

Eric Zimmerman

Thinkpiece for

"Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games"

You ask a funny question...

I was asked by the organizers of this conference to write a brief statement about a strange little phrase, a phrase which also happens to be the name of a panel at the conference. The phrase is the following:

"The Future of Video Games as an Art"

When I first read the assignment I had been given, I must confess that I was somewhat dismayed. Somehow, the intersection of these concepts and contexts (video games and art, academia and public policy) rankled me. But why? Why a negative reaction to this innocuous query?

At the risk of biting the hand that feeds me (or least pays for my hotel and air fare), I intend to spend the rest of this short essay meditating on my initial dismay. We were asked to submit papers as a way of contributing to the discussion of ideas at the conference, and that's what I'm trying to do here. I'm not writing this essay with a definite thesis or agenda. I offer a range of reactions to this provocative question as food for talk.

Part 1: Questioning the Question

As a game designer that also operates in wider circles of culture, I am often asked the question, "Are games art?" This seemingly simple inquiry is a curious nugget of ambiguity. And it is, in my opinion, the ghost lurking in the machine of the strange little phrase, "The Future of Video Games as an Art."

So, *are* games art? The ambiguity in this question, of course, has to do with just what one means by "art." There

are two general ways to tackle this dilemma:

1) Pragmatic. Let's take the question as a practical one. If "art" is a contextually grounded, societal phenomenon, the answer to the question, "Are games art?" is No. Pragmatically speaking, art is defined by the set of cultural institutions that house and facilitate its production and reception. It is a construct of the private and governmental systems that fund it, the museums, galleries, and theaters in which it is displayed and performed, the demographics of its audiences, and the media and academic environments in which it is reviewed, critiqued, and studied. Presently, art and digital games do not share these institutional contexts and by this rubric games could not be considered art.

2) Philosophical. Although the pragmatic approach makes the question much more approachable, the question "Are games art?" is usually not meant to be about the societal institutions of the art world. Typically, what's meant is something like: Can games be (or become) part of that special kind of culture we call "art?" The challenge of this species of inquiry is that it can mean a great number of different things. For example, it could mean: Can the objects of a game embody deep meaning? Or: Can games play a profound role in the lives of game players? Or perhaps: Can games have a positive impact on culture at large? Of course, all of these versions of the question are riddled with ambiguity as well. But their spirit is certainly different than the pragmatic approach outlined above.

So what about the answer? I am hardly an objective observer of the phenomenon of games, but the answer to the "philosophical" framing of the question seems to be self-evidently Yes. Answering Yes to the second formulation of the question for me assumes that cultural meaning is something that follows from the use and deployment of culture, rather than being a property of some forms of culture and not of others. In other words, I answer Yes to indicate that games are indeed capable of being significant culture – but not necessarily that they resemble "art."

Which brings me back to my initial discomfort with the question itself. The agenda behind the question "Are games art?" is that art itself is held up as a standard for proper cultural production. My beef is with the assumption that games need to be raised up to the status of art – particularly these days, when the art world seems increasingly specialized, circumscribed, and irrelevant to culture at large.

Don't think me a reverse art-snob. If anything, I'm the loyal opposition. I'm trained as an artist – although now that I make computer games, I think of myself as a designer. Both roles, the artist and the designer, clearly involve the production of culture. And why would I make the distinction? Or to expand the scope of that question, what is at stake in defining games as art or as design? What is at stake in defining a standard of

successful culture production via the discourse of media and design, rather than through the discourse of art?

Part 2: Media on Trial

These aren't just rhetorical exercises in which I'm engaging here. The distinction between varying forms of culture, their technological, legal, and ontological status, are key questions to ask when trying to understand and work within a media. Which, I believe, is what this conference is all about.

Case in point: quite recently, in August 2001, I served as an expert witness in a legal proceeding in Vancouver about video games. Here is the scoop on the case:

- The American computer game publisher Activision released the PC title *Soldier of Fortune* within the last year.
- *Soldier of Fortune* is a "first-person-shooter" game (or FPS), in the tradition of Doom and Quake, in which the player uses a first-person point-of-view to navigate a 3D space and combat enemy targets.
- The game was specifically designed to be a "realistic" and bloody FPS. For example, the wounds that your target receives are mapped onto its anatomy depending on the exact hit location of your bullets.
- A consumer in the province of British Columbia complained about the game to the government. The Director of Film Classification for B.C. classified the game as an adult motion picture. My understanding is that this means that the game would only be distributed with porn films.
- Activision, the game's publisher, became concerned for the commercial success of the game and contested the ruling.
- And I was hired by the Activision team as an expert witness to submit a report and appear before a three-judge Administrative Tribunal in Vancouver.

Here's what is surprising about the case: what was under consideration had nothing to do with the content of the game. The publisher was contesting whether or not the Director of Film Classification had jurisdiction over video games in general (and *Soldier of Fortune* in particular). In other words, what was "on trial" at the hearing was whether or not *Soldier of Fortune* was a film; and whether or not a computer game was in fact a motion picture.

When I was first contacted to write a report and testify with an opinion on this matter, the whole affair seemed laughably obvious. Of course a video game isn't a motion picture. The focus of my academic work has been to try and demarcate the field of game design, by identifying what distinguishes games (both digital and non-digital) from other media. In my "expert" opinion, when considering the essential characteristics of the form, *Soldier of*

Fortune has more in common with Chess than it does with a motion picture, even a film like Rambo that might have similar subject matter.

To me this seemed obvious. But it wasn't until I appeared in court that I realized it wasn't going to be so obvious to everyone else. To a roomful of lawyers and judges that didn't have familiarity with games or with digital technology, something like *Soldier of Fortune*, an entertainment product that filled a screen with cinematic images, might seem very much like a motion picture.

The result is that my testimony primarily consisted of a close dissection of the visual elements of a 3D computer game. In examination and cross-examination I was asked to explain not just how computer games functioned, but how computers worked as well, how a piece of software interfaces with an operating system, which interfaces with the low-lying hardware of the CPU. Or how the frame rate of a 3D display engine is different than the cathode-ray tube flicker of a computer monitor – and how both of these phenomena relate to the filmic phenomenon of "persistence of vision." Or especially, the difference between recorded media and procedurally generated media: how it is that code creates architecture, light and shadow, and emergent agent behaviors.

If these questions were all that the case was about, then perhaps my trip to Vancouver would merely have been a fascinating chance to examine the formal differences between the media of games and film. But in fact, there were strong ideological forces at work in the case as well. Because having jurisdiction over games ultimately meant having control over ratings and content. And so the case itself was really about something entirely other than the subject about which I had been asked to testify.

My first glimpse of this second, invisible trial was early in the testimony of the expert witness hired by the government lawyers. She began to ramble, grandstanding about the need for governmental ratings for violent videogames. This unasked-for tangent was silenced by the judges, who directed the witness to only answer questions and not volunteer additional opinions. I was shocked that an expert witness would so brazenly jeopardize the veneer of "objectivity" that is the basis of credibility in these contexts.

But my second glimpse of the ideology at work beneath the machinery of the trial was even more telling. Other than the two expert witnesses, the three judges, and the four attorneys, there were only two others who sat in the modest room throughout the case. One of these, I was told, was the Director of Film Classification for B.C. herself. The other, an informally dressed man in his late fifties, I was lead to believe was the plaintiff. He was the man who had originally filed a complaint against *Soldier of Fortune*. The two of them sat together in the back of the small room. The man clucked disapprovingly and rolled his eyes whenever the Activision lawyers spoke (and distractingly enough, throughout my own testimony).

At some point during a recess, I glanced back to where the two of them were sitting. During the entire proceedings, they seemed quite familiar with each other and on friendly terms. At this moment, they were sitting next to each other, speaking in hushed tones, and were passing a book back and forth. The book explained everything. It was *Stop Teaching our Children to Kill*, by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano, the much criticized post-Columbine book that accuses computer games of dehumanizing murder, encouraging innocent children to become violent criminals.

As of this writing, the outcome of the case has not been decided.

Part 3: Center and Margins

The point of that anecdote is to demonstrate that in making comparisons between media, such as "art" and "games," there are often issues at stake that go beyond the formal or philosophical differences.

My own model for thinking about the medium of games isn't art at all. It is so-called *pop culture*: graphic design, electronic music, film, fashion, etc. Each of these forms of culture comes in a broad array of manifestations, from corporate-sponsored vanilla dreck to underground sub-cultural experiments. In diverse economies of scale, pop culture media network with each other globally and locally, influencing style and content in every sphere of society. In the last few decades, pop culture has been the site of media's greatest formal innovations, not art.

Digital games do seem to belong to this class of media as well. But only as a geeky stepchild. It's not clear to me what will happen to games: will they shed their stigma of male adolescent power fantasy and achieve a more significant status within culture at large? Perhaps they will, but only after overcoming a cornucopia of economic, technological, and cultural factors that stand in their way.

What follows is a brief survey of some of these realities that shape, for better or for worse, the state of digital gaming:

Economic

- Games are big business. Despite the fact that the oft-quoted statement "games are as big as Hollywood film" is a misleading statistic, it is true that the economic scale of the game industry is immense and growing rapidly. So games are big business – but the question is: What kind of business?
- A very positive component of the game industry is that it shares the artist/publisher business model of other "content industries" like music, film, and books. The *game developer* creates the content (like the book author or musician) and the *game publisher* funds, manufactures, markets, and distributes the content (like the book publisher or record label). If the game is a success, the developer gets royalties. This model has helped games become the only form of digital culture that people actually seem willing to purchase.
- The dark cloud that enshrouds this silver lining is that as the platforms for games have grown more complex, titles have become more and more expensive to make. This has led to a conservative, hit-driven industry adverse to experimentation and filled with lookalike clones. Distribution is a cutthroat bottleneck, with a handful of chain stores running most of the show.
- The fact that the vast majority of games lose money and only a handful turn a profit each year means that publishers are all barking up the same genrifed trees, gunning for that top ten hit. The game industry is all center and no margins: it's like Hollywood film without any independent cinema.
- What's needed are alternative contexts for the production, distribution, and reception of games. Where are the small record labels, college radio stations, and DJ club cultures of gaming?

Technological

- As with film, creating game is a complex, multi-disciplinary form of media production. A game can't be created in a garage over a weekend like a demo tape for a band.
- The technological nature of software development has contributed to an over-emphasis on technology. Newer and better means faster and more complex. Stats like the number of polygons rendered per second are the typical standards by which games are judged, both within and without the industry.
- While their technological profile is clearly an important facet of game development and game playing, to gauge the importance of a game on its technical merits is like judging a film solely by the sophistication of its special effects.
- And at the same time, like the rest of the computer and software industry, the game industry indulges in planned obsolescence: competition between platforms means that the Playstation is quickly followed by the Playstation 2. Backwards compatibility is the exception, not the rule.
- The resulting plethora of standards makes archiving and playing older games a hobbyist's trade, rather than the more "universal" formats of the videotape or audio CD. It creates a medium without a history, a medium in which (as I've already mentioned) tech innovation becomes an end, not a means.
- Is it possible to create meaningful games on a smaller scale and without getting sliced on the bleeding edge of techdom? Yes, but not if the standards for judging games remain the size of the production budget and the number of polygons on-screen per second.

Cultural

- All of this complaining might make me sound like a disgruntled game-maker. But I'm not. I really am of two minds about being a game developer – depending on which context I'm in.
- If I'm speaking outside the field, talking to artists, academics, architects, etc, I become the apologist. I try and get my audience to see beyond the shoot-em-up stigma and appreciate games as the complex and groundbreaking media that they are.
- On the other hand, when I'm in the belly of the beast, speaking to an industry audience at the GDC or E3, I try and get them to face the fact that computer games are culturally retarded. They know that games are interesting: my aim here is to sow seeds of discontent.
- Currently, games are made by and for gamers, the product of an unapologetically geeky culture. While the game development community shares much of the rich dedication and invention of other fan cultures, it needs to broaden its horizons.
- If the aim is to have gaming join the ranks of other, more robust forms of pop, games need to be brought into the fold of culture at large. For example, over the last several years there has been a tremendous amount of cultural appropriation involving games, from fine artists appropriating the imagery of computer games to DJs sampling retro game audio effects, from Playstations appearing in London clubs to videogame characters on Urban Outfitter t-shirts. This is, indeed, the way that media culture seems to operate: through rich networks of appropriation and hybridization.
- The problem is that games need to be the subject as well as the object of these processes. When are games themselves going to shed the narrow-mindedness of "retarded realism" (to coin a phrase from designer Frank Lantz) and take on aesthetic and narrative content from different than the genre pulp we're getting? As innovative as games have been, they need to shed their cinema envy to arrive at genuinely new forms of gameplay.

- The general answer is that game design and development needs to be seen as a cultural activity, not as a technological one. This means, among other things, the development of a critical discourse that can bridge the theory and practice of games and help developers understand their work as both as a disciplinary activity and in broader terms as the production of culture.

So now that we know what's keeping games down, what would happen if they would rise up? Let's say that games managed to address all of these economic, technological, and cultural challenges. What would that mean for games? What would happen to the medium, to technology, to the status of games in our culture? And how would these changes relate to the question that sparked this essay, "The Future of Video Games as an Art?"

I don't know. I really don't. Ideally, the young medium of digital games has many wonderful transformations in store for us, ways of constructing our lives and commenting on them that we have yet to experience. My hope is that games can offer radically new forms of culture, forms that are uniquely suited to the complex emergent systems which seem to increasingly constitute our understandings of the world.

If I could predict the future of the medium, I wouldn't be drawn towards working in the field in the first place. But I do have a suspicion that "The Future of Video Games as an Art" is a misnomer. Games do have a future of some kind. But instead of shutting it down with outdated cultural categories, let's open it up to discussion.