Hitting the "play" button:
the aesthetic values of videogame experience

di Nuno Fonseca
nunosmdafonseca@gmail.com

In just a few decades, there's been the birth and fast rise of a recreational activity that implies the interaction between one or multiple players with electronic devices, normally, known as videogames. Being a very complex process and a multi-sensorial practice, playing with videogames produces intense and fulfilling experiences for all those who engage in such activity. Here, I intend to show how those experiences entail relevant aesthetic – and also cognitive and ethical – values for philosophical discussion.

1. Why should philosophy seriously consider videogames?

It may still sound eccentric or adventurous, for more conservative aestheticians or philosophers at large, to bring the topic of videogames into serious philosophical reflection. Yet, it is a real and growing presence in contemporary society that has implications, not only for our leisure economy, but for business in general, on the way we communicate and engage with others in our everyday lives. In fact, more than 50 years of videogame history and exponential growth of the videogame industry, make it today the most (economically) important form of entertainment, surpassing cinema and television and having a strong impact in other media, society and culture, in general: in such a way that we can honestly speak of the *ludification of culture*, as Joost Raessens says. The widespread presence and pervasiveness of videogames in everyday life and its role in the formation of the younger generations makes them inevitable in order to understand contemporary society, and not just how it globally works but the way we individually think and solve problems, or even the way we feel and identify ourselves. Videogames create new social and technological networks, new forms of social interaction and affect the behaviour and values of human beings and, thus, they should not be ignored when we seriously try to have a deeper understanding of contemporary human

experience. These are some of the reasons that explain why, since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a growing and interdisciplinary academic focus on game studies, which majorly means videogame studies.

In this article, I will try to show that playing a videogame might be a very complex and fulfilling experience with relevant aesthetic value. Even though, all forms of play have this aesthetic aspect, videogames entail aesthetic – but also cognitive and ethical – values in ways that are specific to them. That's why we should first do our best to understand what a videogame is and what might be specific about playing videogames. Afterwards, I'll focus on the aesthetic features of videogame experience, also referring some of the cognitive and ethical issues and values brought by the videogame culture. Finally, and with the purpose of underlining the aesthetic values of videogame culture and the experiences of playing videogames, I will show how contemporary artists have been appropriating features from this cultural phenomenon and from the aesthetic experience of playing a videogame.

2. What is a videogame?

In the last fifteen years of academic reflection on computer games, electronic games or, simply, videogames, several possible definitions have been presented. However, as it certainly became apparent with my previous hesitation concerning terminology, there are some difficult issues that arise when we try to define the subject and find its proper designation[1]. If we select the term "videogame", we are putting an emphasis on the visual and graphic aspect of the game. However and in spite of the fact that most games of this kind have a graphic display that is, often, used as the primary platform of perceptive interaction – I am, here, referring to the *interface* – between player and machine, there are also games where the visual aspect is not decisive, being sometimes even secondary, as in musical and text-

---

[1] Cfr. J.R. Sageng, H. Fossheim, T.M. Larsen (ed. by), *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, Philosophy of Engineering and Techonology 7, Springer Science + Business Media B. V, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 1-7.

based games. If, instead, we opt for "computer games", we may seem to be excluding coin-op and arcade machines or the ever-growing popular console games (like the PlayStation and Nintendo series), but basically these games are also based on electronic data processing units, where computing operations and instructions from a software program are regularly running in what can certainly be considered a computational system. "Electronic games" is another possible choice that includes a wider range of games: beyond the types already mentioned, it also entails toys with integrated systems or electro-mechanical devices (like *Furby* or *AIBO*) which require some sort of cybernetic data processing, but do not offer first-hand game experience that is participatory nor provides an immersive experience – where the player effectively feels involved – as in computer or videogames.

From what has been said, it seems that the kind of games we are referring to could be defined as *forms of ludic interaction with data systems* (software, computer programs), *installed and executed on electronic devices, e.g., a personal computer, console, arcade or digital platforms of communication* (as would be mobile and smartphones), *which may involve one or several players in a physical or virtual networked environment, through one or multiple interfaces* [understanding here interfaces as communication devices between two systems: human-machine]. Of course this sort of definition[2] assumes something that is central to the definition of games in general and is common to many other types, namely, "ludic interaction". So, we should try to understand what this means in the context of *videogames*[3] and in what way this kind of "ludic interaction" distinguishes itself from the kinds that occur in other types of games.

From the outset, the element of *interactivity* seems crucial in order to properly understand videogames, insofar as they encompass actions from the player that continually react to (visual, sonic, tactile, etc.) stimuli from the machine, which will determine the events and progression throughout

---

[2] Cfr. J. Newman, *Videogames (Routledge Introductions)*, Taylor & Francis, London-New York 2004, p. 27.
[3] For the sake of simplicity and, taking in consideration that a considerable amount of literature on videogames usually makes use of this designation, we are going to use it here as well, despite the problems and limitations we mentioned above.

the game. However, it is fair to say that this element of interactivity is as essential for the definition of a video game as it is trivial, in the sense that any game is interactive by nature and that any activity that requires such a dynamic (mediated by an interface) between two systems – in this case, the player and the electronic device – also is. In a certain sense, we could also say that even the mere contemplation of an intentional artistic object seems to entail an interactive dimension, on the basis that active perception and the interpretation produced by the contemplating subject transform the sense and meaning of the object perceived as well as the experience itself[4]. Actually, if we consider the contemplation of sculptural and architectural works, we easily recognise that each act of contemplation also requires an engagement of the body and not merely of the mind, given that the spectator needs to engage himself in space in order to better understand the object[5]. Likewise, when attending to a theatrical performance, a ballet or a live musical concert the audience is constantly required to focus over different spots on the stage, thus having to move their eyes, their head, in order to grasp the multiple narratives and events happening there. Notwithstanding, in these last examples, the actions of the viewer/listener merely transform her own experience of the objects (or events) being appreciated and not the presentation or structure of those artworks (performances), therefore we shouldn't rigorously speak of interactivity for this purpose.

We could probably tell something similar concerning interactivity in the experience of reading a book. The reader needs to actively turn the pages of the book (either physically, when reading a printed book, or digitally, when using the software on an electronic reading platform), but he can also interrupt the reading, close the book and reopen it later, in order to proceed with it, or even read the book in a different order. Nevertheless, the book in

---

[4] For this purpose we could easily recall the famous statement by Marcel Duchamp, «Les *regardeurs* font les tableaux!», which illustrates the dynamic interaction that pervades the aesthetic reception of art and, particularly, the active role of the beholder in the experience of painting.

[5] But even when considering such a painting as Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, particularly, if we think of the famous anamorphosis featuring at the bottom of the painting, viewing it properly may require physical actions from the beholder!

itself or, more precisely, its narrative structure is not modified due to the actions of the reader. It's, nonetheless, important to recall that there are certain texts where the actions of the reader might change, not only the experience of reading, but also, in some sense, the narrative structure. This happens, though, because some texts hold, for themselves, semi-open, "*multicursal*", or "*labyrinthine*" structures, which allow the reader to choose the different narrative paths that he can run through[6]. Composed by sections of text at the end of which the reader must choose on how to move forward in the narrative and find one of the multiple possible endings, these "books", popularized in the 70's, but, somewhat, conceived since the 40's[7], are, ultimately, gamebooks, written, frequently, with the second-person perspective, inviting the reader to participate as a player in the narrative. But strictly speaking – and if we set aside those books which are basically sets of scenarios and instructions for table top role-playing games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which the dynamic is very different, since it involves features like the introduction of randomness with the use of dice, the creation of characters, multiple players, etc. – the vast majority of those books with multiple pathway narratives is as interactive as the menu of a DVD, insofar as the user can make choices concerning movie sections, viewing order or even viewing speed, but cannot alter the content of those sections or of the whole movie. However, in a computer game, the action of the player(s) continually changes the game or the simulation and determines, as much as it is determined by, the responses of the data-processing device that generates the simulation and supports the game. In this case we can effectively identify a real dynamic process of interaction or, borrowing the term that Aarseth has chosen to characterise a cybertext

---

[6] For a better understanding of these terms, see the introduction of the seminal book on "ergodic literature" written by Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext—Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1997, pp. 1-23.

[7] For some examples, we could mention Jorge Luis Borges' *Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain* (1941), the programmed learning textbooks by B.F. Skinner in the late 50's, the ludic experiences of the literary group OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), namely, Raymond Queneau's "Un conte à votre façon" (1967), Gianni Rodari's children's books like *Tante storie per giocare* (1971) or, finally, the series of children's gamebooks *Chose Your Own Adventure*.

(Aarseth 1997), "ergodicity"[8], *i.e.*, a process where a nontrivial and "*extranoematic*" (not only in the head of the subject) effort is required from the reader or, more accurately, the player – insofar as the model adopted here is more *ludological* than *narratological*[9] – , in order to traverse the text or run through the game and – we can add – to determine and transform, not only a sense, a meaning, an experience, but a ludic process.

Still, how can we distinguish between these types of games (computer, electronic, video games) from games or play in general? The category of play is so wide and open that we can include any activity characterised as (following the French sociologist Roger Caillois's definition)[10]: *free*, that is, a voluntary activity, source of joy and amusement, where it should not be mandatory to play in order to preserve its ludic character; *separated*, *i.e.*, circumscribed in time and space (that's also why the hour and place for its course is usually defined and fixed in advance); *uncertain*, since it's deployment and outcome cannot be previously predicted; *unproductive*, as far as it won't generate, of its own accord, useful goods or wealth for its players – despite the fact that, historically, society allowed room for professional game activity, but the profit is external to the game itself; *governed by rules*, that suspend ordinary laws and impose a new ludic legislation which only implies within the limits of the game[11]; and, finally, *fictional* or *make-believe* activity, that is, «accompanied by a special

---

[8] "*Ergodic*" being the adjective formed from the Greek words ἔργον (work) and ὁδός (way, path).

[9] Since the late 90's, there have been several epistemological debates, between two opposed views – *ludology* vs. *narratology* – concerning the best way to understand games. The ludological view argues that games should be understood on their own terms, by analyzing the abstract and formal systems the games describe (this would be Aarseth's view). While the narratological position argues, instead, that games should be understood as new forms of narrative and should thus be studied under narratology models (this would be, for instance, Janet Murray's view on her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* from 1997).

[10] Caillois' definition was presented in his famous book *Man, Play and Games* [*Les Jeux et les hommes* in the original 1958's French version], already critically reviewing Johan Huizinga's own definition (R. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), translated by Meyer Barash, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 2001, pp. 3-10).

[11] We should keep in mind, though, that not all playing and games have the same degree of rule governance or game normativity, so this aspect of the definition should encompass a wide range of activities that goes from more "*ludic*" (from *ludus*) games (structured activities with explicit rules) to more "*paidiac*" (from παιδιά) playing (unstructured and spontaneous activities with, almost, no rules beyond the fact that playing *as if* is already a sort of playful commitment to a kind of normativity).

awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life»[12]. From this – still keeping with Caillois' anthropo-sociological analysis – it follows that games can be: *agonic*, that means, competitive – although there are also cooperative games –; *aleatory*, *i.e.*, based on chance (*alea*) and thus independent on the players will; *mimetic*, when dealing with mimicry, simulation or illusion; and/or promoting a *vertigo* (*ilinx, ἴλιγξ*) impression; or even a combination of some or all of these categories[13].

In fact, we can easily find all of those characteristics and the various categories of games, mentioned by Roger Caillois, in the vast universe of videogames. It would thus seem that this kind of games is not particularly distinguishable from all other types. Nevertheless, intuitively, I believe there must be something very specific about video or computer games that allows us to make them stand out within the meta-category of *play* or *games*.

Thereby, in order to characterize the specificity of video/computer games I should try to find and underline particular features that we couldn't find in other types. Considering the ontology of the videogame, it is usual to emphasise the fact that the game structure is determined by an algorithm, that is to say, a program that contains a set of instructions and procedures that control the graphic and audio display of the game, the constant and dynamic connection between the data "inputs" and "outputs" from the players and the simulation, the rules that govern the game, the possible behaviour of the characters and the course of events of the game, in other words, what is usually called *game mechanics*. Ultimately, the algorithm is responsible for the representations and simulations presented on the screen or electronic display, as well as for the enforcement of the rules that govern the game and the interpretation of the player(s) responses, but it also provides the potential degree of randomness that, basically, ensures a certain amount of unpredictability and openness for the game. Furthermore, the existence of *interfaces* is essential for the possibility of player activity, since an interface is a material and logic device that allows the

---

[12] R. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games,* p. 11.
[13] R. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games,* pp. 14-26.

communication and interaction (data exchange) between those two systems that are, as we have already mentioned, the player and the machine. Among other things, I have in mind the screen or display, the loudspeakers and microphone, keyboard, mouse and/or joystick – a control handle whose designation already announces the pleasure of playing, which means, the aesthetic dimension that I'll refer to in more detail below –, wheels and other input/output peripheral devices. Some authors also refer *graphics* as being fundamental in videogames, although not absolutely necessary (by definition) in other electronic games, as well as *player activity*[14], often mentioned to stress the active participation and the, simultaneously physical and mental, experience – in-between actual and virtual reality – of the player. However, I would not consider this a singularly specific and distinct feature of video games, insofar as every game is an experience and requires the participation (in some way or another, even though in different degrees according to the type of game) of the player. Nonetheless, the player activity of the videogame experience is important and unavoidable in order to properly understand what it is all about. Moreover, I am now going to focus, precisely, on the game or playing experience underwent by the player.

3. What is playing a videogame?

The possible experience of playing a videogame will, undoubtedly, arise from the specific characteristics mentioned before but also from the general character of the playing experience, while at the same time it will be influenced by the general psychological mood and disposition of the player and the specific expectations he might have concerning that game in particular. But, what does a player expect from a computer game? To start with – and this is the result of one of the most important characteristics previously mentioned – the player expects *to do something*, *to act*, *to participate actively*, instead of only having the role of an observer or a beholder. This is, straight away, useful to distinguish the experience of playing – which is properly interactive – from the experience of the

---

[14] B. Perron, M.J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Routledge, Oxon 2003, pp. 14-16.

spectator, reader or listener, although aspects of these different experiences end up also being part of the experience of the player, and in particular, the player of videogames, which have an important audio-visual and sometimes linguistic dimension. But the action, the participation, of the player occurs in a special world which, in a significant aspect, is, as previously mentioned by Caillois, in the steps of Huizinga, a separated world – some even mention a "magic circle", created by the ludic simulations of video games[15] – circumscribed in space and time, with its own rules, that suspend the laws of the ordinary beyond-the-game world – although, we can always find connection links between the game world and the non-ludic circumstances of the player –, but that must ensure its internal coherence and fictional consistency. It is, thus, a world where the player wants *to immerse himself* in order to explore it with a certain degree of freedom, insofar as he will have the power to control some aspects of the simulation, but, simultaneously, in order to *voluntarily* try to *respond to a challenge* which the game is supposed to present[16]. It should be mentioned, however, that the kind of challenge presented in a game does not necessarily resemble a competitive goal of winning or conquering, since there are, for instance, games where the purpose is to simply explore the very own simulation the game creates and thus the goal is merely the act of playing, with no previously defined targets or finish lines.

Flight simulators are often of this type, as well as some games, usually, designated "open world" or "sandbox RPG" (Role-Playing Games), where the player has a fair amount of freedom in his moves and actions, being able to creatively enjoy the game by shaping some features of the simulation,

---

[15] Borrowing the expression from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explore the idea of a "magic circle" created by the simulations of a videogame, which separates the virtual worlds thus generated from the tedious and uneventful ordinary life: «… the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. [...] Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players». K. Salen, Katie, E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA & London 2003, p. 95.

[16] Bernard Suits, in his famous book *The Grasshoper: Games, Life and Utopia* (1978), defines playing a game or the "lusory attitude" as «*the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles*». B. Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto-Buffalo-London 1978, p. 41.

changing the, previously left open, game configurations and disregarding any pre-defined goals that might have been proposed.

We can, thus, see that video or computer games have a varied assortment of possible genres: some that are competitive, others dealing with cooperation, some that allow the incarnation of characters (role-playing) and the construction or participation in narratives (action/adventure), others that present pure logic challenges, others still presenting psychomotor challenges, and also those which offer the simulation of, more fantastic or more realistic, worlds and activities, strategy games, development games and several others that combine miscellaneous genres, providing richer and more diversified experiences. In face of all this diversity, different possible attributes and merits of the player's videogame experience are open to discovery, such as the cognitive virtues – since the game can be a learning tool, a knowledge acquisition instrument, or a skills training expedient –, but also aesthetic virtues – relative to the sensible, expressive, affective and even emotional properties and qualities that come from the game mechanics and the audio-visual modes of presentation, not to mention the tactile interaction experience – or even ethical virtues – of socialization, deliberation and decision-making.

4. So, why does it matter to aesthetics?

Let's, now, focus on the aesthetic aspects of video or computer games and gaming, and therefore, ask the following questions: what is the aesthetical dimension of videogames and videogame playing experience? And why should it be a matter of consideration in philosophical aesthetics? These questions are slightly different from another brand of questions that have been keeping some scholars of game studies and also some aestheticians and philosophers of art busy: should we consider video/computer games to be artistic objects or mediums of artistic expression? To inquire if a computer game as a technological device can be considered an art form, if, as far as they are particular instantiations of that device, those games can be artistic objects and, thus, if by playing them, we are in some sense experiencing something analogous to the reception and appreciation of art works, are

very interesting questions for some and maybe very ridiculous for others, but they are not necessary nor sufficient criteria in order to assert to what extent those games provide aesthetic experiences. I, therefore, step aside from an aesthetic theory of art – in which art works would be defined for their capacity to produce aesthetic experiences – as well as from an attitude of reduction and confusion between philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of art, domains that share a wide range of topics and study objects and thus cross each other's paths on multiple occasions, but do not overlap. This doesn't mean, though, that we must avoid, heuristically, the analogies between the properties of videogames and those of artistic objects or the similarities between the experience of playing a videogame and the experiences provided by artistic forms and practices, with which they share some important (yet not decisive) affinities, namely, with cinema, literature, performance and theatre plays, the sonic arts and even, in some measure, with design, sculpture and architecture. What is crucial, on the contrary, is the aesthetic dimension that emerges from the playing experience itself – *play* being, in the first place, a very fertile notion to understand what an aesthetic experience is – and from the particular circumstances of *playing with* a rich and diversified technological device, which, at the same time, shapes and intensifies the properties of possible experience.

Having in mind the general features of play – in the tradition of Huizinga and Caillois' analysis –, we could say that playing a videogame is, to start with, a *free*, and in a way, *disinterested* activity. In one hand, it is not an obligatory activity, but instead a deliberate action to surrender to some arbitrary rules that put those we are used to submit to in our ordinary lives on hold, in the same way that it is not a necessary activity, since our survival does not depend on it. On the other hand, considering it is a non-productive activity, because no profit or goods outside of the game will be produced, our interest in the playing of the video game is intrinsic to the game itself and to the pleasure of playing it. Of course, taking in consideration the growing importance of videogames and gaming in our contemporary society and culture, just as, in times past, different types of games were very important for previous cultures and civilizations, other

motivations can always bring players to engage in videogames, but those are accidental and non-essential to the experience of playing. It can be argued, though, that the notion of *disinterestedness* that I am talking about here does not, properly, correspond to what Kant was referring to in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (§§2-5), which was an essential feature in the characterization of the experience that gives rise to the judgement of taste, in other words, in his view of the aesthetic experience. The «disinterested and free satisfaction» (§5) generated in the Kantian experience of the beautiful is rather a contemplative pleasure, indifferent to the existence and objective value – purposiveness, utility – of the contemplated object, where the satisfaction does not result from the mere delight in the sensible properties of the object, insofar as that would, certainly, imply an empirical judgement that would derive from a sensorial and subjective response to an external stimulus. Instead, the Kantian aesthetic pleasure consists of a feeling that is the correlate to a subjective representation, to a transcendental and reflexive judgement made by the subject over his own feeling caused by the contemplation of an object.

However, in a videogame, even though it is a free, separated and useless (non-productive) activity, the player acts, participates, engages himself, physical and psychologically, in the playing activity, not being satisfied with the simple contemplation of the game. The satisfaction or fruition the player can get from the game results, precisely, from his participation, from actually *playing with* his body, with his imagination – in a way that is both actual and virtual –, with those conceptual objects and the representations or simulations offered by the machine and by the game's audio-visual display and, even, with the other eventual players, if we are dealing with a competition or cooperation game[17]. There is, then, this fruition obtained from the playing activity – which is in itself an end to that same activity – but there is also a psychomotor, sensorial, mental, emotional and, eventually, social joy in playing with, which is not completely indifferent to the conceptual or practical existence of the object – as in Kantian aesthetic

---

[17] See also David Myers, "The video game aesthetic: play as form" in B. Perron, M.J.P. Wolf, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, Routledge, Oxon 2009, pp. 45 sgg.

experience – in a fashion where, and, again, to use the Kantian terminology, the satisfaction *in the beautiful* (aesthetic pleasure), the satisfaction *in the agreeable* (delight) and, eventually, the satisfaction *in the good* (even though the objects in the videogame only have a somewhat make-believe, or fictional, existence) are intertwined, hence undermining, in some manner, the strict sense of the disinterestedness as it is used in the *CPJ*.

Of course, while playing, the subject is presented with the possibility of enjoying aesthetic experiences in a more traditional sense, since he can still appreciate the sensible properties and formal relations of the objects and virtual spaces audio-visually displayed, as well as enjoy narrative, fictional, compositional or dispositional aspects of the game, not to mention rhythm and intensity. The fact that the player has also the possibility of expressing itself, by participating, in some cases, in the active configuration of the game – for instance, in 'open world' games – brings an additional element of creativity and expression to the aesthetical dimension of videogames. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, beyond the formal and sensible properties of the representations and simulations of the game and, according to the type of videogame, some other psychodynamic factors, determined by the game mechanics, by rules, challenges and events of the game or even by its audio-visual stimuli, may influence and will certainly modulate the aesthetical and emotional experience of the player. The fact that challenges and goals may exist, the possibility of winning or conquering, the quantitative (points) or qualitative (grades or comments in the) evaluation of the player's performance by the game itself will, additionally, adjust the levels of satisfaction or frustration while playing. Certain types of challenges will induce some psychological states, inflicting, for instance, "stress", when adding levels of time pressure, confusion and perplexity or when increasing logical and psychomotor difficulty levels, but also controlling expectation and possible frustration with goals and penalties as well as by partially hiding rules or intermediate challenges, or even motivating primary emotions like fear through the introduction of suspense and surprise effects, with the help of visual and auditory means – and here we should have/keep in mind, not only the sound effects, but also

the music, the soundtrack, as far as rhythm can create "empathetic" and "anempathetic" effects[18]. In games where the player embodies a character – something which is very common in adventure games or RPGs (Role-Playing Games) – in the context of a scenario or of a simulation with a plot, the embodiment and narrative (be it semi-closed or open) will certainly enhance and deepen the layers of emotional variability and aesthetic appreciation.

To sum up: video or computer games as artefacts and the playing experiences provided by them delivers, by its richness, density and depth, multiple aspects to the consideration of its aesthetic dimension and values.

5. The values of videogames

We have just seen how videogames may hold a vast set of aesthetic values, considering that playing them can induce aesthetic experiences and enhance the creativity of its players. Furthermore, it is possible to judge aesthetically the videogame for its *playability*, which implies evaluating the game mechanics – rules, challenges and events –, its potential to entertain and gratify by providing satisfaction and emotions to its eventual players. As a matter of fact, it is an important part of the ever-growing gaming culture to review and critically analyze the features of a videogame. And besides *playability* – which we just mentioned – the thousand magazines and websites, exclusively dedicated to videogame reviewing, focus on many other aspects of the game structure: the perfection of the simulation and/or narrative, the design of its characters, the composition and consistency of the game, along with the architecture of its – in case there are more than one – multiple levels; and, even as artefacts, they can also be – and are frequently so – appreciated and evaluated for their features, the visual display, the graphic style, the sound effects and the original music. All these aspects may thus be – and usually are – judged according to formal and qualitative, *i.e.*, *aesthetic* criteria, which go way beyond – as it should now

---

[18] These expressions are borrowed from Michel Chion's famous book on sound in cinema, *Audio-Vision*, where he exposes his own theory of audiovisual effects. M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on screen* (1990), translated by Claudia Gorbmann with a foreword by Walter Murch, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, pp. 8-9).

be easy to understand – the simple and often meaningless verdicts concerning beauty, agreeableness or goodness.

Notwithstanding, videogames are frequently judged beyond their aesthetic values and we can, certainly, identify other types of values, mainly, cognitive and ethical ones, in videogames. To begin with, when playing a videogame one can positively learn new data, get hold of new knowledge, acquire or improve new skills. This is why there is a vast range of educational games, sometimes comprised under the umbrella term "edutainment" or the expression "serious games". They often include logical, mathematical, verbal or graphic puzzles set to perfect mental and rational aptitudes: linguistic proficiency, semiotic interpretation, argumentation and rhetoric, psychomotor coordination and perceptive powers (identification and object recognition, spatial and temporal awareness and orientation), memory training, audio-visual and technological literacy, etc. Thanks to all these cognitive aspects, the technology that has been used to design and implement videogames has sometimes been recycled and adapted in order to develop technological tools for the simulation of non-ludic practices and activities. Flight and driving simulators, once childish games, have now become useful tools for the training of pilots and learning drivers; first-person shooting games have been adapted in order to serve military exercises; building, molding, management and strategy simulator games have served as prototypes to other computer software and applications for medicine, industry, business and administration, and even political contexts; eventually, several virtual worlds for multiple players, like the famous *Second Life*, have been virtual scenarios and experimental territories for the exploration of social, economic and marketing theories and practices. Now, all these video and computer game applications allow us to understand that even more than aesthetic and cognitive dimensions, they certainly also have ethical, social and cultural ones.

Well, it couldn't be otherwise, since one of the main features – as we have already seen – of videogames is the fact that the player *acts* – even though it does so, mainly, in a fictional world – within a normative context, *i.e.*, an active environment consisting of a set of rules and purposes. And therefore,

this ludic activity is made up of a combination of choices, decision-making processes and, eventually, the embodiment of a character, if not the expression of personality traits in the behavior and pathway of the players. The fact that the game is taking place in a separated world, within a "magic circle", doesn't preclude its actions and events to become objects of ethical appreciation. It is of course true that, when one player slays its opponent in a battle of the fighting game *Mortal Kombat* or poisons the spy enemy in the stealth game *Hitman*, those characters – or the eventual players embodying them – do not really die and will certainly respawn 20 seconds later on the screen, for a repetition of their fatal destiny, if a new match or round of the game is once again set in motion. But the realist simulation and enactment of those murders is not totally unrelated to the representations and values of the world we share outside of the game. This becomes even more relevant when dealing with multiple-player (*multiplayer*) games, where several individuals (users) interact, by competing, fighting or cooperating, with others, probably, in a network of multiple computers or consoles – sometimes generating vast communities of players, connected consistently for a fair amount of time. In these situations, the actions of a player, no matter how fictional or simulated they may appear – and by players we must bear in mind the actual human beings that manipulate their avatars in the simulation –, those actions, as I was saying, actually affect the other players and, when it is the case, reverberate in the community of players. It should be added that the reiterated and consistent practice of certain acts and certain behaviours throughout the simulation may, in some circumstances, reveal the moral options of players or, on the other side, produce habits or tendencies which could, in some cases, pass on some aspects of the players' everyday life. Even though, to be fair, the thesis saying that the violence enacted in videogames contaminates or produces real life violence is yet to be proven. Quite the opposite, it may well be the case that it is, instead, a way to sublimate violent impulses or drive out the tensions of ordinary life in a safe and harmless activity (protected by the "magic circle" and benefitting from the healing powers of make-believe). And yet, it is true that some games – some of them were even designed,

programmed and distributed by government organisations, as it is the case with *America's Army*, a game that simulates the experience of belonging to the northern American army, ultimately, with the goal of recruiting soldiers[19] – have been used to simulate war situations in the training of soldiers or terrorists. However, not only the avowedly violent videogames – the war-themed, military strategy simulations or fighting games – convene moral dilemmas and ethical stances. Social life simulation games, like the successful *The Sims* series, as well as "massively multiplayer online role playing games" (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft*, in many aspects similar to a virtual world such as the famous platform *Second Life* (even though this online environment with a large community of members is arguably a game[20]), face its players with action and strategy decisions, professional career choices, socialization practices, domestic or budgetary management and even with affective and libidinal economy, which, as a whole, emulate social conflicts along with behavioural and personal identity issues that may assist each player, as a moral being, in revisiting their ethical values[21].

6. The artistic appropriation of videogames

Therefore, given the aesthetic properties that we can find in videogames, the expressive and creative drive of this specific kind of playing experience, the depth and richness of the (aesthetic, cognitive and ethical) values at

---

[19] Ernest Adams introduces it, when dealing with moral decision-making in games, like this: «America's Army, a team-based multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) game distributed free by the U.S. Army, is intended to serve as an education and recruiting tool, teaching players how real soldiers are supposed to fight […] it requires that the player act in conformance with the actual disciplinary requirements of the Army, so it detects and punishes dishonorable behavior. The Army is anxious to make the point that soldiering comes with serious moral responsibilities». E. Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, Second edition, New Riders/Pearson Education Inc, Berkeley 2010, p. 108.

[20] As Ernest Adams tries to clarify, in a chapter about online gaming, «Users access the virtual world through a client, just as players of MMOGs [massively multiplayer online games] do. However, unlike MMOGs, *Second Life* does not offer quests to achieve, combat or other types of challenges, a system for leveling characters up, or any of the other gameplay features typical of persistent worlds. It is simply an environment, and what happens in it is entirely up to the users». (E. Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, p. 608).

[21] For a more developed view on "players as moral beings" and the relevance of multiplayer networked games, see M. Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA & London 2009, pp. 61-105.

stake in the vast range of videogame genres and, thus, how relevant the actual games seem to be for a wider discussion of value transformation in contemporary culture and society, it shall not be a surprise if, even at an early stage of videogame history, some creative minds understood and foresaw the artistic potential of these forms of ludic interaction, both as subject matter and as an artistic medium. Again, it is not my purpose here to discuss if videogames as technological devices can be viewed as artistic objects or if the conception and design of videogames should be regarded as an artistic activity, an art form[22]. Instead, I am just taking it as a matter of fact that, in the last decades, several artists have been using those technological devices, sometimes with the help of video game designers or modifying[23] the games themselves, or carrying out any other strategies of appropriation (or "*détournement*") of videogame culture, in order to create artworks and expressively engage with contemporary society and lifestyle values and issues.

Often, they simply get inspiration from the characters or even the games that are recognizable features of popular culture and include them in their artwork pieces or installations. Other times, the artists use the technological tools of game design – the most popular case being the audio-visual creation technique usually known as "machinima", where real-time computer graphics engines are used to generate computer animations or

[22] The discussion of these issues can be extensively read, for instance, in Grant Tavinor's book *The Art of Videogames*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2009, particularly in the chapter "Videogames as art", pp. 172-196, and in a significant part of Dominic McIver Lopes argument for computer art in *The Philosophy of Computer Art*, Routledge, Oxon-New York 2010. A positive answer to the question "Are video games art?", in a certain – more prosaic - sense of the word "art", can also be explored in the catalogue of the 2012's exhibition by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, *The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass effect*, Welcome Books, New York 2012. But other contemporary art museums have been interested in acquiring video games or hosting exhibitions focusing on video games and gaming culture. Actually, having in mind an 'institutional theory of art', some could even argue that it was only the fact that some curators, in the late 80's and early 90's, decided to look at old video games as preformed (*ready-made*?) works of art and display them in art exhibitions that, in a sort of Duchamp-like *manoeuvre*, gave legitimacy to the consideration of video games as an art form.
[23] In the video game culture, "*mods*", that is, game modifications, alterations of code or content from a video game, made by the general public or by a developer, in order to make it operate in a manner different from its original version, are extremely common. When these modifications are made in order to produce an artistic effect they are called *art mods* in the video gaming jargon.

short films[24] - with the purpose of carrying out their own creations. And in some cases, when the artists are also game designers or have designing skills, they create *art games* themselves that are actually playable but may be somewhat undermined, in the sense that they may have been, at least partially, hollowed out from some ludic challenges – competitive goals[25], winning, defeating or conquering – and, merely, conceived: to provide pure aesthetic experiences, to enhance the enjoyment of the sensible and formal properties of the games and their display and, eventually, to promote the expressiveness and imagination of its players by allowing them to participate in the creative development of its features.

Indeed, besides the several instances of appropriation of famous characters like Pac-Man or Super Mario in contemporary art[26] (by Cory Arcangel, Antoinette J. Citizen or Kordian Lewandowski[27], for instance), we have seen some artists, like Jon Rafman, Feng Mengbo or the duo Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead, among many others, appropriating already existing games, modifying them or setting them in different scales and

---

[24] For a more detailed account of the "machinima" topic, see Henry Lowood's article, "High-Performance Play: The making of machinima" in A. Clarke, G. Mitchell, *Videogames and Art*, Intellect Books, Bristol, UK-Chicago 2007, pp. 59-79.

[25] Although, some authors seem to claim that, to still be considered a game, an art game should have a competitive nature or be goal-oriented: «…art games contain at least two of the following: a defined way to win or experience success in a mental challenge, passage through a series of levels (that may or may not be hierarchical), or a central character or icon that represents the player» (T. Holmes, "Arcade Classics Span Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre", at the *Digital Arts and Culture* (*DAC*) International Conference, Melbourne 2003. Available at http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Holmes.pdf, retrieved the 31st March 2016). Supporting this view, see also the paper by Rebecca Cannon, "Introduction to Artistic Computer Game Modification", delivered at the *Plaything Conference* of October 2003 at Sydney, Australia.

[26] Not to mention in popular art, namely, in the movie business with cinematic adaptations of several famous videogames and characters, such as the *Mario Bros.*, *Street Fighter* or *Tomb Raider*, just to name a few, animation and television series based on games and the frequent references to well-known videogames or gaming culture in popular tv shows.

[27] Cory Arcangel is a New York post-conceptual artist that has been obsessed with pop culture's character of *Super Mario Bros.*, including it in artistic movies (such as *Naptime* [2002] or *Super Mario Movie* [2005]) and other artistic media. Antoinette J. Citizen is an Australian artist that used, not the character *per se*, but the now famous objects of the videogame landscape in her interactive installation *Super Mario Brothers Level 1-1*, where she transformed an art gallery into a Super Mario game space. Kordian Lewandowski's famous version of Michelangelo's *Pietà* where Nintendo's characters Mario and the Princess Peach replace the Christ and the Virgin Mary is another good example of the appropriation of gaming culture by contemporary artists. See more at Mathias Jansson (2011), "Videogame appropriation in contemporary art: Super Mario" at http://furtherfield.org/articles/videogame-appropriation-contemporary-art-super-mario

contexts, in order to create new computer art pieces, video installations or other forms of interactive new media artworks. In *Trigger Happy* (1998), the English duo set a gallery installation where the visitors could take the place of a player in front of an arcade game, inspired by the old *Space Invaders*, and, in order to skip through the paragraphs (each paragraph being a new level in the game) of a theoretical discourse on the 'death of the author', they had to shoot the words of each paragraph, controlling the laser cannon that moved horizontally. In *Long March: Restart* (2008), Chinese artist Feng Mengbo installed a videogame in an 80-foot-long wall, in the exhibition room of MoMA PS1, where viewers – also turned into players – could have taken over a wireless controller so they could play *Red Army Soldier*, a previously modified version of *Super Mario Bros.*, where the hero, a Red Army soldier, throws Coca-Cola cans to his enemies. The audience of an exhibition, consequently, becomes a group of potential players and yet, considering the length of the display, these "gamers" are relegated to the position of aesthetic beholding. In *A Man Digging* (2013), canadian artist Jon Rafman used *Max Payne 3*'s computer graphics engine to produce an art video, where a "virtual *flaneur*" roams through the original game scenery, just after the bloody massacres have taken place, as he placidly meditates on the human frailty and the violent death, rendered so banal and almost innocuous to an anaesthetised player, which is relentlessly flooded by gory images. The first-person shooter (FPS) game – which the original *Max Payne 3* game is –, where the player is usually enacting a fighter and responds to a virtually dangerous environment, perceived through the eyes of a protagonist, becomes a sort of elegy, where the viewer – no longer a player – is guided through the eyes of a phantom-like narrator, contemplating the uncanny and peaceful post-mortem crime scenes, converted into disquieting aesthetic landscapes.

In a different and, in many cases earlier[28], approach, some game developers or, often, non-developer contemporary artists, have created

---

[28] In various historical surveys of videogame art, it is common to make reference to Conways' *Game of Life* (1970) as one of the earlier "art games". It is, in fact, a two-dimensional (with on and off, or 1 and 0, values) cellular automaton contrived by the British mathematician John H. Conway. It is a discreet mathematical model that simulates generative pro-

games with an artistic – in opposition to a commercial – intent. In 1983, American computer scientist, composer and virtual reality pioneer, Jaron Lanier, conceived and developed a generative music videogame for the 8-bit computer Commodore 64, called *Moondust*, where the player controls a "spaceman" – humouristically named Jose Scriabin, in an obvious homage to the Russian synaesthetic composer – with the primarily given goal of covering a bullseye at the center of screen with what is, playfully, called "moonjuice". The motion paths of the "spaceman" character interact – ephemerally – with an abstract ambient score of electronic music that can be enjoyed by the player and at some point will, certainly, divert his focus from the spaceship challenge, which means that, despite its game-like appearance, *Moondust* is mostly aesthetically motivated, the initial challenge being more of an excuse to musical creativity. More recently, the American musician, writer and game designer, Jason Rohrer, created Passage (2007), which was described by the author as a *"memento mori"* game[29]. The player spends exactly five minutes experiencing an anonymous[30] male character's entire lifetime, from birth to death. There is no proper goal in the game, since the player cannot control his destiny. He can move through a labyrinthine landscape, he can even meet the love of his life and get married, but, no matter what he does, he can only be sure that the character will get old and die five minutes after the beginning of the game. It is not merely a moving picture, since there is a level of interaction with the male avatar, yet it is more an opportunity to meditate on life's

cesses displaying the evolution of patterns. As a game it is a "zero-player" one, since the evolution of the game is determined by its initial state, requiring no further input beyond the initial configuration. It can easily be considered an item of recreational mathematics, thus the apparent game-like character of Conway's invention. And mentioning it as an "art game" is probably related to the fact that it is possible to contemplate the evolution of patterns and appreciate their formal properties.

[29] Cf. Jason Rohrer's own creator's note, where he also states that the player's interpretation of the game is nevertheless more important than his intentions when creating it. J. Rohrer, "What I was trying to do with *Passage*" in Jason Rohrer's webpage, November 2007, available at http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/statement.html, retrieved the 31st March 2016.

[30] According to the journalist Aaron Rutkoff, the avatar is loosely inspired on the author's physical appearance, but we are talking of a very rough pixelated anthropomorphic image. Cfr. A. Rutkoff, "The Game of Life" in *The Wall Street Journal,* 28 January 2008, available at http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB120034796455789469, retrieved the 31st March 2016.

ephemerality, death and its apparent absurdity than a challenge (even though, ironically, some point values are attributed to certain actions).

Bringing these examples of "art games" or of the artistic appropriation of video games, simply serves the purpose of strengthening my standpoint, that playing a video game can be a fulfilling experience which might be a philosophically interesting subject for aesthetics, in so far as it offers many relevant issues to consideration. The notion of *play* is, of course, a matter of philosophical discussion for a long time, more so, it is an overarching concept that helps us to understand what happens when we have aesthetic experiences, both as beholders (listeners, perceivers, etc.) and as creators (participants, designers, actors, etc.), since it reveals something about the way we engage in them. But playing a video game has specific features that make them particularly interesting, as I hope became clearer with what has been said in this fast-paced presentation of video games: they can be enjoyed at many levels, from their sensible features and stimuli to the challenging interaction with a complex and dynamic structure, which is definitely ludic but can also have narrative elements; they imply an experience of immersion that engages the subject as a sentient body but also as a reflective mind; even though they postulate, like any other kind of game, a "magic circle", they also convene our existential, social and cultural identity; they can be appreciated and evaluated as technological devices, as artefacts, but also as conveyors of aesthetic, cognitive and ethical content and values; as an ever-growing economic, social and cultural phenomenon, the video game culture may, undoubtedly, be relevant for a wider discussion of value transformation in contemporary culture and society; the fact that art and artistic intentions have been appropriating features of this cultural phenomenon not only shows the truth of the previous statement but also how trully relevant they are in our aesthetic experience of everyday life and the world.