

2013

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Recommended Citation

Goodlander, Georgina and Mansfield, Michael (2013) "Press Start: Video Games in an Art Museum," *Journal of Interactive Humanities*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.14448/jih.01.0004

Available at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/jih/vol1/iss1/4>

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Press Start: Video Games in an Art Museum

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Abstract

Art museums can be complex, confounding, boring, exciting, absurd, and breathtaking. They can be sad, enlightening, hurtful, alive, dead, mainstream and avant-garde. They can, at once, be all of these things. Or they can be any one of these things separately. Museums can be more. Art museums might provide a place for contemplation, a place for social commentary, a place for political discourse, a place for lunch. They can identify us, deconstruct us, or illuminate our experiences for everyone. They can be an index for the health and vibrancy of our culture and our time. The Smithsonian American Art Museum provides such an index. American Art's collections and exhibitions compile the permanent record of our aspirations, character and imagination. The museum has been a leader in identifying and collecting significant and sometimes unconventional aspects of American visual expression. One of the more vibrant artistic expressions of late, (not only nationally, but globally), has been in and around video gaming. Video games are an undeniably important contributor to our cultural discourse. They cannot be marginalized because they might be commercial, popular, or competitive. The creative and artistic expressions captured in video games are vital to our cultural heritage. Video games are art.

Key Words

Video Game, Art, Museum

Video Games Belong in an Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum has an active time-based media arts program [1]. We have been looking closely at the collection, preservation, and display of these complex, creative works and how they fit into our mission of telling America's stories through its art. The museum categorizes time-based media arts as any material that exhibits a changing observable state. Whether it is a videotape,

an electronic work, or an interactive virtual space, there are variable processes that occur over time exhibited within the artwork. Film and video are obvious examples, but orchestral scores and scripts for performances would also be described as 'time-based' art. Born-digital and code-based works fall into this category quite nicely. Coding itself can be poetic, but the performance of code can make art. Many contemporary artists have employed "scripts" or sets of instructions to describe interactions between people and conceptual ideas. Nam June Paik's *Symphony for 20 Rooms* (1961) [2], for example, outlines a series of sounds and events in different rooms. The participating audience completes the

performance by moving through the rooms and discovering the sounds. Artworks like this are not necessarily designed or composed to be experienced in any one specified fashion. The artist sets the stage for the performance, but the participant is a co-creator, making decisions and often manipulating the rules as the experience unfolds. This is not unlike video games. Game designers create a virtual space and a set of encounters. The player activates this space as a participant, one subject to the rules (or at least some of the rules) of a new environment but with the freedom to make decisions that define their personal involvement.

All The Virtual World's a Stage. Actors Wanted

Video games cast three “characters:” the game designer, the game mechanics, and the player [3]. As in other forms of media art, the designer creates the world and outlines a narrative (even games with no overt storyline have some kind of narrative that describes what happens between the beginning and the end of the experience). The game’s mechanics include the rules and structure of the game, describing how the player performs in the environment, and setting limits or boundaries for that participation. Players complete the script by virtually writing it in real time as they play. In this way, a video game can be viewed as a performance space and the player as the performer; the art happens when someone activates the space. Players physically, emotionally, and intellectually respond to, enliven, interact with, and affect the game as it happens. It is the relationships between the designer, the game, and the player that makes video games a compelling new mode of creative expression.

***The Art of Video Games* exhibition**

Video games as a medium are relatively young. Electronic games can be traced back to the late

1950s when Willy Higinbotham, a scientist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, programmed an oscilloscope to play an interactive tennis game [4]. In 1961, Steve Russell programmed the game *Spacewar* on MIT’s PDP-1 computer. In 1967, Bill Rusch and Ralph Baer created a ping-pong/hockey game that could be played on a television, sold later as *Odyssey* [5]. And in the early 1970s, Al Alcorn developed *Pong* while working with Nolan Bushnell at Atari [6]. The Atari Video Computer System (VCS), later known as the Atari 2600, was the first major consumer console that allowed players to experience a variety of games through a single system by inserting different ROM cartridges.¹ Today, less than 40 years after the release of the Atari VCS, it is clear that video games have continued their dramatic evolution. The capabilities of contemporary video games and computer gaming systems are far beyond anything the early programmers and engineers could have imagined.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum recognizes that video games are playing an important role in the larger story of visual art. The compressed evolution of video games, the speed at which they have progressed and become ubiquitous in our media culture, warrants considerable attention. And it is notable – or at least unique – that many pioneers of the medium are still alive and working today. In 2009, we started work on an exhibition that begins to tell this story. The *Art of Video Games* was on view at the museum from March 16 through September 30, 2012, and is now partway through a ten-city national tour. The exhibition explores the evolution of the medium over the past four decades, includes interviews with the artists (game designers, writers, programmers, musicians, etc.), and takes a closer look

1 The Fairchild Channel F was actually the first system with interchangeable ROM cartridges, but the Atari VCS quickly surpassed it with the quality and variety of games (<http://www.cedmagic.com/history/fairchild-channel-f.html>).

at this innovative new art form that is attracting some of the best and brightest creative minds today [7][8].

Inviting Participation

“I want this exhibition to include the collective voice of the video game world, which is not limited to the developers, designers and artists but also the game players. It is important to me that when gamers visit the exhibition, they find the experiences that most matter to them.” Chris Melissinos, guest curator [9].

If the gamer is a key voice in the video game, then the gamer community should have a key place in the exhibition. With such a novel medium it was important to include contributions from the community, to show that we were listening, not dictating [10]. The museum worked with guest curator Chris Melissinos and an advisory group to compile a pool of 240 video games that spanned twenty game systems and four broadly-defined game genres. We launched a voting website in February 2011 and invited the public to select from the pool 80 titles that would be included in the exhibition. One hundred and nineteen thousand people in 175 countries cast more than 3.7 million votes during the five weeks that the voting was open [11]. This was an overwhelming response, but the truly interesting outcome of the process occurred on the website’s discussion forum. Over 700 comments (the longest of which was 1,300 words!) clearly show that in addition to voting, gamers were thinking about whether video games should be considered art, whether they have a place in a museum, and who should be responsible for making these decisions. Members of this community (which included many people who might not otherwise engage in conversation with an art museum) were thinking critically about the role of museums in society and, perhaps even more importantly, how museums and

art relate to their lives. Highlights included:

“I hope that people remember to also vote based on more than the fun factor or difficulty of a game and instead vote on it as if it were art.” (S. Patterson)

“[The voting process] raises important questions about ‘who owns the art,’ and if user generated content is ‘free’ enough to be called independent works of art. This further leads to questions about the relationship between quality and art, and also what criterias (sic) must a game have to fulfill the art standard.” (E. Danielsen)

“It doesn’t matter if the games here had better graphics. That isn’t what games are about. [It should be about] the true innovators of the genre.” (Robby)

“How can you hope to accurately represent this subject by going about it in this way, as opposed to allowing each individual to submit their own opinions?” (Anthony)

“I am glad the Smithsonian of all places asked normal people to help out.” (Bt1295) [12]

The 80 winning games formed just one part of the exhibition. In addition, there was a variety of concept art² and supporting ephemera as well as five games available for visitors to play (*Pac-Man*, *Super Mario Brothers*, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Myst*, and *Flower*) that each represented influential, innovative techniques in game creation.

² Concept art is art created to convey a visual representation of an idea.

Balancing Act

Implementing *The Art of Video Games* came with many challenges. The biggest of these was finding the right balance between adequately representing the immensity of this new field and presenting rich, meaningful content. This was the first major art exhibition in the United States to focus on the entire video game experience as an artwork, not just the concept art or graphics. We felt a responsibility to include the broadest feasible survey of the medium while simultaneously presenting coherent and focused interpretation. As a result, the *New York Times* review stated:

“‘The Art of Video Games’ does not represent the brash young cultural newcomer kicking in the doors of officialdom, belching loudly and declaring that he is taking over. Rather, it represents a humble penitent carefully putting on his least-threatening outfit and being allowed to take a place in the corner.” [13]

While negative in part, this review also recognized that compromises were necessary to mount a successful exhibition. The exhibition itself and supporting research identify video games as a significant new mode of expression, one that can be performed across cultures and that touches on so many aspects of the human experience. As a museum expressly committed to representing our creative character, we felt compelled to use a broad brush in setting the stage for future – and much deeper – investigations into the ways in which the medium is explored. *The Art of Video Games* acts as a kind of opening bell. Following rounds will no doubt investigate specific aspects of the past, present and future of video games as an artist’s medium, or dig deeper into the creative process of developing a single video game from the initial spark of an idea to the completed experience. This is such completely

unexplored territory and there is so much more ground to cover.

Commitment to the Medium

The Art of Video Games exhibition is a significant step forward in the widespread recognition of video games as a valid and important artistic medium. The Smithsonian American Art Museum has a diverse and inclusive permanent collection that captures a wide array of creative materials. Holdings obviously include paintings, sculpture, photography, and works on paper, but they also include metals, textiles, crafts, glass, electronic constructions, video and film, digital installations, sound art, and digital code. The exciting and new performance space of video games is a natural addition to what already resides in the museum. American Art is in the process of formally representing the medium of video games among its many other works of art. These acquisitions, while supported by original research underlying the exhibition, require new investigations into both the material science of video game components and digital preservation of the source code for the games themselves. Fulfilling the mission of the museum with the inclusion of video games ensures their ongoing preservation, study, and interpretation as part of the national collection of fine art.

Conclusion

Video games represent a vast, diverse, and rapidly evolving, very human medium. Clearly they provide some fundamental insight into understanding the complex media culture in which we live. But video games spring from the minds of people. Video games and their creators are altering the ways we see, hear and touch. Video games are not only redefining life experiences, they are giving us new ones. They are changing the ways in which we communicate and participate with the world around

us. They are shifting the grounds on which we live and work, interact and interpret. Far beyond the formal business of drawing shapes, choosing colors or toying with scale, video games are altering fixed perceptions, conceptualizing entirely new ideas, and making real the imaginary. Doesn't that belong in an art museum?

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