

# Video Games, Walking the Fine Line between Art and Entertainment

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is partly a response to the ongoing debate in the game world about whether games can be art, and partly an excerpt from my Ph.D. research. I aim to offer some insights in the cognitive experiences gamers have while playing - hopefully useful to both designers and scholars. I will argue that an art experience is a particular kind of cognitive experience, namely a distinctive type of imagination. The essence of an art experience is the mental representation of a signification process, a sort of mirrored representation that is also known as mimesis. I hope to demonstrate that it is a universal feature of art to mirror life, or more accurately, a deliberate view on it. And that what constitutes art is not defined by the properties of an artefact, but by our experience of it, by our mental actions. Along the same line I maintain that the boundaries between what we usually label entertainment and what art can not be as sharply defined as we generally assume.

The main arguments in the aforementioned debate concern affective features, perceivable aesthetic qualities (as opposed to artistic properties), and the uniqueness of a game. I will set out explaining why most expert assumptions seem not discriminating enough to distinguish an art experience from an entertainment experience. Next I present some theoretical perspectives on both kinds of experiences, after which I will explain how they are being mixed and intertwined in everyday practice. Some gameplay examples should finally illustrate this inevitably condensed theoretical framework, drawn from my more detailed and elaborated dissertation on signification, imagination and mimesis<sup>1</sup>.

## Keywords

Games, Art, Entertainment, Representation, Cognition, Signification, Mimesis

## INTRODUCTION

On January 14 2011 game journalist Niels 't Hooft (2011) shed some interesting lights on *Katamari Damacy's* designer Keita Takahashi (Kabushiki, 2003). He considers Takahashi - who is an educated visual artist - a sculptor of games, and his central statement is that games can be art, especially games like *Katamari*. The art conception 't Hooft implicitly applies is built on the claims that *Katamari Damacy* has a particular starting point, and it looks unique. 't Hooft continues to argue that many consider this game a comment on mass consumption, while the designer himself tried to refer to our throw-away attitude somehow (not aiming to produce art at all, by the way). These last remarks are clearly interpretations. 't Hooft's first comments however seem to reveal an art view which is based on the believe that art must possess an unusual principle, which has to be expressed through an extraordinary appearance. Although attractive and widely acknowledged maybe, I would like to argue that this particular art conception is not

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discriminating enough. The features 't Hooft identifies in *Katamari Damacy* just as well describe the essentials of an entertainment experience. To illustrate my assumptions I firstly cite the artistic features brought forward by experts in the game world. The fundamental distinction between entertainment and art experiences will be explained in the following theoretical account.

### **Experts about games as art**

Scholars, game designers and authors that have contributed to the games-as-art debate bring up some similar, but also rather different arguments than what 't Hooft claims. Henry Jenkins (2005) for example seems to ignore the perceivable features (the aesthetics) or the novelty-factor of games altogether. He particularly emphasizes the content of games and the experience gameplay produces when he nominates games as the new lively art. The properties he refers to consist of emotions, actions and atmosphere, with which the lively arts strive to express immediate experiences and impressions. In *The Art of Computer Game Design* Chris Crawford (1997) illustrates his position with a definition. Art is in his conception something designed to evoke emotion through fantasy. He claims that an artist offers a set of sensory experiences that stimulates commonly shared fantasies, which in turn generate emotions. This conception is shared by Lionhead Studios leader Peter Molyneux, as he explains in an interview with *gamesindustry.biz*. "If art is described as something which promotes a reaction in you, and lets you glimpse something that's more than reality – then yes, of course they're an art form" (Gibson, 2007). Author, director and game designer Clive Barker contributes to the same discussion with an argument that again is emotion-related: "We should be stretching the imagination of our players and ourselves. Let's invent a world where the player gets to go through every emotional journey available. That is art. Offering that to people is art" (Androvich, 2007). So again fantasy, imagination and emotion are proposed as the fundamental properties of an art experience<sup>2</sup>.

Designer and author Raph Koster takes a different course in his *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. To him artfulness is characterized by the extent to which an artefact is puzzling and implies more than one right answer. In his view the best definition of when something ceases to be craft and turns into art is the point at which something becomes subject to interpretation (Koster, 2005). I admit there must be a point at which something ceases to be craft or entertainment, and becomes art, or more precise, gains the capacity to stimulate an art experience. Nevertheless I have to reject Koster's assumption that this threshold is defined by its complexity or its ability to stimulate interpretation. I think we could easily find examples of exactly these features in TV-shows, Hollywood movies or non-literary detective novels, without having an art experience with them on just these grounds. And this is also where all the above arguments seem to fall short: the argued characteristics are not discriminating enough to distinguish an art experience from an entertainment experience.

### **THE ART EXPERIENCE AS IMAGINATION OF MEANING-MAKING**

To be able to discuss the distinction between the two kinds of experiences, and to identify the probability of these experiences in video games, we initially need to capture the main features that characterize both. In my abstract I already referred to the essentially cognitive nature of an art experience. Everything we perceive with our senses - what we see, taste, hear, feel - can be considered as mental representations, and our mind continuously compares our actual perception with stored representations. Only if we encounter a difference between the actual and the recollected representation we feel the

need to assign meaning to it (the essentially semiotic human cognition creates a sign) (Cobley & Jansz, 1999; Heusden, 1998; Eco, 1976; Eco, 1981; Blonsky, 1985; Peirce & Moore, 1972; Goodman, 1968). So we constantly use our imagination, when we read a novel, when we plan to buy a present, when we watch a movie, when we recall the day, when we play a game and so forth. The way we use our imagination is rather unremarkable and happens mostly autonomously. In order to grasp my concept of an art experience it is crucial to acknowledge that our ordinary imagination predominantly contains mental representations of actions, of situations and occurrences.

Now the only phenomenon that in my conception distinguishes an art experience from other experiences, from other mental representations, is the nature and the level of the imagination. I contend that in an art experience on a basic level we mentally represent actions and occurrences through our perception of a text (a painting, a novel, a film, a game and so forth). But on top of that - on a meta-level - one could imaginatively perceive a signification process as well. We all know the feeling when a slight deviation or remarkability in a text makes us wonder: "what does the maker mean by this?" It is crucial to acknowledge though that it is not the actual artist's consciousness we perceive. What we sense between the lines can at best be conceived as an imaginative, constructed consciousness, which reveals a specific awareness of the depicted actions and occurrences<sup>3</sup>. We are able to catch a perspective, an ideological vision or a critical, revealing view towards what is represented, towards the world, towards life. And it is not only this perspective we imagine, but especially the way this imaginative consciousness feels about, reflects on and signifies the represented actions and occurrences. So in fact we catch and represent metacognitive mental actions (a signification process), and reflect on them on a metacognitive level (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995; Walton, 1990; Heusden & Jongeneel, 1998; Donald, 2001; Currie, 2004; Turner, 2006; Bruner, 1990; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Markman, Klein, & Suhr, 2009).

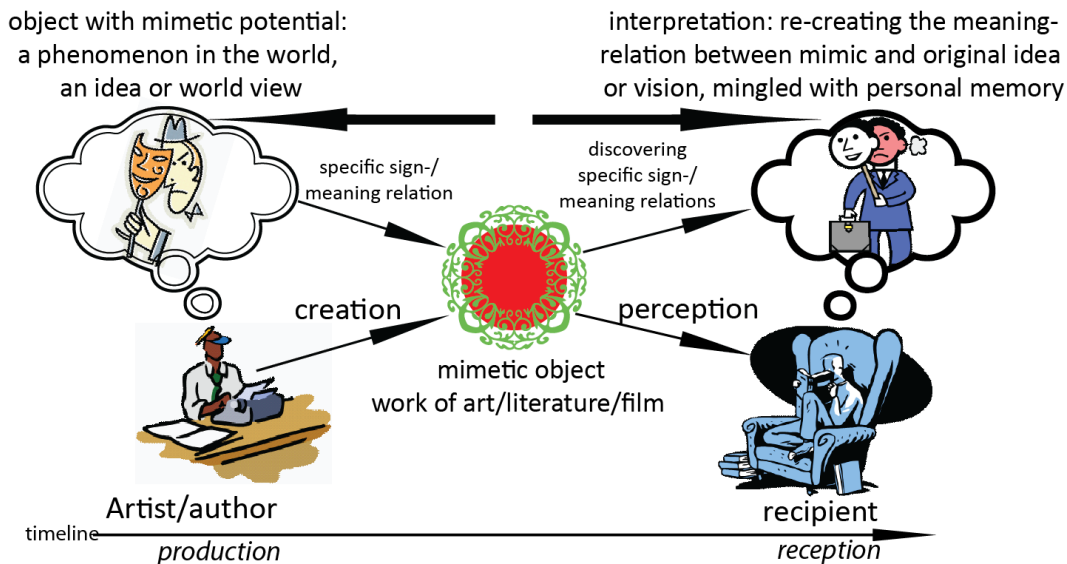
Some examples of the fine arts might illustrate this line of thought. In a nearly inescapable way the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn betray the presence of an imaginative consciousness, which seems very much aware of certain issues to express about life, about its world in its age. One could recognize this conscientious awareness in the subtle and clever directed play with social ranks and relationships in Rembrandt's *schuttersstukken*, and in his self-portraits, which delicately disclose what facial expressions can reveal about the particular nuances and shades of emotional states. We are also able to discern an imaginative, constructed consciousness in the work of Van Gogh, through his commonplace subject matter: a bedroom, a wheat field, a bridge. It reveals how these objects possibly can relate to one's particular mental and physical world, and moreover, how they fit into a specific conception of what art is. His work thus reflects a literal outlook on one's daily life, and for those who are able to 'read between the lines' a particular view on how we perceive and signify our surroundings as well.

It is essential to realize that art always imitates something. What is imitated though is not the world or life itself, but the *representation* of it, of objects, people, occurrences - as Van Heusden emphasizes most significantly (Heusden, 2007). It is the artist's constructed representation of the way we perceive, how we listen and feel, how we think and argue, how we conceptualize the things we perceive and experience, and how we finally act on that. Art is about representation of signification processes, and the art experience about perceiving these processes one way or another.

## A cognitive-semiotic perspective on an art experience

Previously I mentioned the fundamental cognitive nature of culture, or more accurate, our experience of it. It is of no use to look for culture or art in the objects themselves, because art is a cognitive action, something we do in our minds with these objects, as Kant (2009) in 1790 already convincingly demonstrated in his *Critique of Judgment*. And this mental action can be triggered by different things, and differently between individuals as well. This mechanism works similar to how we recognize and interpret a sign, which is among others defined by Eco as *something that stands for something else* (Eco, 1976) - in which he left out Peirces more specific part - *for someone in a certain capacity* (Peirce & Moore, 1972) (Heusden, 2001). I consider this last part rather fundamental because it takes into account the possible individual, cultural, situational or social context, in which something is recognized as a sign. An object or an occurrence itself is not a sign, but to perceive and read a sign is an intentional mental action, that can differ from person to person. Essential in this view is to acknowledge that inspiring something with meaning in a creative process is a cognitive action as well. Evolutionary cognitivist Merlin Donald (2006) identifies *objects of art* in themselves as a *cognitive construct*, in the sense that they are representations that influence the way not only artists, but art recipients as well perceive the world. I must agree with him that art is always aimed at a cognitive outcome, designed to engineer a particular state of mind in the beholder. And it not only triggers cognition, but meta-cognition as well. We do not only think about what we perceive and what it means, but what it means to us, and why we think about it in exactly this way, and how it relates to what we already know. So on a meta-level we are aware of, and can reflect upon our own signification process. Meta-cognition, Donald claims, is definitely self-reflection, and art self-reflective. The artistic object evidently challenges us to reflect on the very process that created it. And that is on the mind of the artist, and therefore on society she emerged from.

From a semiotic perspective an art experience is basically defined by mimesis, conceived as an imitation of signification processes. According to semiotician Timo Maran (2003) mimesis is a mirrored process that starts with an artist, a writer, a sculptor (see figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The mimetic process.

Firstly he has to identify the latent power for mimetic expression in an object, which can be an ideological or social issue, or a certain outlook on the way we perceive and know reality. This is followed by the physical creation of an art work, in which mimesis is recognizable, operational and functional. Suppose a writer has to imagine a scene for a movie in which a guy finds out the true nature of reality, namely being entirely virtual and controlled by machines. The scene in question has to function as a sign that somehow stands for the awful way the man discovers the truth. The writer could imagine how this guy overslept again and is being reprimanded in his manager's office. And he considers, "what exactly represents transparency, clarity, lucidity? Sure, behind his employer I could depict a window-cleaner, who reveals the view on the world outside, wiping the opaquely-foamed windows with horribly screeching sounds. That would do the trick". The second phase of mimesis starts when we perceive the outcome of mimetic creation in the work of art, and assign meaning to it. What cognitively occurs in our minds is opposite or mirrored to what happened before in the writer's mind. We try to re-establish the meaning-relation between the art work and the original object or idea to which it refers to. In trying to discover which relation the writer accentuates - what it signifies - we are free to decide whether this relation is iconical, symbolical or indexical<sup>4</sup>. Mimesis in Maran's conception is an intentional process of sign creation. Something new is created in a way that the outcome could act as a sign for the interpreter.

Although in my view the art experience is not established just by interpreting the outcome of this process of sign creation. It is stimulated by imagining the signification process itself, and to conceive what this constructed consciousness wants to express or reflect about life. It is not just due to our comprehension of what happens when the Wachowski brothers metaphorically refer to what follows, in the scene with the window-cleaner. Of course there is no doubt that this Matrix scene foretells Neo's painful and disturbing discovery of the true nature of reality (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). But I can also sense, as a kind of meta-thought, something more universal in their use of this metaphor. It seems to me they also suggest in a more general way to stay alert in our 'real' world, to be more cautious in our own reality, because we tend to take things for granted too easily. Maybe our own reality as we know it is more constructed and manipulated than we are willing to admit in our everyday life. In my conception it is my higher-level awareness of this additional vision and how I deal with that, that constitutes an art experience for me, on top of the perceived meaning-making process that gives the story depth and ingenuity. Of course we possess the autonomy to apply previous knowledge and experience, convictions and aesthetic preferences in this mimetic action. So our interpretation and opinion about the issues at hand, or the way we read the signification process can always differ somehow from what the artist had in mind while he constructed it.

### **The art experience: aesthetic vs. artistic properties**

We still have to discuss one important feature that is regularly called upon by experts and layman alike. I refer to *appearance*, or the perceivable aesthetic features that supposedly constitutes the artwork. Again it might not prove to be distinctive enough to distinguish art from entertainment (or from any natural phenomenon for that matter) just by possessing unique looks or extraordinary beauty. Of course there is nothing wrong to identify art with beauty, or to refuse to accept something as art because it lacks exquisite looks. However this view ignores a great deal of not so pleasurable art, which nevertheless is universally accepted within the contemporary art world (with which I do not imply that everyone can or should have an art experience with them). A lot of art does

not attempt to be beautiful, leading to the conclusion that an *artistic experience* is not always enjoyable. I only have to refer to artists like Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Marina Abramović, Marlene Dumas, Anselm Kiefer and Damien Hirst. Some of their creations even arouse disgust and repulsion on first sight. It seems not entirely implausible to cross out the term *aesthetic* for now, just like the notion *aesthetic experience*, as conditional features of art or the art experience. Philosopher of art Stephen Davies (2006) offers in my view adequate distinction between what is aesthetic and what is artistic. He maintains that we generally describe *aesthetic* properties as objective features perceived in the object. Their recognition does not depend on information about the circumstances under which the item was made, or about its intended or possible functions. I guess nobody would want to disagree with my observation that aesthetic properties can be nice or ugly, pleasurable or disgusting. *Artistic properties* on the contrary mostly depend on the content, on messages and meaning artworks communicate, that however by no means can be separated from the *aesthetic properties* (which frequently function as a signal that guides us to the artistic content). So in my view we cannot have an art experience and thus label something as art without a certain connection to its content (Carroll, 2006).

## **GAMES AND PLAY AS ENTERTAINMENT**

Before I will elaborate on the nature of entertainment, I would like to spend some words on the imaginative character of play. Since most of the experts maintain that (next to emotion) imagination and fantasy are the main pillars of art, some quotes from the historian Johan Huizinga could put their arguments in perspective slightly. In his influential study *Homo Ludens, a Study of the Play Element of Culture*<sup>5</sup> in 1934 Huizinga already emphasizes that play is an essential mental, and not material, phenomenon. Play is not something tangible to be found in things or artefacts or games. While play in lots of ways is corporeal, ultimately it is something we do in our minds. Huizinga assumes that play is founded on the use of certain images, on a particular imagination of reality. If one would be looking for the function of play in and of culture, one needs to comprehend the value and the meaning of these images or fantasies. One would want to observe how exactly these images or imaginations operate in play, with the intention to understand play as an agent of cultural life (Huizinga, 1951). And this is exactly what I have in mind here, when we discuss whether games are art or entertainment. My point is that play stimulates imagination just as well as art does, that all kinds of entertainment products provoke imagination and that even in everyday life we make ample use of our imagination. It is essential to acknowledge that imagination, fantasy and mental representation are very common and not exclusively connected to an art experience.

So what about the remaining expert arguments on emotion, puzzling complexity and ambiguity as distinctive properties of art? We can hardly deny that our everyday entertainment experiences consist of similar features as well. Indeed, entertainment is above all an emotional experience characterized by fun. It is a simple truth: If it is no fun, it is not entertaining. Psychologist Ed Tan (2004) underlines the potential of entertainment media to evoke all kinds of emotions, from sadness, fear and horror through disgust, anger and disdain to love and cheerfulness. But the overarching emotion is always pleasure. I can still recall my emotions jumping up and down playing Quake (Id Software, 1996), excited and exhilarated when I brutally kicked some ogres ass, leaving it as a pile of bloody and palpitating flesh and intestines, and frightened away with horror and awe when some brutal monster was giving me the shivers of genuine fear. But oh boy, was it fun to do! Or think of how you felt when dr. Hannibal Lecter tells and shows

FBI trainee Clarice Sterling how he ate someone's liver, with fava beans and a nice Chianti in *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme & Tally, 1998). Or when the nasty asylum administrator dr. Chilton shows Clarice a picture of a nurse's face, bitten off by Lecter when his mask was removed momentarily. As viewers we do not get to see the liver eating nor the photograph, but the suggestion alone is powerful enough to make our imagination run wild in a most unpleasant and horrifying way. But we enjoy it. Please notice that in both examples a wide range of potential emotions and imaginations come into view. Nevertheless I would consider it misplaced to classify my experience of *Quake* or *Silence of the Lambs* as mimesis, at least on account of just these particular instances. Remains the aspect of difficulty, of the puzzling and multi-interpretable character that supposedly renders something as art. Firstly we have to acknowledge that most of us look for some kind of challenge in entertainment media. Too easy is no fun, no challenge is no fun. To look at the image of a security screen in a shopping mall would be just plain boring, as well as listening to the sound of a tuning symphony orchestra for a while. Vorderer, Steen and Chan (2006) suggest that in order to enjoy the experience people always strive to attain the optimal challenge in entertainment media, an assumption that is confirmed and supported by the widely adopted Flow theory from Csikszentmihalyi as well (1990). And the optimal challenge is always located on the level at which people perceive the greatest sense of competence.

Next to the important feature of relevancy<sup>6</sup> that Tan brings forward, he correctly assumes that if the challenge becomes too complex, the pleasure ends. However I fundamentally disagree with Tan's assumption that the entertainment experience, exceeding a certain complexity level, could transform fluently into an art experience - which is rather in line with Koster's argument of ambiguity and the puzzling nature of art. They are disregarding the fact that the institutional art world acknowledged, authorized and adopted a wide range of uncomplicated and comprehensible canonical art that can be enjoyed for a lot of different reasons. I would like to evoke the work of Rembrandt and Van Gogh again, which we hardly consider complex or puzzling. No-one will deny that there is a lot to look for and to discover in their paintings, regardless of the fact that our potential to do so is largely governed by cultural upbringing and acquaintance with historical developments. But to observe them, enjoy them and possibly perceive a signification process is not necessarily complex or enigmatic. The crucial matter is that we can enjoy art without having an art experience at all. Moreover, I maintain that a lot of people enjoy visual art, literature, art film, classical music and opera, modern dance and what not on a regular basis as if it were entertainment. Countless art-lovers engage in this kind of experiences in the primary and utmost intention to be entertained, and I am extremely certain there is nothing wrong or strange about that whatsoever.

### **Consuming art as entertainment**

Since I already expressed some doubts on 't Hooft's claim on aesthetics, his argument about the innovatory quality of art – using different expressive forms and new themes - still deserves some thought. The newness of art is partly due to the phenomenon that the world changes, and with it the artist's constructed perspectives on that changing world. But moreover it is the outcome of the artist's anticipation to our cognitive and neural needs for new stimulants. It is obvious that when something ruptures routine or alienates the ordinary, it triggers our attention and provokes signification processes. So newness or differentness can function as a trigger for an art experience, but do not constitute the experience itself.

Our principal preference for aesthetics, beauty and the innovative nature of art is largely indebted to our evolutionary developed cognitive system and neural networks. Not only our senses are rewarded and pleased if positively stimulated, i.e. when they are treated with nice smells, agreeable sounds, pleasing tactility, delicious flavors and delightful visuals. But in our fulfillment of sensory needs (and the connected cognitive processes and emotions), in short in our pleasure seeking, we are in constant search of stimulation as well. So we are consciously looking for something new and different, which is slightly similar, but at least as much enjoyable as our previous experience. And it seems that even this activity of seeking and discovering something similar-but-new is rewarding on its own (Miron, 2006). It is obvious that the entertainment-business takes advantage of these particular cognitive mechanisms, of the way our brain developed - initially as a function that reinforces survival, according to Miron. She implies that most entertainment is suitably equipped to represent or stimulate typical survival-related emotions like fear and anxiety, anger and rage, social emotions, playfulness and sexual love, pair bonding and offspring nurturance. It is hardly surprising that we recognize every instance of these affective qualities in the various videogame genres. My point here however is that when we consume art, we mostly do not act very differently, subdued as we are to the very same mechanisms. So whether we mentally represent what is depicted in a play, an art film or a literary novel, we focus and respond automatically on the above-mentioned emotions, in our search for pleasure.

Some examples might illustrate and enlighten this conception. When one starts reading Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, or, *The nature of the offence* (1991) one is immediately confronted with a story told backwards. Once grasped and accepted this narrative device the reader is left to the whimsical and humorous occurrences and events that the protagonist experiences, while living from departure back to birth. One can imagine the absurd fun in seeing (mental representing) him walking on the sidewalk with his pants down, quickly entering a house in which he steps into a bedroom, into a woman's bed while her husband puts out the light and leaves. The whole novel is packed with this kind of ludicrous and hilarious events: taxi's are always there when you want them, you get paid in advance and then they take you to unwanted places where you wave them goodbye for a long time, you are getting paid in advance for spitting food on spoons in restaurants, and so forth. It is that amusing that hardly anybody cares the story does not give a clue on where the plot is heading. The novel so far touches mostly emotions that relate to playfulness, social feelings, sexual love, pair bonding and so on. Until the protagonist arrives at Auschwitz, where he becomes a healer (in the horrible backward sense). It is in this and the subsequent scenes that the reader could sense a hint of a constructed consciousness, and what it tries to express with this particular story, told in this way. But, even when confronted now with other, possibly more negatively rated emotions like fear and anxiety, anger and rage, one could still be just very eager to find out the back-story of the protagonist, to discover how his motivations and moral dispositions will originate. The reader could thus be subdued to what Marie-Laure Ryan calls temporal immersion (Ryan, 2001), while he still seeks to satisfy his curiosity and emotional needs with new stimulants. In other words, while Amis' novel is intended to be literature, and is recognized by literary experts as a successful creation and source of mimesis (hence as a work of art), I assume that a lot of readers all the way through are completely engaged in, or caught by the represented action, which is a distinctive property of entertainment (Stromberg, 2009).

And the same counts for numerous other successful, basically engaging and captivating literary novels like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, J.D.



Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Without exception readable and comprehensible in an entertaining way, they not only address primordial emotions, but satisfy our mere search for stimulation and our need for newness and differentness as well. So in spite of the fact that there is not the slightest doubt about their literary qualities among literary critics, we can access and treat them just like entertainment. They are acknowledged as art, but that does not mean the reader is guaranteed to end up in an art experience.

## **THE CONSTRUCTED MIND MIRRORED IN A GAME**

If imagination of consciousness and a signification process is the main feature of an art experience, in what way then we are able to experience this in a game? In the well-known role playing game *Fable II* (Lionhead, 2008) for instance, after a while the gamer discovers that the only successful way to play the game is to comply with its economical system. The gamer has to earn money with tedious jobs, buy property, and rent it out, so she can buy more properties, better weapons and better equipment. We easily suspect a certain moral structure in this gameplay: exactly this type of economic behavior is rewarded, and being lazy or refusing to comply brings you the opposite. It is not that difficult to recognize this simple economical mechanism as an idealization of the work ethic we hold in Western society. Seen this way it could reveal a constructed consciousness which expresses a certain perspective on what would be good and praiseworthy in our life, in our world. Initially it seems like a rather conventional, straightforward and maybe even religiously inspired ideology, especially if combined with the normative ethics on food. Consuming healthy food (lettuce, vegetables, juice) leads to a higher level of purity, consuming supposedly unhealthy food (fast-food, meat, alcohol) leads to a higher corruption level - and a more nasty appearance. But strangely enough the gamer can marry more than one partner from her own or the opposite sex, and this is totally acceptable within the game world, as long as you keep them happy and well-cared-for. When we try to match this rather conservative world-view with an evidently libertarian opinion on polygamy and same-sex marriage, we sort of observe a particular view and (meta)reflection on how apparently conflicting values can exist in harmony next to one another. On a different level this imagined mind seems to consider it important to stimulate gamers to explore moral values and convictions in a game, to play around with cultural conventions. So during gameplay we sometimes catch a glimpse of a constructed consciousness which seems to poke and prick our minds, to create new meaning. And this could easily stimulate meta-cognitive play, in which we compare the implied perspective with ours, this composed world view with our own. It seems not extremely far-fetched to qualify this cognitive action - combined with, and guided by game mechanics and game aesthetics - as an art experience. Especially if compared to an entertainment experience, in which we usually lose ourselves (are immersed) in the represented action, carried away in our strive to overcome the challenges it provides.

## **Mimesis in Bioshock**

The operation of this mimetic 'mindreading' probably comes to life even more clearly with another example, in this case from *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2010). The gamer is encouraged by the Irish workman Atlas to kill Rapture founder Andrew Ryan for his corrupt and totalitarian policy. When you finally get to him, the statesman calmly adds some subtle distinctions and corrections to the story so far. The moment you realize you are being lied to all the time, and Ryan is probably not the villain in this story, you lose control and kill him anyway. You comply unwillingly, but since you are put under

hypnosis it is impossible to resist (in fact your controller does not respond anymore, which symbolizes your loss of control perfectly). Again one could easily perceive a constructed consciousness, which in this case seems to refer to a certain relation between this involuntary murder (seen as morality, or a lack of it) and free will. In semiotic terms it becomes a triadic index when we read between the lines that the whole scene seems to function as an iconic sign (1), which refers symbolically to the object (2) free will, which could have the mental effect (representamen)(3) that we discover an essential connection between having free will and the morality of one's actions. Only unraveling this may not render it an art experience by itself. But on top of that one could sense an imagined perspective, a particular opinion about the importance of being aware of this relationship in the world outside the game. And it seems to me that exactly this type of complex mimetic imagination is rather similar to an art experience. Thus for me personally it would render Bioshock as art.

## **CONCLUSION**

The art concepts of most experts in the field appear to be fragile or implausible. Whereas their suggested artistic properties relate to perceivable aesthetic features, fantasy, imagination, emotion, complexity or ambiguity, these all prove to be not discriminating enough. Actually they seem to characterize just as much an entertainment experience.

Having said that, I feel obliged to put my own conception of what is entertainment and what art into perspective. I have no intention whatsoever to propose an ultimate definition of art or entertainment, let alone to define them as fixed and indisputable phenomena. My main goal is to describe some essential differences in the cognitive processing that people exert while dealing with cultural texts. One kind of cognitive experience is mainly related to an absorbing representation of action; another kind to the mental representation of a signification process, in which we perceive a constructed perspective on life. That these two types of experience more or less correspond with our reception of entertainment and art might be slightly coincidental. Nevertheless I maintain that they offer a more accurate distinction than what is generally assumed about the differences between art and entertainment. At the same time they allow for an approach in which it is not the artefact and its designation as art or entertainment that defines the type of experience one has, but one's disposition and attitude.

On the one hand game designers might be inspired by this paper to explore and venture upon the two kinds of cognitive experiences, to invent new and interesting ways for both thrilling and contemplating gameplay. With which I am not merely referring to an ordinary combination of shooters or action games with difficult puzzles however, but to more sophisticated interconnections between game mechanics and stories.

On the other hand I suppose my concepts to be of particular use to the field of Game Studies. In the first place they provide a toolbox to examine which cognitive strategies gamers generally apply while playing (mainstream entertainment) games. Are gamers willing or prepared to alter their conventional type of gameplay, to be able to perceive a signification process, to be captured by a different level of imagination? To put my work in a wider perspective I would like to conclude with a rephrase of an observation from Johan Huizinga. If we wish to understand play as an agent of cultural life we not only need to comprehend the value and the meaning of these imaginations, but we have to observe accurately how they operate in gaming. The theory and gameplay analysis offered in this paper can be considered a modest attempt to describe one fairly useful approach.

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## ENDNOTES

1 Where I write *he* one can read *she* as well in this text (and vice versa). I intend to write gender-neutral, but due to reasons of aesthetics and readability I mainly use masculine pronouns.

2 Barker replied in his keynote speech on a specific utterance from the Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert, who once publicly declared that games never can be an art form (a conviction he gladly repeats on every possible occasion). His firm belief most likely provoked the still ongoing debate that is frequently being stirred up, most recently I think on a TEDx-talk by designer Kellee Santiago (2009). Her in my opinion feeble arguments however were again skillfully knocked down by Ebert (2010).

3 This is best illustrated by the way consciousness is worked-out in a literary novel. The thoughts, ideas and intentions of the *invented* characters reveal their consciousness, their awareness, opinions and perspectives on the occurrences in their (fictive) world. This constructed consciousness can however by no means be equated with that of the writer. There may be some resemblance, but we cannot assume any identity between the author (and his thoughts and viewpoints about life) and his characters (and their thoughts and viewpoints about life).

4 An icon is an undivided sign(function), in which the reference is established by pictorial identity; a symbol is a dualistic sign that refers to something by convention or agreement; an index is a triadic sign that refers to something by its resemblance with a structural connection, in short, with a theory: smoke is an index of fire, but not because it indicates something is on fire, but because it shows a structure, a theory about the universal nature of the necessary connection between smoke and fire.

5 In the introduction of the original Dutch publication Huizinga complains about his German and English translators, as they crippled and transmuted his well chosen title 'The Play Element *of* Culture' into 'The Play Element *in* Culture', which evidently signifies something completely different.

6 Relevancy as a quintessential feature of entertainment media is defined by Tan as the extent to which an entertainment product refers to something, and to the nature of the reference. The more painful or controversial the issues involved, the more relevant it is (Tan, 2004). And relevancy, I would like to add - as well as difficulty and challenge by the way - always depends on the intellectual capacity and the cultural background of an individual. So relevancy is always connected to and identified by someone in a certain capacity, exactly as how signs function.

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