# Designing Auteurs:
# Video Games, Authorship, and MoMA

## Abstract

This article uses The Museum of Modern Art's 2012 foray into video game collection as an occasion to consider several key issues related to video game authorship and critical comprehension. In the first section, I demonstrate how MoMA's equivocal curatorial decisions for their video game collection in terms classification, preservation, and display, reflect broader critical ambivalence regarding how, or if, video games should be critically apprehended as individuals' artistic expressions akin to auteurist works in cinema. In the second section, I suggest comparing authorship in video games to authorship in film by partitioning MoMA's game collection into five descriptive categories. Each of these categories – Indie, Art, Mainstream Studio, Commercial Auteur, and Auteurist Studio – has a rough equivalent in filmic contexts, and this helps illustrate how video games are already apprehended within distinct critical frameworks depending on how they are produced, marketed, distributed, and received. In the last section, I take a closer look at one particular game in MoMA's collection, Valve's *Portal* (2008), to address whether video games' intrinsic variable and responsive forms prevent comparisons to film in terms of authorship. Ultimately, though, relating video games to film, demonstrates the importance of avoiding medium-specific generalizations regarding how to critically apprehend video games.

## Critical Interventions

Four decades after the Lumière brothers' first public moving-picture exhibitions in 1895, the Museum of Modern Art established its massively influential "Film Library" and began acquiring films. In 2012, four decades after the earliest video game home console, the Magnavox *Odyssey*, was released to the public, MoMA made the curatorial decision to begin acquiring video games into their permanent collection. Without assuming any intentionality behind these parallel 40-year timeframes – something MoMA's curators were not even aware of – the correspondence still reflects analogous journeys these media traversed before being considered culturally mature enough to gain recognition from a preeminent cultural institution. For many, MoMA's foray into collecting video games provided a particular symbolic shift in the medium's cultural status. This sentiment was expressed quite succinctly in a *New York Times* "Arts Beat" blog post reporting on the occasion: "If you have been disparaging video games […] it's time to think again. Video games are now high culture, with the imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art" (Kozinn, 2012). Whereas the Museum of the Moving Image or the Museum of Play had both previously collected video games alongside other pop-culture ephemera, MoMA's venture provided what appeared to be an indisputable signal that the gatekeepers of aesthetic taste and value had granted video games approval for critical admiration and recognition outside the confines of subculture, alongside revered works of art[1].

At the same time, MoMA's rapport with video games has been far more ambivalent than it its relationship with film. When MoMA became the first major art institution to begin acquiring film in the United States, in scholar Haidee Wasson's account, the move effectively proclaimed film "a new modern art [that] should be collected, saved, studied, and, most important, seen" (Wasson, 2005, p. 3). MoMA's acquisition of video games carries few if any of the equivalent declarations. For one thing, MoMA conceives of their video game collection

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[1] Felan Parker contextualizes MoMA's decision to acquire video games within a broader "concerted effort to incorporate games into an increasingly influential art world assemblage and a particular conception of design and the aesthetic". See (Parker, 2014, p.165)

quite differently than it once did for their film collection – the chief distinction being that no equivalent institutional space to MoMA's foundational "Film Library" has been allocated for video games. Instead, the video game acquisitions were conspicuously made by the Department of Architecture and Design and rhetorically couched within an ongoing effort to bring "interaction design objects" into the design collection. During a TED Talk on the subject of MoMA's foray into video game collection, Curator Paola Antonelli specifically (if somewhat *coyly*) denied accusations that she or MoMA had played any role in uplifting video games to the status of high art: "did I ever say that [video games] were art? *Pac-Man* and *Tetris* are two floors away from Picasso and Van Gogh"[2].

Even if design and aesthetics are not conceived as mutually exclusive categories, MoMA maintains significant organizational and emblematic distinctions between the traditional fine arts found in, say, the Departments of Painting and Sculpture, and applied art objects collected by the Department of Architecture and Design. Within a department that has its roots in "Industrial Design" and "Machine Art", video games are catalogued amongst objects like furniture, blueprints and schematics, electronics, fonts, promotional material for films and concerts, household objects, and commercial goods. Effectively, then, MoMA's approach to video games places them within with an established lineage of conveying artistic value and formal appreciation to functional objects, a tradition continuing back to the monumental 1934 Exhibition of Machine Art, which made the historically radical curatorial decision to display "springs, gears, cables, chemical capsules, carpet sweepers, and kitchen cabinets [...] among [other] useful objects [...] not on the basis of their usefulness but for their beauty of form, finish and material" (MoMA, 1934). The acquisitions made by the design curators demonstrate a delight in taking overlooked, sometimes quotidian objects – even mass manufactured items – and imbuing them with the prestige of the high art institution, without calling them "art". This way individual video games can be declared worthy of cultural appreciation – deemed "historically and culturally significant, aesthetically appealing, functionally and structurally ingenious, and innovative" (Antonelli et al., 2013) – without validating the entire medium as a fine art, which would have been the case if MoMA had started a new department for video games, or continued their collection within the Department of Media and Performance[3].

MoMA's classification of video games as "design objects" associates their production with technical skill and craft, but it also primes video games for a type of critical intervention. Precisely because they are not artworks, MoMA's can approach video games quite similarly to how Peter Wollen imagined auteur theory saving Hollywood directors works "previously been dismissed and consigned to oblivion" (Wollen, 2004, p. 519). The premise for both MoMA's design collection and Wollen's version of auteur theory is that a particular cultural artefact's significance, as a meaningful and intentional expression worthy of consideration, lies dormant until a critical intervention subsequently comes along to uncover it. MoMA's rhetoric drawing attention to the formal qualities of video games, objects thought of merely as products of mainstream industrial practice, echoes Wollen's notion that "auteur analysis" removes the "'façade' which hides and masks the process which remains latent in the film 'unconscious' [...by disengaging] a structure which underlies the film and shapes it" (*ibid.*, p. 532). The

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[2] (Antonelli, 2013). As a matter of fact, elsewhere Antonelli had quite clearly stated that she considers video games to be a unique art form. In both the blog post and PR statement announcing the video game collection, she called video games "a new category of artworks in MoMA's collection" and rhetorically asked and answered, "Are video games art? They sure are, but they are also design, and a design approach is what we chose for this new foray into this universe." (Antonelli et al., 2013).

[3] Sharp also makes the point that MoMA's Media and Performance Art might have been a more appropriate department for the video game collection. This point is also made by Sharp (Sharp, 2015, p.12) In fact, MoMA's Media and Performance Art department had previously acquired artist Feng Menbo's 2008 videogame installation work *Long March: Restart* in 2008.

suggestion is that these are objects unlike fine art objects, which require no such interventions to be approached critically because they are already assumed to be imbued with artistic expression. The laudatory formal qualities of video games, popular Hollywood films, and furniture are concealed – or *were* concealed – until the critic recognized a pattern.

While adopting an auteurist framework could seem like an antiquated approach, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of video game critics see it as strategy for achieving an air of cultural respectability for an entire medium consigned to oblivion (Nagata, 2007; Roberts and Kelly, 2015; Schreier, 2011). Presumably video game auteurism would face the same critiques as its filmic counterpart over issues like fostering a "cult of personality", providing elitist evaluative criteria, idealizing a romantic notion of the author, disregarding historical and socio-political forces, and snubbing other labor contributions (Buscombe, 2005, p. 26; Heath, 2005, p. 216 ). Yet some scholars too would gladly suppress auteurism's drawbacks, if it meant garnering legitimacy for the discipline, as evidenced by Bloomsbury Press' nascent book series "Influential Video Game Designers", which is described as "the first series to take seriously the role of game designer" (Bloomsbury.com, 2016). In this case, the move towards auteurism may be less about cognitive dissonance or widespread denial, than a mere practical concession. Michel Foucault recognized that our continued reliance on a singular author "assur[es] a classificatory function […and] permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p. 107). Accordingly, assigning "authors" to video games is simply a way for secondary criticism to organize a meta-discourse. After all, film scholars are also certainly aware of the problems in attributing films to individual directors, yet in practical usage – journal articles, books, and teaching – this remains a stalwart practice. If nothing else, consecrating game designers as auteurs provides guidelines for establishing a canon of primary material for scholars to teach, debate, and discuss. Later on, of course, we can always critique that canon.

Still, it is perhaps not as easy as turning a switch and revealing all the hidden auteurs – there are several practical challenges to developing a discourse about video game auteurism. For one thing, video game productions come in all shapes and sizes, and assigning attribution is not simply a matter of identifying a single director. It is also imperative that we consider how attribution already works in video game culture. Another key complication stems from the video game form itself, which ostensibly requires the collaboration of a player in its expression. Scholars like Epsen Aarseth have made the case that this quality significantly changes models of authorship (Aarseth, 2005, p. 262). What these complications share, though, is that none of them can be applied to all games equally. Simply assuming all "video games" have a standardized relationship to authorship fails to apprehend key distinctions between how video games are produced and consumed. Our first step should be to recognize the variability among these objects collectively called "video games". Only then can we demonstrate that video games provide several distinct modes of authorship.

## Productive Distinctions

Whereas MoMA's film collection invariably credits a film's director as the "artist" of a given film, their video game collection lacks reliable consistency[4]. On one level this reflects

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[4] MoMA objects catalogued the following objects under the medium, "Video Game Software", the classification, "A&D Design", and the department, "Architecture & Design": *Another World* (Éric Chahi, 1991), *Asteroids* (Lyle Rains, George "Ed" Logg, 1979), *Canabalt* (Adam Saltsman, Daniel Baranowsky, 2009), *Dwarf Fortress* (Tarn Adams, Zach Adams, 2006), *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003), *flOw* (Jenova [Xinghan] Chen, Nick Clark, 2007), *Hyper Street Fighter II: The Anniversary Edition* (Yoshiki Okamoto, Akira Yasuda, 1991 (this edition 2003)), *Katamari Damacy* (Keita Takahashi, 2003), *Minecraft* (Markus "Notch" Persson, 2011), *Myst* (Rand Miller, Robyn Miller, 1993), *Pac-Man* (Toru Iwatani, 1980), *Pong* (Allan Alcorn, 1972), *Portal* (Valve, 2005-2007), *SimCity 2000* (Will Wright, 1993), *Snakes* (Nokia Corporation, Finland, 1991), *Space Invaders* (Tomohiro

an industry that lacks the uniform production conventions and established hierarchies found in film production. If there even is a principal creative decision-maker on a given video game production, that person might be credited the "lead designer", "lead developer", "game director", or one of several other titles. Most of MoMA's games are still credited to single "artists". Although this perhaps makes sense for games like *Yar's Revenge* (Atari, 1982) and *Passage* (Jason Roher, 2008) because, by most accounts, these games were in fact designed and coded by a single person (Campbell, 2015; Rutkoff, 2008). However, for other games, like *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003) and *Portal* (Valve, 2005), MoMA lists entire companies as the "artist". The logic behind this decision is presumably that these works are more difficult to attribute to a single person because they were bigger productions made by commercial studios. Yet, the same could be said about *Hyper Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991), but this one is attributed to two of the dozens of creative personnel who contributed various aspects to this version of game (and only one of whom is typically credited with overseeing the game)[5]. Another curious case would be *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), which, while a large-scale production by a big company, is only credited to Will Wright.

Still, the inconsistency in attribution is less of an indication of inattention than a reflection of the diversity in the types of games in MoMA's game collection. Although it is comprised of only 21 games, the collection includes an enormous range of gameplay mechanics, relations to narrative, historical import, popularity, hardware platform, genre, source code language, country of origin, and distribution method. Besides engendering a wide range of gaming experiences, it also reflects vastly different types of development, which seems particularly important for understanding the different ways in which attribution is broadly assigned by video game players and critics. Accordingly, in the following table and subsequent section, I propose a descriptive taxonomy for arranging MoMA's video games into categories based on how authorship already functions in the gaming community. The table provides an indicative example from MoMA's collection and some other games that would be understood similarly. For each category, I have decided to also include a comparable film example – in terms of year, production, and reception – taken from MoMA's collection to make these categories more legible for a film studies audience.

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Nishikado, 1978), *Tempest* (Dave Theurer, 1981), *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984), *The Sims* (Will Wright, 2000), *Vib-Ribbon* (Masaya Matsuura, 1997-1999), and *Yar's Revenge* (Howard Scott Warshaw, 1982).

[5] Notably MoMA also neglects to Akira Nishitani, who is usually the one credited alongside Akira Yasuda. Yoshiki Okamoto is not listed in the original game's credits.

| Category | MoMA Example | Popularly Credited to | MoMA Film Collection Equivalent | Example Video Game from outside collection | Additional Examples in MoMA's Collection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Indie** | *Another World* Éric Chahi, 1991 | Individual/ Developer | *Poison* Todd Haynes, 1991 | *Braid* Jonathon Blow, 2007 | *Tetris* *Myst* *Vib-Ribbon* *Minecraft* |
| **Art** | *Passage* Jason Rohrer, 2007 | Individual | *Transmission* Harun Farocki, 2007 | *The Artist is Present* Pippen Barr, 2011 | *flOw* *Long March Restart*[6] |
| **Mainstream Studio** | *Pac-Man* Toru Iwatani, 1980 | N/A | *The Blues Brothers* John Landis, 1980 | *Doom* Id Software, 1993 | *Pong* *Space Invaders* *Street Fighter II* *Katamari Damacy* |
| **Commercial Auteur[7]** | *The Sims* Will Wright, 2000 | Individual | *Gladiator* Ridley Scott, 2000 | *The Legend of Zelda* Shigeru Miyamoto, 1986 | *SimCity 2000* |
| **Auteurist Studio** | *Portal* Valve, 2007 | Entire Studio | *Ratatouille* Pixar (Brad Bird), 2007 | *Grand Theft Auto III* Rockstar Games, 2001 | *EVE Online* |

## Indie

In the video game industry, **indie games** are developed without the financial support of large publishing companies, usually by smaller development teams or even single individuals (Juul, 2014; Lipkin, 2012). With a few exceptions, indie productions are typically cast as the alternative to big-budget, mainstream studio productions which have become to be known AAA games (or "triple A games") in the past ten years or so. For the most part, indie games have a formal sensibility that is more modest in scale compared to AAA games and they are more likely to include some formal experimentation. A select few of the now thousands of indie games released each year gain widespread popularity and critical attention, while most remain relatively obscure (Sarkar, 2016). Just like "indie films", it is assumed that indie games are more genuinely artful expressions because they are produced outside the mainstream studio system and apparently face less commercial pressure (Newman, 2016, p. 25). This does not mean that all indie games are considered works by auteurs, but they are certainly more predisposed to be apprehended in this manner than mainstream studio productions. In fact, among video game critics and fans, a number of indie game designers are already recognized in auteurist terms. For example, the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (Lisanne Pajot, James Swirsky, 2012) profiles game designers including Edmund McMillen and Jonathan Blow, both of whom are considered auteurs who work outside the mainstream industry to avoid compromising their artistic expression.

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[6] Artist Feng Menbo's video game installation work *Long March: Restart* was a completely separate acquisition from the popular video game collection. See note 3.
[7] I have taken this term from Felan Parker. See (Parker, 2014, p.115)

## Art

**Art games** have much in common with indie games, but I am differentiating them because art games operate in somewhat distinct spheres of distribution and reception (Parker, 2014, p. 49-50; Sharp, 2015, 77). While indie games are produced and sold to a general audience, art games are generally not sold and are produced for niche, more art-centric contexts like MFA programs. Aside from being more at home in the realms of artistic institutions, museums, gallery spaces, they are also more likely to require specialized equipment making them impossible to distribute more widely. These are comparable to avant-garde or experimental films by Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, or Stan Brakhage. What is deemed an "art game" has as much to do with the facets of its production, exhibition, and distribution as with its avant-garde style and content. Cory Arcangel's *I Shot Andy Warhol* (2002) and Feng Menbo's *Long March: Restart* (2008), for instance, are artworks in part because their designers produce art outside of video game form. Other art games, like Jason Roher's ultra-minimalist *Passage* (2007) and Pippen Barr's low-resolution parody/simulation of Marina Abromovic's performance piece at MoMA, *The Artist is Present* (2012), self-reflexively engage with the preoccupations of the contemporary art world. Because they already dabble in the high-art discourses, the designers of art games are already considered auteurs.

## Mainstream Studio

The **mainstream studio games** in MoMA's collection are somewhat atypical examples of popular productions, in that MoMA specifically acquired iconic, genre-defining titles like *Pac-Man* and *Street Fighter II*, which are exceptional because of how popular and influential they became. Certainly, most mainstream studio games do not impact the gaming industry and the surrounding culture the ways these titles did. Still, the mainstream games in MoMA's collections are representative of the way most mainstream studio games are not popularly attributed to individual designers. That is, outside the context of MoMA or industry experts, most video game players would not be able to name these games' designers nor would these games be attributed to any individual designer. Like the blockbuster superhero films of today or musicals from the 1940s, mainstream studio games are generally received as commercial products that may achieve financial success, and perhaps critical admiration, without ever being considered artistic expressions of an individual. They are products of a cultural system and their legacies become tied up with a host of cultural signifiers outside of the games themselves. *Pac-Man* and *Street Fighter II* are remembered as franchises associated with institutions and imagery, but not authorial intent and latent meaning. Even games like *Tempest* and *Yar's Revenge*, which were designed by single individuals and did not become franchises, are more likely associated with Atari, the company that produced and distributed them, than their respective designers. In this way, MoMA's crediting of individual designers seems like a cultural shift akin to an auteurist intervention. However, without context and more information about the "artists" and their other works, MoMA is recognizing these works as *authored* rather than specifically recognizing the individual designers in question.

## Commercial Auteur

Within the gaming community there are some mainstream large-scale games that are already attributed to individual designers. **Commercial studio auteurs,** like Sid Meier and Hideo Kojima, manage to work on AAA-games for large studios, while still cultivating an auteur status (Aarseth, 2005, p.263). This seems somewhat comparable to contemporary Hollywood directors like Christopher Nolan, JJ Abrams, Tim Burton, and Stephen Spielberg who operate

in the film industry, but cultivate an aura of balancing creative control with commercial success (Hadas. 2017, p.47). At some point, their auteur status even becomes a way of branding their games as a marketing tool. In MoMA's collection, the only real example of a mainstream auteur is Will Wright, whose auteur reputation has been pivotal to the success of the games he produced starting from a small studio working on *SimCity* (1989) to a giant studio overseeing the 20 million-dollar production of *Spore* (2007) (Jones, 2008, p. 155). As one *New York Times* profile states concerning Wright and *Spore*, "the game perhaps deserves to be seen as a work of art first and foremost, a way of seeing and making sense of the world" (Johnson, 2006). Like the television show *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* or a film that advertises that it was "produced by Christopher Nolan", video games will also cultivate a persona as a marketing ploy to sell video games. For instance, the designer Sid Meier of the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series and a few other series, has his name affixed to several games to which he made little contribution in terms of design (Schreier, 2017).

## Auteurist Studio

Among video game critics and fans, it is well understood that video games, even more so than film, are collaborative productions. Consequently, video games are often identified with entire studios and even publishers ahead of any single individuals who may have been responsible for a number of the critical creative decisions. **Auteurist studio games** describe the fairly common phenomenon in gaming culture where the studios themselves functionally serve as the author in the minds of critics and fans. Companies like *Valve*, *Bethesda*, *Naughty Dog*, *Bungie* are often treated like individual personalities because fans will critically link their output and decipher their works relationally, as well as purchase and evaluate games based on their understanding of that studio. Similarly, industry journalists and popular critics will also rank studios as if their output forms a cohesive creative expression[8]. Even video game industry awards, such the Video Game Awards and the Developers Choice Awards, have shifted away from recognizing individual people and teams in their technical awards, and instead award honors to an entire development studio. Consequently, the equivalent to the Academy Award's "Best Director" prize would be the Video Game Award's "Studio of the Year".

Noting the ways authorship already functions in video games enables us to better articulate how auteurism already operates in the popular video game discourse. First, we should acknowledge that auteurism should already be recognized as an important way of how players and critic engage with games. Also, most of the divisions of how authorship is popularly assigned find clear parallels in film culture. Indie and art video games, like indie and art films, are certainly more readily associated with auteurs than mainstream productions. Similarly, both cultural forms have significant commercial auteurs working very much in the mainstream. And both industries still produce a lot of commercial products that are not generally associated with authors. While this preceding category of films may be one area ripe for auteurist intervention as it has been in the original auteurist projects in film, the more interesting question regarding auteurism in video games arises in relation to the auteurist studio phenomenon, which is arguably the starkest difference between how authorship is popularly attributed in video game culture compared to film culture.

Aside from collaboration, there is a plausible technical explanation for the auteurist studio phenomenon. Video game developers will often build vastly different games using the same underlying architecture or "game-engine," and this means that games with starkly

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[8] For example, see lists like "Top Ten Best Video Game Developers" (Snoshe, 2014) or Metacritic's "Annual Game Publisher Rankings" (Diertz, 2016). A popular website's comic depicting anthorpromophized video game developers is also extremely suggestive of how fans relate to their entire companies (Lepetit and Bridgman, 2012).

divergent narrative genres and tone might still rely on a shared pool of game mechanics, textures, physics system, etc. The effect is that a large development studio like Rockstar Games with largely autonomous development teams will produce distinct games, which somewhat maintain intrinsically consistent qualities: the fictional prep school *Bully* (2006, Rockstar Vancouver), the faithful recreation of 1940's Los Angeles in *LA Noire* (2010, Team Bondi), and the parodic version of New York City in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2009, Rockstar North) all feel like they are set in the same navigable environment. The games share enough signature processes, visual styles, and conventions that a player can feel the distinctive Rockstar mark through each. Because of the reliance on technology and proprietary templates in their productions, studio-auteur's potential counterpart in film culture is perhaps only animation studios where, over time, studios like DreamWorks's Animation, Pixar, Aardman Animations, Studio Ghibli, and Disney Animation become associated with distinguishing styles and characteristic sets of ethos. Whether or not it is simply a matter of branding, the studios themselves seem to provide an author function as each studio's films can be critically linked, as if the output comes from a cohesive intentionality (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2005, p.112).

At the same time, the auteurist studio phenomenon which is so prevalent in the video game community provides challenges to traditional notions of authorship. Is authorship about assigning the intentionality to a single creative mind? Can a "personal" a style and an interior meaning be shared by an entire studio? Does auteur theory rely on positing the intentionality of an individual? One argument might be that auteurist intervention parallel to the French version on the 1950s would require looking closely at those various games by auteurist studios like Bethesda and Blizzard with an eye towards identifying the signature flourishes within the output, and assigning them to individuals working within those studios. A separate argument could be made regarding a pattern of criticism organized around the game engines that are used to build these games. A case might also be made for a more political-economic analysis of how these video game companies create the sense that they are individuals and what this means in such a commercial industry. Regardless, any consideration of auteurism in video games should account for how the authorship of games is already attributed by those playing them.

## Authorship in the Video Game Form

Before even considering auteurist studios, some would argue that video games present even more fundamental obstacles to assigning authorship because of their variable and participatory structural form. Among others new media scholars, George Landow argues that hypertextual, variable forms like video games "create an active, even intrusive reader […who] infringes on the power of the writer, removing some of it and granting it to the reader" (Landow, 2006, p. 125). Following this logic, Landow and others see the video game player as a meaningful "collaborator" in the production of the video game's text, providing a categorically different mode of reception from, for example, the film spectator (Aarseth, 1997, p. 79; Landow, 2006, p.136). The further implication is that video games categorically disorder notions of authorship, to the extent that the designer cannot even provide an "author function" comparable to a director. That is to say, if the intrinsic structure of video games requires designers to cede agency to video game players, perhaps the form negates the possibility of even rhetorically imagining an author. The fundamental problem with this line of thinking is, however, that it grossly generalizes the conditions of all video game collaborations based on a notion of a shared medium (or material condition). Simply assuming a "collaboration" between a player and a designer neglects crucial distinctions regarding how games can grant agency to players and what these different types of agency actually suggest. Properly assessing a given

video game's collaborative elements requires a close reading of that game and, more broadly, a better sense of what should be understood as the text of the video game form.

One way to begin thinking through how video game's grant agency to players is to draw a direct comparison to the spectator's filmic experience. In thinking about agency in film, Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological assessment of the film experience proves quite helpful. She explains that as we watch films we are "engaged in a living dialogue with a world that sufficiently exceeds our grasp of it as we necessarily intend toward it, a world in which we are finitely situated as embodied beings and yet always informed by a decisive motility" (Sobchack, 1992, p.11). In her understanding, film spectators indeed maintain a direct experience through a "living dialogue" of the filmic world, however, there is inevitably a level of mediated narration, a "decisive motility", that governs the range of experiences. We could further say that components of narration like camera movement, mise-en-scène, editing are all aspects of this decisive motility that effectively we attribute to the author function or something like the director's intentionality.

So, what does the video game player have control over that a film spectator does not have control over?[9] As a form, video games are different because, by definition, they cede *some* amount of this decisive motility to the player. And this agency is different from simply enabling the text to be expressed; as opposed to pressing play on a remote to watch a film or even hand-cranking a flipbook in a Mutoscope to watch a motion picture, playing a video game entails enabling the text to be expressed, which ostensibly alters the text itself. Video games are materially distinct because of their mechanical form allows players to affect actions within the world of the text (Aarseth, 1997, p. 17; Galloway, 2006, p. 33). However, there is a huge range among video games regarding the type of actions one can perform and how they shape the greater text. The aim of understanding authorship in a given game, then, is to analyze the aspects of decisive motility that players maintain in specific texts. This allows us, as critics, to acknowledge player agency, while still recognizing the ways in which the world of a game – like Sobchack's film world – may "exceed our grasp of it". To better articulate how agency works, however, it is helpful to look at a specific example, and *Portal*, the first-person puzzle game in MoMA's collection, is an impeccable text to consider.

In *Portal's* story, the player controls the mostly unseen Chell, and the player's primary task is essentially to make their way out of a giant labyrinth. The player does so by solving intricate, physics-based puzzles and progressing through a series of "testing chambers", all while being goaded by the voice of a facetious and nefarious artificial intelligence named GLaDOS. At some point, it becomes clear that GLaDOS intends to kill Chell, so you "escape" by making your way to the maintenance corridors and observation rooms, and offices surrounding the testing chambers, on your way to confront and destroy GLaDOS.

So what role does the player have in the construction of this text? For one thing, the player can make diegetic decisions – acting in the world – about where Chell is looking, where she moves, and what she does. By extension, the player also controls non-diegetic aspects like the composition of the frame and the timing of the narrative events. The control the player wields extends far enough to ensure that virtually every play-through of the game will be different from all others to some measurable degree. But what does it mean to say the player "controls" any of these things? When the player decides where Chell looks, the player is really limited by what has been programed into the parameters of the game. We are tied to Chell's constrained avatar as our window into this world. When the player decides where Chell moves, the player is confined by the architectural configuration of the diegetic spaces and the physics

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[9] Alternatively, what does the video game player have control over that the spectator sitting beside them does not have control over?

of the designed world. We can only do something if the game's designers permitted us ahead of time to do world.

In a game like *Portal* the player is essentially confined to picking between a limited set of variables laid out ahead of time within limited sets. That is, the player does not so much collaborate in the construction of the text as the player decides the shape of the text. In terms of the story, the player merely contribute to how that story gets told. The player's agency differs from the film spectator because players have limited agency over the narration of the text. In fact, *Portal* is a somewhat reflexive text in this regard. As the player progresses through the game, solving the individual puzzles as we encounter them, through the character of GLaDOS the game mocks our limited agency pointing out how illusory it is. Both as a character within the game, and the player playing the design, we are working our way through a series of situations that have been designed for us ahead of time.

Each time a player fails to reach the end of a test chamber, the player encounters a narrative dead end, in which they have essentially exited the route required to keep the game going as an expression. The understanding is that if a player replicates their actions on subsequent attempts, the player can expect the exact same result. For the game to continue as an expression the player must essentially discover the route they are being compelled to follow. On subsequent playthroughs, the player may even choose a different tactic or work to discover an entirely unique way to complete a testing room; the player is thus testing out different paths to achieve different results. The seemingly countless paths a player can take are still confined within a narrow set of parameters, and the unifying principle at the end of every puzzle, which inevitably end in a funneling point to compel us to the next puzzle, is that any sense of agency – any sense of a collaboration – has been carefully calculated within the confines of the game's meticulous design. Each time we think we have invented a clever solution, we are made to realize that we were compelled to discover this solution. Playing a game like *Portal* is an act of discovery, not of invention.

Jay Bolter argues that the collaboration of the player in a video game is akin to the dramatic actor, performing and collaborating in the material production of the text (Bolter, 2001, p. 173). The idea would be the interpretative choices the player makes contribute to a unique version of the text. But this fundamentally misunderstands the video game text. What a game like *Portal* demonstrates is that the text of the video game is not that which is encountered during a single iteration; the text includes all different iterations simultaneously. The text of the game is the entire protocol, the system, all of the possibilities embedded into the design.

Within the games at MoMA we find a spectrum among video games in terms of the agency afforded to the player. On one end of this spectrum is a game like *Pac-Man* which, although it allows for variable experiences, greatly prescribes the kinds of the experiences the player can have. The player can move only through specific pathways, pre-coded to allow for player movement, an idea which is expressed visually through the walls of the maze of the game environment. In *Pac-Man*, the player's agency cannot really extend to anything other than the limited set of tasks afforded by the rules hardcoded into the game. At the other end of the spectrum, however, would be a game like *Minecraft*, which is often categorized as a "sandbox" game. Although here too there are a pre-coded set of rules that ostensibly limit what the player can do in the environment, the game also provides a tremendous amount of room for players to create new and different environments. In *Minecraft*, the game's possibilities are quite literally endless and the rules may limit the world, but they do not prescribe how players exist within it. As such, players have created entire cities, built elaborate "Rube Goldberg" devices, and – in an example that frankly boggles the mind – constructed a rudimentary computer within the game's world, which then runs a simplified version of the game *Minecraft*. What is essential to recognize, though, is that the amount of *decisive motility* that a player has is largely dependent on what the video game designer allows for in the very design of the game.

That is, the author still expresses their hand in the very act of providing the room, limitations, and conditions under which the player operates.

## Conclusion

Even as video games are given resolute stamps of approval by various complimentary cultural gatekeepers, what fundamentally unites these objects we call "video games" remains an open question. Do these cultural artifacts that MoMA classifies as "video game software" really have such defining qualities that it justifies tethering a high-pressure puzzle like *Tetris* to the long-running, expansive, networked-multi-player, role-playing, virtual universe of *Eve Online*? The arcade classic *Pac-Man* to the sprawling, procedurally-generated customizable worlds of *Minecraft*? The competitive fighting of *Street Fighter II* to the point-and-click, adventure story of *Another World*? What this quick look at some of complications regarding authorship demonstrates is that in our rush to define what makes video games a distinct and distinguishable medium, we can obscure the resonances with other forms like film, as well as meaningful distinctions among all those artefacts that we call video games.

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