames and Art" presented by SF MoMA in 2001. In the last five years, the number of art exhibitions focusing on Game Art has literally skyrocketed. It is probably a good thing.

37 At the recent "Pong.Mythos" (2006) ex-

hibition in Berlin there were more than thirty artworks on display (installations, videos, games, performances etc.), dedicated to a single game, Pong (1972). For more information, see: http://pong-mythos.net/index.php?lg=en&main=Works_and_Artis&site=01:05:01. Curated by Andreas Lange, "Pong.Mythos" has also been presented in Stuttgart, Leipzig, and Bern (2007).

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