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Are video games art? If they are, what does that mean for the games themselves, the players,

the developers, the art world and society? If video games are not art, what are they and what is their

significance? This is no small question, as the fields of aesthetics and philosophy of art is an old and

expansive field with many unanswered questions and schools of thought. Video games are not as old

but in their own right are quite diverse and interesting artifacts of human creation. My thesis is that

regardless of the system used to judge the artistic status of a work video games can qualify in theory

and that there are some video games in existence that should be considered works of art or literature.

The closing part of this paper will be devoted to working out the implications of encountering video

games as works of art, essentially arguing for the value of video games as artistic artifacts.

To start, I will examine some theories of art put forth by major philosophers and some major

ideas about art. Since, according to Alfred North Whitehead, "all of philosophy is but a footnote to

Plato," I will start with his ideas about art and follow up with the ideas of George Dickie, a modern

aesthetician of particular note. Also, since the goal here is to discuss art as a human activity—to mark it

off more or less among traditional lines—lived experience will trump ridiculous conclusion given by pure

theory in order to facilitate the application of the line of argument here to the world of gamers and non-

gamers alike.

Plato is an especially interesting case because he values beauty very highly but kicks all the

poets out of the ideal society in The Republic. Why does he object to poets, and generalizing, artists?

Plato convicts them of mimesis, mimicry of knowledge and wisdom of the subjects. The problem with

mimesis is that it is a deceptive imitation that does not contain any true knowledge of the subject about

which the characters speak. If the audience is unreflectively presented false ideas or if the knowledge

presented is "bullshit" in the Harry Frankfurt sense, then mimesis can act as an infection against real

knowledge by impeding its pursuit and by giving the impression that the knowledge imparted by the artwork is complete and thereby creating a false confidence in the audience members. An example of this might be watching A River Runs Through It and feeling confident in one's newfound ability to fly fish. Another example, of particular interest to this paper, would be playing Guitar Hero and claiming the mantle of a superb guitar player, while never honing the skill of playing a real guitar in favor of utilizing the simulacrum that is the Guitar Hero controller. On the other hand, if the art is able to give true impression and avoid bewitching the audience, or if the audience themselves are inured against any accumulation of false beliefs then the study of arts is allowable, even encouraged. The problem for Plato is that people are often impressionable, especially at young ages. For this reason, he favors music over poetry and tragedy, which he sees as more likely to include characters that partake in mimesis and weave stories that come against the ideas of a healthy society as presented in The Republic.[1]

What would he make of video games? Clearly, some video games would not qualify as acceptable art. Guitar Hero, as mentioned above, would probably fall into this category, as it is a game particularly susceptible to this sort of illusion creation. According to the American Psychological Association long term exposure to violent video games leads to "increases feelings of hostility, thoughts about aggression, suspicions about the motives of others, and demonstrates violence as a method to deal with potential conflict situations" and also points out that the perpetrators often go unpunished in violent video games. Apparently, the American Psychological Association would agree with Plato in the case of violent video games.[2] Plato's criticism seems to be doubly backed by the interviews of children, and the occasional adult, during the Frontline documentary about the Army Experience Center. When prompted by the interviewer the early adolescents answer that they indeed have been given an

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[1] This paragraph is indebted to http://www.umass.edu/philosophy/PDF/Aune/plato_on_art.pdf and http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-aesthetics/
[2] http://www.apa.org/about/governance/council/policy/interactive-media.pdf

understanding of what it means to be in the army. By stimulating these "illusory ideas in the viewer,"[3] or

in the case of video games, the player, some video games are beyond the pale for Plato. Fortunately,

however, Plato is not an intemperate critic and his worries can be answered in a couple ways. First, since

he is mostly classifying arts by genre and content, it would be unfair to jump to the conclusion that Plato

would oppose all video games, just ones that create illusory competence or antisocial behavior in the

viewer. This could be true for some games, but certainly not for all. The most popular game in the world

is Tetris,[4] which is subject to neither of these criticisms. A related claim is that video games do not

stimulate this kind of anti-Republican behavior. Long-term players make dismissive gestures when

confronted with studies showing increased aggression or violent scripts in the minds of video game

players because these are so distant from their lived experience, the tendency of video games to

increase aggression is not borne out in life. Some games are cooperative and have the opposite effect.[5]

Putting this in argumentative terms, games will only disturb someone with a demented understanding

of reality. While children could be susceptible to this it would be not difficult to train them in the

reflective capabilities and provide them the information to combat the corruption of the perception of

reality. This is part of what is at stake when something is called art, a critical philosophical reflection of

which Plato would approve. Under these qualifications—i.e. non-violent video games played by a

reflective audience—video games could qualify as art and avoid Plato's objections.

Another aspect of Plato's ideas about art can be summed up by the oft-quoted brief version of

Plato's idea was that art imitates nature. Video games are technological artifacts and yet a super-

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[3] http://www.netplaces.com/philosophy/plato-dramatist-of-reason/platos-ideas-about-art.htm
[4] As an appendix to this paper, I have included a chart of the world's bestselling video games FYI. The reason Tetris does not appear on that list is that it has reach 100 million downloads on mobile phones [http://www.ea.com/news/tetris-game-surpasses-100-million-mobile-downloads] and the chart catalogues only traditional video game mediums. The top games on that list avoid these criticisms as well: Wii Sports, Super Mario Bros. and Mario Kart Wii, none of which makes any suppositions of increased competency about anything outside the purview of the game, nor do they include realistic violence.
[5] One study place competition over violent content: http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2011/08/video-games.aspx. Jane McGonigal thinks gaming is good for society: http://motherboard.vice.com/2011/3/18/playing-well-together-jane-mcgonigal-thinks-gamers-can-save-the-world

majority of games are crafted to be realistic, in graphics, controls, and mechanics. Everything is designed to be intuitive, a natural extension of the world we already inhabit and understand. That is, games do not recreate nature in the same way a garden or music might, but they create images of it with great depth and interactivity. Interactivity gives video games a head start relative to other mediums in trying to imitate nature. This is due to the fact that almost every other medium, poetry, painting, film, music is procedural, in that the audience is separate and distinct from the performers ergo the audience can only passively absorb the works as given to them. Nature does not work this way except in the worst forms of guided tours and metropolitan jungles. Video games, by allowing us to interact with what we see and partake in it, give a better imitation of nature, than say film.

A significant modern figure in the philosophy of art is George Dickie. His definition of art is based on a series of definitions of a circular nature:

1. An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art

2. A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an art-world public.

3. A public is a set of person the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them.

4. The art-world is the totality of all art-world systems.

5. An art-world system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an art-world public.[6]

This is an interesting definition of art and fits very well with the idea of demarcating art among traditional lines or by parameters available to us in our lived experience. What makes Dickie's definition so interesting is in part it is very good explanation of the way the art world actually operates. If an artist were to neatly stack two hundred and sixteen bricks and call it A Pile of Bricks and it was displayed in a museum it would be treated as art whereas a materially identical arrangement in a construction site

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[6] This wording of Dickie's idea comes from Puzzles about Art: An Aesthetics Casebook edited by Margaret P. Battin, John Fisher, Ronald Moore, and Anita Silvers.

neighboring the museum would not be considered art. This allows for conceptual art, surrealist art, silent music, decades long music compositions, movies, and many other objects not usually considered art permissible. This acceptance of new, original, or unconventional works is both a valued characteristic of art and the reason some people reject pieces of modern art.

There are two ways to bring video games under Dickie's definition of art, either of which may be considered more or less authoritative. One way would be to show that the art world as traditionally understood has accepted video games as forms of art and therefore video games should be considered as works of art. The second available avenue, would be to argue that the culture that has been built around video games constitutes an art world, that developers could be considered artists, players an art world public, etc. Let us approach this definition via the former tactic to begin. This would mean that video games would have essentially already been considered art. This is a ridiculous proposition. It is true however.

Enter Long March: Restart,[7] a video game by artist Feng Mengo. The observer/player is faced with two 16-foot screens that provide two different views of the actions of the player as the narrative of a Red Army soldier during the Chinese Communist Party's Long March of 1934. This piece was displayed in the Museum of Modern Art. The game play is very similar to the classic Super Mario Bros-style games, the best-selling games in the world.[8] One player at a time can use the included controller to interact with the giant displays and push the story along. In this way, video games have been officially institutionally labeled as art. One could fairly object however, that this game is not popular, i.e. point to the fact that this is a unique display and is not available to the public as a video game usually is. For video games in general to qualify a typical, average or normal video game would have to be included in some art world system.

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[7] http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/02/04/new-acquisition-feng-mengbos-long-march-restart
[8] Excepting Wii Sports, which was sold bundled with the Wii console and infrequently purchased by itself.

Fortunately, the Smithsonian is here to help. Currently[9] the Smithsonian American Art Museum is running "The Art of Video Games."[10] This exhibit is displaying, and in some cases offering playable version of some of, the best reviewed and most popular video games,[11] indicating acceptance by at least one art world system that video games can be art, in the sense that they are worthy of the consideration of an understanding public. The art world public by interacting with them shows some level of understanding if the audience can consciously play and consider the games on display. This demonstrates that games can qualify as works of art.

On the flipside, it can be argued that the gaming culture, in the form of players, developers, critics and reviewers mirrors the structure of other art world systems. Gamers are frequently involved in reviewing the development and design as well as the messages of many games, and in exploring the relationship of games and gaming to the rest of the world, in very similar ways to more established art and critic systems.

It would be very simple to continue along this path of highlighting a definition and arguing video games into it ad infinitum. That task however, has been undertaken elsewhere,[12] demonstrating that regardless of the focus of any particular definition video games can theoretically qualify and some specific games may already have. The above definitions are an attempt to add to that project, using both a modern and an ancient example. What now calls for attention are questions about the value of video games, their potential to explore, elevate and explicate things important to human lives, such as philosophy, virtue and literature. Id est, how should one respond to video games given they are art? As we progress along this route, I will also hope to address some objections to video games as being art.

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[9] March 16, 2012 to September 2012
[10] http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2012/games/
[11] http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2012/games/winninggames.pdf
[12] Dr. Aaron Smuts argued in the 3rd Volume of the Journal of Contemporary Aesthetics from 2005 that video games should be considered art in a piece called "Are Video Games Art?"

Video game theorists from Ben "Yahztee" Croshaw, a columnist at the gaming magazine The Escapist, to Dr. Aaron Smuts, professor of philosophy at Rhode Island College, highlight the importance of interactivity as a necessary aspect of video games. What is meant by interactivity? It is the ability of the player to shape the way the game progresses. Interactivity is the sine qua non for classifying something as a video game. The first and most helpful idea to understanding video games as art is to highlight this interactivity and ability to shape the outcome. The ability to shape a performance in progress is not available to visitors of art museums in most cases. It is not an option for the audience in the mediums of film or theater or dance or music. Creating, recreating, and participating are options open to the actors, dancers or musician. These people are the artists [or co-artists] for their mediums. It is most helpful to understand players of games in this way as well. Marcel Duchamp puts it this way: "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." This fact is magnified by the medium of video games. Players are so vital, so essential to the performance of the video games, just as much as the developers, that it is helpful to understand players as being collaborators. The artifact of the game and the piece of technology used are not the art objects themselves, the act of playing the video games is the performance most relevant when considering video games as art. This is interesting because in many ways the video games collapses space and time between the programmers, the actors and the players and makes them all collaborators. Technology is vital in constructing this experience. It is helpful to think of the video game console and the players as an artifact-person within the game world.

This leads to two revelations about the way we play video games. First, the player as a co-artist needs to take the work seriously. That is, just as an artist is reflective and purposeful in their planning and execution of their piece, so also should the gamer think critically about their gaming experience. An artist acts with an eye towards an aesthetic value, or a response from the audience. Both the developer

and the player should also participate and intellectually construct their gaming experience. A game should be both well designed and well played to achieve artistic merit. What are the aesthetic values of video game play? What makes for a well-played game?

Many players [and Roger Ebert] would respond fun or winning or getting the achievements or reaching the end or beating the other player or getting the high score, since video games are games. On the face of it, this seems to oppose the idea that video games are art, because art is not about completion or competition but performance.[13] In the course of research for this paper, a frequently encountered critique was phrased as "Is chess art?" The fleshed out critique is that video games cannot be art because they are games. Games cannot be art because they cannot be about something; they can only have rules and outcomes. Video games, though called games, can be about something. Video games can have narrative structure, framing stories, sets, dialogue and characters. This distinguishes them from games that would be held up as examples of games being separate from art, like chess. The comparison to chess is not anti-art in all respects however, frequently chess games are judged for their elegance. Some artists goes so far as to consider chess art; Duchamp says "The chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem... I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists." His conclusion is not widely accepted, but it is very interesting. In chess tournaments, one award is given to the winner, and another award is given for the most elegant game. This criterion could also be applied as an aesthetic judgment to video games and I submit should be, in order to edify and foster reflection.

Elegance is not a bad criterion for judging a well-played game, but it does not seize upon the ability of video games to deliver content in ways other games cannot. Another test for a well-played game is the reflection it is inspiring or the education it provides to the player through this content.

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[13] Dr. Smuts points out that Greek tragedies were explicitly entered in contests in the ancient world, but this does not disqualify them from being excellent, if histrionic, expressions of human qualities.

Tackling "big themes" is one way to do that, and some games such as <u>Bioshock</u>[14] achieve this very well, while still reaching a wide audience and providing fun. Some games are also very literary in the ways they comment on video game conventions and creating introspection in the community. One game in particular, <u>Portal</u>, is the premier example of this ability.

Video games are in a unique position of being a fantasy trip but also being interactive and computerized. As such, video games above other games and mediums lend themselves especially to metrics and storage of replays or traces of the experience. This provides a tremendous opportunity for people to gain insight into their own nature and the nature of their interactions with the world and with others.[15] If the metrics are shared with the developer, the developer can also gain insights into human nature and improve their own art. Video games can also create space for great learning. In games that offer the player the most control over how the game progresses there are often side-quests or game world objects like books through which the player can explore ideas either based in reality or grounded in the fiction of the game world. Both of these sets of content and the ability to explore information and its relation to the game world constitute "tangential learning"[16] and this kind of intellectual diversion is attractive to players and surprisingly popular. In this way games fit in neatly with the ideas of associative learning.

A corollary to this is a note about how games can deliver on ideas and concepts nearly unattainable in any other medium. Video games are frequently experiences that either extend the experience of the natural, comprehensible world or which transcend it entirely. They can be disembodying without being alienating or intrusive. Fun vertigo. Some games that are examples of this include <u>The Polynomial</u> or <u>Fractals: Make Blooms Not War</u> or <u>Tetris</u>, games whose devotees are often forced to reach to the hallucinogen-related vocabularies in order to articulate the content they

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[14] Bioshock delves into the philosophical ideas of Ayn Rand as implemented in a small society.
[15] At the end of this document I have included two info graphics developed by gamers that lend insight into what it means to game.
[16] http://www.penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/tangential-learning

experience. These games enrich our experience by allowing us to interact with a game world in ways that it would be impossible to interact with the physical world. Games that stimulate the intellect this way deserve to be praised and so extending the lived experience is another metric that can be used to measure the success of a game.

Conceiving of the player as an artifact-person, the other important insight from seeing players as co-artists, means noticing the hardware and software and the player merge to create an avatar in the game world. The avatar then can interact with the game world to shape their own experience, and in some games shape the game world itself and/or the experience of other players. This gives us another an idea of what a well-designed game would look like: A well-designed game embodies the player in such a way as to be intuitive and sensible, and the various technologies involved should work well together. This metric can inject some objective measures of achievement for video games. Video games, if they are to be art, must avoid the breakage and present-at-hand frustration that frequently accompany other technologies.

With these ideas in mind, let me argue with a regards to a hypothetical future, that video games are something that should be cultivated just like many of the other arts. Roger Ebert, the most prominent critic of the idea of video games as art, asks "No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poets." This is true, or true enough that most serious video game critics would agree to it. This does not have to be true, however. I submit that the value we attribute art is in large part a function of how old it is. Ebert is right on the mark when he says that there are not yet games worthy of such comparison, but I submit that there are likewise not filmmakers who are worthy of comparison with Homer or Shakespeare. Likewise, even excellent artist's work today pale in comparison to Michelangelo's David or the Sistine Chapel or even the Apotheosis of Washington and The Course of Empires. The advantage to video games is that they have room to innovate beyond the ridiculousness into which the high art circles of some older

mediums have descended. Some video games developers, in particular Valve and Irrational Games, are taking steps to create high minded as well as fun games. While video games maybe "too new" to considered sublime, not good enough to be widely studied, the work of these studios is building a foundation for a comparison between Melville, Mark Twain and a yet-to-be-named amazing developer and player collaboration.

What has been accomplished thus far is to show through some interesting and important cases that video games can be valued as art and what that would mean for players and developers. Let's get some specifics. After what is art and why should we value it and what does it look like to approach video games as art the important question becomes what are good video games? What are the finest examples of the medium? The aforementioned Bioshock and Portal are particularly good examples which can be recommended unqualified to the novice or the experience. Bastion and Half Life 2 are some of the finest examples of story telling and depth of interaction and overall game design. Grand Theft Auto is a series of games most often mentioned because their gangster-inspired ideas about violence, but the games are also excellent, vicious, near satirical reflections on American culture and the American Dream, particularly the latest iteration Grand Theft Auto IV. These are some of the finest examples of merit-worthy creation. Portal and Bioshock are what I would include as art, while Half Life 2 is one of the finest examples of its genre and its medium.

Appendices:

Pos	Game	Platform	Year	Genre	Publisher	North America	Europe	Japan	Rest of World	Global
1	Wii Sports	Wii	2006	Sports	Nintendo	38.80	27.91	3.77	8.33	78.81
2	Super Mario Bros.	NES	1985	Platform	Nintendo	29.08	3.58	6.81	0.77	40.24
3	Mario Kart Wii	Wii	2008	Racing	Nintendo	13.52	11.77	3.49	3.06	31.84
4	Pokémon Red / Green / Blue Version	GB	1996	Role-Playing	Nintendo	11.27	8.89	10.22	1.00	31.37
5	Tetris	GB	1989	Puzzle	Nintendo	23.20	2.26	4.22	0.58	30.26
6	Wii Sports Resort	Wii	2009	Sports	Nintendo	13.46	10.34	2.90	2.87	29.58
7	Wii Play	Wii	2006	Misc	Nintendo	13.71	9.07	2.93	2.82	28.53
8	Duck Hunt	NES	1984	Shooter	Nintendo	26.93	0.63	0.28	0.47	28.31
9	New Super Mario Bros.	DS	2006	Platform	Nintendo	10.37	8.58	6.44	2.79	28.18
10	New Super Mario Bros. Wii	Wii	2009	Platform	Nintendo	12.56	6.08	4.53	2.13	25.30
11	Nintendogs	DS	2005	Simulation	Nintendo	9.02	10.71	1.93	2.71	24.37
12	Pokémon Gold / Silver Version	GB	1999	Role-Playing	Nintendo	9.00	6.18	7.20	0.71	23.10
13	Wii Fit	Wii	2007	Sports	Nintendo	8.90	8.13	3.60	2.07	22.71
14	Mario Kart DS	DS	2005	Racing	Nintendo	8.95	6.94	4.08	1.84	21.81
15	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	PS2	2004	Action	Capcom	9.43	8.48	0.41	2.49	20.81

C.f. footnote 15