

GAMES: FROM BLOCKBUSTER ENTERTAINMENT TO IRREVERENT EXPERIMENTS AND LOVELY BASTARDS

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This paper presents games as the post-cinematic cultural form. In the era of powerful accessible tools and internet enabled distribution, there are broad questions about what and why (high?) art is. What is clear is that the increasingly broad field of games already includes everything from blockbuster entertainment through serious games to 'games d'auteur' and experimental forms such as the five examples presented.



Propinquity: 2010–11, Lynn Hughes and Bart Simon with team, Custom wearable sensors and interactive visuals. Photo: Brian Li.

In the contemporary art world, even in the new media sector, games are often still caricatured as 'mere' entertainment - somehow essentially superficial. They are at best a minor mode or a trendy margin. But I am interested in games because I think they are absolutely central -formally, technologically, socially and artistically. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in the way that cinema was the central cultural form of the 20th century, games are the central form of our time. [1] This is not to downplay the persistence or importance of other inherited or current forms of art, it simply describes the contemporary, cultural state of affairs.

I would characterize the centrality of games in two ways.

The first is formal: current post-cinematic culture is the culture of the computer rather than the camera and, by implication, of active rather than passive relationships between audience and cultural product.

Computer and network-enabled interactive media imply a designed relationship between a closed, authorial shape (typical of, for example, painting, photo or cinema) and a more open, participative space. The participative space is still a designed one but is open, to one degree or another, to user choices or paths and may have emergent qualities - whether deliberate or unanticipated. [2] While this is generally true of interactive media, digital games articulate this relationship in a particularly explicit and clear way so that we can see them as the definitive form of interactive (digital) media.

A, perhaps more compelling, description of games puts the emphasis on the notion of exploring a system. Playing a game leads us to discover an underlying, constructed / designed system with its affordances and assumptions. [3] In a nutshell, games stem from, and point to, the world as increasingly systematized and they ultimately suggest that we need to be both aware and critical of the implicit, constructed and systemic nature of our realities. Here again games can articulate in complex, critical and compelling aesthetic ways, key contemporary preoccupations and situations.

Beyond these formal arguments, it seems essential to point out that people who dismiss games, or rather don't see them, almost always have little or no playing experience. Perhaps even more importantly, they have little idea of what the field of games looks like, even at this relatively early point in its development, in terms of breadth, depth and variety. To a significant extent this is simply because of the pace of development. Games have really developed over about the last forty years and the acceleration of development after 2000 was matched only by the revolution in approach and audience in the last two or three years. Most art critics and curators are over forty and so it is not surprising that they don't understand games. To them, games are the violent blockbusters that all look about the same, along with, perhaps, the recent addition of lightweight family entertainment for newer controllers like the Wii, Move and Kinect. A few curators are becoming aware that there is an art fringe to the game community. But art games or game art are just a margin of what is already a very rich, varied, artistically and socially exciting arena. It is already clear that the field of games will soon look very much like cinema in that it will include everything from blockbuster pure entertainment (like Hollywood, much of it repetitive and uninventive but occasionally something both commercial and good) through games d'auteur, to low budget independent and experimental genres.

Even a book like *Gamescenes* [4] makes the mistake of seeing the games industry as relatively monolithic and, while this may partly be because it was published in 2006, it is also because it looks at games through an art / not art lens that is essentially rooted in the fine or visual arts. In his introduction, Matteo Bittanti suggests that games cannot be art because they have too big an audience (!) [5] Like much cinema d'auteur and experimental cinema, independent and experimental games also (usually) have smaller audiences.

At the same time, games' very centrality is firmly linked to a digital culture that is radically questioning who makes art and for whom. As David Robbins suggests in his collection of essays called *The Velvet Grind* [6] the rapid and radical democratization of access to sophisticated networks and digital tools has already enabled a culture of 'amateur,' users and assorted individuals and groups, who even a decade ago would not have had access to the means to both sophisticated production and distribution. [7] In the games industry this is leading to rapid development of the independent sector as alternatives paths - from individual, to micro and small, development studios- become viable. Arguably more viable than the ungainly mega studios.

As a corollary to the increasing accessibility of sophisticated, affordable tools for creation and distribution, many polarities supported by more traditional social and cultural models are beginning to break

down. These include creator versus consumer, of course, but also high vs popular culture. Robbins also suggests that the quality and relative accessibility of new technology and distribution networks means that independent and experimental work is no longer condemned to obscurity. In fact he contends that we need to end the “tired theatre” of opposition between artists who cultivate exclusivity and look down on mainstream culture, and a mainstream industry that cultivates the illusion of speaking for the masses and encourages a suspicion of intellect and experimentation. [8] I would argue that many other traditional distinctions such as art vs design, object vs performance and virtual vs physical are also, at the very least increasingly unstable. Contemporary game culture participates in and provokes this fertile instability.

The visual part of this presentation will look at a few recent games that experiment in different ways with the game form. (Needless to say, in such short presentation it is difficult to suggest the variety and breadth that is currently emerging around games or to decide what angle to privilege). The four games I will present are: *Propinquity* (2010-11) a full body game by myself and Bart Simon, *B.U.T.T.ON* (2010) by Douglas Wilson of Die Gute Fabrik, *A Slow Year* (2010) by Ian Bogost and *Chain World* by Jason Rohrer (2010).

References and Notes:

1. *Bio “media” may dominate experimental culture relatively soon but this does change the fact that the game is replacing cinema-based culture.*
2. *Emergent qualities are unanticipated ones that arise due to the complexity of a system. Increasingly, emergence in games is seen as desirable.*
3. *See, Ian Bogost’s notion of procedural representation or Will Wright’s ideas about reverse engineering simulations.*
4. *Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta, eds., Gamescenes: Art in the Age of Videogames (Milan: Johan and Levi, 2006).*
5. *Bittanti and Quaranta, 8.*
6. *David Robbins, The Velvet Grind: Selected Essays, Interviews, Satires (1983-2005) (Zurich: JRP Ringier, Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2006), 287-312.*
7. *Ibid., 289–292.*
8. *Ibid., 288–289.*