

SHOULD VIDEOGAMES BE VIEWED AS ART?

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History repeats itself in every aspect of life, but more predictably in art. Every time a new technology provides a fresh medium in the art world it is met with a lack of respect, indifference, or indignation, and must go through an acceptance process by the art world. New mediums are often commercially based ventures, and are not easily accepted as art.¹ Today, knowing how to manipulate images using computers is considered impressive, but the images created are not currently viewed as art. Videogames, much like its predecessors photography, video art, and cinema, will struggle through this process.

Misinterpretation faced photography in the mid-nineteenth century as landscape painters had their work recreated in a matter of minutes. The art world argued photography required no talent because cameras achieved the same effect regardless of the user. Creating art may not have been the goal of the camera inventors, however, the sale of cameras to the masses may have inadvertently impeded the advance of photography as art.

Landscape painters used cameras to achieve accuracy in the studio rather than painting outdoors; artists took the photograph to the studio and then traced and painted from the photograph to achieve the desired look.² Cameras were also used in photo booths on street corners to capture snapshots for entertainment, as they are today. As a result of these uses, it was hard to argue that photography was art in its infancy. Furthermore, early art photographers chose subject matter to mimic traditional art and exhibit the capabilities of the new invention. These were often still lifes such as Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre's *The Artist's Studio* or William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Open Door*.³ Landscape painters and portrait artists of the time were initially grateful for the new invention because they realized its potential to advance their skill to the next level. Conversely, many could now use cameras to create their own landscapes with little effort. This created fears among artists that painting would fade away and be replaced with the new technology brought on by the Industrial Revolution.

Oscar Rejlander was one of the few artists of the time to argue that photography was art. The photograph *The Two Paths of Life* is Rejlander's reaction to the allegorical paintings of the man he admired most, Hogarth.⁴ Created in 1857 in his ingenious studio, *The Two Paths of Life* was a piece Rejlander believed others would consider art.

The print is 30" by 16" and required approximately thirty negatives to produce. Even though his cone-shaped studio ingeniously utilized daylight, it took nearly two hours to expose some of the negatives because the chemicals needed more light than a modern negative.⁵ This piece would be difficult to reproduce today, and Rejlander created it with fledgling technology that few understood at the time.

The photograph resembles Raphael's *School of Athens* and Thomas Couture's *Romans of the Decadence*. The composition includes a father figure/wise man, showing his two sons/apprentices *The Two Paths of Life*. The imagery of the right section suggests the virtuous road of life and includes a holy figure, a nurse helping an injured person and inventors. Rejlander referred to figures on the left side as images of "gambling, wine, licentiousness, and other vices, ending in suicide, insanity and death".⁶ The allegory of good and evil is unmistakable, but the message was misunderstood. Some believed the wise man pointed to the road of pleasure rather than the road of virtue. Rejlander made another print of the work with the wise man pointing to the right. Though, he made several alternations to the work, this was the only alteration made in response to criticism.⁷

Criticism of Rejlander's photograph came from all sides and voices. The public did not accept it because it depicted nudes. Though the painting world highly respected nude studies and Rejlander was copying the nudes found in Couture's work, people viewed photographs as more true to life. Many regarded it as pornography, and during its exhibition the left half was censored at times to prevent public outcry. Other critics could not accept that something mechanically produced could create such an image and viewed the piece as a direct insult to Raphael's and Couture's works. This was also a result of reproducing Couture's work so close to its debut in 1847. Raphael's work was produced in 1510, so the reference was not as fresh as Couture's work, but critics believed it was a mockery or outright plagiarism. Another criticism was that the artist's hand never actually touched the final product, which was practically sacrilegious in the art world at the time. Additionally, the photograph was devoid of color, looking like a very accurate sketch to most viewers and, therefore, incomplete.⁸

At one point Rejlander explained every aspect of the photograph, subsequently revealing his secrets. The alternations to the work also hindered his argument because people believed it was easy to change. Once his methods and alleged short cuts were revealed, the public viewed the work as rudimentary. As a result, the meaning of the photograph was lost, as well as the time and effort Rejlander spent to produce the piece.

To defend his work, Rejlander stated:

A photographic composition commenced in this manner must contain many parts in common with art; and even where they part company photographic art does not stand still,

but proceeds and gathers other merits on another road – though a more humble one, yet full of difficulties requiring much thought and skill up to the last moment, when they again converge.⁹

This statement represented a call to action for other artists exploring the medium. Instead of replicating previous art, Rejlander encouraged pioneers to create stand-alone images that would be considered art. Rejlander evidently reached a multitude of artists. Rejlander's disciple, H. P. Robinson, actually bested Rejlander in several showings. Robinson was not attempting to simulate art of the past like Rejlander. Instead, Robinson strove to be an excellent art photographer, and the critics appreciated the attempt.¹⁰ Robinson's work did not generate controversy; he did not use his work to transform photography into a legitimate art form. Rejlander pushed people too hard, too fast, and they did not understand what he wanted to convey. They either thought he insulted traditional art, stole it and made it his own, or tried to get publicity with his controversial photos. He merely wanted to open people's minds to a new medium with great potential.¹¹

Just as with Rejlander and his cameras, anyone can compose with a computer, but is it art? Does training matter? The answer is found in how the public views Rejlander's piece today – as true art. Though Rejlander is not considered popular and he rarely appears in art history literature, his reverence for his new medium share eerie comparisons with the thoughts of modern artists. "The time will come when a work will be judged on its merits, not by the method of production..."¹²

Though photography is regarded as art today, other mediums have shared the same fate as early photography. Video art is a particularly good example.

Video artist Nam June Paik must fight television's commercialistic base to have his work viewed as art. Moreover, his medium of choice is the focal point of his audience's living room. He began his crusade in the 1960s, when television became a household staple. He defends his work by saying, "We are moving in TV away from high fidelity pictures to low fidelity, the same as in painting... the aim [is] fidelity to nature. Monet changed all that. I am doing the same."¹³ Whether cognizant or not, he relied on the methods photographic artists used in photography's formative years. Paik's work mimics other art forms rather than emulating them. His *TV Cello* placed television sets in an upright position resembling a cello. Appropriate music and visuals on the sets accompanied Charlotte Moorman's hand movements.¹⁴ His ingenious method of overlapping mediums, as opposed to copying them, garnered him respect in much less time than Rejlander. He strengthened his art by straying from the medium's commercial roots and avoiding full emulation of traditional art. Viewers will not see any of the film noir elements of Alfred Hitchcock's films in Paik's work, nor will they see Charlie Chaplin's hilarious portrayals of the Tramp. Nor are there television ads reminiscent of Andy Warhol's studies of American commercialism. Paik explored video with independent thinking, and therefore his work stands in higher regard than Rejlander's.

The art world had a hard time accepting the new medium initially and this was another circumstance evocative of photography's past. The 1960s proved a better era for exploring avant-garde mediums than the nineteenth century, so Paik had an easier time than

Rejlander. Nonetheless, Paik had to overcome many obstacles. He exploited the new open-mindedness to expose his art publicly, and was met with criticism. Many of his pieces were misunderstood. Paik's piece *America* showcased a United States map in which each state was represented by a television playing images of that state's heritage. In each state the exhibit appeared in, audience members were filmed and displayed on their state's television.¹⁵ Though many viewed it as patriotic, Paik was questioned as to why his video was not a special program on television. In response, he argued the experience of walking around the exhibit would be lost if aired on television. Furthermore, ad sponsorship was needed to appear on television, which would make the piece difficult to argue as art and would clash with the purpose of creating the piece. His other pieces were even more disputatious and misinterpreted. Paik dealt with the nude female figure with *TV Bra* and most of Moorman's other appearances.¹⁶ Paik did not attempt to mirror famous nudes of the past, but expand on them. *Reclining Buddha* expanded on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Edouard Manet's *Olympia* by using a filmed nude model in a provocative pose that was compared with a Buddha on top of the TV. Controversy has arisen with each piece across history, but Paik's controversy is unique because a live model was used and the images were moving.¹⁷ Surely in the public's eye this was the closest art had come to pornography to date. Though Paik's ideas for forging a new medium should be applied to videogames, the case for videogames as art cannot be completed without a comparison to cinema.

Stylistically, cinema is the closest medium to videogames. Both rely heavily on technological advancements to draw crowds and are entrenched in the commercialistic world. The majority of the public views movies as an art form, but not all movies are regarded as art. *The Wizard of Oz* is one interesting example of cinematic art. The movie was a major achievement due to its innovative special effects and application of Technicolor. This was a major selling point for the movie, but the movie is considered to be significant for several additional reasons. The movie had complex sets, perfectly integrated musical numbers and ground-breaking special effects.¹⁸ However, the movie stood the test of time not simply because of the colour, but in the way colour was used. The metaphor of Dorothy leaving her drab, colourless life to visit the exuberant Oz could not have been fully realized without the use of colour. This is a rare case in which a technological achievement also housed art.

Cinema also relied on past mediums to gain momentum in its early years. Theatre terms and styles were used in early film, but this was mainly due to the fact that the actors and actresses originated from this medium before turning to film. Many early movies were based on plays, but cinema actually lost the ethereal experience that makes theatre still popular today. Theatre holds more refined elements of artistic value than cinema, and therefore early cinema was not considered art. Film in the later twentieth century had to establish itself apart from the books it obtained material from by offering acting and imagery that books could never offer. When film turned to special effects, lighting tricks as in film noir, and *trompe l'oeil* techniques, it matured and established itself apart from theatre as these elements could not be reproduced easily on stage. Videogames take the technological advancements to the extreme and share the element of an ethereal experience with theatre. However, movies today have more to offer aesthetically than games, and until games establish themselves apart from movies they will not be considered art.

Videogames' solely commercial history will be another issue to tackle. Computers share this history, but software makes the computer an artist's tool rather than a plaything. Several artists use computers to plan, create, or finalize their art; but no well-respected artists showcase their work in a videogame format. As a result, it may be difficult to prove videogames can be aesthetically pleasing. Many gamers argue the *Final Fantasy* game series is an art form because each screen is a beautifully rendered puzzle piece that creates an entirely imagined world. However, most gamers do not argue that the *Madden* football games are art, despite the lifelike feel from mapping famous player's faces on to polygons. This implies games create art through imitating life, but games will not be accepted as art simply because they replicate reality.

Videogame creators utilize many of the same processes that painters and movie producers employ. Concepts must be sketched out, characters modeled, landscapes rendered, narratives produced, music composed, and video edited. In doing this, videogames 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. Rejlander echoes from the past again when he said that new mediums, "must contain many parts in common with art".¹⁹ The one element separating videogames from movies, which also compile the aforementioned skills, is the interactive element allowing players to control and manipulate the game's environment while creating an ethereal experience from playing. Videogames and movies utilize art to entertain audiences. Games frequently emulate movies for this reason.

Videogames may only be regarded as an art form if movies are considered art. Is the *Wizard of Oz* art? Strong arguments indicate it is. Is *National Lampoon's Vacation* art? Not likely. It is not regarded as a significant contribution to art, but was created in the name of fun. Simply because a medium combines several different accepted forms of art does not mean it is art by default. The problem may be distinguishing between games that are art, games that sell well, and games that are simply poor. A similar problem arises in distinguishing which paintings are art.

Certain paintings are viewed with differing amounts of significance. Claude Monet paintings are held in more regard than a Bob Ross piece. In the same sense, *Final Fantasy* is more respected by gamers than *Madden*. Both games present varying levels of entertainment, but so do most paintings. Is the significance of the abovementioned artists due to them creating a precedent? Perhaps so, but the artists did not merely set trends, they understood the potential of the medium and elevated the art form.

The analogy between movies and games also brings up another argument: games rely on the vocabulary and style of movies and, therefore, videogames may not be viewed as unique. Rejlander strived to emulate famous paintings in his photographs, and videogames seek to emulate movies. As argued before, making equivalents of paintings as photographs did not help Rejlander prove that photography is art. In fact, it was a hindrance. Games continually strive to become interactive movies. Instead, the games should become an independent art form. Jack Kroll argued that producers want game designers to be viewed as artists because the games would sell better as a result. The game designers are already

artists even if they create art for commercial purposes. Producers would likely never support a game created solely for aesthetic purposes because it would not have the guaranteed sales producers are looking for. Kroll also argued games could not possibly convey the emotional complexity art demands because videogames only simulate humans.²⁰ Henry Jenkins refutes this by arguing Disney's animated movies invoke basic human emotions, so "why should pixels be different?"²¹ In fact, several games deal directly with human emotions, including death. *Final Fantasy VII* had one of the main characters, Aeris, perish at the hands of the main villain, Sephiroth. In *Secret of Mana*, one of the main characters, Sprite, was the last of her kind and sacrificed herself to save the world. These might not have had the same effect as a tragic movie, such as *Schindler's List*, but videogames are attempting to tackle tough issues. However, in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Secret of Mana* the other characters do not display the emotions that death evokes to the degree found in cinema and novels. When attention is aimed at fine-tuning the narrative elements and characterization instead of technological achievements, videogames will take a major step in becoming art.

Videogame creators are taking a step in the wrong direction by imitating the closest related medium. The more videogame producers use other mediums to gain strength, the more it detracts the overall medium from becoming art. Games based on movie licenses are historically poor and only offer significance through technological advancements. *Goldeneye*, a James Bond game based on the movie, is one of the few games escaping the fate of most licensed character games. Its multiplayer function and innovative reward system are precedents. It did not further the medium artistically, but made the genre more appealing and expanded options. Producers should look to Paik for guidance, as he overlapped the mediums instead of imitating them.

Another objective of art is to reach the audience in some way. Videogames accomplish this by allowing the player control. However, games could and should go much further. As in any book or movie, if the main character is uninteresting or flat, the story will suffer. Therefore, the character gamers control is even more important. This is obvious to most writers, but videogames are not known for their plots or the pseudo-acting of the polygonal characters. A character-driven medium can only gain significance by exploiting elements that make these characters human.

A hindrance in the argument of videogames as art is the lack of an efficient way to display them in an exhibit or gallery. These shows would also be mocked and judged maliciously by those in the traditional art world, if history truly repeats itself. However, we do not see televisions on walls in museums displaying *Wizard of Oz* as cinematic art. With technological advancements comes change in the way we view art. Simply watching a movie or playing the videogame will become the exhibit. The test will be if the exhibit has anything to offer aesthetically, morally, critically, or otherwise.

Aside from testing our reflexes or stroking our egos, videogames have little purpose. This could work in their favor. Richard Serra, an acclaimed sculptor and well-known artist, once said in an interview with Charlie Rose that art can in no way be functional. He argued that architecture and furniture design was not art.²² Aside from the potential for moral allegory

that Rejlander believed all art should contain, art forms have no purpose. Even with this in mind, Serra pointed out that there was not a painting during World War I or II that kept bombs from dropping.²³ Serra may have good points, but he is overlooking the idea that form follows function. Without function, form can become several things and is often termed art. Form can then be used for a function regardless of whether functionality was a requirement. Videogames could benefit from not having the function to entertain. Without this requirement, the game could become art. It may still entertain, but entertainment would not be the main function. The industry would benefit from having more experimental games as video art is often formed from. One example of this experimentation today is *Rez*. This is a flight simulation/shooter mix with a polygonal human form attacking polygonal enemies. The music also interacts with the play in that defeated enemies produce a beat that enhances the background music. The game's storyline is a man vs machine narrative that has a computer become too powerful and a gamer that must hack in to save the world from computational meltdown. These innovations are welcomed, but it is the symbolism in this game that should turn heads in the industry. The human form evolves with each level based on a historical civilization, which portrays the span of time and symbolizes man's accomplishments. The game is experimental, as it appears to be a merger between the dance genre and the first-person shooter genre. This game is a major step to games becoming art and may some day be viewed as art itself, but an independent videogame industry may be the only answer to creating videogame art. This could end the cycle of cloning more popular games and making repetitious sequels within the industry. Such an industry would also allow for entertainment not being the main focus and would not be solely driven by sales. An independent gaming world may also deter videogame creators from increasing levels of violence, as the innovation alone would grip the audience and the industry would not have to shock to sell.

It is argued by some that videogames teach our children unsatisfactory moral codes, but, if this is true, games are no less to blame than books, movies or other art. In *Grand Theft Auto*, it is interesting to note that there are no children in Liberty City. Does this suggest that the happenings in Liberty City should not be viewed by children? Though the mature rating answers this, the game holds some moral allegory even though it is so violent. Art pieces are often shocking and violent, but are given the term art because they evoke some human emotion. The raging controversy over *Grand Theft Auto* may be a step towards considering videogames as art; games are an undeniably major part of our society. Art imitates life, but life also imitates art. Nevertheless, violent movies and videogames are cathartic and are healthy ways of releasing anger and frustration. In situations where violence appears to stem from the media, the perpetrators often are so far removed from reality that all cathartic possibilities are lost. While shocking videogames may elicit human emotion, it is the wrong sort of emotion. Shooting someone in *Grand Theft Auto* does not produce sadness or rage, but is deemed fun, and the emotional response outside the gaming world is outcry from the public. Increasing shock value to sell does not help in the attempt to classify games as art.

Few artists make videogames for the aesthetic, but thousands of artists creating videogames want to establish something more than the next big game that will sell. Several online artists use the element of videogames in their work, but this is not

videogame art. This is art based on games and presented in separate mediums such as computer art. There is not a game on the market today which possesses all of the qualities needed to substantiate the title of videogame art. The closest games have come to art is the early games found on 8-bit systems. Games like *Super Mario Bros.* used the medium to nearly its full potential at the time. *Super Mario Bros.* was a gamble because the game was a precedent in the field. *Super Mario Bros.* was born from art, reached its audience through being interactive, served its function of entertainment, is historically significant in the game world and is not based on previous art forms. It is not considered art because it does not elicit any emotional response toward the characters, it does not have a meaningful plot, and there is little moral allegory to be gained other than saving the princess. These factors suggest that the full potential of the medium as a storyteller was not achieved. It can be argued art does not need these factors, but the traditional art world holds certain works with significance because those pieces are extremely important in the cultural context. Paik's art would be misunderstood if it was not created in the context of the MTV generation, and Rejlander's work was misunderstood because he was ahead of his time. Videogames sell well, which suggests that games are important within the culture, but only the art world decides if games are art, and the public can sway that decision. The public only considers a movie artistic when all of the elements that create it are at their full potential, and even then there is a possibility that the movie is not art. Games are not being considered by the art world because the public still sees games as a child's plaything. With each new game that targets wider audiences, games come closer to getting noticed on a broader scale.

Kingdom Hearts, a game that merges the worlds of Disney and *Final Fantasy* along with art and videogames, uses a mixture of realism and surrealism to achieve what may be the closest attempt at videogame art today. This game poses unique challenges for designers, in that it attempts to take two very different styles (the intense art of *Final Fantasy* with the cartoon art of Disney) and have them converge in one world. The Disney characters had to make the large jump from two dimensions to three and the *Final Fantasy* elements then had to mesh with the worlds of Disney. This sort of merger is a precedent in the gaming world, both in the game and in the real world; Square and Disney represent the largest companies in their prospective fields. The significance of this game is indisputable because of these precedents, but it is still not viewed as art. The game entertains while being innovative and aesthetically pleasing, yet the emotion is missing and portions of the game distract from the narrative. *Kingdom Hearts* also has no memorable moral allegory other than the "save the world with new friends" mentality that can be found in nearly every role-playing game. Movies edit scenes to keep narrative flowing, but videogames will need to tackle the lingering problem of keeping gameplay intact without disrupting narrative flow. This is further challenged by the view of narrative disrupting gameplay. Several games only use the often unseen intro and the ending to convey the plot, meaning it is not seen as a key element. *Final Fantasy* games have attempted to solve this dilemma by using unplayable movie scenes to advance the plot, but this is also a series that is striving to become an interactive movie. The gaming world must better employ narrative if it hopes to contend with mediums that use the element more efficiently, and thus become art.

Significant videogames have been created even though none can be considered art. Nevertheless, more games are on the way that may sway the art world to reconsider shunning this unique new media. The public must open their minds and realize that new mediums, no matter how embedded in commercialism, have the potential to become a well-respected art form. Producers of videogames must take drastic and expensive measures to create games that leave past mediums behind and create games that can independently be considered art, if that is what they truly desire to achieve. Designers must hone the elements of the mediums that have come before games to their full potential and use them innovatively and independently. The public should not let a new medium frighten them, even though the work spawned from it may be upsetting. Photography, video art, and cinema have shown the art world that great mediums with limitless potential are worth struggling for and that history repeats itself. Perhaps one day Rejlander's words will urge the public to accept whatever medium artists choose and "[the] work will be judged on its merits, not by the method of production..."²⁴

Notes

1. Art will be defined as accepted fine art in the nineteenth century during and right after the Enlightenment period where the traditional art world accepted more mechanical forms of art such as photography because the technology was understood.
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10. Spencer, Stephanie, *O. G. Rejlander: Photography as Art*, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 21.
11. Spencer, Stephanie, *O. G. Rejlander: Photography as Art*, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 42.
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15. Stockstad, Marilyn, *Art History* second edition, vol. two, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2002, p. 1182.
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17. Fineberg, Jonathan, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* second edition, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2000, p. 352.

18. Dirks, Tim, *The Wizard Of Oz*, Dir. Victor Fleming. <http://www.filmsite.org/wiza.html>. 2004.
19. Rejlander, O. G. *An Apology for Art-Photography*, 1863.
20. Espejo, Roman, *At Issue: Videogames*, New York: Greenhaven Press, p. 47.
21. Espejo, Roman, *At Issue: Videogames*, New York: Greenhaven Press, p. 45.
22. "Program 1: Place" *Art 21*, PBS, 21st Sept. 2001.
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