

Game as Art: A Matter of Design

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Abstract

As claimed by Chris Crawford in 1984, games must evolve to a potential form of art. 25 years later, the discussion demands a more mature state of the art, since games are still seen mostly as entertainment products. Considering them as a direct heir of cinema, in terms of language and dispositive parameters, games may be seen as a new form of media, and thus a vehicle both to entertainment activity than to artistic expression. To explore such possibilities, it is necessary to re-think the means of production and to purpose a new model of collaborative work that involves technicians, scholars, and artists.

Keywords: Game Art, Design, Art,

1 Introduction: The Way We Look at Things We Make

In the preface of one of the earliest books about technical routines in computer game design, Chris Crawford (1984) claims that games should evolve to a form of art, with a language, theory, and criticism parameters analogue to previous manifestations. Although based upon a controversial concept of art — sometimes arbitrary or naive —, Crawford anticipates a debate that concerns new media and contemporary art, which on its turn reflects an old conflict within the field of culture: entertainment vs. artistic expression. Even though that happens due to an ingenuous view on commercial art (and its specific market), it is well known that experimental activity detached from profit obligations may contribute to art development, for new elements of language and dispositive are introduced. In this sense, the lack of a more mature discussion in the specific bibliography of game design suggests that nowadays the industry still faces a problem that was pointed by Crawford in 1984: in general, artistic flair is subordinate to technical process.

Thus, we focus our reflection in some primary questions: are games a potential medium for artistic expression? If so, in which aspects can we see games as an art form? And, finally, how will this affect the way we create and develop a game? This is a challenging matter for game design, for the way we see something may change the way we make it.

As a contribution to this debate, this paper is presented in three more sections: firstly, we bring to light a reflection on games as the point of convergence of many cultural and technical processes, inheriting the role of previous forms of art; then, we establish a general aesthetic view on games in the contemporary world, trying to examine their means of production in dialogue with other forms of art, integrating artistic and technical nature; at last, we present our conclusions, and possible applications of this reflection.

2 Warming Up: Convergences in Art and Media

Crawford named his work "The Art of Computer Game Design", presuming that designing games are, in fact, an art. Although assuming that an artistic perspective on games was only emerging, he sees art as an activity connected with inspiring emotions to a certain audience. Two decades later, Jenkins (2005) resumes the subject with the text

"Games: the new lively art", presenting some reflections of an American art critic of the 1920's, Gilbert Seldes. who defended cinema as a "lively art", for it was a "democratic art which embraced average citizens. Jenkins brings Seldes' conception to the present day, comparing the skeptical suspicion on cinema (for its commercial motivations and technological origins) with games. But as Crawford, he focuses his reasoning on the matter of the audience emotions. This link is fragile when we consider thinkers like German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who made a first distinction of artistic expression and aesthetic pleasure; according to him, pleasure at a aesthetic level is completely independent of any statement of art, for you may find a natural sight beautiful. Hegel (1770-1831), on his turn, identifies the emulation of this contemplative character of aesthetics as being basic to the existence of art (Haar, 2007).

For over two centuries, philosophy of art and aesthetic thought have been influenced by Hegelian concepts of physical presence and religious function of contemplation. A work of art would presupposes a *hic et nunc* ("here and now"), conceiving it authenticity and legitimating its status of reverence. Later, Walter Benjamin (1996) called that attribute "aura", and denounced its systematic disappearance as techniques of reproduction (press, photography, phonograms, cinema) were being developed. For Hegel, that would be the "death of the art"; contents that approach art of the representation of truth in the material world are lost as things can be perfectly reproducible.

From Benjamin's anthological text "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (1938, in: Benjamin, 1996), French philosopher Gérard Lebrun (2006) estates that we are testifying not the Hegelian death of art, but rather a change in its semantic definition. Art is becoming immaterial and more linked to the Kantian subjective concept of pleasure, as humankind establishes a new aesthetic attitude towards reproduced work. Due to the increasing presence of technology in our lives, it is not unlikely that sensorial and cognitive perception would change the same way. In fact, it is from cinema, originally a technological dispositive that later becomes a form of art, that Benjamin's reflections emerge. In this context, the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a "total" work that would unite elements from all art forms in one), originally coined by German composer Richard Wagner referring to the opera, is used by Walter Murch (1999) to describe the multiple expressive nature of cinema.

Examining the emergence of the so-called "new media" (websites, CD-ROM, games), Manovich (2000) implies that they are a natural evolution of cinema, both in technical terms than in language configuration. In fact, all the sensorial stimulation of cinema may be applicable to digital media, as well as the statements of image representation and dramatic aspects. That being said, the author distinguishes two types of interactivity.

One first type is called "open interactivity", which is referred to reading and interpretation of an expressive act. The number of possibilities of this interactivity is high, for it results from free interpretation of an open speech, but in such case the interaction does not alter the content of the piece. The second type is called "closed interactivity": the user (not a simple reader anymore) browses, accomplishes tasks, and operates a given system of information; insomma, he/she interacts directly with the dispositive, changing its contents and form. This interactivity is pointed as a basic element of digital art.

When it comes to videogames, the two cited types of interactivity are accomplished. A number of language and style elements of cinema (artistic) join the playable characteristics of media operation. Furthermore, games also gather another cultural element: gameplay. If we think interactivity and gameplay as fundamental elements of contemporary culture, we may think games as a convergence of several cultural tendencies, potentially a more complete art form — a true Gesamtkunstwerk of our times.

3 Media and Game Design: an Artistic Perspective

Although born as a technological device, cinema is celebrated as a form of art that takes the works out of the museums and gives them back to the audience (Panofsky, 1969). In fact, throughout the 20th Century, films have become the greatest product in the consumption of narratives, covering a large range from pure entertainment to deep art.

Recently, the game Grand Theft Auto 4 has been registered in the Guinness Book as the most profitable product of entertainment in its release date. This fact has put an increasing industry in the entertainment market on the top of the chain. In a world of digital routines, games are the heir of cinema not only in style and language elements, but also as a marketing product.

As films have also established more complex products in terms of language possibilities and narrative interaction, games may also explore that potential. As Crawford claims, a greater complexity for a greater audience is required. Besides, if we think of games as a contemporary medium, we may also connect them to new configurations of digital arts. In this sense, not only recognized creative artistic aspects are part of its statement, but also technical ones. Now, more than ever, collaborative work is needed, in a more intense dialogue between the fields of art and technology (Barragán, 2008).

Thus, considering games as art is also to re-think the way they are produced. Groups of artists, scholars, and technicians such as Brazilian *Poéticas Digitais* (Santaella & Arantes, 2008) have been working together for exploring the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of game design. Filmmakers and scriptwriters also contribute to a deeper experience for gamers in terms of storytelling, reinforcing a tendency that seems irreversible: interacting with a story and other aesthetic stimuli gives one more dimension to gameplay immersion.

4 Possible Paths

It is important to remark that this is a preliminary study, and certainly the points presented will be matured with a deeper and more open discussion. Yet, we may point out some immediate steps for this reflection.

First of all, it is important to set a new state of the art to aesthetics in games. We believe to have enumerated some important references, but a deeper systematic work is necessary, adding other references and reflections so we can establish a consistent theoretical basis for the design of more artistic games.

Secondly, an approximation between game and contemporary art can be good for both, for it promotes an exchange of parameters that might contribute for a more intense experience for the users. A direct consequence of that is the possibility to create new types of games, increasing and gathering actions of transmedia, alternate reality, augmented reality, etc.

Finally, viewing games as art demands alternative means of conception and production for this specific form of media art. To achieve that, it is urgent to integrate artists, researchers, and technicians, as well as models of GD documents and scripts may be re-structured so artistic and technical issues may work together.

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