Press Start: Video Games and Art

BY ERIN GAVIN

Throughout the history of art, there have been many times when a new artistic medium has struggled to be recognized as an art form. Media such as photography, not considered an art until almost one hundred years after its creation, were eventually accepted into the art world. In the past forty years, a new medium has been introduced and is increasingly becoming more integrated into the arts. Video games, and their rapid development, provide new opportunities for artists to convey a message, immersing the player in their work. However, video games still struggle to be recognized as an art form, and there is much debate as to whether or not they should be.

Before I address the influences of video games on the art world, I would like to pose one question: What is art? One definition of art is: "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power."[1] If this definition were the only criteria, then video games certainly fall under the category. It is not so simple, however. In modern times, the definition has become hazy. Many of today's popular video games are most definitely not artistic, just as not every painting in existence is considered successful. Certain games are held at a higher regard than others. There is also the problem of whom and what defines works as art. Many gamers consider certain games as works of art while the average person might not believe so. What is considered artistic, to some degree, is a matter of opinion,

[1]Oxford Dictionaries Online, s.v. "Art," accessed April 15, 2011, http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/art.

and therein lies the problem. The criteria for what determines the value of art are also fluid and evolve through time. For instance, the photographic medium was not considered art for a long time, and it took many pioneering artists to change that opinion. Another problem with new art forms is the time it takes for people to understand them and recognize their artist merits. Vincent Van Gogh, an early impressionist painter, was not recognized as a great artist until after his suicide. Today, his paintings are some of the most expensive ever sold. This slow recognition is happening with video games. They are gaining a reputation and notoriety in the art world.

Another argument for the inclusion of video games as art is their amalgamation of numerous different types of art forms. Video games "compile all of the art world's tools into one medium; drawing, painting, sculpting, design, architecture, creative writing, computer and video art and acting all come together to create videogames."[2] The designers and artists draw inspiration from film, poetry, drama, music and art, and take advantage of using these different media within video games.[3] Game designer Jesse Schell states that: "Video games are the medium that subsumes all others. Ultimately, they will become the ubermedium. You can put everything into a video game. You can put a movie in, a book in, music in. You can put just about anything, and video games are big enough to hold it all."[4] Video games include a vast array of creative talent in their design, from the story writer, to the graphic artists and animators, who "paint" and "sculpt" in three dimensions on a computer. All of the different artists involved in the development of video games make them collaborative works. It would

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[2] Brett Martin, "Should Videogames Be Viewed as Art?," in *Videogames and Art*, eds. Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), 205.
[3] Kevin Bachus, interview, in *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect*, eds. Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke (New York: Welcome, 2012), 66.
[4] Jesse Schell, interview, in *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect*, eds. Chris Melissionos and Patrick O'Rourke (New York: Welcome, 2012), 176.

be somewhat difficult for a single person to design and create one without the help of a team. This argument is particularly true for commercial games, as they are developed on such a scale that it would be nearly impossible for one person to do. The creation of a video game involves input from many different types of artists who must communicate to make the game work.[5] The player can even be included as part of this collaboration, as it is the interaction of the player that makes it all work. Game designer Mike Mika sums up all of the above points very nicely:

> Game designers are communicators, inventors, and dreamers. Like 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. […] Ultimately it is the element of human interaction that makes video game creation one of the most complex forms of art […] they are not complete without that symbiotic connection. This is what sets games apart from other mediums. Games *evolve* with us.[6]

It is the combination of multiple different art forms, the collaboration of many different artists, and the vital role of the player that makes video games art.

One of the arguments against video games as art is the problem with displaying them in museums, and the opposition of showing them alongside "high art." Many people believe that something is not art until it has been displayed as such. Until recently, commercial games had no place in the galleries of art museums. This changed with the exhibition of *The Art of Video Games*, which opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum on March 16th of 2012. The show presented the evolution of video games, with examples of games from different eras

[5] Robin Hunicke, interview, in *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect*, eds. Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke (New York: Welcome, 2012), 194.
[6] Mike Mika, "Introduction," in *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect*, Eds. Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke (New York: Welcome, 2012), 11.

of the development of gaming in chronological order. Does this mean that commercial video games can finally be recognized as an art form? Even if not, it does mean that the medium is certainly gaining traction.

Two of the main forms in which video games are a part of the art world are art games and game art. These do not have to be two distinct categories, as there are most certainly crossovers. A true argument for video games as an artistic medium, an art game can be defined as:

> An independent or commercial game which expresses its 'artness' through its play mechanics, narrative strategies or visual language. An Art game may employ novel interfaces, non-mainstream narratives, retro visual language, experimental gameplay and other strategies. An Art game may be any interactive experience that draws on game tropes.[7]

While independent artists do not have the budget of commercial game studios, the freedom from commercial constraints allows them to innovate, experiment, and play with genre and media: the definition of what makes an art game. Many art games play with and go against traditional gaming ideas. By intentionally challenging norms, art games and their audiences explore the games' underlying structures, mechanisms, and narratives.[8] A surprising number of independently developed art games are well known within this particular community of artists.

A good example of an art game is *The Path*, released in 2009 by the independent game company Tale of Tales, founded by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn. This game uses gothic horror to retell a classic fairy tale about growing up. The player controls

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[7] Corrado Morgana, "Introduction," in *Artists Re:thinking Games*, Eds. Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett and Corrado Morgana (Liverpool: FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), 2010), 9-10.
[8] Corrado Morgana, "Introduction," 10-11.

six sisters in turn, with the goal of interacting with their respective wolves; in order to "win" the game, the player must lead the characters to their deaths. This fact alone goes against classic video game principles. Just as with the fairy tale, this game addresses the passage from childhood into adulthood. The emphasis on each sister's death calls up memories of stages of childhood lost over the passage of time. *The Path* also goes against traditional video game mechanics as it regularly takes control of the character from the player, giving it a voyeuristic pace of play. The ethereal artistic design and attention to detail adds to the mood, creating a beautiful setting.[9] *The Path* addresses an issue that has been around forever and retells it for the gaming generation, using its unique style of play and art.

Intertwined with the development of video games is the creation of game art, which is defined by Corrado Morgana as: "art that uses, abuses and misuses the materials and language of games, whether real world, electronic/digital or both. The imagery, aesthetics, systems, software and the engines of games can be appropriated or the language of games approximated for creative commentary."[10] Basically, this means that game art is any sort of artistic work that uses the style of video games, or modifies an already existing game for the artist's purposes. The video game provides inspiration for the artwork, and the artists appropriate and/or approximate many different aspects of the games and gaming culture.

One of the simplest forms of game art is artwork that uses the style and culture of video games to reflect the artist's own purpose. These artworks are generally done in traditional mediums, such as painting, drawing, photography, film or video. An example of an artist who

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[9] Emma Westecott, "If you go down to the woods tonight…," in *Artists Re:thinking Games*, Eds. Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett and Corrado Morgana (Liverpool: FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), 2010), 78-81.
[10] Corrado Morgana, "Introduction," 12

has appropriated gaming culture is Miltos Manetas, a painter and media artist. He has created two distinct sets of work related to video games. Manetas created a series of paintings that depict people playing video games, including one titled *Christina Playing Video Games*, along with paintings of various controllers, cables, and other components required to play. Of more significance is his series of short videos recording his gaming sessions, which he has not altered. These videos depict elements of the game, and "have titles that enhance the ironic distance to the depicted action."[11] For example, one of his videos, entitled *Super Mario Sleeping,* is a two minute video of the character Mario sleeping under a tree in *Super Mario 64.* These video works are intended for an audience familiar with these games. Only players would understand the work's ironic humor, because they would recognize the setting. This presents an interesting problem, because the videos require an audience who has played the games before. However, the way they are presented removes the gamer's choice of what to experience. This may also be part of the intention of the artist, to present an unusual situation. Manetas appropriates the gaming culture for his artwork, which could be why a person would have to be a part of that culture to understand.

Another example of the influence of video games on artists is *Super Ichthyologist Advanced* by Paul Catanese, created in 2003. In this and some of his other works, he appropriates gaming technology in the form of the Game Boy Advanced, a handheld gaming device created by Nintendo. He wanted a compact device that could play video loops on a small screen, which was easy to set up in a gallery space. Using the Game Boy was a far more practical idea than attempting to develop something himself. The low cost of the system was a

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[11] Axel Stockburger, "From Appropriation to Approximation," in *Videogames and Art,* Eds. Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), 30-1.

benefit that allowed him to experiment.[12] His use of the Game Boy for this project

inadvertently provided him with a source of inspiration for other projects. He states:

> What began as a solution for multi-channel video installations has grown into a wellspring of inspiration whereupon I find myself imagining galleries that fit in your pocket, personal hand-held theatres, digital Cornell boxes and electronic books imbued with the intimacy of Chinese scroll paintings.[13]

Catanese has since used the Game Boy Advanced system for two other projects, achieving his

goal of "galleries in your pocket." He also accomplished this back in 2004, when technology

like smart phones was still new. The works of Catanese and Manetas show how video games

have been a presence in the art world for some time in different forms.

One of the most common forms of art in video games is something called "art

modding"or hacker art. Art modding is when an artist uses existing game software and changes

the code and otherwise appropriates the game engine for their own use, usually to convey some

sort of message. An example of an art mod is *Adam Killer*, a modification of the game *Half-Life*,

created by Brody Condon in 1999. In this work, multiple replicas of the same figure, dubbed

"Adam," stand inactive in a room, dressed in white. The point of the mod is just as the title

suggests; the player can kill all of these Adams. Condon explains that the choice of white was

for aesthetic reasons; "I felt it contrasted well with blood. As the characters were shot and

bludgeoned with various weapons, an exploited glitch in the game's level editing software

created a harsh trailing effect. This turned the environment into a chaotic mess of bloody,

fractured textures."[14] For the player, Condon's work explores the recreational attraction of

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[12] Paul Catanese, "The Evolution of a GBA Artist," in *Videogames and Art*, Eds. Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell (Bristol: Intellect, 2007), 206-7.
[13] Paul Catanese, "The Evolution of a GBA Artist," 129.
[14] Rebecca Cannon, "Meltdown," *Journal of Media Practice* 7.1 (2006), 16.

murder, as well as the distinction between real violence and violence in media. The game also

provides a release of stress for people. It is a far better way to release pent up anger and

frustration on something that does not actually exist, than repressing those feelings and possibly

causing real violence. The game questions whether people innately have the desire to kill.[15] This

game expresses its message by offering the player the opportunity to commit mindless murder

with no actual goal.

Due to the stigma associated with the commercialism of video games, it is harder for

them to be considered art. Certainly, most commercially successful games, like *Madden*, might

not be called art. This fact can be compared to other media. A Monet painting will be held in

much higher regard than a painting by Bob Ross, a well-known instructional painter who had

his own television show. While Ross is a "good" painter, Monet is viewed as greatly superior

partially because of his reputation.[16] A complete separation between art and commercial

endeavors does not exist. Classical master painters usually created their works to make

money, and worked off of commissions. It is an undeniable fact that most artists use their

artwork to make money. This is not to say that there is no message or creativeness behind

their artworks. This fact can be applied to the video game medium. Today, there are

companies whose reputations are quickly growing as developers of artistic games. The

rapidly improving technology of the gaming industry has recently also allowed for more

artistic expression. Video game developers can take cues from classical art techniques in

[15] Rebecca Cannon, "Meltdown," 17.
[16] Brett Martin, "Should Videogames Be Viewed as Art?" 205.

creating their games, in order to make them more artistic.[17] There are a few commercially

successful games, created within the past decade or so, that many people do consider both

works of art and great video games. Commercial games can be art, as long as companies are

willing to take risks.

Rez, a game created in 2001 by United Game Artists for the SEGA Dreamcast, is a

unique targeting game that stands apart from others in its genre. An artificial intelligence

being called Eden has become self-aware and is trying to shut down the global information

network that it controls. The player takes on the role of an avatar placed in the system by a

hacker, and the avatar's job is to rid Eden of viruses before it shuts down and causes a total

global information meltdown. The works of Wassily Kandinsky inspired the graphics of this

game, portraying an abstract picture of what life in a computer system might resemble. The

game uses simple shapes and lines to represent the abstractions of a digital existence, just as

Kandinsky's works attempt to represent music in the same abstract manner. By using simple

shapes and a humanoid figure for the avatar, the game is grounded in the familiar. Besides

the abstract aesthetic, *Rez* also makes use of sound to add to its artistic nature. The game starts

without sound, but as the player eliminates more viruses, the soundtrack becomes richer. The

combination of the audio and visuals "achieves the goal of synesthesia…to merge two senses

and overpower the user."[18] *Rez* provides a unique, almost meta experience for the player, with

its abstract representation of the technology they are using to play the game itself.

[17] Chris Solarski, "From Botticelli's Venus to Super Mario: The Evolution of Art History and Future of Video Games," (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., September 18, 2012).
[18] Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect* (New York: Welcome, 2012), 125.

Another game that has been regarded as a work of art is *Shadow of the Colossus*, the 2005 game created by Team ICO for the PlayStation 2. In this game, the player takes control of a young man named Wander, who seeks to bring his girlfriend, Mono, back to life. If Wander defeats 16 monstrous creatures, called colossi, a god will revive Mono. This game takes place in a "forbidden land," and the time period is unclear. The forbidden land is littered with ancient ruins and is devoid of any life besides the colossi, Wander, Mono, and Wander's horse, Agro. The player must traverse this desolate land to find the colossi and defeat them one by one. The colossi are designed to awe the player with their size and unique character designs, which make them look like living beings from another world. Besides the unique design of the land and colossi, *Shadow of the Colossus* also comments on the rift between the player's intentions and the consequences of their actions. While the goal of the game is to defeat these colossi, there is a sense of loss with the death of something so wondrous, especially in such an empty and haunting landscape.[19] *Shadow of the Colossus* is a distinctive game with a subtle message conveyed through unique character design and clean graphics.

Another innovative game that takes a unique approach to graphic art is *Okami*, created in 2006 by Clover Studio. Described as "one of the purest examples of traditional art and storytelling in a modern video game,"[20] *Okami's* art style mimics the traditional Japanese art of sumi-e, a type of ink wash painting with a woodcut aesthetic. In this game, the player controls the goddess Amaterasu, in the form of a white wolf, on a quest to rid a fictionalized historical Japan of evil and restore life to the land. The game uses an innovative play mechanic dubbed the "Celestial Brush," which is used in combat and to interact with the play environment. The

[19] Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*, 200.
[20] Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games,* 203.

player uses this brush to draw symbols that activate the different powers that Amaterasu possesses. This play mechanic fits well with the artistic style of the game,[21] which offers the classic story of good versus evil. Art itself is the weapon, and presents a traditional art form in a new and interesting way.

While all of these provide solid examples of games that have made advances for the medium as art, one company is at the forefront of developing artistic commercial art games. Thatgamecompany has developed games that most people will agree represent art. This corporation, founded in 2006 by Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen, has created three very unique, artistic, and critically acclaimed games in their short existence. The company's focus is not only to entertain, but also to make the player think and have an emotional experience. The designs of their games are simple and elegant, and often convey some sort of message for the player. It has been said that thatgamecompany created the first "art house" games.[22] The company's mission, as explained on their website, is to "create timeless interactive entertainment that makes positive change to the human psyche worldwide."[23] Two games developed by thatgamecompany, *Flower* and *Journey*, could be the bridge needed for video games to be recognized as an art form.

Flower, the second game created by thatgamecompany in 2009 for the Playstation 3, is very different from almost all of the contemporary games at the time. The protagonist of the game is the wind, and the goal is to bring life back to the world. The player guides the wind using a feature unique to Playstation 3, called six axis control, where the player tilts the entire

[21] Ibid.
[22] Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*, 168.
[23] "About Us," *thatgamecompany*, 11 Nov 2012 <http://thatgamecompany.com/company>

controller in order to guide the wind. Playing the role of the wind, the player seeks flowers across the environment, and as more petals are released to join the wind, the world around heals. Chen describes the game as an "interactive poem exploring the tension between urbanity and nature."[24] The game allows players to bring nature into their homes in a way never experienced before. Each blade of grass is animated, and the wind affects the game accurately. *Flower* also makes use of a musical score built upon the different petals collected, similar to how the music developed in *Rez.* The combination of the beautiful, colorful graphics, the music, and the gameplay all serve to develop an emotional arc, rather than a narrative one.[25] *Flower* provides players with an intensely emotional experience in a beautifully rendered world, making it a true work of art.

The culmination of the work of thatgamecompany is realized in their 2012 game *Journey* for the PlayStation 3. This game is truly artistic, from the graphic style to its emotional message. The protagonist is a figure in a red robe who awakes in a vast, almost endless desert littered with ruins. By visual cues only, the protagonist is directed towards the goal, a mountain off in the distance. In order to depict the story of a fallen civilization revealed in hieroglyphic-like scenes, the player traverses the desert. It is unclear why the character is on this journey, perhaps as a form of self-discovery. The design of the main character was inspired by many different sources, such as Native American rugs and symbols, Japanese kites, and Egyptian hieroglyphs. The development team also traveled to Pismo Beach in California to research the dunes and the way sand moves, in order to replicate it accurately in the game. The imagery of *Journey* has a painterly quality, giving it a unique art style. The

[24] Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke, *The Art of Video Games*, 212.
[25] Ibid.

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company had to develop a new graphics system that gives the game its rich, bright color palette.[26] One of the main features of the game is the online multiplayer aspect, wherein the player can randomly meet another player while on their journey. They can choose to interact with each other or not. Interestingly the only way to communicate with each other is through a musical call and a glowing icon above the player. There is no text or voice communication, causing the players to figure out new ways to interact. One of the game's designers, Robin Hunicke, states that *Journey* "is inspired by the idea that we want humans to connect and feel awe toward one another, to feel that they're small, but part of something bigger."[27] The art of this game comes from its vast and beautiful design, as well as the idea of a brief connection with another person without communication. The core idea of *Journey*, going on a journey of self-discovery, also adds to the message. It is safe to say that *Journey* is truly modern art and propels video games to an art form.

Video games have clearly become engrained in the modern culture, and with the technological advances made are well on their way to being considered as art. The gaming industry is at a crossroad of commercialism and artistic vision, and who is to say it cannot go in both directions? Games' influence on the art world is indisputable. It is very likely that they will be considered art in the near future, as they combine the dramatic arts, including cinema and physical, evident in the painstaking animation processes involved in their creation. Commercial game companies only need to be willing to take some risks to develop truly artistic games.

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[26] Karen Moltenbrey, "Mysterious Journey," *Computer Graphics World* 35.4 (2012): 40-42.
[27] Robin Hunicke, Interview, 194.