

“Are “Games” Becoming Art, and are they Already Art?”

An Honors Thesis

by

Aiden P. Brooks

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California, Pennsylvania

We hereby approve the Honors Thesis of

Aiden P. Brooks

Candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Date

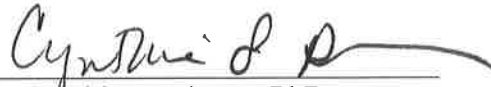
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Craig Fox, PhD
Honors Thesis Advisor
Associate Director, Honors Program

3/27/18



Cynthia Persinger, PhD
Second Reader

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Director, Honors Program

Aiden Brooks

International Studies

Dr. Fox (advisor), Dr. Sittler (librarian), Dr. Hettler and Dr. Persinger (2nd and 3rd readers)
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Introduction

My name is Aiden Brooks, and I am an International Studies student at California University of Pennsylvania. While this topic is only extremely tangentially related to my major, it has been something that I have thought about a lot for several years now, and the motivation behind this thesis. I have been a player of games my entire life, from being taught how to play cards at a young age, to playing video games as an adolescent, to working in the board game industry during my time at university.

Additionally, since I was 9 years old, I have been a musician of many different instruments. Music is an art form very dear to my heart, and I have always enjoyed the feeling of having expressed a beautiful or interesting idea through the art form. I have also come to enjoy creative writing over time, but music has always remained my primary artistic venture. Particularly, I enjoy the interactions between myself and others when I perform live, or when I receive feedback on my recorded music. Like many others, I consider the music that I create to be a sort of extension of myself, something that I feel very intimate with, something that makes me feel very exposed in a thrilling and interpersonal way. Releasing one's music "into the wild" is inviting others into a very personal space within you.

Until recently, I never seriously considered why I felt so motivated to argue on behalf of games being art. I first believed that my interest in the topic of games being art, in the same way that music is considered art, was motivated purely by an interest in "accuracy". I would have said that despite my love of games and my interest in the creation of them, and I didn't really think that I was personally invested in the question beyond finding it to be an interesting debate in which I felt that many were looking at it improperly or making weak arguments.

However, recently I have realized why it is that I feel so strongly about this debate. I have

been a Dungeon Master for various Dungeons and Dragons groups, and I've created countless scenarios or custom rulesets for a few different board games during my stint in the board game industry. For those unfamiliar, a Dungeon Master plays the role of the narrator in a game of interactive storytelling. The players have individual characters that they roleplay, and it has been my job to tell them how the world and its inhabitants respond to their actions. This takes a variety of forms, from simple interpretations of written rules, to lengthy descriptions of a cohesive fantasy world, to improvised dialogue between non-player characters and the heroes that the players control.

I've come to realize that when I am doing this, I feel remarkably similar to how I feel when I am performing. Not only does my role require a lot of writing, which occasionally takes the form of stories or poems that the players will discover, but I am put on a stage to some degree. I've spent the past six or seven years creating a world that I feel very invested in. When my players explore this world with their characters, they are being exposed to something that I've put a lot of time into, and that I'd really like to think is *good*, in whatever way art can be good. It is like my friends are reading a story that I wrote aloud to me, and I'm hoping that it sounds good through another person's voice, and that I'm not going to look silly, or uncreative, or boring. This is the nature of music performance, of literature publication, and apparently, game design.

I'm no longer claiming that this essay comes from an attempt at pure objectivity, or detached points about something just for the sake of "getting it right". It comes, at least partially, from a desire to have what I have created be viewed with the same level of respect and dignity that one would view an impressionist painting, even one they don't particularly like. Perhaps this bias weakens my argument, but I truly believe that my position as a "traditional artist" and also as game designer and enthusiast has given me a unique and interesting perspective on the matter.

The world of art is constantly changing and evolving, and with it, our understanding of what we consider to be "art" is also always changing. As new technologies and techniques change the way that we express ourselves, and the ways in which art is created, displayed, consumed, and preserved change, new mediums and styles of art have earned acceptance within the art world. What is it that allows something to be or to "become art"? Since "art" has existed as a concept, philosophers, artists, art critics, curators, and others have argued what "art" is, in order to recognize it when it exists, and to form a framework for how we could evaluate it.

Photographs, a relatively recent innovation in the history of art, are now displayed in museums alongside Renaissance-era paintings, and alongside Greek marble statues. Beethoven's 9th Symphony is considered "art" in much the same way as these other things, but it doesn't reside within a museum the way that other works of art might. We have come to recognize music as a form of art just as valid as sculpture, paintings, and photographs, and the act of listening to music as a way of consuming art.

New mediums of art have generally faced resistance to being accepted as legitimate artforms. Photography as an artform was rejected from the art world at first, being seen as something that lacked the technicality or creative elements of other art forms (Thripp). As the technology surrounding photography changed, and the culture of taking photographs grew and adapted into something different, the medium began to be seen as a legitimate art form. *The Guardian* said in 2012 that "When Andreas Gursky's photograph of a grey river Rhine under an equally colourless sky sold for a world record price of £2.7 million last year, the debate was effectively over" (Prodger). For games, the debate most definitely continues.

What am I referring to when I say "games"? I am intending to talk about games of all sorts- these could be card games, board games, video games, word games, sports, etc. The

argument of whether game are or are not art has come into the spotlight in recent years particularly because of the video game industry growing to such a massive size. Interestingly, the rise of professional sports leagues earlier in the century did not trigger this debate in the same way that the video game *The Last of Us* (2013) did.

However, to those that call themselves "gamers", or players of particular games (such as boxers, or *Go* players), the question of games being art has been thought about time and time again, with many game players saying emphatically for decades that "Yes, what we have been doing is art". The Chess Grandmaster David Bronstein said in a 2003 interview that "Chess is a fortunate art form. It does not live only in the minds of its witnesses. It is retained in the best games of masters, and does not disappear from memory when the masters leave the stage.", although it should be noted that Bronstein is disappointed with the direction that chess has taken since he was champion (Radović). He believes that the "art of chess" is actually dying, because the game has been played out too much and the optimal strategies are too thoroughly understood for anything new and interesting to happen; "the chess players should be playing, not going over the same lines over and over again" (Radović). His words demonstrate the idea that something can cease being art if it changes sufficiently, similarly to how some non-art could "become" art if it were to change in some way.

Even new art styles within existing mediums have faced resistance. Impressionism as a style of painting was denied the classification "art" by its critics at first. In response to the painting *Impression, Sunrise* by Claude Monet first being exhibited in 1874, art critic Louis Leroy said "Impression! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished!" (USEUM). Impressionism as an art faced resistance because of its style, not because of its medium. It embraced ideas that were entirely contrary to what the art schools of the time period were

teaching as "the way to paint". Over time though, as more artists began to paint in the Impressionist style, and more art critics began to criticize it *as art*, it began to actually become art, to the dismay of its most ardent critics (Hudson).

However, despite the long historical trend of new styles and mediums being slowly accepted into the traditional conceptualization of art, "games" of all types remain largely outside the realm of "art" in the minds of many people in the art world (Ebert, *Games vs. Art: Ebert vs. Barker*). It does not seem difficult to point out many things that seem to be wildly different between games and more traditional forms of art. Games are extremely interactive; they require input from the player in a way that appears very different from the way we generally absorb art in a more passive way. Games are not rigidly defined, in the way that the text of a book remains unchanged as it sits on a library shelf. We shape our experiences with games in potentially very different ways each time that we play them. Games are also often created by large groups, such as video game development studios, or they emerge in a somewhat organic fashion, like playground games. We often think of a work of art as being the manifestation of some individual person's "artistic vision", not as something that can arise spontaneously on the playground.

It isn't entirely unreasonable to suggest, though, that art could arise spontaneously on a playground, just as games might. It is recognized that children can produce art, whether it is considered good art or not (Why the ICAF). Children poking and scratching designs into the mud might say that they are "drawing", something we consider art. They might even call it "mud art". However, an adult watching them do this might say that they are "playing in the mud". Are the children or the adults wrong? Is it unreasonable to think of art as something that is "played"?

I don't think that the children are wrong for calling what they are doing "art", and the adults are not wrong for calling it "playing". Amongst their own circles, meaning is conveyed

adequately, and the terms they employ contribute to what they are saying in a significant way. The ability for a "game" to be represented and spoken of by using the term "art" without confusion more often each year as the medium develops is what "makes games art" just as photography has done in the past. This way of examining art, by looking at ways that the term is employed, had been done long before the popularity of video games brought this question into the spotlight. Morris Weitz writes on page 30 in his 1956 essay "*The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*" (building off of the work of the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein):

"The problem with which we must begin is not "What is art?," but "What sort of concept is 'art'?" Indeed, the root problem of philosophy itself is to explain the relation between the employment of certain kinds of concepts and the conditions under which they can be correctly applied."

Understanding how the term "art" can be correctly applied is my goal in this essay. This is a subtle but critical distinction from more traditional approaches to arguing for or against something "being art". What I am doing is not attempting to talk about what should follow after a colon in the dictionary next to the word "art", but rather to claim that by examining the way we are already using certain terms, one can reasonably use the word "art" to describe what would be called a "game", without serious confusion from listeners. Interestingly enough, Ludwig Wittgenstein himself refers to the use of and understanding of a word as a "language game" very often. One of these "language games" is described in detail in the very first section of his *Philosophical Investigations*:

"Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip of paper marked "five red apples". He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples"; then he looks up the word "red" in a chart and finds a colour sample next to it;

then he says the series of elementary number-words - I assume that he knows them by heart - up to the word "five", and for each number-word he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. -- It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. -- "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" -- Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. - But what is the meaning of the word "five"? - No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used"

I intend to argue that by examining instances where the word "art" is used- ways that we talk about art, things that are written about art, things that have the label of "art" placed upon them- we can begin to get an idea of the "sort of concept" that art is. If we do the same for the word "game", examining the way that game designers talk about games, the way that players of games talk about them, the way that games are presented, displayed, and used in our culture, we can compare the two concepts and get an understanding of the possible connections between the two terms.

Also, I would like to make the scope of this argument clearer. There are far too many instances where these terms are applied to say anything about all of them in one document. Here, I intend to examine a number of possible arguments that can be made in favor of games being art, arguments that are either directly made by people very often, or arguments that are implied through our use of language very often. As much as I am not providing a concrete definition of what "art" is, I am also not providing a definition of what "games" are, a detailed exploration of which would could be very instrumental in making my points here.

For another example of the type of argument I am trying to make, there exists a debate over whether a hot dog is considered to be a sandwich. To nearly all those who argue about this,

it is agreed that the debate really doesn't matter all that much, but nonetheless, people have very strong opinions about the matter. Typically, some of those on both sides end up looking in various dictionaries for definitions that support their belief, and examples of other things that may or may not be sandwiches are brought up in attempts to make the other side's arguments seem absurd.

Many will claim that a sandwich is bread with some sort of meat filling, but then cheese sandwiches or ice cream sandwiches are brought up. A common counter argument to that is that at least cheese sandwiches and ice cream sandwiches have two individual pieces of bread or something similar, between which the filling of the sandwich resides. Submarine sandwiches where the bread is in one solid piece are brought up to disprove that point though, and inevitably, the argument continues in a similar fashion, with an agreement on the matter rarely being found.

These all usually seem like reasonable ways to argue if something "is" something else, or that an object belongs to some sort of category; but if we look at the way that the words "sandwich" and "hot dog" are *employed*, to use Weitz's terminology, then we should imagine the following situation. A person says to another, "Bring me a sandwich. I'm not picky though, you can bring me any kind of sandwich".

If the first person returns with a hot dog, what would the second person's reaction be? If they would be surprised when presented with a hot dog, not expecting that as a possible result to their request, then perhaps (to them, at least), a hot dog does not fit the category of "a sandwich". If they feel that bringing them a hot dog was a perfectly reasonable response, then the proper employment of the word "sandwich" can be understood to refer to hot dogs.

There are other reactions that we should consider, though. The second person could reasonably say "I didn't expect you to bring me a hot dog, but I suppose this counts". In this

situation, it is implied that the requester did not think of hot dogs as sandwiches until presented with an instance in which "sandwich" was interpreted as a category of foods that includes sandwiches. I believe this situation more closely resembles what happens with games and art, where many people might not list "games" as a medium of art off the top of their head, but if presented with a game that claimed to fit the category of "art", they may agree.

What is going on when someone asks for a sandwich, and they are brought a hot dog? Wittgenstein again discusses a very similar situation in section 74 of his *Philosophical Investigations*. He imagines a scenario in which someone has a depiction of a square and two rhombi, which form a schematic drawing of what we call a cube. He says, "Bring me something like *this*", and is potentially met with varying responses. Multiple people could be seeing the drawing the same way, in that they are physically perceiving the drawing "accurately", but people could respond by bringing him a small cube made of metal or plastic or some other substance, or perhaps by bringing him a cardboard box of a similar shape but a much larger size, or even by bringing him yet another drawing that looks identical to his. This is a more realistic model for these types of requests than the "five red apples" scenario presented by Wittgenstein earlier.

There is an amount of interpretation necessary in order to carry out the request. In our everyday lives, these circumstances arise all the time. We consider who is speaking to us, and the context of the situation in order to respond appropriately, and to essentially "match up" what is requested of us with a sort of mental database of what categories things belong to. When someone is requesting a sandwich, we base our response off of the information about sandwiches that we believe ourselves to have accumulated. We may think back to seeing a "sandwiches" section on a menu, and what was contained there, or we might think of conversations we have

had that involved sandwiches. If someone travelled to a place that was foreign to them, and asked hundreds of people to bring them a sandwich, and each time, someone returned with a hot dog, they might begin to get the idea that perhaps a hot dog is a sandwich after all.

How does this relate to art and games? Imagine that someone made a request such as, "Bring me art", or, "Bring me a work of art". How could one respond to this request? It is easy to imagine a scenario in which someone brings them a painting. If architecture is also art though, which it is often understood to be, it would be difficult to physically bring them an example of architecture. They could return with tickets to tour some sort of building, but it isn't exactly the tickets themselves that are art. Despite not having "art" itself brought to them, the requester might still reasonably see this as an appropriate response. Could they be brought a photograph of architecture? Or could they be brought tickets to a play? If they could reasonably be brought a game, without confusion, it could suggest that games art art, at least as much as these other possible things they could be brought.

I should also make clear that I understand that to a certain degree, I am hoping to *preempt* the use of "games" in this way. The arguments I make in the rest of this paper are ones that I expect to permeate our language more and more each year, as the "trend" seems to me to be that games are increasingly being recognized as art. If my premise that games are art, as I describe in this paper, is not "true" at the time of writing, I believe that it may grow "more true" as time goes on, leading to a point in which games are questioned as art about as much as photography might be.

Art is a particularly interesting item to be requested because of the ways in which we interact with it. It has long been debated whether "artworks" are physical objects, intangible concepts, perceptual information, or something different altogether (Danto 2). One common

view is that art is "experience", in that a person interacts with art through material objects, like physically seeing a painting, but that the "real artwork" itself could be more accurately thought of as the *experience* of doing that (Collingwood, 30). Art itself is an "experience", but it still requires some degree of interaction with material objects in order for us to "access" it in some way. This can be our eyes being used to read text on a page, or to see dancers on a stage. It could be using our ears to hear music, or to hear a speech being given. Less intuitively, it could be tasting culinary art, or feeling art that utilizes textures as part of the art.

As conscious beings though, the experience of art is not likely to be something that consists entirely of sensory "input". Some degree of processing or feedback occurs, voluntarily or not. Incoming information is compared to our past experiences; we may see a painting of something and think to ourselves that it is a painting of a dog. We are able to identify the painting as a painting of a dog because of our past experiences with things that we have assigned the category "dog" to, through processes like the ones that Wittgenstein described with cubes, or the process of asking for sandwiches.

One can ask that someone "bring them art", but without some sort of advanced technology that interacts with our minds directly, one cannot bring to someone else "the *experience of art*". If such a request were made, likely the closest approximation would be to bring them something that is expected to induce the experience, thus satisfying the need indirectly, through something like a painting, a photograph, or tickets to a play. John Dewey, American philosopher who espoused his ideas in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*, said that "A work of art, no matter how classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art when it lives in some individualized experience" (Dewey 43). The point is that it is necessary to interact with art in some sort of *experiential* way in order to acknowledge the art. This interaction is facilitated by

material objects; we use tickets to see plays, we use our eyes to see paintings, and we have to move our bodies to where the paintings actually are in order to see them. In game-playing terms, you have to actually *play the game* in order for it to actually exist as a game.

Furthermore, our ability to experience the art and the manner in which that experience occurs is contingent on a wide variety of things. We are only capable of hearing sounds within a particular range of tones, and we can only distinguish a finite number of colors. Aside from basic sensory characteristics, it is understood that our mental capabilities are another limit on our ability to experience art. When a movie director makes a movie, if it is made well, it will be made with the understanding that every audience member isn't going to be able to perceive and memorize each individual frame of the movie. Our focus and awareness is a limited resource to us, and understanding how this limit shapes our interpretation of the artwork is critical to being a good artist. This limitation on our ability to perceive art shapes artistic decisions by the creators of the art. In *The Godfather* movies, oranges were shown on screen in some form or fashion shortly before most instances where someone was killed (Moviepedia). This is something that most people would only notice after watching the movie several times, or having it pointed out to them, because the oranges are generally not something that the audience is focusing on during those scenes.

The process of the audience experiencing art through their own limitations is often characterized or romanticized as an interaction between the audience and the artist themselves, with the artwork functioning as the medium through which some sort of message or information is conveyed. The English philosopher R.G. Collingwood describes the interaction between artist and audience in his book, *The Principles of Art*, as such: "The artist may take his audience's limitations into account when composing his work; in which case they will appear to him not as

limitations on the extent to which his work will prove comprehensible, but as conditions determining the subject-matter or meaning of the work itself" (Collingwood 311). Understanding and shaping the limitations of the audience is what game designers do when they make games, which, generally speaking, is *making rules*. Game designers provide the boundaries for what constitutes playing the game "properly", doing something very similar to what a playwright does when they provide stage directions in a script. If the directions are entirely ignored, it can be said to have been performed "wrong", or at least that it is in some way different than the "original", similar to "house rules" or how other modifications of a game would be viewed.

Rules, objectives, goals, and the idea of "winning" a game are common complaints with the idea of games being art (Ebert, *Video Games Can Never Be Art*). Conditions for winning a game provide the player with explicit goals to achieve, goals spelled out very clearly in the rules of the game. Traditional art can definitely have goals- such as protest music of the 60s and 70s that sought to end the war in Vietnam- but these goals don't appear to be stated or expressed in quite the same way that a game's rules are. If one believes that art can be used to achieve goals, it is generally understood that art can be straightforward, or ironic, or satirical, or that it might go about achieving its goals in a wide variety of ways that may make any "goals" of the art less clear.

Arguments against games being art sometimes take issue with the idea of "winning" art, or the idea that playing a game is something you can *be good at*. However, not all games can be "won"; for instance, many games that are considered works of art, such as *EVE Online*, are games that cannot be won (Antonelli). The particular way that a game is won can also be the subject of evaluation or interpretation, similar to other artistic decisions in other forms of art. In chess, there is a gap in skill between the top human players and the top computer engines that

play chess. Human moves can be refuted by the computer players, shown to be sub-optimal moves. However, fans of the game, including top players, develop an appreciation and a sort of "taste" for some strategies, even ones that are "refuted by the engine". Antonio Radić, Chess Grandmaster most known for chess commentary and analysis, has a particular appreciation for a game played between Vassily Ivanchuk and Garry Kasparov at the 9th Annual Linares Super Tournament in 1991 (Agadmator). As he says in a video on his YouTube channel, "It contradicts everything you know about chess" and that the game "is beautiful, a beautiful accomplishment by Ivanchuk" (Agadmator). Many of the moves Ivanchuk made can be "proven" to be worse than the best possible move, but nonetheless the particular *way* that they allow Ivanchuk to win is particularly satisfying.

The choices involved in how a game manifests are something that may seem to discredit games as art. After all, the audience does not decide if the main character in a horror movie opens the door; in fact, part of the horror is that they are powerless to stop it. Not only do games inherently seem to require some degree of choice, but even the initialization and continuation of a game requires a choice- the choice to play the game, or perhaps the choice to "turn off" the game, in the case of a video game, or forfeiting a game of chess.

Games certainly would not be the first examples of art that are not predetermined creations, but rather boundaries of what the artwork could acceptably be. This is seen across other mediums of art. In the "silent piece" of John Cage's *4'33"*, a piano player is given instructions to sit at a piano, and to deliberately not make any sound (Gann). The performer is armed with a stopwatch as well, to ensure that the piece lasts four minute and thirty-three seconds (Reilly). In this artwork, there are instructions given, and through those instructions, boundaries are set; playing a note would violate that rule, and thus the artwork would no longer

exist as 4'33" (but perhaps as something else).

The boundaries of the artwork are also set by the audience, and by social practices concerning the way that we view art. 4'33" was first premiered at the Maverick Concert Hall, near Woodstock, New York, on August 29th, 1952 (Ross). Audience members went to the concert hall intending to hear a selection of contemporary classical music (Ross). This means that they would have purchased a ticket in advance, they would have been seated, they would hear other music potentially before and after this piece, etc. Notably, they would have been expected to follow traditional concert etiquette, which includes being silent. However, absolute silence can never be achieved, even if all the people in the room tried their hardest to be silent. John Cage himself was partially inspired to compose the piece after visiting an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951 (Reilly). The chamber was built as to prevent as much sound as possible from being heard within the room; however, he heard two sounds in the room, a high one and a low one. He was later told that the high sound was his nervous system, and the low sound was his blood flowing. About the experience, he later wrote "Try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. One need not fear for the future of music" (Cage 7).

Thus, during the premiere performance of 4'33", there were "rules" set- the piano player is not to play the piano, and the audience is expected to remain as silent as possible. The artwork is "allowed" to be whatever can happen as long as those rules are followed- there are often stifled coughs, or the sounds of people adjusting themselves in their seats during the recordings of the piece. 4'33" has also been recorded in a wide variety of locations since then, including busy street corners where lots of environmental sounds are expected to make their way into the performance (Brown).

In his book about 4'33", the composer Kyle Gann calls the piece "an act of *framing*, of

enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music” (Gann 2). This "act of framing" is done in other artworks as well- indeterminate music has a rich history, going at least as far back as 1757 with the "Musikalisches Würfelspiel" or the "musical dice-game" (Nierhaus). This was a set of instructions that allowed one to create one of 45,949,729,863,572,161 similar yet unique waltzes, using dice (Nierhaus). The Musikalisches Würfelspiel cannot be evaluated in exactly the same way that music can be. Rather, it can be evaluated as a *generator* of music. The Musikalisches Würfelspiel is a procedure, a set of instructions or "rules" that can be followed in order to generate music.

The procedural generation of art, as in the Musikalisches Würfelspiel, is something that has appeared consistently in the realm of video gaming for decades. "Roguelike games" are a genre of video games that generally consist of exploring a procedurally generated dungeon of sorts, with each play being different than the last because the rooms created, the items available to you, the enemies you encounter, and the exact attributes of your character are often randomized. The genre derives its name from the 1980 computer game by Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman titled "Rogue" (Berlin Interpretation).

Roguelike games are an excellent example of an artwork in which one of the primary components upon which it is evaluated is the *frame* that the artists have created via their procedural generation algorithms. When talking about a game like Rogue, it makes less sense to say that "this dungeon is a well-designed dungeon", than to say "this game generates well-designed dungeons". The game is evaluated based on what it *can be*, rather than what it always *is*. If the realm of possible outcomes is too narrow, than the game will get boring and repetitive too quickly. If the realm of possible outcomes is too wide, or poorly designed, than many

dungeons that are created might not be fun or even playable.

Roguelike games can be praised for doing things that were not explicitly expected or created by the developers. For instance, if the location of enemies is determined on an enemy by enemy basis, two very different enemies might end up being generated very close to each other, and it may present a unique challenge that was never anticipated by the game designer (Galloway). Unanticipated interactions between game elements is perhaps no better exemplified than by the free game that began development in 2002, titled *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress*, more commonly known simply as *Dwarf Fortress*.

Dwarf Fortress is a roguelike game created by Tarn and Zach Adams. The developers state on their website that the "long-term goal is to create a fantasy world simulator in which it is possible to take part in a rich history, occupying a variety of roles through the course of several games" (Development, *Bay 12 Games*). The "rich history" that they mention is something that is created via an extremely complex and vast amount of code that procedurally generates locations, historical figures, famous events, and artifacts of note. Not only would the amount of variance in these creations be impossible for a human being to create by hand in some way, without procedural generation, but the game also allows the player to influence these creations and to make new ones for them to stumble upon in a later play-through. For example, if you have a dwarf that becomes an excellent stonemason, and the dwarf crafts a throne of "legendary beauty", in other playthroughs, you may have dwarves come to your fortress that tell stories of the throne and its beauty. They may even have some details about the throne wrong, due to their own memories not being perfect, or due to them not having seen the throne themselves, but rather having heard about the throne from another dwarf.

What does *Dwarf Fortress* and its procedural generation and complex interaction

between game elements have to do with art as we understand it though? Well, *Dwarf Fortress* is like *4'33"* in that a nearly limitless amount of possibilities can be "framed" within the artwork. In the case of *Dwarf Fortress*, there is an extremely high number of possible things that can happen within the game, and in *4'33"*, there are as many "variations" of the performance as there are possibilities of combinations of sounds that occur in the background of the recording. Clive Barker, British horror novelist and writer-director of *Hellraiser* praises video games for their ability to be malleable (by the player), and also for their ability to portray a wide variety of potential outcomes. In a speech at the Hollywood and Games Summit, Barker suggests that art in this form, games that generate a wide variety of potential outcomes create "a world where the player gets to go through every emotional journey available. That is art. Offering that to people is art" (Ebert, *Games vs. Art, Ebert vs. Barker*).

Barker made this statement in response to multiple articles by the acclaimed film critic, Roger Ebert, who had said first that games categorically could never be art, and later that "never is a long, long time", and rather that "no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form" (Ebert, *Video Games Can Never Be Art*). Ebert questioned Barker's praise of the malleability and potentiality of video gaming :

"If you can go through 'every emotional journey available,' doesn't that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices. If next time, I have Romeo and Juliet go through the story naked and standing on their hands, would that be way cool, or what?" (Ebert, *Games vs. Art, Ebert vs. Barker*)

Here, I believe that Ebert implies something about drama incorrectly, and he approaches the evaluation of video games from a particular and biased perspective. Ebert's use of the term "inevitable conclusion" and his rejection of the idea that there are choices made by the audience

involving the reception of drama completely dismisses the work of those involved in the production of a play, and even the "work" done by the audience in the viewing of the play.

I believe that skilled actors, directors, set designers, costume designers, and other contributors to the production of a play would most definitely say that they have a "smorgasbord of choices" to make in their presentation of a play. No doubt, Shakespeare can be said to have written the play, *Romeo and Juliet*, but to suggest that he had (or more absurdly, currently has) complete and finite control of every aspect of the performance is incorrect. Individual actors make choices about how they are to deliver their lines, and how they are to move on stage. Set designers make decisions about the placement of props, the way that scenes will be changed, the lighting involved, etc. It is accepted by playwrights that what they write down, in terms of lines, stage directions, descriptions of scenes, etc. will necessarily be interpreted and expressed by those that are creating the individual performances of the play.

It could be argued that the amount of deviation between various performances of a play is small enough as to be negligible, but that seems to be at odds with the current state of the entertainment industry. There is a reason that many local theater groups perform for free, and that Broadway performances can be quite costly. When audience members deliberately choose to seek out particular performances of a play or musical, over other options, they are showing that when presented with a "smorgasbord of choices" to make concerning a performance, they believe that some theater groups are going to make better choices in some way.

These types of choices that I have described have thus far been made entirely by the theater group, rather than the audience. In video games, rather than viewing different "versions" of a play as they differ from theater to theater, a player views different "versions" by making different decisions within the game as they play it. Quite often, a video game publishing

company will distribute one version of the game to everyone individually, and the actual software that each player runs will be essentially identical to every other player's. On the surface, this can seem like an extremely different model, and it seems that this model is more along the lines of what Ebert is criticizing.

I don't believe that making a distinction between "versions" that performers, costume designers, set designers, directors, etc. make and "versions" that an audience makes in the way that they interpret, create, or otherwise influence entirely makes sense, though. The audience's role in the artwork cannot be dismissed.

The "audience's limitations", as described earlier by Collingwood in *The Principles of Art*, may refer to prior knowledge that the audience may be assumed to have or to not have (Collingwood 311). A successful artist will not create art that is unintelligible to their audience, and claim that it is simply "too profound" for their audience to understand. Collingwood goes on to describe how the anticipation of the audience's "endless quest" for understanding can be taken into account by the artist, before the creation of the art: "Instead of conceiving himself as a mystagogue, leading his audience as far as it can follow along the dark and difficult paths of his own mind, he will conceive himself as his audience's spokesman, saying for it the things it wants to say but cannot say unaided. Instead of setting up for the great man who (as Hegel said) imposes upon the world the task of understanding him, he will be a humbler person, imposing upon himself the task of understanding his world, and thus enabling it to understand itself" (Collingwood, 311-312).

Collingwood was not able to refer to video games in his book, as they had not been invented yet. However, I believe that his words apply to games as well. Working within or around an audience's limitations is something applicable to all art; in video gaming, much of the

artist's work could be described as creating limitations. Just as *4'33"* is shaped by the audience's limitations, created by "rules" enforced by social custom, a game like *Dwarf Fortress* is shaped by the limitations of the software. *Dwarf Fortress* is not primarily praised for "what is there" - the visual elements are entirely text based, and there is only a small amount of music that comes with the software. The game is praised more so for its ability to function as a "sandbox style game", a set of tools and limitations that allows the player a great deal of freedom and choice in how they choose to work with those limitations. Understanding choices that a player can make within the limitations set by the rules of the game is a fundamental part of our understanding of "games". Analyzing the behaviour that results from a player following the rules of a game, and what that experience is like, is the nature of game reviews.

Art can reasonably be understood in a very similar way. Art presents information to us, and our behavior in response to that information is often the subject of art criticism. It can be said to have succeeded at art because it holds our attention, or engages us. It can be judged in regards to the moral nature of the behavior that it produces in the audience (Melissinos). Ebert suggests consistently in his articles about video games as art that he believes in the value to our society that art holds due to the ways in which it improves the human condition in some way (Ebert, *Okay Kids, Play On My Lawn*). This is a line of thinking that makes sense intuitively, and it has roots in much earlier philosophical theories of art. In his essay, "*What is Art?*", Leo Tolstoy writes that art "...is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity" (Tolstoy 4). Ebert has a more individualist approach to the idea, but he shows a similar attitude when he writes that, "The real question is, do we as their consumers become more or less complex, thoughtful, insightful, witty, empathetic, intelligent, philosophical

(and so on) by experiencing them? Something may be excellent *as itself*, and yet be ultimately worthless" (Ebert, *Games vs. Art, Ebert vs. Barker*).

Are games able to make us more complex, thoughtful, insightful, witty, etc.? It can be difficult to feel this way when looking at games that are not much but "point and shoot in many variations and plotlines", as Ebert believes are common (Ebert, *Games can never be art*). It is difficult to argue that games do not influence our behavior in some way, because the actual act of playing a game can be considered "behavior" that is influenced. In what ways do games change our behavior "outside of the game", in such a way that they might progress humanity or lead individuals to successful lives, as Ebert and Tolstoy suggest is needed for art to succeed?

The way that games are interactive and focused on the players' behavior within them is what they are valued for. In fact, the Museum of Modern Art selected 14 video games to be part of their collection, as art, in 2012, partially due to the behavior that some games incite in the players. The Huffington Post wrote in an article about the acquisitions, that "Museum officials selected games for the collection after evaluating the work based on 'behavior (the behavior a game elicits from a player), aesthetics, space (physical environments built by code) and time" (Grenoble).

The behavior that games encourage is not just limited to raw decisions made in the game, though. Just like traditional forms of art, games can influence our behavior outside of the artwork, and change fundamental things about ourselves. It can be difficult to understand how something like *Pac-Man* can be a serious influence on someone, but the gaming world is certainly not devoid of games that function as art in the way that they "stay with us" after playing them, and the way that they change our worldviews (Simmons). *The Last of Us*, *That Dragon*, *Cancer*, and empathy games as an entire genre have been extremely powerful works of art that

some people have used to gain a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Simmons).

Another reason that art is encouraged to some degree is that it has often served the function as an "outlet" for the artist. Art is made as a way to express emotions, convey messages, and a way of organizing thoughts and ideas in such a way that is seen as beneficial towards the artist. Viewing art through the lens of an expressionist, the artists has emotions that are expressed through art. Those emotions are intended to manifest within the audience as a result of viewing the artwork. Leo Tolstoy, as an expressionist himself, thought this act of "infecting" another with your emotions via expression in art was actually a fundamental requirement of art. He stated this in his 1899 essay, *What is Art?*:

"The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it...and it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based" (Tolstoy 1)

This process of experiencing another person's emotions through artwork is consistently praised as a reason to value art (Oliver). By Tolstoy's way of thinking, if something is intended to be art, it must succeed in some way to transfer feeling and emotion to someone else, and that that process is a good thing. Art, by succeeding as art, can be a way to better our society. For games to have the label of "art", they would need to be able to function as expressions of emotion that others can receive by seeing, hearing, or otherwise experiencing. This suggests that "art" as a title to something is an honor or entitled to some level of respect. This respect is shown in the way that we treat art, particularly in formal institutions of art. There are a number of

reasons that our behavior towards artworks is typically different than our behavior towards other things. For example, artwork in a museum generally cannot be touched by the public.

A desk in your home is understood to be something that you can use to write on, or to eat on, or to otherwise use for very practical purposes. This is not something that is typically permissible of something that is called art. If the same table were in a museum on display, it would be seen as disrespectful or disruptive of the artwork. The same action when applied to art and non-art is viewed in very different ways, because of the "status" of something being considered art. By succeeding in being a means of expression for the game designer, through which they convey and induce emotions in another individual, "games" would earn the privilege of being respected in a similar way.

It should also be noted that the way in which we "respect" art is different depending on the medium and the circumstances. We do not have symphonies in art museums, but there are other ways that music can be shown respect as art.

How do video games function as an expressive outlet for the artist, and can these expressions of emotion "infect" the players of the game successfully? It is relatively easy to find examples of games producing emotions within their players. The most common example is the general feeling of satisfaction, pride, confidence, etc. in winning a game. Those emotions are not easily traceable back to the artist, however- it would be like saying a glass of water is art because someone was happy when you gave it to them.

How can games be the outlet of expression, and can whatever emotions are expressed be transferred to another person in the way that Tolstoy reveres? I believe that many games that are narrative-driven can most definitely do this. Many modern, successful video games from well recognized publishers, such as *The Last of Us* and the *Bioshock* series, are well known for their

emotional impact (Grenoble). These games are often compared to movies, or TV series, because of the depth of the characters and the plot, and due to their ability to pique our interest and induce emotions within us (Grenoble).

The comparisons drawn between those games and movies make another interesting point. Many games use in-game movies, called cutscenes, to progress the plot and develop the characters. With many games, it is possible to watch all of the cutscenes in order, without "playing" the game in any way, and to be told an interesting story and possibly presented with what would normally be an entertaining and interesting film. If those cutscenes were displayed at a movie theater, without the game ever being produced or released, it would likely be called a "movie" by those attending the film. Does the addition of what we call "gameplay" in between those cutscenes somehow negate that previous label of "movie" (and therefore, art)?

Ebert's comment about a game in which *Romeo and Juliet* is recreated, but with the characters naked walking on their hands, seems to be a criticism of the inclusion of "choice" in video games. I don't think that he would argue that *Romeo and Juliet* was somehow not "art" if the original play did in fact call for the actors to be naked and walking on their hands. It certainly might not be the respected masterpiece that it is today, but it would still be called "art" by most—it isn't what the choices actually *are*, as much as it is about who is making those choices. Ebert's use of the word art, as shown in his articles about games not being art, demonstrates that he sees art as something that involves choices by the artist, but not by the audience.

I don't believe it is fair for us to discredit games as art because of the inclusion of choice by the audience, though. The audience always has choices in regards to art; even if that choice is simply to look at the art in the first place. We are constantly met with decisions about where to focus our attention, what angle to view the artwork from, or even less obvious choices such as

whether we clap at the end of it or not. These choices shape our experiences with the artwork: choosing to watch what the characters in the background of a stage performance are doing, as opposed to watching the character delivering an important monologue, will yield a dramatically different experience. I believe that when art is created, it is generally made with the understanding by the artist that the audience will have some degree of choice or interaction with regards to how they experience the art. Painters recognize that their painting may be viewed from the left side or the right side, and work within that understanding. Game designers crafting the rules of a game will recognize what options they are giving the player, and will seek to craft a successful artistic experience that accounts for the player having a degree of control and choice in the experience- painters, playwrights, movie directors, sculptors, and others are already doing the same with their artworks.

The particular choices that the players of games make are often viewed in a similar way to how choices made by an artist are viewed. The choices are talked about, and their significance might be debated by the audience or by critics. Conversations may occur where audience members attempt to discern something about the artist, or the player of the game, based on the decisions they made in the creation of the artwork. People who feel that they "understand" the decisions made may cite possible reasons for those choices, or suggest "goals" that those choices were trying to achieve. This process of giving "reasons" or "explanations" is often the nature of the interpretation of art, and this interpretation is something that happens surrounding games as well. A variety of questions surrounding the object in question come about as part of this "interpretation", as listed on page 201 of *Principles of Interpreting Art*, by Terry Barrett:

What is it about? What does it represent or express? What does or did it mean to its maker? "What is it a part of? " Does it represent something? What are its references? What is it

responding to? Why did it come to be? How was it made? Within what tradition does it belong? "What ends did a given work possibly serve its maker(s) or patron(s)? What pleasures or satisfactions did it afford the person(s) responsible for it? What problems did it solve or allay? What needs did it relieve?" What does it mean to me? Does it affect my life? Does it change my view of the world?

In professional art criticism, there is an understanding that art "deserves" in some ways to have these questions asked of it. Dismissing the art immediately without considering how the art may have alternative interpretations, how it fit into the life of the artist, how it might impact audience members, etc. is seen as not giving the art a "fair chance". One who hasn't really delved into an artwork deep enough to ask or answer these questions could potentially be considered unqualified to have a "serious" opinion on the artwork. The "Feldman Method" is a common structure that many critiques of both art and games follow, whether purposefully or not (Oliver). This method includes providing a neutral description of the artwork, an analysis, an interpretation, and finally a judgement. During the analysis and interpretation of the artwork, questions about the artist, the purpose of the artwork, the goals of the artwork, the purpose of individual components of the artwork, and other similar questions are asked.

These are questions that motivate game criticism as well as criticism of traditional art forms. Take the following excerpts from a review of the board game *Freedom: The Underground Railroad* from the reviewer known as the "Rules Lawyer":

"...we are dealing with real events that affected real people. Academy Games did a great job of making sure that you know this throughout the entire game. And thematically, this game makes me feel *uncomfortable* for being part of a nation with such a dark time in our history. This *uncomfortable* feeling comes out most strongly for me when I look at the back of the card decks.

Each has an illustration of shackled hands with the appropriate epitaph: "Am I not a man and also a brother?"

"What Academy Games has achieved here is masterful, they have attempted to show the harsh realities of an ugly side of history and get you thinking about it, all in a very tasteful and honest way" (The Rules Lawyer)

The game is praised for the way that it induces feelings of uncomfortableness within the players, and that it challenges the player's worldviews and identities by presenting such a powerful and honest presentation of slavery in American history. The reviewer provides his interpretation and analysis of what he believes the game designers (Academy Games) were trying to do through the artwork. The game reviewer was praising the game for the same characteristics that other traditional forms of art are praised for. *12 Years a Slave*, a film about the same subject (American slavery), was praised for its success in presenting the same subject matter in a similar brutally honest fashion; "*12 Years a Slave* lets us stare at the primal sin of America with open eyes, and at moments it is hard to watch", as Owen Gleiberman of Entertainment Weekly said in a review of the film. The same review repeatedly implicitly suggests motives and reasons behind the presentation of the film by the author, just as motives or design decisions of a game designer would be questioned.

In the eyes of the "Rules Lawyer", comparing his positive criticism of *Freedom* to a positive criticism of *12 Years a Slave*, it would seem that *Freedom* has succeeded *as art*. If a game is able to do what "art" does, and to do it well, it is exceedingly difficult to argue that it is not art at all, to someone who has felt the impact and power of the game, as *artistic* impact and power. Indeed, examining a wide variety of critiques of games and art, games can be seen to have an effect on us that we cannot shake, similar to the way that a fan of classical music cannot

shake the beauty of a great symphony. In fact, as evidenced by the typically contrary responses that Rogert Ebert (someone that we might think of as having some level of "authority" on the matter of art) received to his articles declaring games non-art, it seems entirely fruitless to try to convince believers that games are *not* art. It is something that a lot of gamers will tell you that they *just know*, and whether or not they are "right" in some sense, if there are enough of them, then those that align with Roger Ebert will be powerless to stop their "misuse" of the English language, as they continue to call games "art".

Conclusion

Our understanding of "art", and of most concepts in general, is derived from our use of terms in relation to other terms and objects. When asked if "games" are "art", one will necessarily be answering the question by thinking of when those two terms are used, how they are used, and what possible connections can exist between the two ideas. The gradual creation of a conceptualization of "what art is" is done at every level; from the audience in their interpretation of art, to the artist as they create their work and relate it to themselves and the world, and to the institutions surrounding art in the way they preserve and display art.

The process that the term "art" undergoes during all of this is a process that the term "game" goes through as well. During the creation of games, the playing of games, the interpretation and critique of games, the preservation and study of games, among other things, "games" are spoken of, understood, and manipulated in such a way that resembles traditional forms of art.

The components of games: things such as choices, player interaction, varying outcomes, narrative elements, emotional impact, unintended actions, and role playing elements are all things that can be shown to already exist in traditional and commonly accepted forms of art. Furthermore, even elements of games that might not be present in existing art cannot be used as evidence of its inability to be art, as "art" as a concept has already been expanded and adapted significantly over time to include a variety of things that it did not previously include.

Games are being talked about "as if they are art", so much so that it becomes difficult to argue that they aren't just actually art themselves. As new games and industries surrounding games develop and push the boundaries of what is possible with a game, games continue to prove that they have the ability to succeed in a way that we might say that "art" succeeds. Games

are proving themselves to be capable of being *good art*, which requires them to be art in the first place.

Those that continue to disagree with the idea of games being art will continue to make their voices heard, although they are rapidly being drowned out by the numbers and types of people that are using the term "art" to refer to an idea that includes games. If games are not "art" yet, it seems that it is only a matter of time before they "become" art, and join the ranks of sculpture, drama, paintings, music, photography, dance, and everything else that typically finds itself being referred to as art.

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