

RE-CONCEPTUALISING THE PLAY-ELEMENT IN ELECTRONIC ART

OLLI LEINO

This paper seeks to clarify the ambiguities at the overlap of electronic art and computer games by reconceptualising the play-element evident in both as not only a set of stylistic and creative strategies which we might approximate as “playfulness” but also as a material affordance of a particular kind of audience engagement, which is referred to as “playability”.

INTRODUCTION

The technological make-up and interface conventions of many electronic artworks invite configurative audience practices which resemble those we are familiar with from the context of computer game play. Not unlike the players of computer games, audiences of electronic art can be invited to use, for example, a touchscreen, mouse, or other pointing devices to manipulate audiovisual representations on the screen, perhaps triggering a variety of spectacles along the way. In this light it is not surprising that some contemporary critics have seen it necessary to be concerned about the associations between play and media art. For example, at ISEA 2008, Daniel Palmer, in his paper *The Critical Ambivalence of Play in Media Art*, [9] concerned with media art’s “association with entertainment spectacle” suggested that if “media art aspires to be taken seriously by the broader contemporary art world, the links between media art, children and mass culture are fatal.” Not only do computer games have a certain stigma within the discourse of institutionalized new media art, but the description works also the opposite way. For example, on the online discussion fora devoted to the topic of computer gaming, “art games” is sometimes used as a derogatory euphemism.

While computer games and electronic art have many qualities in common, they are clearly two different cultural phenomena. However, given the hardships that await those who seek to define either (computer) games or (electronic) art, it is feasible here to consider any account of differences between the two as referring not to the qualities of the works themselves but to the institutional, economical, cultural and political conventions and practices that surround the creation, distribution and consumption of both computer games and electronic art. Instead of dwelling on the conventions that separate the phenomena, this paper attempts to see through them into the forms the “play-element” takes in both electronic art and computer games.

BEYOND THE CONFLATION OF PLAY AND ART

In Western thought, the concept of play has always been closely intertwined with that of art: it occupies a central role in many aesthetic theories and over the course of art history, various movements and traditions have made use of ideas of play in different forms. However, we must note that the play of light sought after by the impressionists, the playing of *Exquisite Corpse* by the Surrealists, and finally the activity of play as an engagement in an electronic artwork are all significantly different phenomena, which come together only in a benevolent colloquial application of the term “play”. Sutton-Smith, [11, pp 133-4] who attributes the origin of the conflation of art and play to the romantic parallel between children’s art and modern art manifested in the attempts to appreciate and emulate the “infantile innocence”,

suggests that the conflation obscures “whatever the true relationship between play and art actually is.” The conflation rightly suggests that some of the concepts we may associate with play, like some of those mentioned by Caillois; [2, pp 10-11] freedom, separatedness, uncertainty of outcome, and perception of alternate reality, seem all equally fitting for the descriptions of both artistic and ludic practices. However, if we stick to Caillois’ definition of play (ibid.), we find other concepts, such as non-productivity and rule-governedness, which seem to hold a slightly more marginal significance if applied to artistic practice.

While there certainly is enough evidence to claim that art and play are associated, it is important to bear in mind that the simple concept of “play” masks a variety of practices (some of which we would be better off conceptualizing through the notion of a game) and modes of experience not necessarily compatible with each other (cf. Malaby [8]) . Thus, addressing the play-element in electronic art requires more specificity than what can be attained by understanding “play” in terms of the lowest common denominator in all examples fitting under the umbrella of play and art intertwined. Pursuing this specificity, I shall in the following distinguish between playful strategies and playability, where with strategies I refer to the decisions that an artist makes in the process of creating a work.

PLAYFUL STRATEGIES

Among what we might call playful strategies we have play, or perhaps more accurately playfulness, as a referring to a work’s theme or style. Consider for example the impressionists depicting the ‘play of light’, where the players, assuming whose involvement is a precondition for any significant application of the notion of play, appear as embedded in the work: neither the artist nor the audience are playing, but the work can be described as representing some kind of play (cf. Sutton-Smith [11, pp 135-47]). In addition to play as a thematic metaphor, we can identify creative methods that fall under the umbrella of playful strategies. Here the artist-player’s choices precede the work, and thus the play is not ‘inside’ the work. Consider *Exquisite Corpse*, the Surrealist drawing-game, as an example of a creative method, users of which are engaged in an activity resembling a game, which in the end produces an outcome identifiable as a discreet work.

This description can be applied also on the tradition of generative art, which Gallanter [4] describes as a practice making use of a procedural system which when set into motion assumes a degree of autonomy and produces a work of art. Generative art, in terms of its implementation of rule-based like principles is not unlike surrealist games – the significant difference being however that the procedural system may not need intervention but can itself occupy the position of a player. However, the emphasis on the outcome challenges the applicability of the notion of “play” for the description of creative methods. Following Caillois, [2, pp 43-55] we may observe that the more emphasis we place on the outcome of the game/play activity, the further the activity moves toward its “corruption.” Hence any rationale for addressing it as “play” instead of for example as a value-creating strategy diminishes. It seems that the game-like creative methods that are geared towards producing a discrete result supposed to sustain hermeneutic projects can be distinguished from game/play per se, in which the process itself is the primary locus of experienced significance.

This does not mean simply that some works require a focus on the process in order to be understood. Consider, for example, Allan Kaprow’s happenings. In *Household* (1964), a group of women were asked to lick jam off a car. To make any sense of *Household*, we must begin with the process, as there is no ob-

ject to analyse, but we will not find the locus of significance within the process of the participatory performance of *Household*, but somewhere on the fringe between the process and the discourses surrounding it, including those of theatre and audience. Consider *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984): while it can be subjected to a multitude of interpretations, inherent significance unfolds from process of playing *Tetris* as it gets underway. The player is presented with a condition that her survival depends on her ability to keep the stack of falling blocks from reaching the top of the container. The *Tetris* artifact evaluates the player's performance and decides whether the playing of the game should end or continue. At will, the player, who we assume is voluntary and thus desires to be a play, can extract a number of value assertions from her condition: for example, constructing unbroken lines of squares at the bottom is good as it keeps the stack from reaching the top thus the player from ending up in the undesirable state of 'game over.'

FAILURE AND INTERSUBJECTIVE SIGNIFICANCE IN PLAY

To illustrate the idea of locus of significance within the process, let us imagine *Tetris* without the possibility of failure, allowing the heap of blocks to rise up indefinitely. From the condition of the player of this game we could not extract the kind of assertions mentioned above. Seeing any difference between the significances of constructing broken or unbroken lines using this or that colour would require reference to outside *Tetris*, not unlike making sense of *Household* requires looking at outside the performance. Playing the ordinary *Tetris*, we soon find out that the colours mean nothing and unbroken lines are good. Hence, we observe that if the possibility of failure is removed, the locus of significance moves outside the process.

The failure here is not a purely subjective failure, as in a failure to interpret or to appreciate. There are works which invite some kind of 'mental play' in their audiences – regardless whether we consider it as "aesthetic play" or as solving a crime mystery depicted in a novel. We can consider these works, like *Tetris*, as using play as a means to engage their audiences, as suggested by Sutton-Smith [11, p.141] regarding "literature of nonsense and humor". Reader of such works, is, according to Sutton-Smith, "immediately at play in an imaginary world of textually incongruous transformations." However, regardless of how we define play, we can observe that the existence of a possibility for a failure on the audience's part distinguishes between the ways in which *Tetris* and a novel use play to engage their audiences: the condition of a reader of a book does not include the risk that some choices lead to not being able to continue reading. Hence, perhaps works which incite 'mental play' would be better referred to as works exemplifying playful strategies.

As observed before, many new media artworks invite input from their audience, perhaps through an interface easily associated with computer games. Often, the audience's choices have consequences in what they see as output from the work. This is similar to how computer games work. We might consider the audience engaged in this activity of input-output as 'participating' or 'performing'. Again, by looking at the kinds of failures afforded we can distinguish these participatory and/or performative phenomena from each other. The failure in *Tetris* discussed previously is not a failure defined primarily by the social reception situation - it is not an ambiguous failure to behave or to use something 'properly,' which might happen in the input-output-situation around a participatory/performative artwork. While the possibility of this kind of failure creates a tension that perhaps contributes to the attraction of "performativity" and/or "participation" in the context of electronic art, it is important to observe that the standards by which the audience's performance or participation are measured are as ambiguous as those suggest-

ing that one interpretation of a novel is better than another. If an artwork is able to evaluate the audience's performance, and decide based on this evaluation whether the audience should be allowed to continue interacting with the work, we can find a more descriptive term with which to refer to it than simply 'participatory' or 'performative'. This term is, I suggest, playability, considered as an affordance in the work.

PLAYABILITY AS AN AFFORDANCE

Playability refers to a work's ability to effect successes and failures on its voluntary users. The criteria for distinguishing a successes from failures are contained in the work itself, not unlike in an "ergodic artwork" which Aarseth [1, p.179] defines as one "that in a material sense includes the rules for its own use, a work that has certain requirements built in that automatically distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful users." However, when referring to computerized forms of play, it makes less sense to talk about rules, as they exist in computer games only through a benevolent reading, at least if we consider rules as they exist in traditional games – as, for example like Huizinga [6, p.8] suggests, something the players have to remember in order to play. If we instead understand these playable artefacts as endowing their audiences with a degree of freedom while simultaneously making the audience responsible for this freedom, we can describe the distinction between a success and a failure with no reference to rules. Failure is the player's choice that led to the material impossibility of continuing playing, and success is her privilege of subjecting her choices to be evaluated by the artefact again. This is what I have elsewhere [7] referred to as the gameplay condition. Thus, in addition to playful strategies, we can establish the concept of playability, referring to a work's affordance of being played. Playability does not exclude performance: the kinds of failures associated with 'performance' and 'participation' and defined by the reception situation, are possible around playable works, which can also incite 'mental play'.

The notion of playability allows distinguishing between works which at a first glance might seem similar – those which invite participation, performance, interactivity, or navigation, and those in which the activity, whether playful or not, is evaluated by the work as described previously. Similar specificity is brought by the notion of playability to the application of the term "navigation" to describe that which goes on between a work and its audience. It allows us to distinguish between works that invite us to navigate merely for the sake of "exploring" the work, and those which specify where to go. The former works, while exemplifying playful strategies, are not playable, unlike the latter. Similarly, while the popular online game *Farmville* (Zynga 2009) certainly is playful in terms of its audiovisual appearance, it does not contain a possibility of failure and is thus not playable. Consider also the Japanese *Konapun* toy set, which we might read as a simulation of cooking à la Frasca [3]: among the behaviours retained from the original activity are for example mixing of ingredients inside containers and setting the finished products on a plate. The standard by which the user's performance is evaluated is arbitrary. A parent might tell a child that her performance was superb even though the dish hardly resembles the one depicted on the box of the *Konapun* set. In contrast, another cooking simulation, *Cooking Mama* (Office Create 2006), is much less ambiguous: not only the player gets a score and Mama either smiles or her eyes glow in fiery red, but unsuccessful cooking attempts prevent the player from advancing in the game while successful dishes unlock new recipes. While both *Konapun* and *Cooking Mama* are simulations, *Konapun* is playful, but not playable, whereas *Cooking Mama* is both.

While the idea of a possibility of failure leading to a locus of significance being within the process itself poses certain challenges for the interpretation of playable works. Previously I have mentioned that the colours of *Tetris* blocks mean nothing, while simultaneously suggesting that if there was no possibility

for failure, we would have to refer to outside *Tetris* to find out whether the blocks have any significance. We may observe that playable works contain the standards for their own interpretation, but in doing so we must remember that the interpretation for which standards are contained is not the only interpretation to be made. Instead of referring explicitly to 'meaning,' perhaps the observation about the colours of blocks in *Tetris* would be better formulated as: treating blocks of different colours differently would not help the player to survive in the game. However, it is important to bear in mind that a successful pragmatic, or, survivalist interpretation of what is going on in a game is a precondition for any interpretation about the game's significance in the larger socio-cultural context. Exploring the consequences of one's choices in relation to failure is necessary before one is able to see why for example *The Marriage* (Humble 2007) has its name.

Playability prescribes a sense of purpose to which any kinds of interactivities (participation, selection, performance, navigation, exploration etc) the work may afford are subordinated. Hence, from the perspective of playability, the actions available for the user of an interactive artwork appear sometimes rather purposeless, not unlike actions in a game of Tetris from which the possibility of failure was remove. While we must note well that the domain to which the concept of playability refers is not the only domain of experienced significance in the reception situation, perhaps the generation of new media art audiences who have grown up with computer games are accustomed to expecting intrinsic significance from the works with which they interact.

CONCLUSIONS

In relation to both Palmer's concern about the links between entertainment spectacle and media we can observe that "playfulness" and "playability" are two separate phenomena, whose coexistence in either electronic art or computer games is accidental rather than essential. Based on what has been said, it should be possible to come up with a definition of "playable (art)works", those from which all the playful "childish" elements are weeded out but which nevertheless subject their users to a gameplay condition. However, assumedly the definition and that at which it would point would be fairly conventional.

While distinguishing playfulness and playability is analytically sensible, it is not to impose a normative agenda of keeping them separate. Especially interesting are those examples in which playfulness as an artistic strategy or a thematic metaphor manifests itself through playability. These we can, following Sutton-Smith [11, pp 147-8], consider as "meta-play", defined as "that which plays with normal expectations of play itself". Galloway's [5, pp 107-126] six strategies for "counter-gaming" are relevant in terms of meta-play, outlining a playing field for meta-play on the conventions of computer games. Another interesting conflation of the playful with the playable is what Ryan [10] calls "dysfunctionality", taking variety of forms. As an example of "politically motivated dysfunctionality", Ryan cites *September 12th* (Newsgaming.com 2005), a game which makes a point by not being winnable. Also Sicart & Wilson's [12] abusive game design strategies, which seek to highlight "the dialogic relation between player and designer" through placing the player in an awkward and/or uncomfortable position, deserve attention as forms of meta-play. In relation to the gaming public's tendency to downplay the so-called art games, we can only remark that while in terms of expressive possibilities of the media, there is room for a variety of artistic strategies for negotiating the relationships between playfulness and playability, the gamers' expectations might sometimes clash with the artistic sensibility of stirring the old in search for the new.

References and Notes:

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