

Solving the Narratology-Ludology Debate As Seen Through Dewey's Aesthetic Theory

For Videogame Theology Readers

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“I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic¹...There is a structural reason for that: video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.”²

-Roger Ebert, 2007.³

1 Introduction

Roger Ebert believes that interactivity and the “low” cultural stature of video games does not allow them to be “art”. The debate over whether video games can be “art” has run aground to a standstill due to such concerns . The two sides of the game studies debate -

¹Roger Ebert, “Answer Man,” on *Chicago Sun Times Online*, November 27, 2005, accessed December 18th, 2011, [http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=ANSWERMAN\(“and” symbol\)date=20051127](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=ANSWERMAN(“and” symbol)date=20051127).

²Roger Ebert, “Games as Art: Ebert vs. Barker,” on *Chicago Sun Times Online*, July 21, 2007, accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070721/COMMENTARY/70721001>.

³Even though Ebert later rescinded the severity of this criticism, it is still a poignant example of the general disdain for new media being an acceptable form of artistic expression.

the narratologist, and the ludologist - have abandoned the project, seeking instead to clarify the proper methodology for study of video games in general. Perhaps frightened by Roger Ebert's claims that "games can't be art", the field of game studies refuses to confront video games qua video games, retreating to observing them as narrative or as sets of rules rather than confronting claims against video games. However, there is a middle ground, not only between the narratologist and the ludologist, but also in defining what constitutes "art" in the video game realm. Using a variety of examples, John Dewey's theory of aesthetics as described in *Art as Experience* bridges the gap between video game rules and video game narratives, allowing for easy categorization and description of what makes a video game "art" in a pragmatic fashion.

2 Definitions and Groundwork

2.1 Defining "Games"

First of all, definitions must be provided for the purpose of discussion. A game, at its most basic, has no concrete definition; Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, states that one cannot see anything in common with various games, but similarities and relationships exist.⁴ However, for the sake of explanation, assume that a game is an activity wherein a particular arbitrary goal is set in advance, and this goal can only be achieved within a set of predefined rules. In chess, for example, two persons agree upon common rules of what the game board looks like, how the pieces are used, and what the goal of the game is. Furthermore, the obstacles created by these rules cannot be trivially overcome; they must present a challenge, for games foster the development of skill.⁵ The more complex a game's rules are, the greater the barrier to entry and the greater the challenge. Chess presents a greater complexity because each unique playing piece moves differently in its rules, whereas checkers only provides one type of playing piece and one type of movement. Thus, the greater the complexity of a game (referring to its rules), the greater its depth (the knowledge and time required to "learn the game), which further engenders greater skill.

Games, furthermore, can categorize their rules in two specific ways. First, the rules can be emergent, "where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations for which the players must design strategies to handle."⁶ A card game like blackjack has a very simple set of rules, in that each card has a specific number

⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), PI 66.

⁵Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 5.

⁶Juul, 5.

of points, and the goal to have a high number that does not exceed twenty-one. However, due to the fact that there are eleven different numbers one can obtain during a game, as well as there being fifty-one cards, means the number of variations that can occur are high. Add more than two players, and the variations increase exponentially. On the other hand, game structure may follow the progression model, wherein the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game.⁷ In this case, the creator of the game has much more control over what experience the player will have; a pen and paper role-playing game such as *Dungeons and Dragons* fits this example. Though progression games display qualities of emergence, the vast number of rules ensure that players, even with variation, have a relatively similar experience.

2.2 What is a Video Game?

Video games, however, present a different set of challenges than normal games. Regular games, constituted of rule sets, require a sense of imagination if anything other than the most basic games are played. The motivation, in most cases, is simply to defeat your opponent or remove whatever problem the game presents. While, at base, video games operate under a set of arbitrary rules and challenges, they can also provide narrative and motivation through uniquely aesthetic means. Video games have evolved in a fashion where the rules of the game reflect the rules of the virtual world presented - for example, in any *Mario* game, such as *Super Mario Bros.*, jumping on top of the heads of enemies is the main form of attack. However, this same rule also applies within the world of the game designer, as *Mario* jumps on top of enemies for his own survival. The player does not receive this information in the form of written text or voice acting⁸; he/she merely learns the rules of the game through the visually represented fictional world.

In this sense, video games strike a contrast in conveyance with other games. Imagine that you do not know the rules of chess in any way. You, as a player, are presented with a chess board and all the relevant pieces required to play chess. How, in this situation, would you learn to play chess specifically? Most likely, the rules are contained in an instruction booklet or passed down through word of mouth from persons who have played the game before. However, without such resources, no avenue presents itself for understanding the rules of chess as a specific game - in fact, it is more likely that an entirely new game would be created than two players with a chess board recreating chess by sheer chance.

The conveyance through a fictional world and narrative, as a result, gives the video game

⁷Ibid, 5.

⁸Unless he looks in the manual, of course; however, most games are designed without the intent of using instructional booklets.

a certain intensity lacking in the traditional game model, as the rules are integrated into the logic and narrative (spoken, written, or conveyed through visuals) of a digital world. This does not mean the game requires a “story” that invests the player like a novel: rather, the game must simply motivate the player towards its arbitrary goals through whatever means the developer uses. The virtual world, in turn, allows for a more complex sets of rules than the traditional model, as they are based on the simulation of a new world with a new symbol system, rather than the extension of one’s semiotic perception of the real world. Although game studies retains a general agreement on what games are, how they should be studied, as art or otherwise, remains a subject of contention. This discussion, in game studies, is known as the narratology vs. ludology debate, and each will be described in turn.

2.3 What is Narratology?

Narratology, in essence, is the study of video games as a novel, or new, form of narrative. In Barry Atkins’ definition, it is “the study of how stories are told”, and its use is not limited to video games exclusively.⁹ Because of this, the same sources used to examine other forms of narrative remain equally valid towards video games. Narratology understand video games, a cultural vehicle, as yet another device for artistic expression amongst many others such as painting or film. Interactivity, though a unique element, provides a space for narrative to occur in a different form. Many video games have stories; these are used as motivation for the player to progress forward. In this sense, narrative is a defining element of many video games, which use the visual and audio elements alike to furnish a narrative, however base and banal “kill all your enemies” might be as an objective. According to Janet H. Murray, who rejects the label of narratology entirely, games can furnish experiences “such as the feeling of immersion, the enactment of violent or sexual events, the performative dimension of game play, and even the personal experience of winning and losing.”¹⁰ In effect, the essential element of a game is its narrative; everything else becomes subservient to this factor.

Barry Atkins, in his work *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*, describes a situation he encountered that encapsulates such experiences. He had, in the course of playing a World War II strategy game, been on the side of the Germans. Much like the film *Inglorious Basterds*, through the game’s mechanics, he had actually created a revisionist history where at the Battle of Arnhem, Atkins’ forces completely destroyed the

⁹Barry Atkins, *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 9-10.

¹⁰Janet H. Murray, “The Last Word on Ludology v. Narratology in Game Studies” (preface to a keynote talk at the annual International Conference of the Digital Games Research Association 2005, Vancouver, Canada, June 17, 2005), 1.

Allies (rather than just repelling their assault) and secured victory for the Third Reich.¹¹ This disturbed Atkins in some sense, as the game "provided a fractured version of the past uncluttered by political, economic, social and (most particularly) human context."¹² In fact, the story could be retold within the game's rules any number of times, perhaps causing the defeat of the Germans at the hand of the Allies the next time. In Atkins' words, "Here was a form of fictional freedom: I could tell the story again and again and bring the story to a variety of conclusions. Here was a form of fictional restraint: I could only tell the story in a particular way."¹³

Atkins argues that video games represent a qualitatively unique form of narrative expression for fictional texts, in that they require interactivity to tell their stories. Contrary to the spectatorial model proposed by Roger Ebert, for example, game narrative change based on the whims of the players operating within the rules of the game, whether more constrained (progressive) or free (emergent). Thus, video games are more than a game, in that "it can also be a form of fiction making...presents a fictional text that rewards close critical scrutiny."¹⁴ Though, for Atkins, they have not yet reached the level where they can engender individual or cultural transformation, they may have that possibility in the future. The fundamental status of the video game does not have uniqueness except in form; though not entirely akin to the observation of "art" in a book, painting, or film, this is a formal difference only, not a qualitatively different object of inspection and observation. Because of this, most video game narratologists dispense with the supposed distinction between narratology and ludology; Murray, for her part, states "It is time to reframe the conversation. At some point in all of these debates, these two commonsensical facts are usually acknowledged: games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories."¹⁵ Thus, narratologists define narrative as primary and the game's rules itself as constituent parts of the fiction which the video game creates.

2.4 What is Ludology?

Ludology, however, does not become subsumed under the common categories of the narrative. Ludology, at its most basic, is the study of games qua games, defined succinctly by the fact that games have rules. As Espen Aarseth states in the first volume of *Game Studies*, "Games, however, are often simulations; they are not static labyrinths like hypertexts or literary fictions. The simulation aspect is crucial: it is a radically different alternative to

¹¹ Atkins, *More Than a Game*, 1-2.

¹²Ibid, 4.

¹³Ibid, 4.

¹⁴Ibid, 10.

¹⁵Murray, "The Last Word," 3.

narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure. Simulations are bottom up; they are complex systems based on logical rules.”¹⁶ A game, as a text, does not work without being played, for it is both an object and a process.¹⁷ As well, there is an innate social element within games that are multi-player, a distinct characteristic of games that does not fall into a traditional textual model of narratology. Thus, ludology towards video games imposes a formalism upon game studies that treat games as composites of rules, and how those rules bring about any myriad number of results.

The problem with narratology, from this perspective, is that applying narrative to games “...is not neutral; it emphasises some traits and suppresses others. Unlike this, the act of comparing furthers the understanding of differences and similarities, and may bare hidden assumptions.”¹⁸ Narrative is an existing paradigm; thus, its years of cultural history imply a certain approach, a certain sense of “meaning”, and certain assumptions about what constitutes a “good” and “bad” narrative in advance of the novelty of form. Ludologist, by contrast, assume that a new methodology fitting to both the idea of rules and the essential aspect of interactivity make games a form that does not have narrative as its primary concerns.

Ludologist Jesper Juul gives several reasons why games do not fit a narrative mold. First, not all games require an anthropomorphic protagonist; most narratives require a connection between the reader/watcher of a book or movie, for otherwise there is no connection to the events. The person playing the game, in Juul’s words, “...inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game.”¹⁹ The game, as stated earlier, presents a goal, and the player interacts with that goal under the stipulation that he/she follow the rules of the game. Secondly, narratives are told from a “past” perspective, whereas interactivity does not exist in a particular time frame; the temporality of a game is in the here and now.²⁰ Lastly, imagine the myriad movie to video game translations - many of these games do not directly translate the narrative of the movie into the game, for that would be exactly like the movie. Instead, most game developers focus on one or two exciting action sequences in that film to translate into the game’s rules and mechanics, allowing the player to experience the feeling of becoming the protagonist.²¹ Even then, without the film’s name, the game would remain inherently playable - thus, games have

¹⁶Espen Aarseth, “Computer Games Studies, Year One,” in *Game Studies* 1 (2001), accessed December 8th, 2011, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Jesper Juul, “Games Telling stories? - A Brief Note on Games and Narratives,” in *Game Studies* 1 (2001), accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

essential elements (what Murray, in her criticism, calls “Game Essentialism”), and they are the game’s rules.

3 Applying Dewey’s Aesthetic Theory

However, these are simply methodologies; neither of them, the historical approach of the ludologist or the institutional approach of the narratologist, have made the attempt to find what “art” is. Philip Deen places the problem in perspective: “Both the historical and institutional defenses address video games from the outside. They do not speak from within the medium itself and to its unique qualities...In short, any argument that video games are art that effaces their particular nature is inadequate.”²² Certainly, this situation appears dire; some have recommended, instead, that the subject should be left alone. Alex Kierkegaard, the pseudonymous video game philosopher/theorist, advocates this third view in stating “The question ‘Can games be art?’ is nonsensical, and therefore any answer one might come up with for it will also be nonsensical. Put another way: the question is not a question and the answer is not an answer.”²³ What occurs, instead, is “good” art and “bad” art become designators of “like” and “dislike”, akin to Wittgenstein’s statements in the *Tractatus* that “When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it.”²⁴ Kierkegaard, in effect, believes that aesthetics are outside the world, and hence the question cannot even be posed, let alone answered.²⁵ Barring a complete nihilistic approach to art, the situation looks bleak.

Thus, neither field has attempted to counter the claims of Ebert, in that “video games cannot be art.” It is not necessarily his criticism that is the primary problem²⁶; it is the avoidance of the issue altogether that strikes one as awkward. Certainly, all new forms of media had a stage wherein their presentation was considered popular junk for the masses; why must this prejudice continue with video games as well? What if the video game itself were not judged, but the experience which it produces upon a person? If art were defined in a fashion that allowed video games to work as a fusion of narratives and rules, a middle

²²Philip D. Deen, “Interactivity, Inhabitation and Pragmatist Aesthetics,” in *Game Studies* 2 (2011), accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/deen>.

²³Alex Kierkegaard, “‘Can Games Be Art?’ and Other Childish Nonsense,” on *Insomnia*, accessed December 18th, 2011, [http://insomnia.ac/commentary/for\(underscore\)artfags\(underscore\)only/](http://insomnia.ac/commentary/for(underscore)artfags(underscore)only/).

²⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden, in *Major Works* (New York: HarperPrereennial, 2009), number 6.5.

²⁵Kierkegaard, “Can Games Be Art?”

²⁶Deen 2011; answers both questions presented by Ebert, though other opposition will be presented further within this work.

ground can be achieved. Dewey's later aesthetic theory, in that respect, can achieve this end by defining art as "an experience", allowing video games to enter the art debate without grand discrepancies in definition.

3.1 A Theory of Video Game Art

3.1.1 The Live Creature and the "Gamer"

According to Dewey, art can be found primarily in the day-to-day normal life of experience - in other words, art exists in lieu of its function in experience.²⁷ For Dewey, the word "art" is an unnecessary compartmentalization; rather, in analyzing daily experience human beings can "discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment."²⁸ Video games, for many in modern society, are an every day enjoyment that replicate that kind of aesthetic experience. However, it is absolutely amazing how many persons can be involved in the making of these games, primarily produced for an audience that may or may not enjoy the product. According to Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter, Electronic Arts, a large video games publishing company, has invested over eighty million dollars in the production of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, a game that will hopefully appeal to millions of players.²⁹ What strikes one as odd is the fact that people will pay to submit themselves to arbitrary challenges in video games - why is this the case?

In the same way that a living creature interacts with its environment to satisfy its needs, so do video gamers perform their task out of their own sense of will. Furthermore, every video game has a sense of pacing, structure (as defined by the developers), and rhythm to which it moves - whether fast and frenetic in an action game, or slow and plodding within a strategy game. The actual playing of the game, interaction with a digital environment, leaves the player in constant danger for his/her playable character. When the temporary goal set before the player has been completed, there is a sense of accomplishment and developing skill within the video game's rules. The player, in interactions with the game world, continually fixes disunity, learning from mistakes, allows discord to induce reflection and continues onward to restoration of unity, or completing the game.³⁰ Video games display elements of "immersion", the full and total focus of a human's consciousness and action to a singular goal or end. Dewey, in describing the "savage man" regales the way he is

²⁷John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Milton, Balch, and Company, 1934), 10-2.

²⁸Ibid, 11.

²⁹James Brightman, "Star Wars MMO Costs a Reported 80 Million Dollars to Develop," on Industry Gamers, accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://www.industrygamers.com/n-ews/star-wars-mmo-costs-an-estimated-80-million-to-develop/>.

³⁰Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 15.

observant of the world about him and most taut with energy...His observation is both action in preparation and foresight of the future. He is as active through his whole being when he looks and listens as when he stalks his quarry or stealthily retreats from a foe. His sense are sentinels of immediate thought and outposts of actions, and not, as they so often are with us, mere pathways along which material is gathered to be stored away for a delayed and remote possibility.³¹

The experience of playing a video game exists as an anthropomorphized representation of the same aesthetic experience of Dewey's "live creature", except the tension, disunity, and unity proceed through the context of a digital world's narrative and rules. In fact, it restores those same feelings but in new and fantastical constructions of reality, creating entirely new worlds still intelligible to human beings. Once the equilibrium has been stabilized and the consummation of "fun" reaches its end, the player begins anew with a different video game.³² However, skill in one game transfer to any number of others; thus, continual experience and the fulfillment of struggles and achievement continue in a rhythmic, developing structure designed by humans, intentionally or not, for this very purpose.³³ The rudimentary glimpse of aesthetic experience has come full circle, though each game is only a small part of the large consummative experience.

3.1.2 War of the Abstractions

Given this emphasis on experience, one must reject the nature/spirit dualism that narratology and ludology provide. The former assume that humans view their lives in the fashion of story, while the ludologist attempts to see the underlying principles behind everything. In both cases, each has established a dualism in the video game that simply does not exist.³⁴ They have merely inherited a methodology using the "apparent" order as a paradigm on which to base their judgement of new forms of media. In fact, "the senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the ongoings of the world around him."; how can the senses exist in isolation from each other in playing a video game when they are necessary for the experience (excepting, for lack of technology, smell and taste)?³⁵

The sense organs find their full realization in sense itself, and thus become a necessity. However, interactions between the player and the game are not enough, for interaction must turn into participation; one does not merely play, or create, a game distractedly. Even

³¹Ibid, 19.

³²Ibid, 17.

³³Ibid, 19.

³⁴Ibid, 21.

³⁵Ibid, 22.

within a game, past experience and knowledge are integrated into the experience of the present; as a game developer wishes to offer new experiences based on all that has come prior, so the video game player thirsts for new ideas and concepts in these virtual worlds.³⁶ However, in this case, natural energies, technically, abstain from the use of actual matter, but recreating matter, and even improbable forms of matter, in virtual worlds; new things in such manufactured realities are simply composites and ideas of the old.

In that sense, humankind, through consciousness, employs imagination to regulate, select, and create variety within video games to expand life. As well, the task restores, in the search for true meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse, and action that has gone missing from compartmentalization of human life.³⁷ That this art form tends to hearken back to the “savage” and integrate the rapid pace of human technology fuses the past and the present together. It is, in this sense, that humans can make aesthetic communion with the virtual world and reawakenen their communion with the real world, an enhancement of ordinary experience that engenders further imagination.

3.1.3 A Video Game “Experience” - Why Is a Game “Art”?

The video game, as a collaborative effort from both players and developers, allows both to participate in the creation of “an experience” within the Deweian mode. How do video games constitute “an experience” successfully? Here, we enter into the criteria for video games that provide the kind of experience listed previously, and those that do not. Firstly, any game that hopes to fall under the category of immersion and “art” must involve conflict of some kind. Whether that conflict goes against some antagonist or even the fish in a fishing simulator, any video game creates an arbitrary set of goals that are, in fact, difficult to achieve. In recent years, games have been criticized for a lack of difficulty, in that game developers try to appeal to the lower common denominator for profit; *Super Mario Galaxy*, for example, repeatedly emphasizes concepts that the player has already learned through talking animals scattered throughout the game, just to ensure the player remembers. Rather than positive reinforcement through individual situations within the game, this patronizing approach is distracting to those intelligent enough to call various game mechanics to mind when presented with similar situations. A video game that provides “an experience” does not bombard the player with tutorials, as it distances the player from the video game’s intended immersion - in other words, it is inchoate.³⁸

Secondly, any game that seeks to be “an experience” must have its material run its

³⁶Ibid, 24.

³⁷Ibid, 25

³⁸Ibid, 35.

course to fulfillment.³⁹ An experience is one in which the material of experience is fulfilled or consummated, as for example when a problem is solved, or a video game is played to its conclusion. In other words, the game itself has its own individualizing quality, its own sense of pacing and rhythm, and its own unique mechanics which create a self-sufficient game that works within life's collection of histories.⁴⁰ Video games that reach this plateau of "an experience" simply enrapture; there is nothing quite like *Super Mario Bros.*, for example. The first time playing the game was a revelation to many - frankly, the idea of a plumber who can grow large by ingesting mushrooms and overcome obstacles solely by jumping and running sounds akin to a bad acid trip. Still, the game has been designed to take advantage of these two simple mechanics, bringing them through a number of obstacles to their logical conclusion. The difference between levels, though difficult for a casual observer to recognize, can be perceived easily by anyone who has played the game through; many gamers share this common experience, even if its quality is difficult to describe, and at some level ineffable. As Dewey states, "There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation."⁴¹ Any one, in addition, who does not remember the *Super Mario Bros.* theme by Koji Kondo, which repeatedly plays over the levels has not played the game; it is part of the defining individual character of the game that its theme has established itself firmly in pop culture. The summation of visual elements (graphics), audio elements (sound effects, music, dialogue) and game mechanics (rules) create a certain quality of "an experience."

Thirdly, great video games present a unity that is not constituted exclusively on an emotional, practical, or intellectual level, but is determined by a single pervasive quality.⁴² One can imagine the intellectual virtues of pondering upon *Pac-Man* are short; any attempt to derive a "meaning" in the philosophical sense from the events of a tiny yellow creature eating pellets and ghosts will be pretentious at some level. However, video games do not need to provide that quality of experience, for they create their own space of "meaning". Video games challenge one's reflexes, but they also reward strategy, planning, and thinking ahead - to subsume games under a purely practical sense of instinct does not give the full quality.⁴³ Emotions are a part of the video game experience: what should I feel in situation X? In a difficult game designed to challenge, one feels frustrated. In a survival horror game, where the player is intentionally weak and surrounded by many unseen threats, one feels fearful and claustrophobic. In a fighting game, where you challenge other players to virtual street fights,

³⁹Ibid, 35.

⁴⁰Ibid, 35.

⁴¹Ibid, 36.

⁴²Ibid, 37.

⁴³I am thinking, but not always consciousness (perhaps after a defeat I am).

one feel the glory of victory or the agony of defeat. The emotions, in the sense of reactions, though giving the experience a certain aesthetic quality, does not make the game what it is; if that were the case, one would simply watch a film. One must understand emotion as a larger moving and concerning force which involves specific events and issues; in other words, the player invests his or her self in the outcome of events.⁴⁴ According to Dewey, the unity of experience as guided by emotion creates “an experience”, not just one in isolation; the need to isolate, rather, is the strict submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure that follows the old dualisms.⁴⁵

Fourthly, any game that wishes to create such an integral experience must take concern with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after.⁴⁶ Although Dewey makes this reference on a purely experiential level, the same principles that apply to life itself also apply to video games based around similar components of life. In any game, there are elements of struggle and conflict. Though these words have a negative connotations, in the context of games they are an essential element. To struggle equals to work within the rules of the video game, and to conflict is to attain whatever goal the game sets even with the obstacles placed before the player. Even as the player and the developer alike engender a continual undergoing, suffering remains an essential component.⁴⁷ This suffering is meant for the reconstruction of the old into the construction of the new. This is why video games, as a generality, stick to convention with slight improvements. There are four genres at base - action, strategy, role-playing, and puzzle - and their rules are normative for all the games within that genre. For example, an action game such as *Donkey Kong* requires the player to control a protagonist, Jumpman⁴⁸, whose goal is to rescue Daisy from the giant ape Donkey Kong. No action game exists where some human, creature, or object is not controlled and required, through good timing, to avoid, dodge, and attack enemies. In this same way, the continuous line of video games both builds upon what has been created and continually advances through presenting the same ideas in new formulations, each video game becoming a period of disunity and consummation in a grand scheme.

Fifthly, both creation and play must exist in dialectic tension. Straying from Dewey slightly, video games take a different route in terms of artistic creation. In one sense, the artists (or artists, given video games are an entirely collaborative effort) uses intelligence to perceive the interactions and relations taking place within his/her work - the artist has specific intentions on how he/she is crafting and presenting that particular work to a public

⁴⁴Ibid, 42.

⁴⁵Ibid, 40.

⁴⁶Ibid, 40.

⁴⁷Ibid, 41.

⁴⁸It is not Mario, as is commonly believed - this was before he received an actual name.

world.⁴⁹ The work is finished when the artist thinks it is “good”.⁵⁰ But, the work also exhibits the fact that it will be demonstrated in a public environment; if it does not take the perspectival into account, then it cannot be art, for the experience is no longer “guided.” However, video games do not exist in a vacuum, nor do fans of video games silently observe and participate; they tend to express their anger or dislike of games quite vehemently on message boards and forums across the Internet. In some cases, their demands are relevant, as in the case of competitive games where one character has a natural and unfair advantage over the others. Fighting games, for example, have formed under the auspices of an arcade culture which breaks the game’s rules to its essentials, abuses those rules to the furthest degree, and from that data can pinpoint the exact strength level of various characters the player can choose. Developers, noting this wealth of experience, sometimes choose to rebalance these game based on player feedback with mixed results.

Regardless of the outcome, the player and the developer are equal partners in the process of creating “an experience”. On both sides, these interactions engage the consciousness and give the emotional sense of fulfillment. Furthermore, the artistic sense has to be trained; they will know to create an experience for themselves relative to the work of art, as both beholder and producer examine it based on their interest, gathering the details into a whole.⁵¹ Thus inception (what gamers want), development (making the game), and fulfillment (both side improving the game) occur within this conversation.. Both being engaged with the present and summing up what has come before appear in the interrelationship of video games. In other words, the fusion of doing and undergoing in perception leads to meaning - hence, it also leads to an excellent video game experience.

3.1.4 Judging Video Games as Art

Now that it is clear in what framework and setting that video games can be “art”, how can that particular quality be judged correctly, or how can video game be examined in a way amenable to their unique qualities? First, the critic must have a full scope of perception, not just recognition of the objects in question, for “natural and artistic criticism is always determined by the quality of first-hand perception; obtuseness in perception can never be made good by any amount of learning, however extensive, nor any command of abstract theory, however correct.”⁵² Judgment, in that case, requires the use of intelligence on perception to allow for greater perception of the object in question.⁵³ The larger problem, for Dewey,

⁴⁹Ibid, 46.

⁵⁰Ibid, 49.

⁵¹Ibid, 54.

⁵²Ibid, 298.

⁵³Ibid, 299.

is the attempt to set concrete rules, stringent requirements, and the baggage of tradition to determine what “art” is, rather than letting the natural processes heretofore mentioned play out in the creation of “an experience”. The fallacy inherent in legalistic criticism of that sort is “...confusion of a particular technique with esthetic form.”⁵⁴ Judicial critics do not allow for the emergence of new modes of life, new experiences, and new modes of expression to account for them; instead, they must retain the old guard, and keep “art” in its proper pedestal.⁵⁵

An example, specifically regarding video games, will make this clear. *Metal Gear Solid*⁵⁶ was one of the premier games of the later 20th century. In it, you control a secret agent known as Solid Snake, whose mission is to recapture or disable nuclear weapons in Alaska that have been stolen by a military black ops group known as Foxhound. Snake, as a former member of this group, warily accepts this mission because he is in Alaska (even though he was retired) and proceeds, under the player’s command, to counter this threat to national security. The rules of the game are thus: the player is much like a human being, so one must sneak around and silently disable, or avoid entirely, enemy Foxhound troops patrolling various areas of Shadow Moses Island. However, the game was revolutionary mostly for its unique storytelling methods, which involved several supernatural elements, as well as numerous cut-scenes of dialogue in the form of a cinematic action-adventure film. The game, through the combination of its unique mechanics, as well as its engaging, though incredibly derivative story (surprise, Solid Snake saves the day), served to heighten the Metal Gear Solid series’ popularity. Inevitably, there would be a sequel.

Hideo Kojima, director of *Metal Gear Solid*, began development of the sequel nearly immediately after the first. The advertising campaign promised a similar adventure except with better graphics and improved mechanics. In fact, one advertisement even promised the return of bosses (special enemies who are more powerful than normal who serve as structural elements in the game, requiring special techniques to defeat) from the previous game. As Jeremy Parish, noted game critic, states, “Metal Gear Solid had been a glorious comic book of a video game, all hyperbolic exclamations and costumed super-villains with silly names, which meant it adhered to the comic book tradition of death - namely, that a character isn’t truly dead until you see them die.”⁵⁷ However, what appeared to a traditional sequel was simply a ruse; instead, that image of that character was a silhouette on a wall, an action

⁵⁴Ibid, 303.

⁵⁵Ibid, 303.

⁵⁶Yes, I have italicized the game names; this is keeping in line with Atkins, who believes that the very act of italicizing gives the object of examination a certain importance, as art or anything else. This is a conscious decision, given the purpose of this work.

⁵⁷Jeremy Parish, “Metal Gear Solid 2: Gaming’s Greatest Con-Job,” on 1UP.com, accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://www.1up.com/features/metal-gear-solid-2-gamings-greatest-con-job>.

figure pretending to be a fearsome foe of the past. This particular situation embodies *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* in a nutshell: it is exactly the opposite of what its audience wanted.

Unlike most games, *MGS2*⁵⁸ intentionally misleads and misinforms the player not only about the plot, but the true goals that the player is striving to complete. The Colonel leading your mission states, as your objective, exactly the same mission as in the first game, except in a different locale - but that is not the true mission. Instead of letting you play as Solid Snake (who dies within the first hour of the game, no less!), you play as Raiden, an angsty and insecure agent who had never been in the field, and his name is never mentioned in any of the press release information. Instead of a wide open environment such as Alaska, the majority of the game takes place on an off-shore drilling platform called Big Shell, a restrictive environment with straight lines and hexagonal shapes. Even with these new environs, it could be assumed that the game simply explores a new environment, but the message here is more sinister, and nothing is as it seems. As Parish states, "...it's a missive about the mutability of information in the digital age. When all forms of communication are digital, everything exists as data, and data can be altered. Text can be edited; video can be manipulated; audio can be masked and sampled. Digital information is unreliable, and as a video game *MGS2* consists entirely of digital information."⁵⁹

Thus, the player eventually learns that the game he is playing, that he paid for, was merely a training exercise to see if human behavior could be controlled and guided without any conscious thought. Raiden is not a person, but a stand-in for the player's interaction with the digital world. Thus, one finds that the player has been manipulated all along, both in plot and in real life! One even learns that Solid Snake, who supposedly dies at the beginning of the game, reappears under a different name. Even the Colonel, who starts the mission in the first place, is nothing but an AI manipulating the player into certain actions. Raiden, the player, was trained into the perfect soldier by recreating the events of Shadow Moses by the Patriots, a mysterious group of persons⁶⁰ who wish to control information to further human evolution. By controlling Raiden, and subsequently the player, they have learned that humanity in general can be controlled by similar means - and the player was the vehicle for this experiment. In other words, by using the unique quality of interactivity, *MGS2* blends the narrative and the rules of its own mechanics to bend and usurps the player's perception of the traditional rules of video games; as Tim Rogers, one of the leaders of the new games journalism movement, has said, "Kojima has made the first postmodern

⁵⁸Which will be abbreviated as such throughout the rest of this work.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Or, as is learned in later games, a group of digitized persons, but that is not clear in this game; we are only dealing with the second game in the series.

videogame.”⁶¹

Video game “review” websites and magazines, as expected of organizations reviewing video games as products, gave *MGS2* nearly perfect scores in their enthusiasm for its “value for money.” However, the general public was not pleased with the “first post-modern video game.” According to Parish, “The general response to *MGS2* was overwhelmingly negative. Many fans felt cheated, and they weren’t shy about voicing their opinions; they had been led to expect an adventure starring the cool, confident Snake, not a sulky substitute.”⁶² Thus, the game’s reputation has made it the least loved of all the Metal Gear Solid games (of which, at the moment, there are four in the main series). However, this game certainly buckled the conventional wisdom of what a game could be and ran right against the establishment of game mechanics and narrative. As such, it is a perfect example of Dewey’s problems with the institutionalization and historicism of art critique - in this case, within video games.

But, one might ask, how does one evaluate such an idea if concrete rules cannot be established? Dewey gives guidelines to this effect. Judgment is not entirely arbitrary. Rather, good judgment requires a rich background, disciplined insight, and the capacity to discriminate and to unify within the context of that criticism. For example, if I did not know the basic plot of *MGS1*⁶³, it would be difficult to criticize the game on a narrative or mechanical level. If I had no prior knowledge of video games, than my criticism only recognizes; it does not perceive how interactivity works within the game to create “an experience.” Judicial criticism, even in the game world, fails because it cannot handle new movements in this art form which, by their nature, express something new in human experience.

However, the opposite response does not solve problems either - the impressionist critic, who evaluates on the basis of total subjectivity, runs into a different problem.⁶⁴ Just as the artist takes objective material from a common world and transforms it by imaginative vision, so too the critic must attend to objective features of the work he or she is studying. Firstly, if personal impressions remain the only form of communication, how can anything human being evaluate anything? By the very act of clarifying an impression through language, one is defining that impression on objective ground to communicate.⁶⁵ Secondly, a mere response does not count for anything, nor does it explain anything about the work - making art into a “he said, she said” situation cannot become the proper role of criticism. For example, to say “I did not like *MGS2*” for no other reason than one’s initial impression paints a bleak

⁶¹Tim Rogers, “Dreaming in an Empty Room (A Defense of Metal Gear Solid 2),” on Insert Credit, accessed December 18th, 2011, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040918232808/http://www.insertcredit.com/features/dreaming2/>.

⁶²Parish, “Metal Gear Solid 2”.

⁶³Which, it must be admitted, I did not know when I played *MGS2* originally

⁶⁴Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 304.

⁶⁵Ibid, 305.

picture for criticism, for no evaluation can be performed.

To solve this problem, Dewey states that it is not that there is an objective judgment criteria, but there is a judgment of criteria; the business of criticism is to deepen experience for others through re-educating and deepening perception.⁶⁶ To understand a work, a critic and the player must both go through the process that the artist experienced in creating the work. How did Hideo Kojima think in creating the work? According to Tim Rogers, who met and talked to Kojima, “His goal was, as he explained to me, ‘To make a videogame that told a story that could only be told in a videogame.’ His first and foremost goal, he claims, was to ‘Use the medium,’ which is, as he put it, ‘inherently postmodern’.”⁶⁷ Most importantly, the critic must have “...an intense liking for certain subject matters,” for otherwise “...there is no chance of his penetrating the heart of a work of art.”⁶⁸ Without making experience the model for criticism, taking either concrete rules or simple impressions as normative, critical evaluation will fail. Wide (multi-culturally) and specific (what are the best video games ever made and why?) knowledge on the subject, as well as vested and interested knowledge on the critic’s part, renders them with the tools for evaluation.

Dewey holds that judgment has two main functions: discrimination and unification.⁶⁹ The first involves understanding of parts, and the second leads to understanding how they are related to each other and to the whole. The former equals analysis, or disclosure of part as parts of a whole, and the latter equal synthesis, the unifying insight of “an experience” based upon the critic’s prior realm of invested, passionate knowledge into the subject.⁷⁰ If, in any case, the critics arrive with a prefigured and preformed methodology, he/she has stunted the work of criticism from the inception of the project; certainly, a critic and artist alike have their own predilections towards certain combinations of matter and form, but that does not make it “bad” or “good” necessarily.⁷¹ *MGS2* has been declared a failure by many, simply due to its complicated, obtuse plot and Raiden, who sometimes acts insufferably passive in what would seem like dangerous situations - still, the game itself has changed little in style from *MGS*. The ability to see the good and the bad alike remains a necessity for any proper criticisms of games. An artist must be free to detect the qualities of any art, as well as evaluate according to the whole history of that medium, a balancing act of the highest order.

⁶⁶Ibid, 309

⁶⁷Tim Rogers, “Dreaming in an Empty Room”.

⁶⁸Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 310.

⁶⁹Ibid, 310.

⁷⁰Ibid, 310-11, 313.

⁷¹Ibid, 313.

3.2 Addressing The Critics

Thus, a theory of video games as “art”, outlined with Dewey’s theory, solves many of the problems associated with video games by treating them as a unique medium. At this juncture, the difficulties with maintaining any of the three views outlined previously - “video games are not art,” “video games are art by virtue of narratives,” and “video games are art by virtue of their rules,” - become clear. As outlined, Dewey applies this to any endeavor such as painting, film, or anything else one can imagine. However, if the modern critic does not accept Dewey’s criterion for all art, at the very least video games, with experience and interactivity as their base elements, can work under this rubric. Otherwise, two different mediums, compared with no concern for their uniqueness, find conflation in the work of a critic.⁷²

3.2.1 Ebert

Much of the reason why video games cannot retain the “art” designation, according to Ebert, is their popularity. Recently, starting with the mid 1990s to the modern day, the video game industry has grown exponentially. As with any entertainment medium, with a larger market come a greater number of releases that do not exhibit a high standard of quality. However, this has been the case with nearly every art form in popular culture, especially in American society; Dewey, seeing his modern entertainment as mere distraction, believed “The increase in the number, variety and cheapness of amusements represents a powerful diversion from political concern...the movie, radio, cheap reading matter and motor car with all they stand for have come to stay.”⁷³ Ebert does not realize that every “art” form has had its “low culture” moment, and video games (which, as noted, are less than a half century old) are similarly in that same place. Secondly, Ebert claims that “serious art” requires a spectatorial and passive model, wherein the artist create his/her work with a specific intent, and that intent transfer to his/her audience through the medium and material means through which the artist works. In a film, this is the script, the cinematography, the actors, the music, the sound, and hosts of other tools toward one specific end. In this case, Ebert adopts an institutional perspective while ignoring the historical location of his own medium, film. As well, he ignores the unique attributes of video games as “not art” simply because they do not fit within the predetermined criteria developed for previous “art” forms - a conflation of methodology with medium.

⁷²This is only a preliminary account of correcting the enterprise of game studies; a conversation is required to explicate these problems more fully, I imagine.

⁷³John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Public Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946), 138-39.

In this case, it is obvious that Ebert has taken a narrow viewpoint that is unwarranted by the facts of the case; in what way is interactivity and “player choice” a problem if the artist takes this factor into account? In video games, complete control does not exist, for the developer determines the game’s rules and narrative in advance - those emergent games allowing freedom of choice still limit one’s choices by virtue of the game’s setting or rules. Ebert’s criticism does not hold true because he lacks the necessary background - rather than understanding the developers as artists, attempting to understand their choices, he make a rash judgment as to the qualities of video games being limited to the visual realm. Unless he can substantiate such claims with stronger reasoning, his argument remains flawed. Ebert, as a film critic, easily falls under any close examination; narratology and ludology, however, begin with extensive knowledge of games already in place, justifying each position’s place to criticize.

3.2.2 Narratology

To examine video games as a simple narrative is to impose a methodology that does not exist within the works themselves. Similar to Ebert, they take an established methodology (observing a medium as a narrative) and apply it to the realm of video games; however, their project appears less insidious than it actually is. Treating games merely as an alternate form removes their uniqueness. To state that interactivity only matters in the vein of reaching different story-telling conclusions reduces video games to a device of story-telling akin to Ebert’s spectatorial mode. What if a video game does not tell a story? Certainly, the narratologist could say that such video games create a “story” within the person who views it, but this means they have, inadvertently, accepted Dewey’s aesthetics in an attempt to escape the problem. As critics, it appears their knowledge of video games does not have the depth and breadth to make such an analysis - the first video game, *SpaceWar!*, does not have a narrative other than “defeat your opponent”, and how does one categorize that as a “narrative”? As well, their terminology of “narrative” remains unclear.

Who defines the category of narrative, and what is that definition? Do rules necessitate a narrative? Puzzle games tend not to have any narrative; the most famous puzzle video game, *Tetris*, literally involves the moving of falling blocks with absolutely no pretensions of storytelling. In that case, the narratologist must retreat to the “interior narrative”: is the narrative or story created in the video game world’s fiction, or inside of the player? At that point, they have again found themselves at “an experience”! The narratologist assumes a future view where “games will become art like other forms”, but that prefigures how video games should be understood. Rather than examine them on their own terms, interactivity becomes an additional characteristic of a currently ersatz form of “high art”, not a unique

entity in itself. Their ambiguity of definition and methodology is a result of ignoring the game's rules as an equal component; when the rules disappear, how can the video game be a game? The fundamentally impressionist view (at least given by Atkins) of video games and narrative does not equal anything but a narrow examination, as well as one without any definitive content.

3.2.3 Ludology

However, the corrective of rule examination goes only so far; to examine video games as a set of rules in isolation tends to remove the experiential quality of the work. Imagine a game solely built of rules; certainly, card games can function in this capacity, but a video game? Though the ludologist certainly wants to view narrative as a constituent of the rules, this is not always the case. In *MGS2*, for example, the rules of the game are still *exactly* the same as *MGS*; the stealth mechanics have not, in any way, changed from game to game (except for the notable change of a first-person perspective option; this was not present in the original, but it does not change how the player interacts with the world to a major degree.) However, the narrative gives the player an entirely different hermeneutical lens by which to view the event unfolding through both their play and their interaction with the material. In *MGS*, the goal was straight-forward and obvious, and the game did not try to deceive the player, but *MGS2* goes out of its way to make the player see their actions in a different light even though they perform the *exact* same actions they undertook in the first game. If rules were the only constituent, then why play *MGS2* over *MGS*, or why consider them fundamentally different at all?

Rules, as the primary criteria, like narratology, limit the options of viewing games as “art” by a restrictive methodology. Even with rules, the ludologist believe these rules, in the fictional world, function to elicit certain feelings and desire in the player - does that not constitute “an experience” as much as anything else? If a game has only rules, the feeling of accomplishment will still be there regardless! The feeling of victory, or defeat, still attempts to create “fun” as the player sets arbitrary challenges - if the narrative is within the self, focuses upon the self's interaction with a fictional game world, and if it is half-real, then a real person still interacts and creates “an experience”. To view a game in abstraction, even retaining interactivity, removes the necessity of narrative for some video games that absolutely require a narrative element to motivate the player. If rules were all that were required, why bother bringing video games into the discussion at all? This is a generalization of all video games that cannot engender fruitful evaluation and criticism. An institutional examination such as the ludologist proposes only leads to misconceptions.

4 Conclusion

From an exclusivist view on any side, video games are misrepresented in both their content and their essential elements. The idea of video games as “an experience” solves the problems of both sides. Instead of isolation, narratives and rules exist in collaboration to create a unique “experience” within a particular work, both with the artistic intent of the developers and the reception of the players. If one is emphasized over the other, inevitably problems emerge; however, if each finds use within its own particular video game context where relevant, then higher criticism and evaluation of games as “art” and discovering those “experiences” becomes a joy and a pleasure. Rather than creating artistic classism, video games as a relatively new medium can find their foothold as a novel form of expression operating under rules that create “an experience” in the players and developers.

One speak here, however, with a cautious optimism; has any video game, thus far, created “an experience” that rivals the socially transformative effects of great literature or film? Do any video games create an “an experience” in the way that a superlative game of chess between two experts can provide? It is difficult to assess, given video games provoke entirely different reactions and experience from players, as well as the relative infancy of the medium. As for now, this analysis of video games from an experiential aesthetic remains a preliminary theoretical construct that has not found full application for the most part. Regardless, its groundwork should be a fruitful place for the general public and game studies scholarship alike to begin in their study of video games. Electronic interaction, media, and social environments are created at a rapid pace in modern culture; to not integrate video games into the realm of “real” experience does not speak to the digitized realms and qualities of the modern era.

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⁷⁴Alernate, but not original, weblink: <http://www.kojimaproductions.net/features/articles/dreaming-in-an-empty-room/>.