

FROM INTERACTIVITY TO PLAYABILITY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the similarities and differences between participatory, interactive, and playable art. It suggests that computer games can provide novel perspectives on interactivity in interactive art. The paper also proposes that the implications of computer games to interactive art extend beyond whatever purpose and value computer games are perceived as having as products of popular culture.

Keywords: interactivity, play, games, ludology

Introduction

Museums and symposia have opened their doors to computer games. The MoMA collection in New York includes computer games, and for several years ISEA symposia have had sessions dedicated to games. This is not surprising, since computer games and interactive art share a number of characteristics related to, for example, their technological underpinnings. The relationship between an audience and an interactive artwork is in many respects similar to the relationship between a computer game and its player. These similarities can make it hard to formally distinguish between interactive artworks and computer games [1], and it is not surprising that the history of computer games can also be viewed as a history of interactive art, and vice versa [2].

Despite their similarities, computer games and interactive art seem to belong to different cultural spheres and are appreciated from different perspectives. Some scholars of new media art have expressed concerns about the infiltration of ‘playful’ impulses into new media art, [3], [4]. The separation is somewhat worrying, as the two phenomena have a lot to learn from each other in terms of strategies of audience engagement and meaning-making. The tensions that are at play between traditions of interactive art and computer games are supposedly due in part to how the phenomena we know as ‘interactive art’ and as ‘games’ become constructed in social settings, and the kind of cultural and conceptual baggage that are attached to the terms. As Chesher [5] puts it: “New media art offers forms of identity for gallery visitors that are very different from the identities that games offer players.” However, in addition to explaining the tensions as social constructions, as Chesher does

with the help of Bourdieu, I believe that it is also possible, to a meaningful extent, to trace the similarities and differences between interactive art and computer games to the technological affordances of the objects in question, and the kinds of human/ technology relations these affordances give rise to.

In this paper I propose, following Dinkla [6], to situate computer games on a historical trajectory, beginning at participatory art and moving on to interactivity. I suggest that this trajectory be extended in terms of a contemporary shift from interactivity to playability. Following my discussion of this shift, I will argue that the notion of ‘playability’ offers a vantage point for analysis and criticism of non-playable, merely ‘interactive’ artworks. Doing so will shed light on the differences and similarities between computer games and interactive art. My argument seeks to support the position that computer games, in the context of art, can be appreciated not only as yet another form of pop culture brought to museums, but more specifically in the tradition of interactive and new media art: as contributing to the re-evolution of interactive art. This will help facilitate reflection on whether the childish stigma that new media art discourse often imposes on computer games is justified.

Participation and Interaction

Dinkla proposed an art-historical trajectory from participation to interaction. Comparing interactive artworks to Kaprow’s happenings, Dinkla suggested that the involvement of an interactive machine allows the artist to be removed from the reception situation. Dinkla suggested that with technology, it became possible to control the relationship between the artwork and the audience by ‘machinic’ means. The dialogue between the artwork and the audience in the reception situation, the very matter that Dinkla [7] views as the ‘artistic material’, was ‘automatized’. In this setting, the machine assumed the authorial responsibility of events in the reception situation. This automatization is, according to Dinkla, what justifies talking about the shift from participation to interaction. Broadly speaking, the common ground that exists between the genres of interactive and participatory art rests upon the fact that they both live by the input from the audience. The audience must invest energy and effort into helping to realize the artists’ vision. This gives us a working definition of interac-

tivity in interactive art; if a work can be ‘complete’ even without any effort from the audience, it is perhaps best described as something else than Interactive. Thus, interactive and participatory artworks leave room for the audience: they afford being manipulated by the audience. This applies to computer games, too: it would probably be impossible, and make little sense, to analyze and critique a computer game without playing it. While computer games and interactive art share the mode of audience engagement described above, computer games commonly contain an element that is seldom found in interactive art, but whose prevalence in the context of games was pointed out already by Gadamer [8]: risk.

The emerging tradition of game studies has sought to conceptualize computer games mainly through an analogy to traditional games. In this ‘ludological’ reading, computer games can be conceptualized with the same terminology one may use for the description of traditional, ‘non-digital’ games: the ‘risk’ that is essential to game-play appears in ludological analysis of a computer game as manifested in, and facilitated by, rules, goals, challenges, winning condition, and so on.

However: there is no shortage of examples of computer ‘games’ that cannot be won, or lack other qualities that would justify the term ‘game’ – perhaps the most popular of these are the games in *The Sims* franchise [9]. It would seem unwise to force the concept of a ‘game’ onto *The Sims*, since it clearly manifests a form different from that of traditional games. Hence, it is not surprising that the analytic and critical capabilities of the ‘ludological’ position have been contested. Woods [10], for example, suggests that for the purpose of describing computer games, mountain climbing or Sudoku would be better analogies than traditional games. The parallel between computer games and traditional games might be beneficial for the project of introducing computer games as products of popular culture into museums and other institutions, for the sake of, for example, the preservation of cultural heritage and/or PR and marketing. However, the analogy to traditional, ‘non-digital’ games is problematic for the description of the shift from interactivity to playability. As I will show in the following, to limit the analysis to digital ‘games’ only would be to overlook the technological specificity of the ways in which playable artworks enhance the kind of audience engagement we may be

familiar with from the context of interactive art.

Playability and Significance

It might be tempting to assume that in the absence of goals, winning conditions and the like, the ‘non-games’ like *The Sims* would ‘fall back’ on being simply interactive. However, doing so would falsely assume that there was no risk in *The Sims*, and overlook perhaps the most important feature in the human / technology relation between the game and its player: the possibility for failure. This observation, that there are works which let their audiences fail, is what prompts me to propose a shift from interactivity to playability. It seems that failure can give us access to the aspects of computer games that make them stand out from interactive art, without the conceptual straitjacket of a ‘game’. Instead of conceptualizing computer games as games per se, and making assumptions regarding the ontology of these objects, I seek to attach the description to the possibility of failure.

Consider, for example, *The Sims*. Players of *The Sims* can do a variety of things – they have a certain degree of freedom. On the surface, this seems to be the case with interactive art, too. For example, *Sono reMorphed* by Berndt Lintermann and Torsten Belschner [11] is an interactive installation which allows its audience to manipulate an audiovisual spectacle projected in 3D. No matter what I do in *Sono reMorphed*, I cannot fail. Any attempt to describe a standard against which my performance as a user of *Sono reMorphed* would be measured would necessarily make reference to the social setting of the exhibition situation, rather than to the aspects of the work itself. On the other hand, by letting its players fail, *The Sims* makes the players responsible for the freedom they enjoy.

Many of the things that the players can do in the game become meaningful in relation to this responsibility. If all of the Sims under the player’s control (that is, the individual semi-autonomous characters in the player’s family in *The Sims*) die, the game is over. Death is possible in multiple ways, including in a fire. Fires can start, for example, if a Sim cooks without knowing how to cook. To avoid starting a fire when cooking, the player must make the Sims learn how to cook from, for example, cookbooks. Cookbooks are contained in a bookshelf, which must be bought with money earned from having a job, which in turn

can be obtained with a good enough education. Bookshelves, education, and so on, become meaningful in relation to the risk of failure. To be more specific, within playable works, failure lends significance to instrumental-rational ontologies. This mode of significance is something very seldom seen in interactive art. Of course, a player of *The Sims* may choose to decorate her Sim’s home with bookshelves simply because of her idiosyncratic preference for bookshelves over aquariums, for example. This would compare to, for example, generating round shapes instead of spiky shapes in *Sono reMorphed*, however one of the most interesting differences between *The Sims* and *Sono reMorphed* is that in the latter no one kind of shape is ‘better’, ‘more useful’ or ‘more dangerous’ than any other. Thus, while *The Sims* is interactive like interactive art, like *Sono reMorphed* is interactive, it is also *playable*.

In Dinkla’s account, interaction is, roughly put, automatized participation. Just as the possibility for participation is contained in interactivity, interactivity is contained in playability: if we extend the trajectory from interactivity to playability, it appears that playability is interaction in which the user is made responsible for the freedom she enjoys.

Playability as a Critical Perspective on Interactive Art

If we look at interactive art from the perspective of playability, it seems to be missing something. We can interact, but we have no reason whatsoever to interact in this way rather than that way. What is missing from interactive art is *purpose*.

Despite the promises of two-way feedback and audience participation made by the ‘new media theory’, interactive art still remains very much about artist-controlled representation: an authorially fixed representation which the audience is invited to interpret in any way they like – the kind of representation that is characteristic of art, in general. In interactive art, this representational – or perhaps better put, semiotic – fixity may come with some interactive concessions, for example that the audience may navigate through the work. It seems that in such cases, the openness of interpretation caused by the seemingly free interactivity is turned against itself: nothing matters and anything goes. Unless the audience is willing to benevolently interpret their (inter)actions in the way suggested by

the artist, no action is more meaningful than another, so every action is meaningless (if an interactive artwork had a ‘score’ to indicate that the audience’s actions matter, it would most likely be interpreted as an ironical reference to popular culture.) Thus, with a nod to Eskelinen [12], it is possible to suggest that in interactive art, ‘action’ is simply a means to access the ‘content’ of the work, whereas in playable art ‘content’ exists to make ‘action’ meaningful.

However, this critique might appear problematic from some perspectives. Having to attach purpose to acts of interaction and to evaluate users’ choices may seem controversial, especially to those who hold that art is supposed to be multifaceted and open to interpretation. It seems possible to assume that playability dumbs down, or banalizes, interaction in interactive art: by making one aspect, for example, ‘more useful’ than another, the artist may be perceived as already restricting the range of interpretations.

Let us explore this possibility. Playable works often ask their audiences to engage in repetitive tasks, with the only reward being the possibility to continue engaging in repetitive tasks. This is often referred to as the ‘paratelic’ [13] nature of play, the feature which makes play stand out from most other animal activities. Here it brings forth the challenge of playability to traditional forms of interactivity: (inter)action is not a tool, but itself the very content of the work. By attaching purpose to aspects of interactivity and thus giving it an instrumental-rational meaning, playable works suggest interactivity as replacing ‘image’ or ‘representation’ as that which can be modulated: for example, in or out of focus, in black and white or technicolor, in standard or high definition, absent or present, and so on. *Tetris*, the puzzle game by Aleksey Pajitnov and Vadim Gerasimov [14] in which the player is supposed to keep a stack of blocks from reaching the top of the container, is open to various interpretations. It could be read, for example, as representing household chores [15]. However, a reading of *Tetris* as representing, for example, a loss of a loved one could not be sustained. The assumption that interpretation is constrained seems to hold true. However, the argument that playability is banal due to constrained interpretation overlooks the fact that while the instrumental-rational significance contained in playable works is the first one the player

must confront, it is not the only, let alone final, significance.

Instead of representing with simple audiovisual 'representations', playable works can be described as representing using alternative strategies. These are, for example, 'simulation' (e.g. [16]) and 'metaphor' (e.g. [17]), strategies which mean that playable works confront their audiences with conditions other than the human condition, conditions that need to be lived, experienced and, most importantly, experimented with by utilizing their instrumental-rational significance, instead of simply being seen or heard and interpreted at face value. In this regard, an important predecessor and a waypoint on the trajectory is Dieter Kiessling's *Continue* from 1997; a simulation of a condition in which resistance is futile [18].

Conclusions

It seems possible to extend Dinkla's trajectory onwards from interactivity to playability without endangering the cohesion of Dinkla's account. An implication of this extension for the creative practices which act upon interactive media is a call for bravery from those entrenched in institutionalized forms of interactive art. To make use of playability in the tradition of interactive art, practitioners need to be willing to experiment with new strategies of authorship and representation, and to withstand some institutional resistance. As computer games have entered the mainstream of media culture, it is likely that the majority of audiences for interactive art have had their first experiences of non-utilitarian computer interactivity with computer games. As Huhtamo [19] suggested, computer games have become an "internalized model for an interactive relationship with the media, influencing other forms of computerized and computer-mediated communication". These new audiences of interactive art, who have grown up with computer games, supposedly speak a novel and different language of interactivity, and thus will engender a different perspective on interactions with artworks. Hence, in this contemporary context, the art-elitist strategies of isolation, protectionism, and tendency to establish fences around 'serious' or 'pure' interactive art to protect it from computer games will not work forever.

Nowadays it is common to have gamer ghettos in conferences, symposia and museums: even the highest echelons of the art world have opened their doors to

computer games. At some point soon, these institutions will no longer be embarrassed about having done so. What will burst from these ghettos is not necessarily only "game art [that] lives on the remainders of mainstream computer games", as Fuchs [20] suggests - that is, works that purposefully straddle the two traditions and thus risk appearing marginal from the perspectives of both interactive art and computer games. Instead, the emergence of playability will bring forth modes of audience engagement which call for re-thinking of what interactivity means for interactive art.

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