Videogame Art and the Legitimation of Videogames by the Art World

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The legitimation process of a new medium as an accepted form of art is often accelerated by its adaptation by acclaimed artists. Examining the process of acceptance of popular culture, such as cinema and comic books, into the art world, we can trace historical parallels between these media and videogames. In recent years, videogames have been included in exhibitions at specialty museums or as design objects, but are conspicuously absent from traditional art museums. Artists such as Cory Arcangel, Anne-Marie Schleiner and Feng Mengbo explore the characteristics of videogames in their practices, modding and adapting the medium and its culture to their needs, creating what is often called Videogame art, which is widely exhibited in art museums but often criticised within the videogames community. This paper aims to give a perspective of Videogame art, and explore its role in the legitimation process of the videogame medium by the art world.

1 Introduction

The assimilation of a new medium into the art world has, traditionally, been a matter of contention throughout the history of art. Media such as photography, film, television, street art and comic books struggled to be recognized and respected for several years after their creation, but were eventually accepted into the network comprised of galleries, museums, biennials, festivals, auctions, critics, curators, conservators, and dealers, defined thus by art historian Robert Atkins:

> The *art world* is a professional realm – or *subculture* in anthropological language – akin to those signified by the terms *Hollywood* or *Wall Street*. (…) quantitatively, it is the sum of the individuals and institutions who belong to the global network dedicated to the production, distribution, and display of art and information about it; qualitatively, it is the set of customs and habits shared by those individuals and institutions. (Atkins 2013)

What media such as film, photography, and comic books have in common is that they are forms of popular culture that have appeared fairly recently in the history of humankind, and which used to be described as having no intrinsic value beyond technological, commercial or anthropological interest. Film, television, and comic books, in particular, were accused of not only having little cultural value, but also of being vehicles for the promotion of violence and deviant behaviour, and therefore, critics affirmed, they could not be art (Jansson 2012). Similar arguments have been used towards videogames for the past four decades. The debate as to whether or not videogames can be art has become commonplace in industry events and publications, with compelling arguments from both sides.[1] But what about the medium's acceptance by the art world? Is it helped, or hindered, by the use of the videogame medium and surrounding culture by traditional artists, to create Videogame art?[2]

Videogame art is commonly derided by those in the videogames industry as gimmicky and implicative of a notion of inferiority to actual videogames. Matteo Bittanti quotes scholar Henry Jenkins in support of this idea:

> 'A few of those critics have been prepared to defend videogames as art when they are created by artists already recognized for their accomplishments in other media (…). As these works take their place in the Whitney Biennial, the curators are not so much conceding that videogames are art as they are proclaiming that "even videogames can be used to make art in the hands of real artists". Of course, the fact that highbrow artists are starting to tap game-like interfaces speaks to the impact this

[1] For opposing views, presented at the same event, compare curator Christiane Paul's presentation, "Image Games", with Tale of Tales' "Over Games," at the Art History of Games Symposium, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, February 2010.

[2] For the sake of consistency, this paper will use capitalization to indicate Videogame art as an artistic movement.

medium has on our visual culture. But if games are going to be thought of as art, let it be because of what Shigeru Miyamoto (Super Mario Brothers) does again and again and not because of what some pedigreed artist does once in a lark. Calling videogames art matters because it helps expand our notion of art and not because it allows curators to colonize some new space'. (Bittanti 2009)

Nevertheless, the adaptation of a relatively new medium by artists can help to accelerate that medium's acceptance by the art world. Evidence of this idea can be found by looking at the history of other popular media.

2 Other Media

As much as the contemporary art world is fascinated by the new, there is still a certain resistance to any medium that challenges previously held conventions, particularly if that medium is popular, a term usually associated with "lower" forms of culture (Tavinor 2009). However, artists themselves do not exhibit this conservatism, and are often quick to adopt new media to their purposes.

The definition of art is a complex issue, one that goes beyond the scope of this paper. The process of legitimation of a new medium as a respected art form, on the other hand, is often a practical question of academic, cultural, and political acceptance that occurs externally to the medium or object itself. With most new media, this process occurs in several overlapping stages.

First, the medium is created and developed by pioneers, who are usually inspired by previously established media and apply those media's rules and conventions to the new medium. (Alexander 2006) Early photographers, such as Julia Margaret Cameron or Gustave Le Gray, adapted motifs from painting, while early filmmakers, such as George Méliès, tended to use theatre conventions.

This is followed by the widespread acceptance and commercialization of the new medium. If it's a technology-based medium, continuous experiments are made, leading to developments which allow for more sophisticated expressions, and which make the medium more accessible, either by making it easier to work with or by lowering the technological entry point. In photography, this included the appearance of portable cameras, like Kodak, Polaroid and instant photography, and more recently, digital photography, while in cinema, the adaptation of microphones led to the appearance of talkies, among other developments:

Technology does not inherently improve a medium, though it can have this effect by allowing a wider, more expressive, vocabulary of techniques to develop. A useful comparison can be made here with cinema.

> Improvements in film technology have not directly helped cinema to become a more expressive medium, but they have had a positive influence through allowing newer, more expressive, shooting techniques to emerge. (Mitchell 2003)

As a medium enters the public consciousness and becomes more pervasive, more artists are inspired by it and incorporating it into their practices. Artists have traditionally been at the forefront of new media usage and appropriation, having "always borrowed and used elements, symbols and characters both from art history and popular culture" (Jansson 2012). Comic books became a source of inspiration for artists since the 1960s. These artworks were distinguished from traditional comic books, but helped pave the way for the acceptance of comic books into cultural institutions:

> The relationship between comics and modern art has a long and tangled history. (...) Some twentieth-century artists, such as Stuart Davis, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein, utilized comic strips as the subject of their paintings. Others – including Öyvind Fahlström, Richard Hamilton, Jasper Johns, Joan Miró, and Kurt Schwitters – incorporated images or actual snippets of comic strips in their paintings and collages. (...) But in all these cases, the distinctions between the inexpensive, mass-produced comic strip and the one-of-a-kind artwork remained clear. This distinction began to blur in the 1970s with the increasing interest in non-art drawings; (...) comics began to be exhibited and collected, often in galleries or museums devoted to a particular discipline (such as the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco). About the same time, art galleries also began to show the original, politically pointed drawings by so-called underground comics artists such as Bill Griffith, S. Clay Wilson, and Robert Crumb. (Atkins 2013)

Likewise, many artists who were inspired by television gave rise to Video art, which is now widely regarded as one of the most important art movements of the twentieth-century. Korean-born Fluxus artist Nam June Paik is credited with having made the first pieces of Video Art (Atkins 2013), while other artists, such as Dara Birnbaum, made works inspired by television (Jansson 2012). Artists such as Lucas Samaras adopted the use of photography in their practices, while Cindy Sherman played with both the photographic medium and the conventions of cinema. Sherman is part of the "Pictures Generation", whose members were "linked by their attraction to photography's mechanically reproduced image, which they put to distinctly "unphotographic" purposes." (Atkins 2013).

As the medium matures, we see the rise of *auteurs*, individuals or groups of individuals who explore the medium's potential, by discovering what is unique to it and using that in their practices. It

often happens that this stage is associated with the rise of single, widely recognized authors, as opposed to the diffusion of authorship commonly seen in collaborative media. In the case of comic books, the appearance of the graphic novel – comics in book form, as opposed to periodicals – and authors such as Art Spiegelman and Will Eisner signalled the maturation of the medium as art. In film, directors such as Ingrid Bergman, Francis Ford Coppola, Federico Fellini and Stanley Kubrick are considered accomplished artists, their works often described as masterpieces.

Several authors have described a similar approach to this process of legitimation as applied to several media, including Janet Murray, in her text *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), as described by Bryan Alexander:

> Every new technology-based medium, [Murray] argues, evolves in two early stages. The first sees the porting over of forms from other media, as when early movies relied upon theatrical conventions. During the second stage creators pick up on the intrinsic elements of a new medium, and create new forms. In cinematic history, we can consider Griffith's innovation of moving the camera while filming, or Dziga Vertov's use of editing to break up filmic time and space. A similar process is visible across the history of digital media. (Alexander 2006)

Media like film, photography, and comic books were gradually accepted into the art world, and once that happened, the media's auteurs started being referred to not just as photographers, filmmakers or comic book makers – they were simply artists.

It can be argued that, when it comes to the videogame medium, several of the stages previously described have already happened. Early videogame designers and programmers contributed to the medium in its first stages, which were followed by its widespread commercialization. Technological developments led to the appearance of ever more complex gaming platforms, which developers pushed into their limits through their creations. As the popularity of videogames grew, artists started adapting them into their practices. Concurrently, in a phenomenon that started to accelerate in the latter half of the first 2000s decade, the medium saw the appearance of its auteurs, commonly referred to as indie videogame developers, with smaller or one-person teams and intentions that went beyond simple commercialization. However, the medium's maturation has not been immediately followed by its legitimation as an art form. Videogames have been largely exhibited in festivals and specialty museums, but are conspicuously absent from traditional contemporary art museums and events. On the other hand, Videogame art has become widely accepted by the art world. Starting in the 1970s, the mingling of popular and high

culture forced artistic institutions to re-evaluate and expand the concept of what could be exhibited as art, and Videogame art may help to accelerate that process when it comes to videogames. But how can we define Videogame art?

3 Videogame art as Media art

Videogame art is sometimes considered a subset of Computer art, and more commonly a subcategory of Media art. These designations can be confusing and overlapping; as Robert Atkins says in relation to Computer art, "the use of digital tools in art – and other realms of contemporary life – is so widespread that it has undermined the ability of *computer* (or *digital*) to describe something distinctive about an artwork" (Atkins 2013). Likewise, the term New Media can be described as "a blanket term that once referred exclusively to the genre of art produced by mechanical reproduction in media more recently invented than photography (…). *New media* has acquired a second, more widespread, non-art meaning, referring to all forms of digital mass media, in contrast to "old media" such as print newspapers or magazines" (Atkins 2013). It is perhaps more accurate to say that the term Videogame art originated from the twentieth-century tradition of adding the word *art* to a pre-existing medium to signal its appropriation by artists, as was the case with Video art, Mail art, Sound art, among others. Videogame art can also be described as a part of a broader concept of Playable art, which also includes art games (usually indie) and those commercial videogames that can be considered to go beyond simple entertainment.

Videogame art can be the use of videogames in a different way than the one for which they were primarily designed, or it can be the appropriation, remediation, modification or emulation of videogames, their language and surrounding culture, into an artist's practice. The result can be anything from mods, to machinima, installations, videos and performances. However, this classification is problematic, and a source of contention between critics. There is the question of whether or not to classify as Videogame art artefacts such as paintings and sculptures that draw heavy inspiration from videogames aesthetics or culture. Matteo Bittanti includes those artefacts in his definition:

> Game art is any art in which digital games played a significant role in the creation, production, and/or display of the artwork (The reason why I'm mentioning this is because my own definition of Game Art is broader than the ones formulated by many other critics, as it encompasses traditional artefacts such as painting, sculpture, and photography, and not only digital works.) (…) The resulting artwork can exist as a game,

painting, photograph, sound, animation, video, performance, or gallery installation. (Bittanti 2009)

However, Bittanti singles out art games, a term often used to describe games made by indie authors with a specific artistic intent, as being left out of the discussion: "Although art games may be considered an expression of Game art, we decided – for a variety of reasons – not to include them (...)" (Bittanti 2000). Traditionally, art games have not been included in the category of Videogame art. However, games that are made from scratch by artists, such as *The Night Journey* (2007), an experimental videogame made by Bill Viola, a celebrated and widely exhibited video artist, raise further questions. On the surface, *The Night Journey* is similar to many so-called art games, so does it need a different classification because it was made by a traditional artist, as opposed to being made by a game developer?

This question can be illustrated by looking at the example of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The MoMA is notorious for being one of the first museums in the world to include videogames, both commercial – such as *Tetris* (1984), *The Sims* (2000) and *EVE Online* (2003) - and indie – *flOw* (2006) and *Passage* (2008) - in its collection (Heddaya 2013). However, those videogames are in the collection of the Department of Architecture and Design. In contrast, Chinese artist Feng Mengbo's work *Long March: Restart* (2008), described by Mathias Jansson as "a large-scale interactive video-game installation" (Jansson 2012), is listed in the Department of Media and Performance Art, classified as an installation.[3] What makes this object art, and the other ones design or applied art? A subtle difference can be spotted in the medium's description, with the traditional videogames described as "video game software" (and therefore, one could suppose, standard), as opposed to *Long March: Restart*, which is described as "video game (color, sound), custom computer software, wireless game controller".[4]

Similarly, another source of contention is the work of cross-disciplinary artist Toshio Iwai, who beyond working with installations, music (he created *Tenori-on*, a handheld digital musical instrument that became a part of MoMA's Design collection in 2009), and television, has also created commercial videogames, such as *Electroplankton* (2005) for the Nintendo DS. The fluidity of the categories can be understood from Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke's view when discussing Videogame art:

> We wish to exclude from our discussion the work of artists such as Toshio Iwai, whose interest is in the creation of wholly original videogames for use within a gallery setting. (...) We are not excluding all gallery-based

3 See Feng Mengbo's *Long March: Restart* (2008) in MoMA's collection: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=122872, compared to, for example, Rand and Robyn Miller's *Myst* (1993): http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=164918.

4 The exception to which is Jason Rohrer's *Passage* (2007), described as "SDL, GNU Compiler Collection, GNU Emacs, mtPaint, CVS, and MinGW-MSYS software": http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=145533.

work from our discussion, but wish to make a distinction between the work of artists such as Iwai, which is typically described using terms such as "audio-visual installation" rather than videogame, and that of groups such as Blast Theory, where the relationship with the world of games and videogames is explicit, acknowledged, and intrinsic to the work. (Mitchell 2003)

The authors go on to propose grouping videogame artworks under the categories of remixing, reference, reworking, and reaction (Mitchell 2003). This categorization, while useful, is insufficient for the purposes of this paper, which will follow an approach closer to Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta's. As such, Videogame art is art created by traditional artists that appropriates the technology, language, content and culture of videogames to produce artefacts such as machinima, patches, mods, paintings, photographs, sculptures, performances, video, animation, games, interventions and installations, as well as works that challenge easy categorization.

The following section is a short selection of artists working within Videogame art, in order to highlight diverse developments in the movement. Due to space constraints, this selection is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive, and is necessarily missing important artists in the field.[5]

4 Videogame Artists

Chinese artist Feng Mengbo was among the first to appropriate videogame aesthetics into his practice. Mengbo's work is described as belonging to Political Pop, a term coined by critic Li Xianting in 1992 to describe an artistic movement "derived from Western Pop art's visually arresting depictions of everyday subjects in styles borrowed from comics and advertising" (Atkins 2013). Mengbo first linked political sensibilities with popular entertainment in *The Video Endgame Series* (1993), "a series of acrylic-on-canvas paintings in which he mixed images from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) with his childhood memories of playing 8-bit video games" (Jansson 2012). In 1994, he created *Game Over: Long March*, a series of 42 paintings that closely resemble screenshots from early videogames. In 1997, Mengbo created the interactive CD-Rom *Taking Mount Doom by Strategy*, "an interactive gaming platform that blends the idealized Cultural Revolution-era opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* and the violent Western video game *Doom*" (Atkins 2013). He modified *Quake* (1996) to create several works such as the machinima-based *Q3* (1999), and the playable mods *Q4U* (2002) and *Ah_Q* (2004), from which he also created several photographs and paintings derived from screen

captures (Krischer 2009). More recently, he created *Long March: Restart* (2009), which is played on two large, opposing screens, forcing the player to turn around and face another screen to advance through the game's levels. Writer Carolina A. Miranda describes the game:

> Visually it is a paean to classic games of the 1980s such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Street Fighter*, but its narrative is largely focused on 20th-century Chinese history, specifically the Long March, the Communist Army's gruelling 6,000-mile retreat from the more powerful Nationalist Army in the mid-1930s. In Mengbo's game, the player guides an avatar, a blue-suited member of Mao Zedong's Red Guard, through the various stages of the Long March – all while pelting an array of intergalactic enemy villains with cans of Coca-Cola. (Miranda 2011)

Feng Mengbo exhibited *The Video Endgame Series* (1993) at the 45th Venice Biennale. Since then, his videogame-based works have been exhibited extensively all over the world, from the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, to the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. In 2002, *Q4U* (2002) was included in Documenta 11. Following the acquisition of *Long March: Restart* (2009) to MoMA's collection, the piece was exhibited at MoMA PS1 (Jansson 2012).

Greek painter and multimedia artist Miltos Manetas, famous for creating Internet artworks such as *JacksonPollock.org* (2003) and *WhitneyBiennial.com* (2002), was, together with Mengbo, among the first to use videogames iconography in his work. His series *Videos after Video Game* (1996-2006) - which included *Flames* (1997), a video in which Tomb Raider's Lara Croft is killed by poisonous arrows, and *Super Mario Sleeping* (1997) - is considered the first example of machinima (Bittanti 2010). He has created several paintings based on videogames culture, and was among the first artists to depict the act of gaming:

> Painted in 1997, the piece *Christine with Playstation* evokes another fleeting moment of style. Angled from above, the painting surveys a domestic scene, the eponymous girl or woman kneels on the floor in front of the television, leaning forward and resting her elbows on a large floor cushion, and holding what is clearly a game controller. (Apperley 2013)

Among the first artists to create mods based in videogames was Orhan Kipcak, who in 1995 created *ArsDoom* with Reini Urban:

> Using the *Doom II* engine and Autodesk's AutoCAD software, Kipcak and Urban created a virtual copy of the Brucknerhaus' [the venue for Ars Electronica Festival in Linz] exhibition hall and invited artists to create or submit virtual artworks that could be displayed in the new map.

> Armed with a shooting cross, a chainsaw or a brush the player could kill the artists and destroy all the artworks on display. (Jansson 2009)

A similar approach was used by Swedish artists Tobias Bernstrup and Palle Torsson, who in 1996 started modifying existing videogames such as *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) and *Half-Life* (1998) based on reconstructions of art museums such as the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen and Moderna Museet in Stockholm. The result, *Museum Meltdown* (1996-1999) allows players to "run around the museum, shoot monsters, and destroy art" (Jansson 2012).

Another example of a videogame art mod based on *Half-Life* is *Adam Killer* (1999) by Berlin-based artist Brody Condon. In this piece, the player is confronted with multiple replicas of the white-clad figure of "Adam", standing passively in a room; the player can either do nothing or kill the Adams. Condon exploited a glitch in the game in order to create trailing textures and effects (Gavin 2014). *Suicide Solution* (2004) is a DVD documentation of characters committing suicide in over fifty commercial shooter games.[6] Condon has also experimented with intervention in multiplayer online games with *Gunship Ready* (2001):

> Designed as a modification of the online game *Tribes*, this work provides a flying gunship within the world of the game. The players are beckoned by the artist to climb onto this vehicle, but when they do, they find that they are taken on a tour around and eventually away from the battleground. They have been kidnapped (by the artist), rather than, as they thought, being taken to more exciting battle. Having been abducted, they are presented with the situation where they must kill themselves (in the game) in order to re-enter the action. (Mitchell 2003)

From the 2000s, artists continued staging performances and interventions within videogame spaces. During the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York, in a work titled *Operation Urban Terrain (OUT): A Live Action Wireless Gaming Urban Intervention,* Anne-Marie Schleiner "armed herself with a mobile Internet connection, a bicycle, a battery-powered video projector, a team of players and technicians, and a laptop" (Flanagan 2009), entered the videogame *America's Army* (2002) and discussed anti-war ideas with the players, projecting the live game session into the urban space. *Velvet-Strike* (2003) is a downloadable collection of spray paints for the walls of *Counter-Strike* (2000) by Schleiner, Brody Condon, and Joan Leandre:

> A player, having installed Velvet-Strike, enters a usual online shooter game and is able to spray clearly seeeble messages to other players on her surroundings. The sprays one can download from the project's web site

6 See Brody Condon's website: http://tmpspace.com/

range from textual anti-war messages ("If god says to you to kill people / kill god") over rendered posters of soldiers in intimate poses to graffitiesque depictions of teddy bears shooting "love bubbles". (Pichlmair 2006)

Joseph DeLappe's *Dead-in-iraq* (2006-2011) is another intervention into *America's Army* (2002), the U.S. army recruiting game. Starting in 2006, DeLappe entered the game and proceeded to type (saying to the other players) the names of American soldiers who died in the Iraq war. Inevitably, the other players killed him; he re-incarnated and continued to type. He did so until December 2011, "the announced withdrawal date of the last U.S. troops in Iraq. Delappe had entered a total of 4484 names in the game" (Jansson 2012).

Artistic interventions within game spaces can be considered performance artworks. This performativity was explored by artists such as Gazira Babeli, a performance artist who exists in the virtual world of *Second Life* (2003). Within the game, she manipulates the virtual world in order to create prints, performances and movies, such as *Gaz of the Desert* (2007), which can then be exhibited in the physical world.

In 2007, Eva and Franco Mattes[7] began to re-enact famous performance pieces from the history of art within *Second Life*. One of their chosen performances was Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) and they also conducted other performances by Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, and Gilbert & George.

Several artists have created artworks that allow game spaces to intervene in the physical world. Antoinette J. Citizen created *Landscape* (2008), an installation that transformed a gallery room into a *Super Mario* level, complete with interactive boxes with questions marks and bricks that produced sounds.[8] Berlin-based artist Aram Bartholl has created several works which allow videogames to invade the real world, such as *WoW* (2006-2009), an intervention in which participants construct their own names out of green cardboard and walk around with them hovering over their heads, as if they were avatars in *World of Warcraft* (2004). He has also brought to life a game level in *Dust – Winter Prison* (2013), a large-scale installation at an old prison yard in Quebec, inspired by the map Dust from *Counter-Strike* (2000).[9]

Several artists have experimented with the physicality of videogames in other ways. The artist duo //////////fur//// (Voker Morawe and TilmanReiff) created *PainStation* (2001), a two-person gaming console based on the game *Pong* (1972) which punishes losing players with physical pain on their hands, in the form of heat, electric shots or a whiplash (Jansson 2012). The physical body of the player is also implicated in multimedia artist Eddo Stern's work. His project *Darkgame 2* (2007/2008) is a sensory deprivation

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7 Also known as 0100101110101101.ORG.

8 See the work on Antoinette J. Citizen's website: http://antoinettejcitizen.com/installation/landscape/

9 See Aram Bartholl's website: http://datenform.de/

videogame that dynamically separates the player from the avatar on screen through the use of a head device: as the player loses his or her physical sensory abilities, the character becomes stronger in the game. Together with Mark Allen, Stern did the performance *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), in which "the participating players were equipped with special bracelets. When the player was hit by the other player on the screen, he got an electric shock in the arm. (…) The bracelet was a form of interface that could connect the virtual pain with the player's physical body and transfer the virtual violence into the real world" (Jansson 2012). Similarly, Riley Hammond's installation *What it is without the hand that wields it* (2008) attempts to turn the virtual experience of videogames into a physical one:

> The installation was an electronic sculpture attached to a server where people played Counterstrike. The sculpture consisted of a number of blood bags with tubing that was connected to nozzles that were opened when one of the players on the server was shot. The virtual killing and violence ran, so to speak, over to reality, the virtual blood in the game was solidified on the gallery floor. (Jansson 2012)

Perhaps the best-known practitioner of Videogame Art is Cory Arcangel, a multimedia, post-conceptual artist who "collects outmoded computer games, decrepit turntables and similar castoffs (…). Through a bit of ingenious meddling, he reboots this detritus to produce witty, and touchingly homemade, video and art installations" (Spears 2011). His earliest piece of Videogame Art is *Super Mario Clouds* (2008), a NES *Super Mario Bros* (1985) cartridge that he hacked to erase everything except for the clouds, effectively rendering the game unplayable. This was followed by other pieces based on modified code, such as *I Shot Andy Warhol* (2002), a *Hogan's Alley* (1984) mod in which the gangsters have replaced by artist Andy Warhol, while the innocents have been replaced by the Pope, Flavor Flav and Col Sanders, and *F1 Racer Mod (aka Japanese Driving Game* (2004), a mod of the Famicom game *F-1 Race* (1984), from which he erased the cars and left only the road and the scrolling landscape. The 15-minute movie *Super Mario Movie* (2005) was produced in collaboration with artist collective Paper Rad:

> (…) our protagonist is thrown into a world neither he nor we can comprehend. The rules of the game universe are turned upside down, colors shift, Mario floats on air. The game's text becomes nonsense and the screen is at times overtaken by vaguely familiar symbols and abstract patterns. Through this all, Mario wanders. (Chayka 2011)

Arcangel has also produced *Various Self Playing Bowling Games* (2011), a series of large-scale projections of bowling games from the late 1970s to the 2000s, to which he added several modded game controllers so that the characters on screen would throw only straight gutter balls. Similarly, *Self Playing Nintendo 64 NBA Courtside 2* (2011) is a mod in which the characters are programmed to miss their shots continually via a modded controller.

Cory Arcangel's work has been exhibited both in solo and group exhibitions in places such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Barbican Centre, London, and at the Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, among others.

From this selection of artists working with Videogame Art, it is possible to identify a few trends. The first artworks to appear were mainly traditional artefacts, such as paintings, photographs and videos, which either referenced videogames or were directly appropriated from the games, through screenshots and machinima. Art mods have tended to favour older games, perhaps because they are easier to hack and modify than more recent ones (the same goes for the hardware). As videogames became more complex, artists started staging performative interventions within the game space, often interacting with other, regular players. And as the medium matured, artists started to explore the potential physicality of videogames, effectively blurring the boundaries between virtual and physical space.

Concurrent to these developments, the mid-2000s saw the rise of indie videogame developers and the widespread appearance of art games. Some artists, such as the afore-mentioned Bill Viola, collaborated with videogame developers in order to bring their vision into reality. We can perhaps detect a subtle convergence between Videogame art and more traditional videogames, leading us to speculate that, as the technologies that allowed the creation of videogames became more sophisticated and accessible, and as artists became more literate in the medium, they no longer felt the need to create mods, and instead started to enter the world of designing and developing games, effectively becoming the medium's auteurs.

5 Videogames and the Art World

In the last fifteen years or so, Videogame art has been exhibited in art museums alongside more traditional artefacts. Some examples of such exhibitions, beyond those that were already mentioned, are "Game Show" (2002) at Mass MoCA, Massachussets, "re:Play" (2003) at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Cape Town, "Killer Instinct" (2003) at the New Museum in New York, "Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts" (2004)

at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, and "Space Invaders" (2011) produced collaboratively by FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool, the Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre, and the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam. Art games are also often included in these exhibitions.

Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, has been at the forefront of exhibiting both Videogame art and art games, both at the museum, the biennial and *artport*, the Whitney Museum's website dedicated to New media art. Works by Cory Arcangel and the *Velvet-Strike* mod have been included at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Another institution that recognized early on the importance of Videogame art was the Laboral Centro de Arte y Créacion Industrial in Gijon, Spain, with exhibitions such as "Gameworld", "Playware" (2008) and "Homo Ludens Ludens".

Traditional videogames, on the other hand, are mostly exhibited in museums as design objects, with most exhibitions that defend videogames as art taking place in specialty galleries, museums and events dedicated to design, art and technology. This is not necessarily negative: many of these museums are exploring the cutting edge of art, and actively pushing the boundaries of what is considered art and what is not. However, it is extremely rare to see them exhibited in contemporary art museums, alongside sculptures, paintings, performances and installations. Mostly, these museums use them as support materials by their educational department.

Resistance to the idea of videogames as art stems in large part from the fact that they can be considered popular entertainment, and therefore too simplistic to be considered art. Traditionally, in Western culture, certain media – painting, sculpture, or literature - have been considered inherently better and more dignified than others – notably, television, comic books, and games. The Pop art movement questioned the boundaries between high and low culture, and the distinction has become increasingly blurry, with more and more areas of human production becoming recognized as artistic (Atkins 2013). Ultimately, once a medium has matured, the process of legitimization is driven by forces external to the objects produced. Certain videogames exhibit conditions, like rules, objectives, and competition, which seem to be outside a traditional conception of the arts; however, they also exhibit many characteristics that approximate them to other artistic media, such as "aesthetic pleasure, stylistic richness, emotional saturation, imaginative involvement, criticism, virtuosity, representation, and even special focus and institutional aspects" (Perron 2009).

Beyond appropriation by traditional artists and the subsequent assimilation by the art world, a medium's acceptance is also influenced by the appearance of criticism and academic studies. With the proliferation of game studies and a more established tradition of serious criticism of videogames, there is still a need for extensive work when it comes to exhibiting, collecting, and contextually framing videogames, in order for them to achieve the status of an art form.

6 Conclusion

Beyond the highly debated question of whether videogames can be art or not, there is the question of Videogame art and its acceptance into art museums, and whether it helps or hinders the medium of videogames. Those who defend videogames as art often criticize the inferiority that the designation Videogame art (and, for that matter, art games) implies. The purpose of this paper has been to argue that, as it happened with the legitimation of other media, the movement of artists adapting videogames into their work helps to accelerate the process of acceptance of videogames as artistic objects in their own right. When introduced into galleries, museums, and biennials, audiences are exposed to videogames in a different context than the one they are used to, and artists, curators, and critics are encouraged to think about the medium critically.

Even if some game developers disagree with their work being considered art, there are many others who consciously affirm their intention of creating art. While the legitimation of a medium as art is not necessary for the development of that medium, it can have considerable value: if something is considered art, then it is more easily protected by creativity and free speech laws (Jenkins 2005). It can also have an impact on how the public sees videogames.[10] In addition, from a museological point of view, videogames put into question traditional modes of exhibition and archival. Videogames' technological demands, the fact that they transform the audience from viewers to players, and the issue of placing them in exhibition spaces largely unprepared to receive them, are among the specific questions that cultural institutions and professionals must acknowledge. Moreover, archiving videogames implies more than just preserving the software: historians need to keep in mind, among other things, the hardware used and the context in which videogames appeared, as well as support materials. Several organizations and art historians have already started to address the problems of game preservation, and the acceptance of videogames can only add to this process.

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10 The importance of the public's opinion on the artistic status of a given medium can be illustrated by looking at the history of comic books and their censorship.

Videogames already have the potential to become one of the most important art forms of this century. Their appropriation by artists can help to explore, question and advance videogames as a medium, which is perhaps a more worthy goal than striving for their legitimation as art by the fickle art world. But their potential influence in promoting videogame's acceptance into art institutions is important to acknowledge, especially for those who believe and fight for that artistic status, in order to further the discussion and effect change.

Acknowledgements.

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