

Videogame as Avant-garde: Secluded Rhematic Expression

Abstract. This article shows how the single player videogame is by its very nature in conflict with the institution of art, and paradoxically, because of that cannot avoid becoming art itself. First, the article shows that the defining aesthetic of the videogame—its kinesthetically charged *ludic rhematic*—has very little in common with the meaning-centered aesthetic norms that dominate the art world. Second, the article shows how the secluded nature of expressive videogame play contravenes the concept of art reception. These conflicts force art to reinvestigate itself through the videogame. That makes the videogame avant-garde, for a moment.

Bio. Veli-Matti Karhulahti is working on videogame ontology and narratology at University of Turku, Department of Media Studies, Finland. He used to play physical games. Contact [vmmkar@utu.fi]

Introduction

The media themselves are the avant-garde of our society. Avant-garde no longer exists in painting and music, it's the media themselves. (McLuhan 1973, 274)

As for game studies, the plurality of efforts to defend the videogame as art functions as an implication of its art historical unsophistication. Discoveries in art—practice or theory—are outcomes of attack, not defense. In accordance with the above, the premise of this article is that the numerous failures to connect the videogame to art theoretical discussion are results of poor strategy; and that the videogame involves art theoretically important aspects that can be revealed with a refined strategy.

The present treatise is limited to the single player videogame, and all future references to the videogame should be read with this limitation in mind.

The following two sections will show how the videogame is by its very nature in conflict with the institution of art, and because of that cannot avoid integrating into its antagonist's domain. What makes the videogame the most aggressive contemporary species of culture in relation to art is that it questions two fundamental artistic norms at one time: meaning and reception. The former is the subject of the first section. The latter is the subject of the second section.

Rhematic Expression

This section will show how the aesthetic of the videogame is not a reconstruction of meaning but a physical attack against the idea of art as an interpreting institution. The point of departure is Markku Eskelinen (2001), one of the few early critics perceptive enough to mistrust the prevailing standard when it comes to videogame aesthetics:

There's no guarantee whatsoever that the aesthetic traditions of the West are relevant to game studies in general and computer game studies in particular.

As the pioneering work of Andrew Darley (2000) had suggested a year before, the aesthetic peculiarity of the videogame has indeed very little to do with the hermeneutic

hegemony of the presently dominating conceptions of art. The core videogame aesthetic lies in the kinesthetically charged manipulation of the product, not in the product's meaning-seeking interpretation.

The second notable step in understanding the videogame as an artistic phenomenon was taken by Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011). His seminal contribution was to embody the sensually excessive but hermeneutically deprived videogame play in the aesthetics of performative expression:

The combination of expressive performance and restraint necessary to play a game well determines an aesthetic experience that is not contained within any kind of sense-meaning; it is more akin to playing a musical instrument. (p. 7)

By 'sense-meaning' Kirkpatrick refers specifically to the meaning-seeking traditions of "interpretation that predominate in cultural studies" (p. 8) and not to the bodily sensation that defines the ludic performance. The aesthetic of the videogame is connected to other arts solely by its expressive nature.

The expressive nature of videogame play cannot be explained by previous art theories. Expressions of *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) players do not surface as tetromino constructs that cohere with the players' thematic interpretations but as play styles that cohere with the players' ludic personalities. One takes risk; another plays safe; third has an inimitable tactic of her own. The way in which players execute their play styles are the actualizations of *ludic expression* that is an entirely different expressive mode than those of actors, dancers, and other performative artists (which are not analogous either). Ludic expressions exist in a different conceptual sphere from the conventional expressions of art because they are motivated by the player's inducing configuration. If not, the player does no more play.

The evident counter argument claims that the expressions that occur in videogame play are not actually those of the player but those of the meaning-conveying game designer (see Bogost 2007). This observation is both valid and invalid. While the material game object can be considered an art product with a domain of designed meaning-filled expressions that actualize in the player's performance, the videogame contains not only one expressive agent but two: the player and the designer. Videogame play may evoke the designer's meaning-filled expressions, but the expressions of the player that occur in her or his performance are essentially meaningless due to the ludic nature of the activity.

In a recent study Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2013) separates meaning-centered aesthetics from sensation-centered *rhematics*, the latter of which he argues as the most productive approach for conceptualizing the videogame's aesthetic and rhetoric:

Negotiations players have with games can be referred to (or given meaning) as 'conflicts,' 'fights,' 'struggles,' et cetera, yet these are not meanings in a thematic sense. While semiotic context may, and often does, charge these negotiations with thematic potential, an actualization of that potential is optional in terms of persuasive success. In this sense ... gaming is fundamentally empty in meaning, a *rhematic*.

Here the adage, often credited to Steven Spielberg, that videogames become art at the moment when they make the player cry is an oxymoron. Videogame art is defined not by emotional thematics but by carnal rhematics. At the moment when a videogame makes its

player cry the videogame is no more a videogame but a storygame (or more accurately, its aesthetic effects are no more those of the videogame). It is no coincidence that *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale 2012) are the games the gameness of which is the most equivocal: in these works the dominance of theme over rheme is evident. It is the depth of the anti-thematic rhematic that functions as the indicator of the object's ludic identity.

The rhematic aesthetic is not a sole property of the videogame but is found in various forms of sensually excessive culture, all which derive ultimately from the seventeenth-century Baroque (see Ndanialis 2004; cf. Sihvonen 2011). Along with the effects of the blockbuster film, the live concert spectacle, and the theme park ride the videogame's *ludic rhematic* is the overgrown offspring of the epoch the primary art of which was to overwhelm the spectator on all possible sensory levels. What separates the ludic rhematic from its predecessors is the physically active position through which the spectator is invited to generate the meaningless content itself.

This performative position of the videogame player is not to be confused with the positions provided by happenings, performances, and interactive artworks that invite the audience to *participate*. When one takes part to a Marina Abramović performance by sitting with the artist in a room, or to a Rirkrit Tiravanija installation by cooking in the provided environment, she or he enters a socially recognized artistic organism in a literal sense. Due to the secluded context of its reception, the videogame, in turn, offers participation only as a metaphor. Its ludic performance, on the other hand, is most tangible; uncorrupted by the hermeneutic expectations of the art world; conceiving a sensually bursting rhematic experience the aesthetic of which cannot be made know by signs.

It is the dual expression of the videogame that poses a critical challenge to art as an institution that is founded on the distinction between the creative artist and the receptive audience. The videogame—both a designed material product and an expressive rhematic performance—cannot be discussed in the conventional terms of 'artist' and 'audience.' While philosophies that question the distinction are not utterly nonexistent (above all Dewey 1934), the history knows no previous phenomenon with such vastness of cultural impact that could be considered a serious ratification for the claim. After the videogame art needs to redefine itself. That is not mere art, but avant-garde art.

Secluded Expression

The present section will show how the secluded context of videogame play violates the concept of art reception, thereby forcing art to reinvestigate its conceptual borders. The constitutive statement is this: *Tetris in a museum is not art. Tetris at home is avant-garde art.*

In an otherwise trivial contribution Karhulahti (2012; cf. 2013) makes a worthwhile comment concerning the expressive distinctiveness of videogame play in relation to art:

Whereas the expressive power of Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* (1917) was based on shocking the era's institutional art norms by means of showing, single player videogames encourage players to perform for themselves ... A single player game is first and foremost a personal experience, which does not have to be shown.

To simplify: it is not important *what* videogame one plays; it is important that one plays it *alone*. What makes the player's ludic performance exceptional from art's point of view is that its instrumental aims are purely hedonistic by definition. Players play for pleasure. The private activity is exercised for the sole fact that it serves the sensual desires of the performer (not unlike pornography). This coheres perfectly with the "increasing individualization of human life that has occurred throughout the past five hundred years of Western history" (Sutton-Smith 1997, p. 175).

The meaningless engagement with the ludic rhematic is both addictive and aesthetic, and so becomes the decisive solution to the quandary of contemporary art that has so far been unable to satisfy the privatized needs of the modern-day consumer. As notes Eskelinen (2012), both modernism and postmodernism

are often understood as reflecting and running parallel to the increasing emphasis upon individuality in western societies, and if that is the case, then extremely personalized ergodic experiences [videogame play as the most prominent instance] will fit nicely into that continuum (p. 359)

At this point it becomes necessary to visit the relationship between the videogame and sports. Sports, after all, have been providing the humankind with extremely personalized sensual experiences as long as culture has existed. For current purposes more important than their formal similarities is the fact that the single player videogame is unquestionably a genuine "anomaly in the eons-old history of gaming" (Salen & Zimmerman 2003, p. 462). The pre-video game, in other words, was more or less synonymous with social play.

In the same way as the asocial videogame ended up restructuring the general understanding of 'game,' it will also restructure the general understanding of the relations between 'artist,' 'audience,' and 'expression.'

Videogame play is expressive performance with no other audience but the performer itself. That expressive performance cannot, however, be derived simply from an independent artist-audience—that hybridization would tear down all conceptual borders between artistic performance and mundane action. The videogame player expresses, but *only as an audience*, for there is also an expressive artist, the game designer, who has designed the play-enabling product. It is the designer that makes the player the audience. And it is the videogame that amounts to the first significant medium that designs means for individual expression for the individuals themselves.

But the videogame is not of artistic significance as long as the art world acknowledges it as such, declares the present-day critic. How primitive!, laughs the future historian. It is precisely the videogame's unawareness of its own artistic identity that makes it of significance to art. This significance will eventually wear out, true, but before that it functions as the exact substance of the avant-garde which reflects the society of our time more clearly than any other present cultural phenomena. Just as modern art became real because it rejected realism, the videogame becomes avant-garde because it disavows art. Recall Johan Huizinga (1955):

One is tempted to feel, as we felt about music, that it was a blessing for art to be largely unconscious of its high purport and the beauty it creates. When art becomes self-conscious, that is, conscious of its own grace, it is apt to lose something of its eternal child-like innocence. (p. 202)

Enjoy the art while it lasts.

Conclusions

The videogame is avant-garde. It will take time for art critics to realize this; and when it happens, the observation is already out of date.

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