The Tragedy of the Art Game

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Keywords

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Computer games have come a long way in terms of being considered a creative practice, even an art form. Apart from dedicated festivals, also established electronic art institutions have embraced computer games. Previously separate practices of computer games and interactive art (Wilson 2008; Leino 2013) are slowly converging. However, I argue that this has been possible only because a fundamental conflict 'built in' to computer games as a "medium" (cf. Sharp 2015), between the artist and the player, has been conveniently overlooked. The game artist wants to express themselves through their creations, while the player wants a new instrument to play (with). Apart from either side compromising on their interests, there is no reconciliation in sight; hence the "tragedy".

On the one hand, having exhausted one medium after another, the 'art-world' seeks innovation in computer games, but at the same time it is afraid of associations with certain elements and qualities of games, which it perceives as straightforwardly didactic, playful, or childish (Palmer 2008). On the other, as Kirkpatrick (2011) noted, games aspire to be artistic, but art resists games. While the contemporary art-world is afraid of being unambiguous, an ambiguous game, according to a ludological view, would not be a very good one: thanks to games' "drive toward unambiguity" (Juul 2003, 36) we can avoid arguing about rules every time we play. Wrestling with a similar tension, the game artists Harvey & Samÿn (2010, n.p.), noted that "beautiful moments" in games are "all too often shattered by the demands of the game". But would those moments be beautiful without the demands? Can a game contain only beautiful moments? Some "gamers" would disagree, as they are accustomed to overcoming challenges and appear to have an almost pathological aversion to the openness and ambiguity that characterizes the mechanics of some art games. This tension is reflected in the recent debate on "walking simulators" (Carbo-Mascarell 2016; Grabarczyk 2016; Bozdog & Galloway 2016; Kagen 2017; Bailey 2019) and apparently is familiar also to those in the art-world. In her empirical art-historical survey of interactive art, Kwastek (2013, 20) noted that "the specification of a particular goal, as is usual in rule-based games, is quite uncommon in artistic projects. More common are analogies to free, aimless play(…)" To paraphrase Harvey & Samÿn, we might speculate that in the history of interactive art, Kwastek found less "demands of the game" and more "beautiful moments". Looking at how art games have resolved the tension between ambiguity and unambiguity, two approaches emerge.

First, the most obvious possibility is to resemble the 'computer games' we are used to: to implement a learning curve by introducing a failure condition along with the manifestations of resistance, against which gaming skill can develop. These are art games, like *Dogness* (2018)*,* in which the player can be good at: "performance-evaluating artifacts" (Karhulahti 2015), which implement a "gameplay condition" (Leino 2009): by allowing failure, they make their players responsible for the freedom they enjoy. These games raise questions and present challenges, and, containing the answers to these questions in themselves, can acknowledge when the player knows the "right" from "wrong" and succeeds or fails. Struggling for survival while being governed by unambiguous rules made manifest by the materiality of the game artifact, the player can "game" the game; optimize their attention and focus only on what is deemed essential for survival, ignoring any "beauty" or "meaning" tangential to their struggle, e.g. the critique of xenophobia implied in *Dogness*. This is not to say that being gamed would purify the work from meaning, but rather that the locus of significance in gameplay shifts from the game as a self-contained work (e.g. Gadamer 2004, 110) to the game as a situated performance: the player dethrones the game designer-artist, and owns the game as an instrument for self-realization (Leino & Möring 2015, Leino 2016), potentially playing it in their own style and for their own purposes. As a result of the first approach, the gamer is satisfied, but there is no room for the designer. This is hardly a radical proposition: like Wilson & Sicart (2010, 1-2) observed in their survey of conventional game design theories, the absence of the designer-artist from the player's experience appears to be the norm.

Second, some art games, such as *Night Journey* (2018)*,* remove the failure condition, and thus do away altogether with gaming, at least if it is understood as described previously. They correspond to interactive art: open-ended exploration without any struggle for survival or possibilities for developing game-specific skill. They provoke questions but do not provide answers (e.g. Bogost 2013) – for example, mountains in *Night Journey* mean both nothing and anything the player projects on them. These games are reminiscent of the "convoluted process" (Kirkpatrick 2007, 82) through which modern art is meaningful: they "display both the subjective need for meaning and its objective denial within themselves" (ibid.). They invite player to "explore" in search of meaning but refuse to provide any. This dynamic carves a space for the designer-artist in the player's experience. Whereas in the first kind of art games, the player's search for meaning can find its closure in dethroning the artist by owning the game through a performance, in the second kind it can render the artist an authority on the game's meaning. Without the resistance and struggle, the second type of art game cannot function as an instrument for gameplay performance, yet apart from possible audiovisual semiotic and narrative cues like those in interactive art in general, there is nothing to imbue player's actions with meaning. This "openness" produces games that are constrained to being treatments of the same existential topic of futility, taking different shapes, such as the futility of capitalism in *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009), of an abusive childhood in *The Hallway* (2016), or, of enlightenment in *Night Journey*. What the artist "wants to say with their game" emerges as the key to unlocking the meaning of otherwise empty and futile actions, while the player's role is reduced to the labour of turning that key. These games satisfy the artist, but not the player, who is reduced to passive audience.

While testing the proposed distinction between the two approaches through a survey of art games is not possible within the confines of this extended abstract, it is nevertheless worth noting that the two approaches could be possibly considered as the ends of the continuum, on which art games could be placed to describe some of them as geared towards satisfying the player, others the designer. Also, not all art game audiences are "gamers": in the age of diversifying demographics and desires (e.g.

Juul 2009) the intention is not to privilege the "hardcore gamer". However, if we want to maintain the notion of computer games as a medium, it is healthy to remember that it is underpinned by an unresolvable tension; the artist and the gamer cannot both be satisfied, because their interests are conflicting. This is the tragedy of the art game. Or, to quote the title of a game by Jason Nelson: *I Made This. You Play This. We Are Enemies*.

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