

Aesthetics of Play: Locating the Ludic in Interactive Art

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The borders between games and art have always been blurred. Several theorists have made connections between art and play, from conceptualising the reception of art objects as an interpretative play (Gadamer) to arguing that computer games should be seen as an art form (Crawford). Phenomena such as interactive art on the one hand and ubiquitous games on the other make the connection between art and games even tighter. What is the essential difference between a game such as *Cruel 2 B Kind* and Allan Kaprow's 1967 happening *Self Service*? The most obvious difference is perhaps that the first one is termed a game while the latter is thought of as art. Does this difference in itself affect our perception of the phenomena? Kaprow himself realised that framing his works as play instead of art could make them more available to people, and more likely to affect people's lives. Could the act of framing them as games also make the works more "fun" to people, providing them with a more intensely engaging experience?

In my presentation, I will look at examples of interactive works of art that require the audience to engage with machines or technology much in the same way as we are required to when playing a computer game. Comparing these interactive experiences with the way intensely engaging interactive entertainment makes us forget time and place, I want to investigate further into the relationship between play and aesthetic experience and see if I can identify possible ludic elements in these works. My focus will be on one central characteristic of play, namely when it is experienced as "fun", or "intensely engaging", which, I want to argue, can be seen as the optimal state of play understood as a particular type of aesthetic experience.

My objective is to approach a definition of the aesthetics of play that applies primarily to the experience of play, and only secondarily to our usual perception of art. When Gadamer defined our aesthetic experience of art objects as an interpretative "play", a "movement to and fro" between ourselves and the object of art, a metaphorical, rather than literal, understanding of play is reflected. His metaphorical understanding of play

nevertheless includes the notion of an autonomous co-player or adversary present in the situation, capable of giving us the sensation that we are being played just as much as we are playing. However, since it is all taking place in our minds, also this co-player or adversary is imaginative at best. Gadamer's concept of play, thus, points to situations that are playful only in a restrictive, metaphorical sense. In order to understand play itself as an aesthetic experience a more literal understanding of the term is required.

Crawford, Chris. 1982. *The Art of Computer Game Design*. Available from <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Coverpage.html>

Cruel 2 B Kind. 2006. Game by Ian Bogost and Jane McGonigal. Description available from <http://www.cruelgame.com/>

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Kaprow, Allan. 1996 [1971, 1972, 1974]. "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I-III." In *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 97-147.

Self-Service. 1967. Happening by Allan Kaprow. Description available in Allan Kaprow. 1995 [1968]. "Self-Service: A Happening." In *Happenings and Other Acts*, edited by Mariellen R. Sandford. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 230-234.