

# WILL COMPUTER GAMES EVER BE A LEGITIMATE ART FORM?

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## **Introduction**

This article is adapted from a lecture delivered at the 2001 Game Developers' Conference in San Jose, California, and as such is somewhat more informal than the traditional academic paper. My objective was simply to address the question posed in the title and to identify the circumstances and events that must occur before artistic legitimacy can be achieved. I begin by examining what art means as a cultural entity in the West and whether computer games have any place within that framework.

For the purposes of this article, I consider the term "computer game" to include personal computer games, home console videogames, online games, and most forms of computerized play that involve a monitor and an input device. The role of computerized toys is not addressed here.

## **What Is Art and What Does It Do?**

### *Types of Arts*

The entry for "Art" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* divides art into a number of types. Among them are the literary arts: writing and drama, which are characterized by the presence of narrative. Film and television also belong to the literary arts. Then there are the fine arts: sculpture and painting, music and dance. There are also the decorative arts: wallpaper, fabrics and furnishings. Architecture is regarded by some as a form of art, and industrial design, but at this point the types move more and more away from "pure" art and into areas with more utilitarian considerations. Industrial design, for example, is not really art so much as it is an aesthetic applied to utilitarian objects. The boundaries between art and non-art are not hard and fast; there is a grey area.

Another characteristic of the literary arts is that the object in hand is not the work of art itself – i.e. the paper and ink that make up the book are merely the delivery medium, not the work. Similarly with film, the strip of plastic is not the movie; rather, the images and sounds recorded on the strip of plastic are the movie – and only when they are projected on a screen. With games, the CD-ROM is not the game; it is the software and artwork recorded there which are the game – and only when they are executed by a computer. This is as opposed to, say, sculpture, in which the sculpted object itself is the artwork.

I believe that many computer games belong in the category of literary arts with movies and television because they do contain elements of narrative, and their narrative elements can be subjected to the same criticism as other narrative arts. However, this is far from the whole picture: many games have no narrative aspect.

### *The Philosophy of Art*

For the purposes of this investigation it is also useful to look at the history of the philosophy of art. For several hundred years it was thought that art was representational, that art existed to portray a person or scene or object. Obviously this notion applied only to visual arts such as painting and sculpture, and not to such things as music and dance. They were considered separate forms not covered by the theory. And to some extent it was thought that the more accurate the representation, the better the art. In other words, a sculpture or painting which looked exactly like its subject was better than one which did not.

In the twentieth century, however, this notion was largely replaced by the idea of art as expression. People began to feel that art was not meant to depict objects accurately, but to serve as an expression of the artist's thought. This had a number of benefits. For one thing, it enabled music and dance to be included with the other forms of art, since they are highly expressive. It also allowed painters and sculptors to start creating works which were not visual reproductions of real things, but images as they saw them, and as they wished their viewers to see them. The notion of art as expression caused an explosion of new kinds of art and new ways of looking at things.

There are other theories in the philosophy of art as well. The novelist Leo Tolstoy believed that the function of art is to pass on cultural values from one generation to the next, to serve a sort of moral purpose. Others believe that art is essentially hedonism, that it exists to create aesthetic pleasure. But, by far, the dominant theory of art today is art-as-expression.

### *Art Lasts*

Another characteristic that we can note about art, good art at least, is that it lasts. There are Greek statues 2300 years old that we still admire today. There are Egyptian statues 5000 years old that we still admire. These things were created in stone, a highly durable medium, and so they naturally tend to last. Nevertheless, we would not put them in museums and look at them if we did not think they were worth looking at. There are many other mundane objects that old that we do not bother to preserve. These ancient sculptures appeal to us not merely because they are old, but because we find them aesthetically interesting.

There are also some very old games. In Egypt, people are still playing games in the sand that have been played exactly the same way for thousands of years. That does not make them

art, it just makes them very long-lived games. Still, it is interesting to note that games can last as long as great works of art. Clearly, they have some appeal that survives across the centuries, despite changes in culture, language, religion, and so on.

It is highly unlikely that people will be playing *Escape from Monkey Island* a thousand years from now. However, it is conceivable that people will be playing *Tetris* a thousand years from now. *Tetris* is so simple and elegant that its appeal could last for centuries. *Tetris* does not belong to the literary arts, since it has no narrative, but to the visual arts. *Tetris* is, perhaps, a work of kinetic sculpture, and I could easily imagine it being displayed in an art museum.

## **Can Games Be Art?**

### ***Art Versus Popular Culture***

I assert that the vast majority of what the game industry does is not art, but popular culture. Art is purchased in art galleries by art connoisseurs, it is criticized by art critics, it is conserved in art museums. It is not sold in toy shops. But the fact that most of what the industry produces is merely popular culture does not preclude the interactive medium from being an art form. It just means that the industry faces an uphill battle to be recognized as one – just as the movies did, moving from the nickelodeon to the screen. Film is an art form, but that does not mean that every movie is a work of art. Some are and some are not, just like games. Most movies are not art, but popular culture. And there is no question that the vast majority of games are not art either. Monopoly is not art; poker is not art; baseball is not art.

### ***Art and Interactivity***

So why aren't most games art? One possibility is that interactivity precludes art; that art is a form of communication from the artist to viewer, and if the viewer starts to interfere, the message is lost. It is certainly true that interactivity operates in a tension with narrative: narrative lies in the control of the author, while interactivity is about the freedom of the player.

However, I do not believe that interactivity does necessarily preclude art. Chris Crawford, in his book *The Art of Computer Game Design*, wrote, "Real art through computer games is achievable, but it will never be achieved so long as we have no path to understanding. We need to establish our principles of aesthetics, a framework for criticism, and a model for development." I disagree with him about a model for development – I think how you create a work of art is irrelevant – but I believe that he is correct about the other things.

In San Francisco there is a science museum called the Exploratorium. This museum takes the notion seriously that its exhibits, while illustrating scientific principles, should also be aesthetically pleasing. They consider them to be works of art, and some of the people who build them are referred to as "artists-in-residence". The exhibits are attractive as well as educational, and aesthetics plays a role in their design. These exhibits are necessarily interactive, and their interactivity does not detract from their status as works of art.

We are used to thinking of art as illustrating the human condition, or addressing large issues related to ourselves, but why should it not illustrate scientific principles? Diane Ackerman

is a poet who wrote a series of poems collected into a book called *The Planets: A Cosmic Pastoral*. These poems were not about people and their emotions, as many of us (wrongly) expect poems to be. Rather, they accurately describe the appearance of the planets, their behaviour, their position in the solar system. The poems are no less beautiful for being scientifically accurate – in fact, to a fan of both science and poetry, they are more beautiful for being scientifically accurate.

### ***The Messages of Art***

This raises an interesting question about the limits on what art can say. Art is not pedagogy – its purpose is not to teach. But still it is capable of making quite complex statements. We know that literature, for example, has themes. The theme of a novel is a declarative sentence which sums up the message of the work. Themes can be trivial, like “Death causes grief”, or they can be non-trivial, like “Death causes many emotions in addition to grief”.

Can games have themes? I believe that they can. Simulations certainly say things. *Sim City*, for example, says that a good transportation system is essential for economic prosperity. This is never stated explicitly; it is something that you discover in the course of playing the game. In fact, it is discovered through interactivity – if you did not interact with the game, you would never find it out. Now, of course, this is a simple economic statement. It is not very deep, and a work of art whose message was no more than “a good transportation system is essential for economic prosperity” would be considered mundane. But it illustrates the point that games are capable of saying things.

There are also non-linguistic modes of expression. Sculpture, for example, does not necessarily have themes. You cannot always distill the content of sculpture into a declarative sentence. But you might be able to distill it into an emotion: a non-linguistic expression of a feeling. And I believe that games can do the same thing.

### **Some Other Characteristics of Art**

#### ***Art Has Content***

Art must have content. This is why baseball and poker are not art: they have no content. Nothing is being expressed. Monopoly has almost no content: it has little houses and pieces that move around, but certainly not enough to be “art”. When we say, “There’s an art to playing poker”, what we really mean is that there is a craft to playing poker – that there is a right way and a wrong way to do it and that playing poker well requires a high degree of skill. But the act of playing poker is not an aesthetic act. It has no content. It is not expressive.

#### ***Art Has an Aesthetic***

Another thing about art is that it is aesthetic, it has rules for determining beauty and ugliness. In the twentieth century the idea that art was simply supposed to be beautiful was thrown out. But, nevertheless, art is supposed to appeal to us in some way. There are mechanisms, though much debated, for assessing the appeal, meaning, richness, depth, significance, and so on, of works of art. Some of these apply to games also and there are distinct aesthetic qualities of games, such as “replayability”, that may not apply to more conventional art forms.

### ***Art Contains Ideas***

Art must have the capacity to express ideas. Film is an art form because it has an aesthetic, and it also has the capacity to make statements. Most games do not make statements, but, then, neither do James Bond films. Most computer games are the interactive entertainment equivalent of James Bond novels and movies. The novel is an art form, but James Bond novels are not art. For a novel to be art it must be more than merely entertaining. For a painting to be art it must be more than merely decorative.

I will mention here two games that I think contained a lot of ideas. One was *Planescape: Torment*, from Interplay. This was a game about an immortal man who had lost his name and his memory. The game was about his quest to find out his name and to learn the reason for his immortality, possibly so that he could die permanently. Along the way he meets a strange collection of people all of whom seem to know him, but whom he does not remember, and each one of them possesses part of the key to his past. Now this is not great literature; in fact it is not substantially better than the average paperback fantasy novel. But it contained far more interesting ideas than most hack-and-slash RPGs, and I enjoyed *Planescape: Torment* a great deal. I found it aesthetically intriguing.

The other game was *Balance of Power*, by Chris Crawford. It came out around 1986, and I think it is one of the best computer games ever made. *Balance of Power* was a simulation of global politics. The Soviet Union and the USA are each struggling to maximize their geopolitical prestige at each other's expense, by supporting friendly governments and overthrowing or destabilizing unfriendly ones around the world. This game taught me all kinds of things about global politics that I didn't know, and, in fact, it was so good at it that the United States State Department began to use it to train diplomats. Like *Sim City*, this was a simulation, so the ideas it contained were not aesthetic ideas, but nevertheless they were interesting and new, and it is clear proof that games can contain ideas.

I had an odd emotional experience playing *Balance of Power*, because I once tried playing it from the Russian side. We are used to playing games from the enemy side in war games – in a World War II flight simulator, you can fly either the German or the Allied planes, but all it really means is that the performance characteristics of the planes are different. But playing *Balance of Power* from the Russian side, I got an immediate and visceral experience of the challenge that the Soviets actually faced. The way the game is designed, the Americans have a lot of money but very few men under arms, while the Russians have very little money but a great many troops. What this means is that the Russians' mechanisms for influencing world opinion are really quite limited and crude. It is easy for them to send in troops, but they cannot afford to buy friends around the world by sending economic aid. I also noticed that all America's friends are extremely rich and powerful – Britain and France and Germany and so on – while all Russia's friends were extremely poor. And the experience of playing this game was quite strange. They were surrounded by enemies and treaty organizations designed to hem them in. It turned my world-view upside down, because I had never put myself in their shoes before.

### ***Art Makes You Feel Things***

Art should make you feel something. That is part of what art is about. And games unquestionably can make you feel things, but for them to be accepted as an art form, they

have to make the effort. If movies had never moved beyond the nickelodeon, they would never have been accepted as an art form. But movies, even silent movies, were clearly an outgrowth of drama, of the stage, and the stage is a very ancient and clearly recognized art form. Computer games' roots are not in movies or the stage; they are in gameplay, in board games and forms. Those are clearly not art forms, because they have so much less emphasis on the aesthetic, and because they don't usually make you feel things – certainly not subtle things, in any case.

### ***Art Is Not Formulaic***

Another important characteristic of good art is that it is not formulaic. The artist Salvador Dali came to be considered something of a fraud in his later years, because his work became formulaic, he ceased to innovate. The *Star Wars* saga eventually lost whatever claim it may once have had to be a work of art, because it became increasingly formulaic and its content driven by merchandising considerations.

### ***Utility and Saleability***

All these characteristics of art – expressing ideas, making you feel things, not being formulaic and so on – outweigh considerations of utility. Art is not about being useful. And to some extent, they outweigh considerations of saleability as well. Art does not involve merchandising. No one creates a work of art with a presumption that it is going to be turned into T-shirts and lunch boxes. A key point about art is this: It is not about what the customer wants to buy. It is about what you have to say. A work does not have to do all the things I mentioned above, but if it does none of them, the chances are it is not a work of art.

### **What Does It Take For Games To Be an Art Form?**

We now return to the question: what would be required for games to be considered an art form? The answer is as much about public expectations as it is about the nature of the medium itself. Computer games must seem like other art forms. For games to be recognized as an art form they must do some of the things that other art forms do – that people expect of art forms. More importantly, their developers themselves must begin to act as if they believe that their medium is an art form. They must treat their work as an art form and act as if they expect the public to do the same.

### ***Fun and Games***

The game industry concentrates for the most part on producing an experience called "fun". No one would want to play a board game that was not fun. But computer games are not just computerized board games. Books and movies are not only light entertainment, nor are they merely "fun". If games never become more than the interactive equivalent of Schwarzenegger movies and teen sex comedies, then they will never explore the full power of their medium.

The commercial game industry concentrates so exclusively on fun that it has lost touch – or never even had touch – with any other forms of entertainment. Most games are the video equivalent of a theme park, a place designed to maximize fun. But adults do not spend a lot of time in theme parks. They get entertainment in other ways.

A few games produce emotions other than fun: suspense, horror, and – far more often than they should – frustration. But fun is an overrated value. If computer games are to be considered an art form, looking beyond mere fun is one of the first things they must do.

### ***Computer Games Need an Aesthetic***

Games need an aesthetic, or a variety of them. Film is not judged by a single aesthetic, but by several. They are judged by the cinematography, the editing, the quality of the acting, the quality of the story, and many other things. And like the movies, there must be a way to judge the artistic merit of the elements that make up games. We must judge the story, if there is one; we must judge the acting, if there is any; we must judge the seamlessness of the experience, which is somewhat equivalent to the editing in movies. We must judge the degree to which all elements of the game work together in harmony, without any false notes.

In time we might find a way of judging gameplay itself according to an aesthetic: is it smooth, easy, natural? Again, the gameplay in *Tetris* is aesthetically pleasing. When a player plays a really good game, she no longer even sees the menu items on the screen or thinks about the buttons. They become second nature.

### ***Developers Must Experiment***

Game developers must experiment with their medium. They must try new things and take risks.

Consider Impressionism. It is now recognized as one of the greatest of movements in painting. It was famously excluded from the French Academy, and the first show of Impressionist paintings had to be held in a private home. But Impressionism was not a technology of painting. The paint and canvas were still the same as they always had been. Nor was Impressionism primarily about looking at new things. It did bring in some new subject matter, but, primarily, Impressionism was a new way of seeing. It was about the fact that the eye is not a camera. That painting does not have to be representative.

What is the computer game equivalent of Impressionism? We do not yet know. But the only way to find out is to experiment with the medium, as the Impressionists did with theirs.

### ***Games Must Challenge the Player***

The greatest works of art, the ones that are displayed in museums and discussed endlessly, are those that took risks and broke new ground. Art must break new ground or it is merely craft, merely decoration. Great art challenges the viewer. It demands that the viewer grow, expand his or her mind, see things that have not been seen before, think things that have not been thought before. Impressionism challenged our understanding of what painting was for. The Romantic movement in music challenged the listener; it asserted that music could be about emotion, not merely melodic “prettiness”.

Who knows more about posing challenges than game developers do? People play games because they want to be challenged. Of course, game challenges are usually of a different form: a challenge to achieve something, a victory condition, whereas great art challenges the viewer to see and hear things in a different way, not to achieve something but to obtain

a new kind of understanding. Yet there is no reason why games cannot challenge the players to achieve a new kind of understanding.

*Sim City* challenges the player to understand the relationship between efficient transportation and economic prosperity. That is not an aesthetic understanding, but it is not specifically a victory condition, either. Games are capable of challenging players aesthetically as well as logically if developers choose to make the effort. The trick is to devise new challenges, not variants on the same old ones. New genres of interactive entertainment.

### ***Gaming Awards Must Change***

No one ever receives an art prize on the basis of the technical merit or the craftsmanship inherent in the artwork. If a sculptor gets an award for a sculpture, it is not for the quality of the welding. If the welding is bad, they might not get the award, but good welding alone is not enough. Craftsmanship is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for winning art prizes.

There are Academy Awards for technical advances in film-making, but it is always a much smaller ceremony, held in a hotel ballroom, not in a big, beautiful theater. The awards are not presented on TV. The only people who attend the technical Oscars are film technicians, not glittering movie stars. The big public Oscars are about art, not craft.

But game awards are primarily about craft. Best programming. Best sound. There are seldom any prizes for best story or best acting, so it should not be surprising that those elements have traditionally been the weakest parts of games. "Best Graphics" is an especially ambiguous category. Some people think that best graphics are those which are rendered at the highest speed or that most closely mimic visual reality. That is not good graphics, but good graphic technology.

Game awards must honor aesthetic content, not merely technological prowess.

### ***Games Need Not Reviewers, But Critics***

Games also need critics to recognize artistic merit. At the moment there are no critics. What the game industry has are reviewers, and poorly educated ones at that. Real critics bring to their profession not just a knowledge of the medium they are discussing, but wide reading and an understanding of aesthetics and the human condition. An art form requires not just reviewers that can compare one work with another, but critics who can discuss the meaning of a game in a larger context. Critics must bring more than a comprehensive familiarity with games: they must bring wisdom, maturity, judgment, understanding.

One objection to this argument is that there simply are no games that deserve this depth of thought – that if you took the intellect of the great art critics of the world and applied it to games, it would be wasted. But that is not a fundamental weakness in the medium. The fact that there are not any games that deserve in-depth analysis is because the industry has not made any, not because it cannot make any.

The movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* baffled all the movie reviewers, because none of their traditional metrics applied. It was (generally) unexciting; it had no romance, no action, no



suspense, and very little drama in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, it had very little acting and most of that was intentionally wooden. The film critics, on the other hand, had a field day. *2001* was rich with ideas, crammed with them from one end to the other. There was an enormous amount to think about.

*2001: A Space Odyssey* is a great work of art. It meets all the necessary criteria. It certainly has content, over three hours of it. It says something – a great many things, in fact. It makes the viewer feel something. *2001* was boring at points – intentionally boring. Stanley Kubrick knew that space travel was not whizzing around the universe in starfighters; space travel is long and slow and boring, and he had the artistic courage to present that aspect of it.

*2001* is not formulaic. It did break new ground in many ways, some of them technological, although those were not necessarily critical to its success as a work of art. It did challenge the viewer, very greatly. It asked questions about a great many things: space travel and computers and man's place in the universe.

Games need their own *2001*.

### ***Art Requires an Artist***

Game development is a collaborative exercise and many people are involved. So is film-making. But film has established a cult of personality around the director, who, justly or unjustly, gets most of the credit for the quality of a film. Games may need to do the same around the game designer. This was tried once, but abandoned for commercial reasons. Electronic Arts was founded with the notion that game developers should be promoted like, and treated like, rock musicians. They eventually abandoned that idea when the games got big enough that they were no longer being made by a group the size of a rock band, and when the fame they were getting started to cause the designers to ask for more money.

But art requires an artist. One of the absolute requirements of any work of art is that it be man-made. For games to be taken seriously as an art form, the people who make them must receive adequate public recognition. Every work of interactive entertainment that wants to be taken seriously as a work of art must have its prime visionary's name on the box. Everyone in the industry knows who Sid Meier and Brian Moriarty and Peter Molyneux and Will Wright are, but it is not enough for everyone in the industry to know these names – they must become household words. Sid Meier must be as well known as Francis Ford Coppola or Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, whether or not interactive entertainment can be a legitimate art form is up to its practitioners. It is in part a public-relations exercise, to let the public and the press know that they believe that it is an art form. But there are a number of additional steps that game developers must take, and I reiterate them here:

- Games must seek to do more than provide “fun”. Fun is but one, rather simplistic, form of entertainment. There are others, and game developers must find a way to provide them through gameplay.

- There must be an aesthetic for games and gameplay. How it may arise, we do not yet know, and it will undoubtedly be subject to endless debate. But arise it must, before computer games can be an art form.
- Game developers must experiment with the medium. They must take artistic risks and break new ground.
- Games must challenge their players as other art forms challenge their viewers. They must force the player to experience new ideas, to see things in new ways.
- Prizes and awards must recognize aesthetic merit and not merely technological prowess or craft.
- Games must be the subject of genuine criticism, not merely product reviews. They must be studied, discussed and analyzed as works of art and aspects of culture.
- Game developers must treat themselves and each other as artists and to grant credit where it is due.

The answer to the question that is the title of this lecture is undoubtedly yes – but only if the people who create the games, the developers, have the courage and the vision to make it so.

### **Gameography**

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