PLAYING GAMES WITH ART: THE CULTURAL AND AESTHETIC
LEGITIMATION OF DIGITAL GAMES

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Abstract

Like other popular cultural forms before them, digital games are undergoing a process of cultural and aesthetic legitimation; the question of digital games' legitimacy as art is being raised with increasing urgency in a variety of different contexts. Mobilizing a conceptual framework derived from media studies, the sociology of art, and certain traditions in philosophical aesthetics, this dissertation proposes that art is constituted in a complex, historically-contingent assemblage made up of many diverse elements and sometimes called an "art world." The legitimation of a cultural form as art is achieved through a process of collective action and interaction between not only art makers and art objects but also thinkers, talkers, watchers, and players, as well as ideas, organizations, places, and objects. The central question of this dissertation, therefore, is not "Are games art?" but rather "How are games being reconfigured as art, where, and by whom?"

In order to understand the legitimation of games as art, it is necessary to attend to the specific social-material processes through which it is taking place in different contexts. This dissertation focuses on the historical period between 2005 and 2010, and is made up of several case studies, including the highly public debate precipitated by popular film critic Roger Ebert's derisive comments about games as art; the cultural reception and canonization of blockbuster "prestige games" that pursue artistic status within the boundaries of the commercial industry, such as *Bioshock*; and at the opposite end of the spectrum, the construction of independently-produced "artgames" such as *Passage* as a gaming analogue to autobiographical indie music and comics. Each of these overlapping contexts represents a particular conception of games as legitimate art, mobilizing different elements and strategies in pursuit of cultural and material capital, and establishing the terms and stakes for more recent developments.

Dedicated to Josephine May Alexandra Parker, who began as this was finished.

Acknowledgements

Notes on terminology

Throughout this dissertation, except where explicitly stated otherwise, "game" and "digital game" will be used interchangeably to refer to digital games. References to the system of fine art institutions commonly called the Art World will be capitalized in order to differentiate from the more general concept of art worlds.

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Introduction

    As digital games have come to play a central role in contemporary Western society, both as a form of popular culture and as a highly profitable industry, their cultural status has changed. Coinciding with the economic growth of the game industry, wider social acceptance of gaming as a pastime, and the demographic expansion (and fragmentation) of the audience for games (Juul 2012, 7-8), over the course of the last fifteen years the question of digital games' legitimacy as art has entered popular discourse with increasing urgency. In opposition to moral panic over possible negative effects of games on children, and to deep-seated notions that play and interactivity are antithetical to art, there has been a push to recognize games as a valuable artistic form (McKernan, 2), and different cultural sectors have contributed to this push in different ways (Heinich & Shapiro). Academic game studies, as well as self-consciously intellectual essayistic game criticism modeled on pop music and film criticism, have emerged as key factors in promoting and sustaining the idea that games are worthy of serious consideration. Games and play have entered gallery spaces, both as materials in contemporary art practice (Bittanti & Quaranta, 9; Sharp 2012), and as exhibited objects at prestigious institutions such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art (Kim). Similarly, the proliferation of grants, awards, prizes, and other accolades for digital games and developers has placed games alongside other legitimate cultural forms, as well as furnishing prestige upon both the winners and the awarding institutions. However, these large-scale, highly visible developments are symptomatic of smaller, more gradual shifts in the cultural status of games.

    The legitimation of popular culture as art is nothing new: film, popular music and dance, comic books, and television are no longer considered frivolous or dangerous low-culture

entertainment, but have come to be seen, at least in certain forms, as culturally and aesthetically important. The multifarious process of legitimation is, as Haidee Wasson suggests, "neither simple nor obvious" (2), and is bound up in material history and cultural politics (Bourdieu, 11). To paraphrase Wasson, "the act of claiming that films [or games] are art or dangerous or edifying is a productive cultural moment, systematically forming the objects being discussed" (27), and furthermore this discursive construction has direct implications for the actors involved, in the form of allocation of resources and social prestige (Becker 1984, 36). According to my conceptual framework, detailed in Chapter Two, art is constituted in an expansive assemblage sometimes called an "art world." Not limited to art objects, an art world includes everything from the creative labour of the artist and others involved in art-making, to the institutions, audiences, and critics that distribute, exhibit, promote, experience, and appreciate it, to the material and symbolic resources that sustain it.

Although the aesthetics of digital games and the relationship between games, play, and art have been discussed at length from various academic perspectives (see Chapter 1), the social, cultural, historical, and political dimensions of "becoming-art" have not been directly engaged by game scholars. This contemporary moment offers a unique opportunity to map and analyze a complex, multiple process of cultural and aesthetic legitimation, the outcome of which remains uncertain. This dissertation is therefore intended to address several related questions: How are digital games being legitimated as art, where, and by whom? What kinds of digital games are being legitimated as art (and what kinds are not)? Why is the artistic legitimacy of digital games being pursued and contested in this historical moment? What is at stake, materially and symbolically, in this process of legitimation?

As Ian Bogost and numerous other commentators on the games-as-art debate have noted,

the idea of art is not fixed and uncontroversial (2011, 11), but is constantly in negotiation, as evidenced by the cultural and aesthetic upheavals of the twentieth century (Berleant, 19). Rather than attempting to determine definitively whether or not games are art, it is more productive to trace the specific material and discursive activities and processes involved in repositioning games as art (Heinich & Shapiro), and the historical context that has made the question "are games art?" sensible to begin with (Baumann 2007a, 21). The boundaries between art and not-art should not be presumed in advance; the *production* of those boundaries is my object of study (Barad, 30). As philosopher Arnold Berleant contends, art and aesthetic experience are made up of a diversity of elements, activities, and occasions (2), and this is especially true of digital games, entangled in a complex, unfolding process of legitimation.

Scope

This dissertation examines the idea of games-as-art, and how it has been invoked and produced in different social-material contexts. This is not an entirely new idea: as early as 1982, Trip Hawkins provocatively called his new computer game company Electronic Arts, and in a two-page magazine ad titled "Can a Computer Make You Cry?" proclaimed his team of game developers "software artists" at the cutting edge of interactive art and entertainment (Hecker). Thirty years later, Electronic Arts has become one of the largest and most powerful corporations in the game industry, publishing hundreds of titles a year produced by a host of subsidiary studios. The idea of games-as-art continues to be controversial in this contemporary context, but it has shifted and transformed.

I am primarily concerned with the status of games and gaming in popular culture, outside of the institutions of the "official" Art World, although the boundaries between the two are

anything but fixed. Gallery-oriented contemporary art practices that incorporate or invoke games

and gaming conventions, which have proliferated since the 1990s, participate in the wider

cultural legitimation of games, but do not overly determine this process as some scholars seem to

suggest. Game-based art, and the relationship between games and art history more generally,

have been written about extensively by academics, artists, curators, and critics, and I will address

this body of work in detail in the following chapter. In my own research, however, I have

focused on more mainstream, higher-profile sites of legitimation in order to supplement the

existing literature. For pragmatic and linguistic reasons, the scope of my research is also limited

to Western (North American and European) gaming cultures, but I hope the approach developed

here proves useful to scholars better equipped to critically engage other contexts, as the

legitimation of games as art is unquestionably a diverse and global phenomenon.

Digital games as an industry and cultural form move rapidly, and while this project began

as an up-to-date commentary on the current state of games-as-art, in the course of my research it

has become an historical study. Specifically, I am interested in the period between roughly 2005

and 2010, which I will demonstrate to be a watershed moment in the ongoing history of games

and art, in which the question of games' cultural and aesthetic legitimacy became a matter of

popular concern (McKernan, 15). My work is structured around a series of case studies that,

taken together, are emblematic of the diverse range of contexts and elements that make up this

dynamic process. My emphasis is on the way that popular and critical discourse are co-

constitutive with game-making practices and industrial/institutional forces in producing the

aesthetic experience of playing digital games and materializing the idea of games as art. As such,

this project makes a valuable conceptual and methodological contribution not only to game

studies, but also aesthetics, the sociology of art, and the interdisciplinary study of cultural

legitimation.

Methodology

A wide range of qualitative and quantitative approaches have been adopted to analyze art worlds and cultural legitimation, making it difficult to say what is the best way to study these phenomena. My research questions are not suited to quantitative methods such as statistical analysis (Bourdieu) or content analysis (Baumann 2007a; 2007b), or historical methods such as archival research (DiMaggio; Wasson). The research questions described above necessitate more versatile methods that can account for the numerous different sites at which the question of games-as-art is being formulated, and through which art world assemblages are calcifying. Additionally, the variable organization of art worlds (not to mention the variety in games as a cultural form) demands an approach that can properly account for a diversity of contexts and sources. As such, I have undertaken several case studies examining some of the key sites in which the legitimacy of digital games as art is pursued and contested.

Robert K. Yin contends that case studies are the preferred method for "how" and "why" questions about uncontrolled, real-world contemporary events (1-2), and enable a holistic approach to complex phenomena that cannot be divorced from larger context in which they are situated (13). Art and cultural legitimation, as stated above, exemplify this kind of phenomena. Case study research is effective for drawing together and dealing with the "full variety" of evidence from multiple sources, including documents, artifacts, discourse, and observations (Yin, 8, 14). The emergent art worlds for digital games are multifaceted and diverse, and reducing them to one common unit of analysis (games, reviews, museum exhibitions, individual designers, or whatever) without situating it in relation to other elements in the assemblage would grant only

a partial view of its functioning and significance. Yin also suggests that case study research works best with a clearly-articulated prior theoretical proposition (14), back to which the findings of each case study can be generalized through analysis, allowing for revision and expansion of the proposition (29, 32). The theoretical proposition of this dissertation, as noted above, is that art is a contingent assemblage of diverse elements that produces aesthetic experience, value, and cultural legitimacy, and can be found in many different configurations. The purpose of this dissertation is not to prove a hypothesis; rather, digital games as a relatively new cultural form offer a valuable opportunity to explore this proposition, building on previous scholarly work.

At its core, this is a study of the cultural reception of games, examining the productive discursive friction between different groups of users and other agents between and within different art world assemblages (Wasson, 30). Because these nascent art worlds are not all the same, and there is no widespread or general consensus about the legitimacy of games (as there is now about painting or film), certain aspects of my case studies are at odds, constructing divergent or conflicting versions of games as legitimate art. The particular organization and operational scale of an art world directly relates to the kind of art produced (Becker 1984, 6), and there is no standard, homogeneous structure or teleology for art and cultural legitimation (Baumann 2007a, 52). The idea of digital games as art is being used to establish different kinds of art worlds and different relationships between games and other cultural forms, and serves other purposes as well: economic, social, political, and so on. Through descriptive and analytical work, and comparisons between cases, I hope to clearly demonstrate this multiplicity.

Chapter outlines

Chapter One begins with a comprehensive survey of the academic literature on digital games and art, including art historical approaches that attempt to situate games in relation to other art forms and movements (especially the twentieth-century avant garde); critical and curatorial writing on game-based contemporary art practices and the possibilities of games in the gallery; and philosophical accounts of games-as-art from a variety of perspectives in aesthetics. What is at stake in this body of work, and what specific conceptions of art and games are mobilized? I contend that while game studies has produced some valuable insights in this area, there are significant gaps: most notably, only a handful of game scholars have addressed the social, cultural, and institutional aspects of art in any detail. My scholarly intervention is intended to supplement and expand upon these approaches, and the chapter concludes with an overview of relevant research on cultural and aesthetic legitimation from other fields that provides the groundwork for my project. In particular, recent studies of film (Wasson; Baumann 2007b), television (Newman & Levine), and comics (Beaty 2007; 2012), popular cultural forms that have undergone processes of legitimation and are now widely accepted as art, represent useful historical parallels to digital games.

Building on these studies of cultural legitimation, Chapter Two presents in detail my conceptual framework, drawing together theoretical insights and methodological resources from game studies, cinema and media studies, the sociology of art, and certain philosophies of art, synthesizing them through Manuel De Landa's theory of social assemblages into a focused and versatile approach. As noted above, I contend that art can only be understood through the contingent social-material assemblages — the art worlds — that give it substance (Wasson, 28).

Art worlds are historically and culturally specific, and made up of diverse elements beyond individual artworks, comprising the many people, activities, discourses, institutions, objects, and conditions involved in production, distribution, and reception. Inspired by critiques of Bourdieu and the philosophical traditions of pragmatist and environmental aesthetics, I propose that contrary to many sociological accounts of art, aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to politics and economics, arguing instead that aesthetics and judgment are situated, emergent properties of art world assemblages that are entangled with, not subsumed by, other elements.

My first case study examines the popular discourse on games and art in its various permutations, focusing on the sustained controversy around film critic Roger Ebert's notorious assertions that games can never be art. These fandom-baiting comments book-end the historical period I am focusing on, and Chapter Three traces the development of this debate between 2005 and 2010, at which point Ebert abandoned it in exasperation (which has not stopped game fans, critics, and scholars from continuing to invoke him as a convenient villain). The Ebert affair is important not because of its particular outcome, but because it is an embodiment of a series of persistent popular concerns around games and art. Drawing examples from participants on all sides, I will use the debate to work through the most common objections and obstacles to the idea of games-as-art, and then to outline the most common legitimation strategies adopted by proponents of games-as-art to address these objections. I will also account for the frustrated dismissal of the debate as foolish or a waste of time by many game scholars and fans, arguing that while it is true that debating the status of games or any other medium as art in the wake of the artistic upheavals of the twentieth century is strange, it is precisely this strangeness makes it so interesting and important from a cultural perspective.

In the remaining chapters, I investigate in depth the canonization of two specific games,

both released in 2007 in the midst of the Ebert debate, as exemplars of games-as-art in popular discourse. Chapter Four proposes the term "prestige games" to refer to popular, critically-acclaimed blockbuster games that are understood to represent the absolute best the commercial game industry has to offer, much like Oscar-winning Hollywood films and premium cable television shows. My case study is the moody Art Deco- and Ayn Rand-inspired first-person shooter *Bioshock*, which was rapidly enshrined as one of the "Greatest Games Of All Time" and has produced pages upon pages of critical and scholarly discourse. I argue that *Bioshock* and other prestige games seek to balance entertainment value and mass commercial viability with distinctive audiovisual style and "mature" narrative themes through the unifying figure of the "commercial auteur" who oversees all aspects of production and thrives within the boundaries of the industry (rather than pushing against them as in other conceptions of authorship). Although it has been highly effective in the case of *Bioshock*, at the end of the chapter I will also discuss the increasing critical resistance to this particular configuration of games-as-art since 2010.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are independent or "indie" games, which feature an oppositional do-it-yourself ethos and low-fidelity aesthetic adopted from other art worlds, such as indie music and comics, that position themselves (at least discursively) against the mainstream culture industries. In Chapter Five I discuss the sub-genre of "artgames," small, often non-commercial, self-reflexively artistic indie games that draw on established aesthetic paradigms of authorial intention, autobiography, emotional expression, and thematic ambiguity. Independent developer Jason Rohrer's memento mori game *Passage* popularized the term artgame, and has become a touchstone in discussions of games and art, in part due to its availability on a variety of platforms, and its short duration of five minutes. As in Chapter Four, by tracing the rise to prominence and canonization of *Passage*, and the construction of Rohrer as an introspective,

emotive auteur in the Romantic mold, I demonstrate the crucial role this "alternative" to mainstream prestige games continues to play in the wider legitimation process. Similarly, however, this conception of artgames has come under fire, with more recent critics and indie developers questioning its problematic gender politics and purported universalism. As I will argue, this further demonstrates that configurations of games-as-art are always contingent and in flux.

In the Conclusion, I will move forward to examine the ongoing influence of the different versions of games-as-art discussed through my case studies, as well as changes and new developments since 2010. Expanding on the conclusion of Chapter Five, I will discuss some of the ways ideas of indie games and artgames are shifting, in particular the rise of a "queer games scene" (Keogh 2013) that uses accessible development tools and a DIY approach to expand the autobiographical possibilities of games to include women, queer and transgender people, and other marginalized voices. Meanwhile, as the idea of indie games is increasingly mobilized as a marketable genre category within the commercial game industry, a new model of artgame has emerged. Commercial artgames occupy a place somewhere between the DIY aesthetic of earlier artgames and the grandiosity of the prestige game, featuring higher production values, and slightly larger development teams. I will also discuss the recent proliferation of blockbuster exhibitions of digital games at major art galleries and museums, which have ensured that the question of games-as-art remains prominent in popular discourse. Emerging in parallel to these highly publicized exhibitions, the "New Arcade" movement of hybrid game/art events at smaller institutions (or in some cases, warehouses and bars) blurs the boundaries between contemporary art, indie games, music, and performance, and represents an alternative conception of games-as-art.

This dissertation tells the story of games' cultural legitimation as art, but the more recent developments discussed in the Conclusion clearly show that the story is still unfinished, and the telling has only just begun. The case studies outlined above are not intended to "prove" games have been legitimated as art, bur rather represent key historical moments that have helped establish the *terms* and *stakes* of cultural and aesthetic legitimacy for digital games, and continue to shape the ways in which games are engaged and judged.

Chapter One — Literature Review

Outside of the academy, there is an overwhelming volume of discourse on games and art, in the form of reviews, criticism, designer statements, postmortems, manifestos, and so on, often dealing with questions and problems similar to those posed by game scholars. These discourses will be engaged in detail in subsequent chapters, but in the interest of showing the context for my own research, this chapter will critically map the academic conversations about games and art. It should go without saying that the academic work surveyed here does not stand apart from more general debates about games and their cultural legitimacy. Historically, scholars and universities have played an important role in legitimating popular cultural forms, and virtually all scholarly work on popular culture is premised, at some level, on the notion that it is, if not art, at least a legitimate object worthy of serious consideration (Newman & Levine, 9). The cultural and aesthetic legitimation of digital games has been bolstered by the development since the late 1990s of academic game studies, and the introduction of practical game design degrees and diplomas at colleges and universities across the world.[1] These institutions serve an important legitimating function, expanding the discursive and material opportunities for the production and reception of digital games as a significant cultural form, and situating games alongside other legitimate art forms like visual art, theatre, literature, and film. The presence of digital games as an increasingly acceptable field of study and training in the academy is necessarily predicated on the notion that games must be worth making, thinking about, and talking about, and perhaps also worth evaluating in aesthetic terms.

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1 See, for example, *The Princeton Review*'s ranking of the top undergraduate game design programs at http://www.princetonreview.com/top-undergraduate-schools-for-video-game-design.aspx.

As I will show, while certain kinds of questions about games and art have been explored in depth by game studies, there are significant gaps in this body of work that demand new theoretical and methodological frameworks. For my purposes, most previous academic work that deals explicitly with the relationship between digital games and art can be organized into a number of threads with overarching themes and concerns: first, art historical work that situates games in relation to other art forms and practices; second, critical writing on game-based contemporary art practices; third, philosophical accounts that apply the theory and methods of aesthetics and the philosophy of art to games; and, fourth, sociologically-inflected work that frames the question in socio-cultural terms. Many theorists fit into several categories at once, and there is significant overlap and interplay between them. Nevertheless, this framework is useful in that it distinguishes between the different disciplinary and methodological approaches that have been mobilized to discuss games and art, accounting for a broad range of scholarship. The chapter will conclude with a look at academic work on cultural legitimation in other fields, which provides important theoretical and methodological models for studying the parallel legitimation of games.

Art history of games

"Games, a creative form 'older than culture,' have served humanity in such diverse ways as entertainment, exercise, conflict resolution, ritual and self-expression. But not until the 20th century did games and the play experiences they provide start to be perceived as an art form as well. With nods to the past and future [...] The Art History of Games seeks to more clearly articulate the importance of games as a form of art." (Bogost, Nitsche, & Sharp)

This statement from the program for the 2010 Art History of Games Symposium, held at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, describes in broad terms the most common

approach in academic discussions of games and art. The art historical approach situates digital games in general, movements and trends in game design, or specific games in relation to the history of art and culture, often (but not always) aligning games with established art forms according to formal or conceptual similarities. Embedded in this kind of approach is a range of particular conceptions of what exactly art is and has been historically, and of how digital games might relate to it. Reacting against both the popular debates about games and art (Bogost, Nitsche, & Sharp), and attempts to theorize the specificity of games in isolation from other cultural practices and disciplines (Pearce 2010), the goal of these scholars is to generate a more nuanced and contextualized discussion of games as art.

The narrative constructed by the art history of games stretches back to the origins of human culture, tracing the parallel — but sometimes intersecting — historical development of art on the one hand and games on the other (including sport, parlour games, board and card games, and so on). Games and art have traditionally been understood as separate domains or modes of culture, at least in the West. Art historian and game designer John Sharp attributes the exclusion of games and play from the "official" history of art to their association with ritual and folk traditions, and later, commercialized mass culture; the long-standing association of games and play with children; and to the puritanical notion that play, however pleasurable, is frivolous, distracting, unproductive, and not a serious or edifying pastime (2010). Much of Sharp's work in this area has been directed at game designers rather than academics, and is intended to engender a fuller appreciation of art in gaming culture, as well as to help designers conceive of games in broader, more ambitious artistic terms, thus transcending these common objections.

Even if these barriers to art status, which also apply to now-legitimated cultural forms like popular music and comic books, are transcended by certain games or dismissed as invalid (as

they are by many theorists and philosophers of popular culture [Carroll 1998]), games are understood to be one step further away from art due to their interactivity. The agency of game players is often cited colloquially as the greatest challenge to games' recognition as an art form (see Chapter Three). Works of art are usually understood to be objects or performances that invite a particular form of contemplation or experience intended and determined (to varying degrees) by the artist, and the indeterminacy caused by active player participation in a rule-based system supposedly complicates the artistic status of games. As Sharp points out, prior to the twentieth century, when games and gaming found their way into art institutions, it was as representational content for other cultural forms, or as decorative art objects (2010). While pieces from the ancient Egyptian board game *senet* can be appreciated for their material beauty in museums and galleries around the world, they are recontextualized as inert physical objects for display, not as played games — their interactivity is stripped away. Likewise, ornate or historically significant chess sets and backgammon boards are displayed and admired *independently* of their rule-based systems. "To display a game in a gallery is to take away a part of its game-ness" — this leaves the problem of interactivity unresolved for art historians interested in games (Sharp 2010).

Much art historical work on digital games is dedicated to dispelling the myth that interactivity and art are somehow incompatible, arguing that that the notion is highly suspect when considered in context of twentieth century art. By demonstrating that interactivity, indeterminacy, and rule-based systems are already present in art that supposed barrier is removed and games can be easily situated as part of a broad artistic continuum. Although some art theorists contend that interactivity and participation have always been present in art to a greater or lesser degree, even in supposedly passive forms (Shusterman 2005, 125; Berleant, 30),

scholars discussing the art history of games tend to limit their references to a particular range of twentieth century examples. Marcel Duchamp's well-known predilection for chess, and the trickster character of his artistic practice, made him the unofficial patron saint of the Art History of Games Symposium, where he was mentioned in almost every presentation. In addition to the playful subversions of the Dadaists, other touchstones include Russian Futurism, the "living art" happenings and DIY games of Alan Kaprow and the Fluxus movement (Pearce 2006), the radical rule-based interventions of the Situationist International (Wark, 15; Schleiner 2011, 149), the chance-based music of John Cage, and the constrained writing of Oulipo (the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*).

Each of these artists and artistic movements incorporate some degree of interactivity or indeterminacy into their work, and many of them also employ generative systems of rules (whether presented explicitly as games or not). For game scholars, these are important properties of both games and art. In many of these historical cases the role of the artist is downplayed in the execution of the work, allowing chance to intervene and for other participants or players to share in the process of art making. As game researcher and *Indiecade* curator Celia Pearce puts it, "sometimes, an artist's silence speaks louder than words" (2006, 70). The artist is not erased completely, but the relationship between artist, work, and audience is reconfigured into something more closely resembling a game than the archetypal work of art, opening a space for games in the history of modern art. For artist and scholar Mary Flanagan, play in art has a political dimension, and these art historical traditions can inform a contemporary practice of radical, subversive, and critical game design and play, looking to "the commonalities among play activities, game genres, and important historical contexts to discover thematic ways in which play can continue to manifest critical thinking" (2-3). Similarly, popular game theorist Ian

Bogost argues that modernist art movements provide a historical analogue for certain kinds of games that "issue a specific challenge to a medium from within it" and thus destabilize established conventions (2011, 17).

Other scholars focus on much the same Western modernist canon, but invert the discussion. These writers use the logic and language of games, rules and play as a way of interpreting historical avant-garde art practices and capturing their irreverent, politically radical, socially anarchic, and often anti-institutional aesthetics (Laxton, 24; Cates, 164). A recurring point is that discussions of play and games have long been marginalized in art history, but are in fact essential to understanding the twentieth-century avant-garde, a fact that has only become apparent with the advent of digital games and academic game studies. Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* identifies game and play elements in a wide range of avant-garde art, charting "how play has influenced the history of creative exploration of the social and the political" and placing experimental game design in the context of historical and present art movements (2). These accounts of the play element in art history produce a sense of reciprocal continuity between playful, game-like art forms and more explicitly game-based contemporary practices, positioning games-as-art as the logical extension of those earlier movements. The question asked in art historical discussions of games is simple: if such important works and movements in the history of art can possess game-like qualities without losing their status as art, then how can games be understood as part of art history?

Among the other forms used to align games with art are architecture and poetry, often in terms of the construction and navigation of complex systems and spaces. For example, Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire stress spatiality and explorability in games, dubbing them "the art of contested spaces," while Michael Nitsche explores the aesthetics of architecture and space in 3D

game environments (15-16). In his influential theory of "procedural rhetoric," Bogost links the capacity of digital games to articulate complex arguments to poetry (2009), a thread followed by Mariam Asad in her discussion of the modernist poetics of self-reflexivity and the use of text in certain independently-produced "artgames" (see Chapter Five). As in the work described above, the dynamic interplay between structure and agency found in other art forms is posited as a key aspect of the aesthetics of digital games. Some writers, like Sharp, Pearce, and Flanagan downplay the distinction between digital and non-digital games, arguing that games of all kinds share common aesthetic features, but others, like Bogost, Nitsche, and J. David Bolter and Michael Grusin argue that digital games are a separate medium, distinct from non-digital games. This distinction has important implications for the ways in which games are incorporated into art history.

Much of the work described above is concerned with digital games in general, but some theorists are interested in accounting for more specific movements in game design. Bogost calls for more granular work on "the developing conventions, styles, movements through which games are participating in a broader concept of art, both locally and historically" (2011, 12). He traces similarities across the work of several artgame developers, including shared formal, aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, and argues that they constitute a distinctive movement, which he dubs "proceduralism" or "the proceduralist style" (2009). Bolter and David Schrank show how the modernist traditions of political and aesthetic avant-gardism are mobilized in contemporary movements in game design and game-based artistic practices ranging from "newsgames" that address current events to interventionist performance art in virtual worlds like *Second Life*. Likewise, in their "platform study" of the failed Sega Dreamcast game console, Mia Consalvo and Nick Montfort argue that it was an uncharacteristically vital platform for what they

describe as a brief tendency towards avant-garde games that challenged the forms and conventions of mainstream game design, such as *Rez*, *Jet Grind Radio* and *Seaman* (82). They attribute this vitality to a variety of historical, industrial and technological factors including the unique organization of Sega's internal game development, and the company's influence over distributors and retailers (96).

While certain periods and movements in art history are frequently cited in game studies, others are downplayed or omitted entirely. These absences are telling as to how game studies scholars conceptualize the relationship between games and art. With few exceptions, such as William Huber's work on Japanese games and art, these accounts focus on the "official" canon of Western art history. Even within the Western canon, pre-twentieth-century art is only selectively invoked, and as noted above, most of the art referenced by game scholars can be placed on the fairly narrow spectrum of the modernist and avant-garde canon. Less well-known twentieth-century movements and most post-1980s developments are generally ignored, leaving open the question of whether there exist other forms and traditions in art might also share features with games. One exception is Angela Ndalianis' widely-cited *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, which points to the illusory expansiveness of digital game worlds (alongside Hollywood special-effects spectacles and other contemporary popular cultural forms) as new manifestations of the formal and conceptual concerns of the Baroque period (109).

Similarly, forms and styles of art that are not usually associated with Art History as a formal discipline are omitted from these historical narratives. By aligning games with certain kinds of art, these arguments distance games from other forms, for a variety of reasons. Novels and other forms of fiction are not generally cited, although non-linear, "interactive" or hypertext literary experiments such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night*

a traveller, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* are addressed, usually in work from the 1990s and early 2000s from comparative literature and new media perspectives (Bolter & Grusin, Aarseth 2001, Murray). These kinds of texts were frequently cited in the so-called narratology/ludology debate in the early years of academic game studies (see Pearce 2005), which may explain their absence from more recent work. While there are many potential aesthetic correlations between games and film and television — especially given the increasing convergence between their respective industries — academic accounts of games as art tend to avoid comparisons with moving image media. From the earliest academic writing on games, there has been a fear in game studies of "colonization" by other disciplines, and in particular film studies and literary studies, that purportedly cannot properly appreciate the specificities of games (Aarseth 2001). Many scholars are also critical of the popular and industrial emphasis on narrative-driven, "cinematic" gaming experiences and transmedia franchises, which they see as de-emphasizing the crucial ludic dimension of games (Bogost 2011, 17). Music, theatre, and dance are only occasionally referenced in writing on games and art, in spite of the fact that many twentieth century avant-garde practices incorporate aspects of all three, though this passing-over of performance arts and other forms may have as much to do with disciplinary boundaries between art history and other fields as it does with the specific preoccupations of game scholars.

Game-based art

To support their art historical work, many scholars point to contemporary art that incorporates games, game-like elements, and references to gaming culture, in order to demonstrate the connection between games and art. This diverse range of art practices is sometimes grouped under the heading of "game-based art" or simply "game art." Game-based

art tends to be produced and exhibited within the institutional Art World of contemporary, new media, and digital art, and refers to self-reflexively artistic or experimental works by artists and game designers intended for these contexts (or collaborations between them, such as Tracy Fullerton and Bill Viola's *Night Journey*). In short, game-based art is art made *with*, *of*, *in*, or *through* digital games. Some scholars, such as art critic and curator Christiane Paul, distinguish very sharply between game-based art and other kids of digital games, arguing that they are wholly separate realms of culture, and that game-based art has more in common with other forms of digital art that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s (2010), while others see a continuum that includes many forms of games *and* art (Pearce 2010; Lopes 2009, 123). Sharp divides game-based art into four broad approaches or modes: "[1] the use of game technologies to generate images; [2] the appropriation of games to create works of art; [3] the hacking and modification of games to create works; and [4] the intervention into game spaces through artistic practices" (2012). Thematically, these works frequently engage either with issues of representation (of race, gender, violence, etc.), or function as critiques of the institutional Art World and are approached as a form of political and creative expression (Sharp 2012). As in other art historical work on games, scholars usually find the roots of game-based art in the modernist avant-garde. Flanagan proposes game-based art as a potential "reworking of contemporary, popular game practices to propose an alternative, or 'radical,' game design" (2), and artist Anne-Marie Schleiner sees in Situationist thought an alternative to problematic but widely-cited theorists of games and play such as Johann Huizinga and Roger Caillois, and a challenge to the supposedly impermeable "magic circle" of play (2011, 149-150).[2] Jon Cates, following the same trajectory, links the institutional critiques of the official Art World found in many game-based artworks (in particular

2   For more on the game studies debates about the magic circle, see Consalvo 2009 and Zimmerman 2012.

a variety of artist modifications of commercial first-person shooters set in famous art galleries) to those of Dada, Fluxus, and the Situationists (164).

Academic writing on game-based art, much of which is by artists, critics, and curators, is less concerned with whether and how digital games as a whole medium might be considered art, and focuses instead on how specific artistic practices involving games function as, or in some cases, in opposition to, art in established forms. Although some scholars consider this "a bit of a cheat" (Lopes 2009, 113) because game-based art, unlike other kinds of gaming, is "automatically" legitimate art by grace of its production within or for the institutional Art World, these works and the critical discourse (positive and negative) surrounding them can be seen as part of a broader conversation about games and art. Consider the historical parallel to the work of Roy Lichtenstein and other pop artists who produced art inspired by comic books: this helped to frame comics as serious art (or at least as appropriate material for serious art) in the eyes of the Art World, but was simultaneously attacked by fans and makers of "real" comics for its perceived cultural appropriation (Beaty 2012, 51-52). By focusing on more-or-less institutionally sanctioned works produced and appreciated in contexts of high cultural status, scholars, critics, and practitioners engaged with game-based art present a strong case for the possibility that *certain* kinds of games can be art, implicitly setting aside other kinds of games that do not fit within this paradigm — especially popular commercial games.

Sharp and others suggest that this conception of game-based art is effectively "over" by the mid-2000s, by which point it had been subsumed into the amorphous category of "new media art," losing both its specificity as a game-based practice and its currency in the institutional Art World (Sharp 2012; Cantanese, 350; Dragona, 26). Paul is less pessimistic, describing game-based art as part of a much larger art historical movement she refers to as digital art, comprising

numerous practices and aesthetics, including everything from early computer art to current game-based work (2008, 7). More recent game/art hybrids largely ignore earlier game-based art, and emerge out of new interactions between contemporary art, independent game development communities, hacker and 'maker' culture, 'chiptunes' and other digital-game-inspired forms of music (I will return to this point in the Conclusion), and essayistic game criticism,. Pearce attributes this lack of explicit continuity between the two phases to a gendered process that disregards the earlier artists and critics — many of whom were women and feminists, such as Schleiner (cited above) — in spite of their important contributions (2012). Sharp, by contrast, suggests that the earlier movement failed in its project by focusing too much on content and representation, and engaging too superficially with the possibilities of game-based art, ensuring irrelevancy in the contemporary art world (2012).

Although writing on game-based art comprises much of the art historical work on games, some scholars dismiss it on the grounds that it represents the *appropriation* of games by existing art forms, rather than showing that games are "natively" art (Bogost 2009; Jenkins 2005). These scholars often favour other kinds of avant-garde or experimental games, which are no less self-reflexively positioned as art, but are not produced in or for the institutional Art World (although they may be occasionally exhibited alongside game-based art). Critically (and sometimes commercially) successful "indie" artgames have been widely discussed by scholars and critics, the most well-known examples being Jason Rohrer's *Passage* (see Chapter Five) and Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (Bogost 2009, Asad, Jagoda). Mainstream, big budget commercial games are not frequently cited in historical accounts of games as art, and when they are, they reflect selective canons of prestigious, best-selling, and critically-acclaimed titles such as *Myst*, *Half-Life*, and *Bioshock* (Bolter & Gruisin; Nitsche; Sicart). There is a clear emphasis on a particular range of

canonical, usually self-consciously artistic or experimental games and works in art historical arguments, mirroring the emphasis on the canonical twentieth century avant-garde.

The art historical approach to digital games and art demonstrates a fairly straightforward strategy of alignment — by developing a history of art that includes games as part of an ongoing process or evolution, the form can be discussed in aesthetic terms appropriate to "real" art, adopted from the language of art history and theory. The idea that avant-garde, experimental or otherwise artistic games should be considered art does not for these scholars require any substantial re-evaluation of either art *or* games as concepts. Objections to the artistic status of games can be dismissed simply as a matter of ignorance about what art is and has been, or of looking at the wrong kinds of games. By situating games historically, the art historical approach avoids the pitfalls of studying a cultural form in isolation from its broader historical context, but the emphasis is nevertheless on formal and conceptual parallels, and these arguments do not significantly address the social, cultural, and institutional dimensions of art and art-making.

Philosophical approaches

"The fact that philosophers have not raised the question of whether video games can be art lends credence to the assumption that they are not." (Smuts 2005a)

A number of books and articles have been written by philosophers of art (or scholars from game studies and other fields dabbling in philosophy) that present accounts of digital games as art using the theoretical and methodological frameworks of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. These scholars tend to be committed to a particular philosophy or philosophical definition of art, according to which they assess the art-ness of some or all digital games, refuting potential counter-arguments along the way, concluding that games count as art. While there are

presumably many philosophers of art who would *not* accept that digital games are art, none

appear to have bothered to write a sustained philosophical argument against the proposition; all

philosophical work to date on games and art confirms their status, or at least gives a positive

account of the aesthetics of the form. In answering the question, "what is art, and are games part

of it?" definition and classification are the primary goals of this approach. The phenomenology

of art, explorations of taste, judgment, and value, and other kinds of aesthetic questions are either

made secondary or set aside entirely (although these questions are taken up by game scholars

outside of philosophy).

Two 2005 journal articles by Aaron Smuts represent some of the earliest philosophical

writing on digital games and art. Smuts essentially runs through a shopping list of different

theories and definitions of art, ticking them off as he determines that games meet the minimum

necessary criteria to be called "art" (2005a; 2005b). These essays, while frequently cited, are

primarily intended for a philosophy audience, are highly selective in terms of the games cited,

and as such leave much to be desired for game scholars. More fully realized work by Grant

Tavinor and Dominic McIver Lopes adopts the "cluster theory" of art, a contemporary analytic

theory in which the art-ness of an object or form is determined based on whether it has "a

significant portion of art-typical features" from an established list of such features (Tavinor

2009b, 171). While this flexible approach makes allowances for the diverse range of "family

resemblances" between different art forms, rather than drawing rigid boundaries, it nevertheless

falls flat as a conceptual framework. Determining that an object is art according to the cluster

theory does little to open up further discussion about how and why this is the case, and does not

provide any useful criteria for making qualitative or evaluative aesthetic judgments.

Game scholars Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas use the work of these philosophers of

games-as-art to argue that in-depth critical discourse assessing the "art-worthiness" of individual games is necessary for legitimation, performing a close reading of the popular and critically-acclaimed first-person puzzle game *Portal*. They conclude that a "growing critical mass of games […] present the case for games as art simply through their excellence" and that artistic status will come in due course as critics and the public are exposed to these games. However, as I will argue, this process is not as linear as they suggest, nor is it governed solely by the artistic excellence of individual works (however defined or determined).

Although much of the philosophical work on games and art is grounded in the Anglo-American analytic tradition of aesthetics, which is centrally concerned with clarity and rigorous definition, other scholars assess the art-ness of games according to other philosophical frameworks. Phillip D. Deen adopts John Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and combines it, peculiarly, with Clement Greenberg's modernist formalism, proposing that the experience of playing games has a special aesthetic quality that sets it apart from both everyday experience and from other art forms (I will discuss my own appropriation of Dewey's aesthetics in the following chapter). In *Imaginary Games*, game designer and critic Chris Bateman chooses Kendall Walton's representationalist "make-believe" theory of art, which conceives of art objects as "props" that enable the free play of imagination, and arguing that the characteristic features of games can be found across many forms of art and culture (65). In his book *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game,* Graeme Kirkpatrick draws on a variety of canonical continental thinkers, particularly Immanuel Kant, Theodor Adorno and Alain Badiou, to articulate a phenomenological and formalist account of digital games as art, grounded in traditional aesthetic theory rather than theories of meaning, ideology, and expressive communication, which Kirkpatrick sees as obfuscating the true aesthetic character of games (5). Kirkpatrick's account

has been critiqued for its "bizarre and destructive" insistence that there must be a "pure" specificity to gaming as a medium (Keogh 2014).

In addition to their definitions of art, most of these theorists also seek to define games, demarcating the range of games to which their argument applies. Tavinor's definition emphasizes the engagement of players as agents within 3D-rendered fictional worlds, and he accordingly limits his discussion to popular genres of mainstream, contemporary digital games (first-person shooters and third-person action-adventure games, primarily) (2009b, 3), while Bateman cites a wide range of digital and non-digital games alongside popular novels, films and television shows, and discusses them all in terms of their construction of imaginary, fictional worlds. Lopes also posits games as part of a larger category or "appreciative art kind," which he calls "interactive computer-based art," which includes everything from *PONG* to participatory digital installation art to mainstream blockbusters. He argues that these diverse works should be seen on a continuum, and can be discussed and evaluated in relation to one another, rather than separately (2009, 123). Deen likewise identifies interactivity as the "defining feature" of games, focusing on survival horror games as an exemplary genre (as Ewan Kirkland argues, survival horror is a privileged genre in game studies, with higher cultural status than other genres [317]). While Kirkpatrick is less directly concerned with producing a definition of games, his conception of interaction emphasizes the active, embodied experience of the "true structure" (that is to say, the material components, system of rules, and underlying routines) of games, rather than their fictional and meaning-making elements, which he contends are merely superficial window-dressing — a somewhat anachronistic echo of the strictly formalist "ludology" approach that leads him to privilege non-narrative games (2011, 7).

As noted above, these theorists are not generally concerned with expanding or adapting

established definitions of art or developing new frameworks to account for games, failing to achieve what John Mullarkey calls a "productive encounter" between philosophy and popular culture in which both are illuminated and transformed (26). Art on the one hand and games on the other are both seen as *fixed* concepts, rather than dynamic, historically-contingent entities in dialogue with one another. Lopes' argument is the most nuanced in this sense, since his intention is to construct new ways of thinking about games by placing them in the context of computer-based interactive art in general, but he nevertheless does not consider at length how these new forms might challenge, expand or revise the criteria of the cluster theory of art upon which he builds his argument.

Another recurring problem in philosophical work on games and art is a downplaying or outright dismissal of social and cultural approaches to art, even the so-called "institutional theories of art" associated with analytic philosophers like Arthur Danto and George Dickie, which are mostly ignored in favour of strict categorical definitions and classification. Smuts, Tavinor, Lopes, and Deen all briefly note the proliferation of gallery exhibitions featuring games, the rise of game criticism and academic game studies, and the increasing recognition of auteur game designers, but move on quickly without investigating exactly how or why exactly these institutional and discursive factors help to constitute games as art. Socio-cultural and institutional definitions of art are not "informative" according to Lopes (2009, 111), and if the goal is to define games as art in unambiguous terms, this may be a reasonable position to hold. But it belies the fact that there are numerous other questions besides classification (aesthetic, philosophical, and otherwise) that the approaches outlined above cannot answer. For example, what is the relationship between critical discourse and the experience and reception of art works (as discussed by Danto), or the role of galleries and other institutions in maintaining cultural

hierarchies (as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu)? While current philosophical accounts of games and art limit themselves to clinical taxonomy, I will pursue these other questions.

Socio-cultural approaches

> "Like *World of Warcraft*, art worlds are intricate webs of social, cultural, technical, and economic interactions between different subjects. Among others, there are creators, technicians, players and spectators. An art world, like a game world, is a collective activity." (Bittanti, 7)

As the above survey suggests, approaches that attend to the social and cultural dimensions of art have largely been overlooked in game studies despite its wide interdisciplinary reach, and the prevalence of socio-cultural approaches in other areas of the field (such as the study of multiplayer online games). One notable exception is Kirkland's article "Discursively Constructing the Art of *Silent Hill*," which examines how the *Silent Hill* series of survival-horror games are positioned as art by analyzing a variety of elements, including gameplay mechanics, narrative, theme, and audiovisual style, as well as its "paratextual" framing through advertising, packaging, and behind-the-scenes 'making-of' documentaries (316). Kirkland focuses only on "official" artifacts and discourses related to *Silent Hill*, omitting equally important "unofficial" paratexts such as reviews, interviews, and criticism, as well as cultural reception and other processes that work to construct and legitimate *Silent Hill* as art. Nevertheless, his article demonstrates the insights this kind of approach can produce. Likewise, John Vanderhoef's work on canon formation in digital games, which interrogates the discursive construction and implicit politics of game canons and their role in a more general process of legitimation, highlights the need for critical perspectives on art that do not take for granted existing cultural hierarchies and the social inequalities they reinforce (2012). Christine Kim's work on museum and gallery

exhibitionss dedicated to digital games and game-based art situates these events historically, critically examining the implications of the many different curatorial (and economic) logics at play, ranging from "blockbuster" exhibitions of mainstream titles at major science and technology museums to one-night-only art parties in Brooklyn warehouses and bars. The particular ways in which these exhibitions present games are laden with social and cultural significance, and represent competing conceptions of what games-as-art might look like.

Other approaches can be framed as socio-cultural, but are less directly useful to my project. Simon Niedenthal presents an interesting analysis of different uses of the term "aesthetics" in game studies and game design, detailing how they reflect different conceptions of games as a form, but he doesn't situate these historically or culturally, nor question why and to what ends these conceptions circulate in particular contexts. Sharp, whose art historical work is cited above, has proposed in interviews what he calls a "proceduralist" definition of art (as opposed to cluster and functional theories), inspired by Dickie's institutional theory of art: "If the cultural ecosystem of the contemporary art world considers something art, then I consider it art" (quoted in Warren). For Sharp, however, this definition is more a way of dismissing taxonomical debates, in order to move on to what he considers more important work, than it is an invitation to examine more closely the processes that constitute the "cultural ecosystem" of art (Warren). Although Mia Consalvo's book on cheating in digital games adopts some aspects of Bourdieu's critical sociology of art, her influential notion of "gaming capital" repurposes Bourdieu's cultural capital primarily as a way of understanding the internal workings of gaming fandom, and does not directly address its implications in relation to cultural and aesthetic hierarchies or the question of games-as-art (2007, 4). Consalvo and Nick Montfort's paper on the Sega Dreamcast, "Console of the Avant-Garde," shows promise as a historical-industrial "platform study" of how games are

constructed as art, and how formal-aesthetic configurations emerge and gain cultural value in specific material contexts, but ultimately their side-stepping of what it actually means to be avant-garde in those contexts, and their reliance on somewhat anecdotal evidence prevent them from offering productive insights. This dissertation is partially intended to expand beyond these potentially valuable, but conceptually and methodologically limited approaches.

Cultural legitimation studies

> "If video games are culture, they are subject to the same processes of judgment, classification, and categorization as other artistic products, which can be understood by exploring critical frameworks applied to comparable media forms." (Kirkland, 317)

Changes in the status and perceived value of art forms, and the cultural legitimation of previously illegitimate forms, are hardly unique to digital games, and a number of fields outside of game studies have also sought to understand and trace these phenomena. French sociologist Natalie Heinich (previously a disciple of Bourdieu but now critical of his methods) presents a multi-faceted account of Vincent Van Gogh's posthumous reconstruction and sanctification as an artist-saint, and the calcification of the Romantic "tortured artist" paradigm that would subsequently come to dominate art and popular culture (122). Paul DiMaggio, a key figure in development of American sociology of art, studies the rise of opera to high art status in early twentieth century Boston, and the denigration of other popular forms (such as vaudeville) that enabled this elevation (1982; 1992). DiMaggio's research dovetails with Lawrence W. Levine's 1988 work on the "invention" of highbrow culture (including opera, painting, drama, and classical music) in North America in opposition to lowbrow mass culture, linking it to the gradual stratification of social classes. Similarly, the complex, shifting status of of jazz music

between black folk culture, avant-garde radicalism, popular dance music, and bourgeois easy listening is documented by sociologists Richard A. Peterson (1972) and Paul Lopes (2002). The increasingly central roles played by mediating institutions and cultural gatekeepers such as publishers and prizes in the formation of literary tastes and canons have been examined by literary scholars Jim Collins (1995) and James F. English (2005) (see Chapter Two).

While the studies described above provide historical context and parallel examples, they are all relatively distant from the present case of digital games. A number of other studies are more directly relevant to the study of games and art. Much of this research is recent, having only been published in the last ten years or so, suggesting that scholarly inquiry into questions of artistic legitimacy and cultural status — particularly with regards to popular culture — is a growing area of interdisciplinary interest. Comic books and film are closely linked to digital games, not only because these forms have all historically occupied a low cultural status, but also because the cultural legitimacy of film and comics is frequently cited as precedent or proof that games should or should not be considered art (see Chapter Three).

In many ways cinema is the archetypal modern example of this process, initially received as a sideshow novelty, but within fifty years widely accepted as the "seventh art" (Abel, 18). While the becoming-art of film has been addressed by numerous scholars in passing, several books stand out as explicit accounts of its legitimation as art. Richard Abel's introductory essays in *French Film Theory & Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939* provide a detailed cultural history of how the idea of film as art develops and becomes widely accepted in France, with particular emphasis on the many competing discourses, institutions, and aesthetics at play in this process (23). Less concerned with the socio-cultural dimensions of art, David Bordwell's influential 1979 essay "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" nevertheless demonstrates

the importance of formal-aesthetic analyses in understanding how certain genres and modes within a cultural form (in this case, the critically-acclaimed European art cinema) are categorized and privileged according to common features, which become associated with art and aesthetic quality and are replicated in other works (657). Bordwell's analysis is additionally useful as a parallel to self-reflexively artistic digital games, which often adopt the principles of authorship, realism, and ambiguity that he identifies in art cinema (see Chapters Four and Five). Haidee Wasson's 2005 book, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* focuses on a single key site, the MoMA Film Library established in 1935, as the locus of a complex and influential set of transformations in the exhibition and reception of films as art (16). Synthesizing the theory and methods of cinema and media studies with cultural history, Wasson traces and contextualizes the development and impact of the Film Library. In *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*, sociologist Shyon Baumann continues this narrative, discussing the widespread acceptance of Hollywood films as art in the 1960s, emphasizing the contextual changes that enabled it, internal changes in production, distribution, and exhibition, and the legitimating critical discourse that emerged around Hollywood films (2007b, 3). (Game scholars Burden and Gouglas include Baumann in their study of *Portal*, but misread his approach as a kind of road map to legitimacy, rather than an empirical case study.) In addition to these specific case studies, the ongoing history and critique of canon formation in film studies, and its social and political ramifications, engages directly with the roles of various institutions, including the academy itself, in the construction and maintenance of cultural hierarchies (Staiger, 4-5; Lupo, 220).

Comics, unlike film, still struggle with legitimacy, in spite of significant changes in the cultural status of certain kinds of comics (particularly "graphic novels") since the 1970s. Comics

scholar Bart Beaty presents a comprehensive and rigorous account of the vicissitudes of comics'

relationship with art in *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the

1990s* (2007) and *Comics versus Art* (2012). *Unpopular Culture* draws on extensive interviews to

examine the emergence and rise to legitimacy of "alternative," often autobiographical, small-

press comics in France and other parts of Europe as a high-status form of comic art, in opposition

to established popular genres and formats (2007, 3). *Comics versus Art* is a series of case studies

focusing mostly on the North American context, and addresses more directly the shifting

interactions between comics culture and the institutions and discourses of the institutional Art

World, as well as with other legitimate art forms like literature (2012, 7). Beaty's work (which

mobilizes a number of the theorists I will discuss in Chapter Two) emphasizes the complexity of

cultural and aesthetic legitimation processes, but shows that with close attention to specific

contexts and instances these processes can be critically mapped and understood.

Television studies also offers parallel and contrasting examples. Michael Z. Newman and

Elana Levine's 2012 book, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*,

explores this process from a number of different perspectives, ranging from the changing content

of specific shows to the construction of authorship, new technologies, and modes of television

spectatorship. Throughout, Newman and Levine pay close attention to the politics of

legitimation, drawing extensively on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, arguing that the

legitimation of certain kinds of television (primetime serial dramas, 'single-camera' sitcoms)

comes at the expense of the denigration of other genres and modes, and indeed the medium of

television itself (2). This paradox, they argue, far from presenting a challenge to the cultural

status quo, re-inscribes hierarchies built on deep-seated inequalities of class, race, sex and gender

— the very hierarchies that historically prevented television from gaining legitimacy (3). As I

will argue in the next chapter, Newman and Levine are ultimately restrained by their reliance on Boudieu, particularly in their account of aesthetics. By contrast, Kevin Dowler's dissertation on aesthetic discourses of television in the 1950s, *An historical inquiry into the political and cultural context for the emergence of a television aesthetic in the nineteen-fifties* (and his forthcoming book based on the same research), examines earlier failed attempts to legitimate television, which employed entirely different strategies and practices than the contemporary situation.

Evidently, film, comics, television, and digital games do not become legitimate in isolation, and these processes interact and overlap in significant ways. The comparison between comics and digital games is particularly interesting because their legitimacy is being pursued and contested in much the same cultural-historical contexts, often by the same means — consider, for example, the high-profile Vancouver Art Gallery show *KRAZY! The Delirious World Of Anime + Comics + Video Games + Art* (Grenville, Johnson & Wright) and the various collaborative game design "jams" that have paired comic artists with game developers. Similarly, the legitimation of television, while unique in many ways, is occurring simultaneously to the legitimation of digital games, and is thus vying for similar forms of status and capital. The "convergence" and conglomeration of the mainstream media industries that provides the backdrop for the rise of both television and digital games, and the technological and formal-aesthetic hybridity it has encouraged, dictates that popular cultural forms historically understood to be distinct must now be framed in terms of the heterogeneous connections between them (Newman & Levine, 5). The legitimation of television as a domestic technology is directly linked to the marketing of game consoles as a "killer app" for HD televisions alongside digital video players and digital cable (Newman & Levine 105). Meanwhile, the convergence logic of transmedia franchises insists

upon media properties that are intended to be engaged across multiple platforms, with digital

games playing an increasingly central role alongside blockbuster films, comic books, TV shows

and other franchise iterations (see, for example, Parker 2013). This dissertation will contribute to

these other fields as well as game studies, by presenting a unique (or at least peculiar) but

nevertheless comparable instance of cultural legitimation, and more importantly by helping to

situate digital games in relation to other forms in the constantly-shifting contemporary cultural

landscape.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the academic literature on digital games and art, while

diverse, is limited in many respects, most notably when it comes to the social, cultural, and

historical dimensions of art and aesthetics. Game studies, when it has addressed the question of

art directly, has been primarily concerned with understanding digital games according to familiar

art historical and philosophical paradigms. The impulse to draw these parallels is understandable,

given the low cultural status of games and the relative youth of game studies compared to more

established disciplines (Burden & Gouglas). Many of the insights that have been produced to

date are valuable, but my questions demand an alternative approach. As evidenced in other

scholarly fields, thoughtful research into the cultural legitimation of popular forms can answer

substantive questions about how art functions in specific empirical contexts, rather than in the

abstract. I will return to these texts frequently, as they set the precedent for the present study, and

help establish its theoretical, and methodological foundation; part of the purpose of this study is

to integrate these perspectives more fully into game studies, and to integrate games into the

broader study of cultural legitimation. A persistent problem in much of this growing body of

work, however, is an ambivalence toward questions of aesthetic experience and judgment, and a tendency to ignore or oversimplify certain aspects of what I call art world assemblages. In the next chapter, I will delve into the theoretical and methodological approaches employed by other scholars studying cultural legitimation, placing them in dialogue with other theoretical resources in order to construct my own hybrid conceptual framework.

Chapter 2 — Theorizing Cultural and Aesthetic Legitimation

As the previous chapter suggests, to understand the cultural and aesthetic legitimation of digital games requires a robust, nuanced theoretical approach. There is an expansive body of critical writing on the relationship between art, culture, and society, and my point of entry is at the intersection between the sociology of art and certain traditions in philosophical aesthetics. Responding to the political, cultural, and artistic upheavals of the twentieth century, a number of philosophers, art historians, and sociologists have proposed theoretical concepts and frameworks grounded in the notion that art and aesthetic experience is constituted in socially and historically specific interaction between objects and people, circumscribed by discourses, practices, and institutions. Rather than treating art as a fixed category of objects defined by essential characteristics, as in traditional aesthetics, these concepts are intended to explain both the internal structures of art and its relation to, and function within society more broadly. Sociologist Janet Wolff argues the aesthetic and the socio-cultural dimensions of art are inseparable and irreducible, in spite of long-standing disciplinary divisions (12), and David Novitz, writing on disputes about art from the philosophy side of the divide, argues that aesthetic debates are not about definitions of art, but are fundamentally social and cultural, and must be understood to be debates about "*how* and *why* we classify objects and activities as works of art," and not simply *what* we classify as art (153).[3]

In order to make sense of the hows and whys of games-as-art, in this chapter I will draw together insights from a variety of theorists to articulate in detail a conceptual framework,

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3   Amusingly, the motivation for Novitz's observations is an argument with his teenage son about whether tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are art — anticipating, perhaps, the contemporary debate about digital games.

according to which art is constituted in the "material-social enactment" and entanglement (Barad, 26) of diverse elements and processes in a contingent assemblage, sometimes referred to by philosophers and sociologists as an "art world." This assemblage produces aesthetic experience, value, legitimacy, and capital (both cultural and material), and includes not only the form and content of art objects, but also the activity of artists, performers, and other participants in the production and execution of the work; it includes the communities of practice in which this activity takes place, the material and expressive-symbolic resources mobilized to support and sustain it, and the institutions and organizations that provide funding, distribution, exhibition, promotion, documentation, and preservation; furthermore, it also includes audience reception, critical and academic discourse, and other "uses" and appropriations of the work (Becker 1984, 2; Baumann 2007a, 47). As Richard Shusterman argues, following pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, the art object is inert until "activated" (2005, 127) in what aesthetician Arnold Berleant refers to as a dynamic, social, and material "aesthetic situation" (2). Elements external to the artwork, usually understood to be peripheral, are in fact crucial, because without them the work is not art in any meaningful sense — art exists and has tremendous power not in spite of but *through* its constructedness. Moreover, this process of construction is always social, political, and economic, as well as aesthetic (English, 26-27). The purpose of studying art worlds is to "reassemble" the aesthetic, including these elements.

Art worlds, cultural fields, and assemblages

Manuel De Landa's *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* provides a concise but versatile framework for my purposes, enabling a move away from the essentialist "reified generalities" of Art on the one hand and Games on the other,

towards a more nuanced and holistic understanding of their entanglement (17). De Landa argues that all assemblages, from the smallest and most localized to the largest and most enduring are constructed and maintained through "very specific historical processes" (3), involving the synthesis of many parts, but are not reducible to their discrete components (4). Assemblages have properties and capacities that emerge only in the contingent interactions between these parts (De Landa, 10-11), or, to use Karen Barad's term, "intra-actions," since the boundaries between seemingly separate entities within an assemblage are themselves contingent and constructed (33). Following Berleant, I take as a starting point the empirical diversity of art, which takes many different forms depending on when and where it is found (2). Art is not a transcendent property of certain kinds of objects; rather, it is constructed in the interactions and engagements between people, objects, ideas, and events in specific contexts (Berleant, 24) — in other words, art is immanent in the organization and operation of certain kinds of assemblages.

Influential philosopher of art and critic Arthur Danto is generally recognized as the originator of the term "art world," in his 1964 essay of the same name. Confronted with radical new art works of the twentieth century, such as Marcel Duchamp's snow shovel and Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, which seemed indistinguishable from ordinary objects and incompatible with traditional theories of art, Danto sought a philosophical concept to understand how and why these works were nevertheless widely accepted and praised as works of art (van Maanen, 8). The art of the twentieth century "called for a revision of art theories, in such a way that the context of works would explicitly be taken into consideration" (van Maanen, 20), and this revision unexpectedly revealed something about the contingent status of *all* art. "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Danto, 577). The institutional and intellectual context provided by

art theory and history does not only distinguish and identify art, it *makes art possible*. Ultimately, Danto abandons the art world concept, deeming it to be primarily of sociological rather than aesthetic interest, but sociologists of art, most notably Howard S. Becker in his influential book *Art Worlds*, have adopted and expanded it beyond the relatively narrow field of the institutional Art World to incorporate and account for a multiplicity of art worlds, and the whole spectrum of different actors and activities that constitute them (1984, 158, 2). I propose that the concept can be revitalized and expanded even further by theorizing art worlds as a specific variety of assemblage in which objects, artifacts and practices are constituted and legitimated as art. When I discuss assemblages in this dissertation, I am primarily referring to art world assemblages, ranging from the rarefied institutional Art World of major galleries and art stars, to the more precarious and compartmentalized art worlds emerging for digital games. While Becker's interactionist art world framework is primarily descriptive, rather than analytical, influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu reacts strongly against this approach (van Maanen, 42), instead setting out to map the general structures, laws, and mechanisms that govern what he calls "cultural fields" and distinction (Bourdieu, 12). As I will argue, the sociological concept of the art world and Bourdieu's critical theory of cultural fields can be reconciled with aesthetics using assemblage theory, with aesthetic experience understood as an emergent property of art world assemblage.

An art world assemblage, and the experience, value, and legitimacy it produces, is always already situated in a specific material-historical place and time, social-cultural milieu, and political-ideological system. For Bourdieu, art and distinction is a "society game" based on denial and exclusion, in which the material interests and cultural status of the dominant class are at stake (499). Positioning his work emphatically against Enlightenment aesthetics, Bourdieu

dismisses Immanuel Kant's notion of "pure" disinterested aesthetics as a class-based refusal and denigration of "barbarous" popular taste (488), in which the empirical social relations of power and domination that govern this distinction are erased and made to seem natural, universal and ahistorical (490). One of Bourdieu's primary goals is to expose, map and complicate this erasure (493). Access to artistic fields is highly restricted based on class background and education, meaning that it is primarily the province of the dominant cultural elite (for Bourdieu, the bourgeoisie), whose elite status is reinforced and perpetuated through their participation. Art that possesses high status bestows high status on its makers and audiences, and this is not a benign or neutral process (Baumann 2007b, 6). As Bourdieu contends, art is not exempt from the social relations of power and domination in a given society — art worlds, their diverse interactions, and the artworks they produce, are value-laden and serve all manner of ideological functions, with cultural capital and distinction, not to mention actual economic capital, at stake for those involved (491-492). Returning to De Landa's terminology, an assemblage provides its component parts with constraints and resources, opportunities and risks, but not in equal measures (De Landa, 34).

Bourdieu's central concept is the field, an objective structure that manifests in a wide range of different social and cultural contexts, and his overarching project is to determine the general properties, laws, and dynamics of fields (van Maanen, 61). Hans van Maanen summarizes Bourdieu's theory concisely:

> An artistic field is a structure of relations between positions which, with the help of several forms of capital, on the one hand, and based on a joint *illusio* and their own *doxa*, on the other, struggle for specific symbolic capital (prestige). The positions are occupied by agents, who take these positions on the basis of their *habitus* (55).

Fields, including artistic fields, are organized according to the (uneven) distribution of economic

and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 262), or in De Landa's more versatile terms, material and expressive resources (63). Like economic capital (including money, but also other forms of material capital such as property and resources), Bourdieu demonstrates that cultural or "symbolic" capital is accumulated, conserved, and expended by participants in the field, in the form of social status and recognition, cultural competency, education, prestige, and so on (English, 5). Fields only function insofar as their participants possess an internalized knowledge and recognition of the rules and stakes of the field and their position within it, through sets of acquired dispositions that govern behaviour, which Bourdieu calls *habitus* (94). Fields are therefore arrays of objective, hierarchical positions waiting to be occupied. The position of "artist" in an artistic field, for example, exists objectively for Bourdieu as a function of the structural relations of the field, but can only be apprehended through the particular agents currently occupying the role (van Maanen, 57). The *doxa* of a field is the set of rules, values, conventions and discourses that governs the field as a whole and is experienced and presented as naturalized common sense (Bourdieu, 496). Agents within the field collude in the *illusio*, described by van Maanen as "the involvement of people in the game, based on the belief that the game is worth playing," which (along with the *habitus* on an individual level) constitutes the "game" and the competition between agents while reinforcing their shared interest in the ongoing existence of the field (62).

Bourdieu's contributions to cultural studies are unquestionably valuable, and I will return to his specific ideas throughout this chapter and the rest of this dissertation. However, his theory of cultural fields is frequently critiqued for being too abstract and rigidly structural (De Landa, 63), placing the theorist in an impossible subject position of "sociologist king" (Rancière, 165). The "society game" Bourdieu describes is based on statistics derived from quantitative survey

data that effectively models a very historically and culturally specific 1980s French reality, but when extrapolated to all art and culture it becomes problematic. The primary incompatibility between Bourdieu's sociology and assemblage theory is the "high degree of automatism" ascribed to the functioning of the field, and in particular the habitus, which becomes a deterministic "master process" (De Landa, 64). However, De Landa proposes it is not necessary to follow Bourdieu in this regard, and that by re-framing the "objective" field of structural relations as a *contingent* assemblage, Bourdieu's insights can be rehabilitated (65). Rather than presupposing an objective structure of relations according to which various roles in a field are enacted, De Landa argues that in an assemblage approach, the distribution of different forms of capital, adherence to norms, taste preferences, common genres and forms, and other patterns of interaction within a given assemblage "cannot be taken for granted and must always be accounted for in terms of specific enforcement mechanisms" (65). Bourdieu's framework is top-down and automatic, and De Landa takes him to task for not properly accounting for the complexity and empirical diversity of social assemblages. By conceiving of these patterns as emergent properties of specific art world assemblages, they can be explained without appealing to a "master process" that applies equally to all fields (64-65). Art is an ongoing, contingent process of becoming, shaped by and shaping social relations (van Maanen, 84).

There is no objective structure that art world assemblages must take, though similarities and patterns may be identified. Becker is quick to point out that art worlds are not governed by universal laws; rather they are assembled in the manifest activity of the people and things involved (35). The relations between an art world's components are empirical and historical, not objective, and only "contingently obligatory," never logically necessary or essential (De Landa, 11), as evidenced by the wide range of different objects and practices called "art" in different

cultures and periods. Furthermore, art worlds are constantly changing and precarious, becoming more or less stable and autonomous as the relations between their components and with other assemblages shift and transform over time, and internal or external forces work to reinforce or destabilize[4] its current structure (De Landa, 12, 28). Wasson makes the point that at different moments in its history, the status of a popular cultural form as art may change over time and as it circulates among contexts (26), supported and sustained by what I would describe as different assemblages. (Wasson is discussing film specifically, but the history of the ancient Egyptian game of *senet*, discussed in Chapter One, is another example.) Depending on the particular configuration and scale of the assemblage, "very different types of art function in very different ways for very different groups of users" (van Maanen 2009, 7). The function and value of abstract expressionist painting to art dealers and critics in 1950s New York as a radical break with tradition is different from its function and value to contemporary gallery visitors, who encounter these works as part of a larger historical canon. As Berleant suggests above, the study of art must first and foremost be empirical, not speculative or prescriptive; De Landa's assemblage approach adheres to this principle, tracing the historical processes through which assemblages are constituted, the contingent interactions between their components, and their emergent properties and capacities (De Landa, 28).

The motivations of participants in a given art world assemblage are not overdetermined by any objective structure. The greatest limitation of Becker's work is that the benefits to those involved in an art world are reduced to a generalized sense of self-worth and the shared belief that the art produced and consumed in the art world is aesthetically valuable (Becker 1984, 39), a

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4   De Landa uses the Deleuzian terms "territorialization" and "deterritorialization" to describe the processes that reinforce and disassemble assemblages. I find these terms unnecessarily opaque, and will refer to "stabilization" and "destabilization."

warm, fuzzy feeling that cannot account for the diverse range of activity in art worlds. Becker is correct that cooperation among participants is an important part of the functioning of art worlds, but Bourdieu's insights stress the equal importance of competition and antagonism within and between different cultural fields over resources and prestige. Indeed, this is part of the reason why conflicts over artistic legitimacy can be so heated and dramatic (Bourdieu, 310). According to Baumann, when an art world stabilizes and becomes recognizable, it begins to offer a distinct form of cultural capital (2007b, 16), but as cultural historian James F. English notes, the forms of capital produced in one context may not transfer to others (9). De Landa's account suggests this is contingent on the particularities of different assemblages and their interactions (65). Different "users" in the assemblage pragmatically mobilize its available expressive and material resources to different ends: while a specialized critic may only possess capital and influence within the narrow boundaries of a particular art world, an auction house might possess capital across numerous art worlds, from modernist furniture to Renaissance painting. It is crucial, therefore, to ask what is at stake, and for whom, in an art world assemblage, what mechanisms and strategies are adopted in service of these interests, "and the ultimate role such cultural assertions of interest play in maintaining or altering the social distribution of power" (English, 8).

Assemblages are inevitably component parts in even larger assemblages at greater scales of interaction, which explains how art worlds can in some cases maintain a degree of autonomy while simultaneously participating actively in culture, politics, and economics (De Landa, 40). Culture is "a site of struggle over taste and value, a site wherein the inequalities and hierarchies that shape society sometimes are resisted but more frequently are reinforced" (Newman & Levine, 154). Art world assemblages do not have impermeable boundaries: they interact and overlap with one another and other kinds of social assemblages (Becker 1984, 35), and so

struggles for dominance within and between art worlds are linked to the relationship of different elements within it to elements outside it (van Maanen, 63). There is uneven distribution of material and symbolic/expressive resources across different art worlds, forms, styles, genres, and traditions, and Bourdieu contends these hierarchies of "high," "middlebrow," and "low" culture are closely tied to broader class distinctions and social hierarchies (16). The historical denigration of folk, mass, and popular art by "the classes" reflects a dominant, historically-specific conception of art, derived from Kant, in which neutral, disinterested contemplation (associated with painting in particular), isolated from the "interested" mundane realities of commerce, politics, pleasure, and so on, is held up above all other modes of engagement (Berleant, 11). According to this narrow conception of art (critiqued in more detail below), the relative autonomy of an art world determines its cultural and aesthetic legitimacy, and this prejudice against "interested" art (especially commercial art) persists today. The supposed breakdown of these cultural hierarchies in the twentieth century has been drastically overstated: the populist ideal of the "cultural omnivore" is simply a new elite, savvy, wealthy, and sophisticated enough to consume and appreciate a wide variety of cultural forms, a disposition that remains largely inaccessible to less educated and privileged consumers (Newman & Levine, 6). For this reason, English cautions scholars to problematize both the sweeping tragic narrative of art's commodification by interest and capitalism *and* the sweeping heroic narrative of art's liberation for "the people" from "the tyranny of elites and gatekeepers" that many followers of Bourdieu seem to reproduce, by looking instead to the specific social-material mobilizations of these ideals (English, 12).

Elements of art world assemblages

In Becker's conception, art worlds ranging from small-scale local scenes to mass media are patterns of collective activity produced through routinized forms of cooperation:

> all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. (1984, 1)

If some of the activities in the process do not take place, or are different, then the art will not be the same; if it is still art, it will be art of a different kind (Becker 1984, 5). Sociologist Natalie Heinich similarly argues that the object of study for the sociology of art should be "not what art is, but what it represents for the actors" who participate in the process (Heinich, 24, quoted in van Maanen, 91). Art is indeed a *social* assemblage (unlike, for example, the solar system) in that it cannot function without human minds and activity (De Landa, 1). However, Becker fails to recognize that the activity in art worlds extends beyond human actors. Art worlds are multidimensional (Berleant, 193), irreducible assemblages of heterogeneous elements both human and non-human (De Landa, 11). The non-human components in social assemblages range "from food and physical labour, to simple tools and complex machines, to the buildings and neighbourhoods serving as their physical locales" (De Landa, 12) and these components can in some cases play a definitive role. To give a gaming-related example, Daniel Joseph uses assemblage theory to argue for the importance of Toronto's urban geography (itself a complex assemblage) to the city's thriving independent game development community (101-102). Broadly speaking, the elements in an art world assemblage can be organized into the conventional categories of production, distribution, and reception, though this is not a linear

circuit through fixed sectors or phases. These are trajectories of activity, and many art world elements function across all three, while some, such as government ministries, may perform additional functions, such as contextualizing and mediating an art world's interactions with other assemblages (van Maanen, 12).

Production in art world assemblages

Becker emphasizes the routine interactions that go into art-making and constitute art worlds in specific contexts, including "all the [actors] whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art" (1984, 34). The allocation and division of tasks in the production of art is institutionalized through tradition and training, and is thus often held by art world participants to be sacred, natural, and inherent (Becker 1984, 13). In De Landa's terms, this routinization serves to stabilize the structure of the assemblage. Usually only certain activities in the production of art are considered "artistic," and those who perform those activities are granted the respected, almost mythical status of artist, which comes with special rights and privileges (Becker 1984, 16). Whereas Bourdieu argues that "artist" is an objective function in the structural relations of a cultural field, occupied by particular agents (57), in my commitment to the empirical diversity of art I adopt Becker's conception of the figure of the artist as a contingent, emergent property of specific art worlds, the function and significance of which can vary significantly. As Becker notes, the artistic status of different roles and activities in an art world can change, even in a short period of time, giving the example of recording engineers in music production (1984, 17). In each of the subsequent chapters, I will examine the construction of different kinds of artist figures in gaming culture.

Artists, however, are only an elevated minority within art world assemblages that include many other participants (Becker 1984, 35). Becker stresses the importance of often-overlooked "support" activities, which range from assistants and technicians to janitors and catering staff, and make the whole process possible (1984, 4). Following De Landa, I would expand this to include non-human agents in the assemblage also, from media platforms and tools to the material conditions of production (favourable climate, locations, etc.), whose relational properties and capacities are no less important in the production of art from an analytical perspective (65). Although they are not valued in the same way as directors and stars, electricians and cameras participate actively in the production of a film. If it seems excessive to include climate or locations in this assemblage, consider the early American film industry's move to the West coast, in no small part motivated by longer daylight hours and year-round warm weather that accommodated temperamental camera technology, acres of open desert in which to build sets, and relaxed California labour laws (Koszarski, 44-45). In studying art worlds, therefore, it is necessary to account critically for the work of obvious artist figures, tracing the construction and elevation of these elevated roles, but also to look to the communities of practice and support networks that enable art production, all of which are interrelated dimensions of the overall system (Berleant, xii).

Distribution in art world assemblages

Of course, art-making is only one facet of art. Van Maanen strongly critiques the tendency in sociological research to focus on the domain of production, which ignores the central roles played by distribution in the functioning of art worlds (293). Distribution in a given art world may encompass a wide range of gatekeeping activities and interactions, including the actual

distribution and exhibition of artworks to audiences in various forms (whether commercially or not), as well as their paratextual framing via packaging, promotion, and marketing (Gray 2010, 23). For example, premium cable channels not only sell and deliver TV programming to their subscribers across a variety of platforms, they also advertise those shows, provide press releases to the media, and partner with other organizations for lucrative or prestigious cross-promotions. On a much smaller scale, zine fairs and other independent publishing events offer writers and illustrators a centralized place to show and market their work directly to a specific audience, as well as the opportunity to network with other interested participants. As in production, a diverse range of people and objects are involved in distribution, from the human agents who make crucial decisions about what and how to distribute, to the material networks and venues that frame, present, and deliver art works to an audience. The location and social milieu in which art is exhibited, performed, or otherwise made available determines "both the composition of the audience and the kind or genre of culture that is included — and by extension the culture that is excluded" (Baumann 2007b, 88). These processes transform (or translate) art works, mediating production and reception by organizing the encounter between art and audience, and thus the aesthetic experience, in particular ways (van Maanen, 14; Wasson, 27). Modes of distribution conventionalize modes of engagement, and the relations and interactions that constitute the assemblage become more stable and routinized as the art form comes to be associated with certain demographics, certain genres, certain kinds of experiences, and so on (van Maanen, 40). By the same token, new forms of distribution can destabilize an art world, even to the point of radically changing it (as in the case of peer-to-peer "pirate" file-sharing networks for music and other media). As Wasson asserts, these contexts and interfaces constitute the art form as much as the work of any artist or critic (27).

Reception in art world assemblages

Parallel to distribution, the audiences that experience an art work must be situated as part of the art world, rather than as external observers or consumers of a finished product (Becker 1984, 4). After all, it is not particularly meaningful to call something art if there isn't anyone receiving and appreciating it as such; reception of a cultural form or individual work as art, especially by people who already possess status and authority, legitimates it for further aesthetic engagement (Newman & Levine, 10). The expressive elements through which reception is articulated, including language and symbols as well as less formalized forms of expression such as affective behaviour and tone (De Landa, 12) hold particular power in social assemblages, defining them in relation to other assemblages and stabilizing and maintaining the identity of the whole, like the "atmosphere of theory" Danto proposes is necessary for the apprehension of modern art. De Landa draws a parallel between expressive elements in social assemblages and genetic materials in evolutionary biology, which help to preserve the identity and integrity of organic assemblages over time and which, if distorted or changed, can have radical and transformative effects (44). This should not be taken as a simplistic social constructivism in which language and symbol is privileged above all else; expressive elements are historically contingent, not deterministic, and although they perform a specialized function are still only *components* in the assemblage. As Barad contends, "ideas that make a difference in the world don't fly about free of the weightiness of their material instantiation" (55). The ideas, feelings, and preferences expressed in and around cultural reception help to bind an assemblage together, framing the ideals, goals, and tactics of its participants (Baumann 2007a, 57), and materializing its products as art. This takes place on different scales, depending on the art world and its degree

of autonomy: there is a "broadly defined discourse of common terms and ideas for discussing art" inherited from Enlightenment aesthetics (what I will later refer to as the dominant conception of art), as well as narrower sets of discursive conventions specific to individual art worlds (Baumann 2007a, 58). Appealing to broader discourses of art may provide the art world with external validation, while internalized discourses build coherence and stability within the assemblage but may not translate outside of it — both may be at play in any given art world.

Critical discourse

Although most participants in the production, distribution, and reception of an art world participate in the framing of its activity as art (Becker 1984, 131), as Baumann demonstrates, some experts such as critics, curators, and academics are granted additional authority and influence through their relational position within and across different art world assemblages (2007b, 177), strongly influencing the application of honorific terms like "art" and "artist" (Becker 1984, 37). Cultural value and legitimacy emerge in part from critical discourse, and so these specialized roles are a crucial area of analysis (Baumann 2007b, 16). Claims to artistic status and the expert's authority to make those claims are precarious and contingent, and constantly need to be justified (Baumann 2007a, 51), depending on the mode and audience of the discourse. Film scholar Barbara Klinger describes criticism as a form of textual appropriation, reflecting the preoccupations and pragmatic concerns of critics in a given historical moment (1). This is not to say, as Bourdieu contends, that all critical discourse is a "factitious […] enchantment" that imposes an artificial sense of artistic contemplation on otherwise arbitrary objects and experiences (53); rather, as Danto suggests, critical discourse is one of many *active* participants in the production of aesthetic experience (577), not an illusory or external process,

taking place in different sectors of art world assemblages and contributing in a variety of ways to

their overall functioning (Newman & Levine, 11).

Beaty divides critical discourse in art worlds into three general categories, based on the

work of literary historian C.J. van Rees:

> journalistic criticism published in newspapers and general-interest magazines that
> offers a quick evaluation of a work; essayistic criticism published in specialty
> magazines focusing on longer and more in-depth coverage; and scholarly criticism
> published in academic books and journals, which aims at a highly specialized
> audience of researchers and teachers. (Beaty 2012, 103)

The journalist is often positioned as a populist "voice of sanity and good taste" (Collins, quoted

in Lupo, 228), the essayistic critic is an intellectual enthusiast, driven by personal passion for the

art form, and the academic operates at a remove, using an exclusive institutional language and

tools for research and analysis. Needless to say, many critics do not fit neatly into one of these

modes — scholars are usually also enthusiasts, shifting between modes and sometimes also

writing as journalists or essayistic critics, while fan discourse exists on the border between

journalism and essayistic criticism. In more developed art worlds, the various roles played by

critics are often professionalized as part of a relatively stable "economy" of critical discourse,

while in other contexts these roles may be more diffuse, performed by artists or amateur fans

(Becker 1984, 132).

As Baumann argues, the presence or absence of criticism (in particular essayistic and

scholarly) is a fairly reliable way to differentiate art worlds from other kinds of social

assemblages and movements, which do not usually require justification in aesthetic terms

(2007b, 16). The aesthetic evaluations and canons produced by critical discourse work to

legitimate individual works and the activity of certain participants in the assemblage as art, while

also providing common interpretive frameworks for experiencing and discussing specific works

in particular ways (Baumann 2007b, 16), stabilizing and reinforcing the assemblage. Critical debates and schisms can have the opposite, destabilizing effect, in some cases resulting over time in the constitution entirely new art worlds (Becker 1984, 310). Different modes of criticism contribute in different ways, providing different material and symbolic rewards for critics. Historically, scholarship has been a particularly important site for the legitimation of popular cultural forms such as theatre, film, and television (Newman & Levine, 153). Journalistic criticism has a wider audience but less cultural capital, while essayistic criticism tends to be "inside baseball" and does less to convince outsiders, but serves to reinforce internal relationships. Acceptance and intellectualization within the academy helps counteract the negative connotations associated with popular culture and mass entertainment (Baumann 2007b, 17) by aligning new forms with established conceptions of cultural and artistic legitimacy (Newman & Levine, 15). The emergence of a scholarly field or discipline around a cultural form is predicated on the notion that the form is worthy of serious consideration and study, and the anxiety of scholars over their own institutional legitimacy (and the attendant benefits: publishing opportunities, jobs, and so on) translates into a careful curation of the works and genres that are most amenable to current notions of what constitutes legitimate scholarship (Brundson cited in Newman & Levine, 159-160). In game studies, for example, the widespread interest in massively-multiplayer online games like *World of Warcraft* and "virtual worlds" like *Second Life* as self-contained social systems or communities can be partially attributed to their (presumed) amenability to established ethnographic research methods.

Awards & prizes

Like critical discourse, awards and prizes are a specialized form of reception. Functioning

at the intersection between distribution and reception, prizes ascribe value, prestige, and legitimacy, contributing to canon-formation processes, and introducing certain works and makers to a wider audience (Baumann 2007b, 54). English points out that although prizes are typically seen as "external" and superfluous, even by the winners, they are in fact complex, multifaceted phenomena that emerge directly from an art world's interactions (2-3). In Bourdieu's terms, prizes negotiate transactions between cultural, economic, and political capital for the wide range of actors and institutions (administrators, judges, hosts, sponsors, critics, nominees, winners, audiences, etc.) involved in awarding a particular prize, a process English calls "capital intraconversion" (English, 10-11). The popular discomfort with this "economy of prestige" can be linked to the widely-held notion that art should be "pure" and disinterested, as described above (English, 2). Scorn and disavowal notwithstanding, prizes and other formalized accolades are one of sites in which art is made legible as art, and so they can be situated as an integrated component of art world assemblages rather than an external apparatus (27).

A situated aesthetics

Art, I am arguing, is a contingent social assemblage made up of many parts. But what of aesthetics? What of the unique modes of experience and evaluation conventionally associated with art? The wholesale reduction of aesthetic preference and taste to mere symptoms of structural class relations in the work of Bourdieu and his followers (including Newman and Levine) is deterministic and inadequate. What distinguishes art from any other mechanism of dominance — say, the legal system? What do people get out of it, other than reinforcing their social status? How are judgments made between objects of equal cultural status? What about objects and audiences that cross or blur the boundaries between popular and high culture? Wolff

argues emphatically that aesthetics must be understood in conjunction with politics, and the complex interplay between them must be made central to the study of art and culture — particularly in the case of popular forms, the aesthetics of which are too often ignored by academics in favour of reductive, "purely" socio-political and industrial analyses (Wolff, 11). Moreover, demonstrating the origins of aesthetic judgment and situating it historically and socio-culturally doesn't necessarily comment on its truth or accuracy (Wolff, 17). The now banal recognition that art is always political in no way suggests that art is *only* political, or that aesthetic judgment is *only* ideological, and Wollf calls instead for a "non-reductionist theory of art" (Wolff, 26). The constructivist framework I have outlined here is also realist and empirically-grounded (Barad, 40), and does not invalidate art, or "reveal" artistic activity and aesthetic experience to be illusory and meaningless.

According to Woff, aesthetic neutrality in the study of art is impossible, as explicit and implicit aesthetic judgments mark every stage of the process, from the selection (and exclusion) of research objects to the demarcation of genres and movements (106). "The solution to this, however, is not to try even harder for a value-free sociology and a more refined notion of aesthetic neutrality; it is to engage directly with the question of aesthetic value" and how it is produced (Wolff, 107). Game studies, even in its more critical, socio-cultural modes (see Chapter One) is grounded in the assertion that digital games "exist in the realm of art and aesthetic experience" (Neidenthal, 1), and so it is my responsibility as a scholar studying the legitimation of games to take into account "the fact that [my] knowledge-making practices are social-material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, the phenomena we describe" (Barad, 26). Rather than leaving aesthetics to art historians and philosophers, which has historically often been the case for the sociology of art (Wolff, 107), my conceptual framework demands a reconstructed

aesthetics that emerges in the manifest activities of art world assemblages, as described above. Wolff refers to this as "a sociological aesthetics" (14), but paraphrasing Berleant and Dewey I prefer *situated aesthetics*, foregrounding the importance of empirical inquiry.

But what is aesthetic experience? Dewey distinguishes between the ordinary flow of everyday experience and having "*an* experience" that stands out from the habitual as memorable, meaningful, or significant (36), and which Berleant characterizes as "the direct and powerful experiences that enclose us in situations involving art, nature, or the human world in intimate and compelling ways" (44). Although as Berleant notes aesthetic experience can be found in nature and other contexts, it is strongly associated with art in Western society (xiv), but crucially, neither Dewey nor Berleant limit aesthetic experience to specific genres or aspects of art, or specific modes of engagement (such as contemplation, emotional affect, or perceptual/sensory pleasure). "As art is not eternal, neither are the modes of perception and consciousness with which we experience them" and so scholars of art must remain agnostic and open (Berleant, 44). As emergent features of art world assemblages, the "peak" experiences and value judgements commonly described as aesthetic are contingent and diverse, but they are situated in specific social material-contexts and can be empirically observed.

Aesthetics permeates all aspects of an art world, circulating through its many interconnected moments and processes of production, distribution, and reception. According to Berleant, both makers and observers, as well as other human and non-human participants in the assemblage, "make active, constitutive contributions" (4), and this participatory engagement is a principal factor in all kinds of aesthetic experience — not only in those cultural forms that foreground interactivity, like games (xii). Even the contemplative experience of supposedly passive art forms such as painting, which may appear at first to support the traditional

Enlightenment aesthetics of disinterestedness, upon closer observation involves active

engagement, and our understanding of these forms has been "impeded and distorted" by these

limiting frameworks (18). For this reason, Berleant prefers the term "aesthetic engagement" to

properly account for the active and receptive participation of all elements in the aesthetic

situation (45).

Aesthetic experience is not completely isolated and detached, as the aesthetics of

disinterestedness suggests. A situated aesthetics must recognize continuity between art and its

contexts (historical, social, political, etc.). As an emergent property of art world assemblages, the

experience of art has a distinctive character, but is interconnected with other realms of

experience and understanding (Berleant, 6, 25). It occurs "in a situation, under [social and

material] circumstances that are concrete and determinative" (Berleant, 2). All experience,

including the aesthetic, is grounded in the interactions of embodied creatures and other actors,

shaped by and shaping a historically contingent and mutable social-material environment

(Shusterman 1999, 20). As Dewey elegantly puts it, "Mountain peaks do not float unsupported;

they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations"

(Dewey, 2, his emphasis). Likewise, the peaks and intensities associated with aesthetic

experience *are* the art world assemblage in its manifest, contingent, unfolding intra-actions.

A situated aesthetics is also political, accounting critically for the construction of the whole

art world assemblage *including* its aesthetic dimensions, rather than reducing aesthetic

experience to a second-order reflection of socio-political structures as in Bourdieu's critique of

Kant. Berleant, like Dewey, demands from aesthetics "continuity rather than separation,

contextual relevance rather than objectivity, historical pluralism rather than certainty, ontological

parity rather than priority" (xiii). Imposing prescriptive limits of any kind on what kinds of

artistic activity and aesthetic engagement "count" as such is counterproductive (Berleant, 38); instead, this framework allows for what art critic and philosopher Boris Groys calls "equal aesthetic rights" between different forms (1). Presupposing the equality of all art and aesthetic experience enables scholars to challenge and critique, like Bourdieu, the historically specific social, political, and economic inequalities produce cultural hierarchies without denigrating, abandoning, or ignoring aesthetics (Groys, 16). Beaty's discussion of the aesthetics of Chris Ware's comics about art in context of their embrace by the institutional Art World demonstrates clearly that such an approach can yield significant insights (2012, 222). As Berleant puts it, "it is presumptuous for the theory of the arts to decree what qualifies as art and aesthetic" (20). The opposite is more appropriate: scholars should strive to understand the aesthetics and politics of existing art in all their diversity and complexity.

Processes of legitimation

Having articulated a conceptual framework for understanding art, I turn to the question of how cultural forms and practices *become* art. Bearing the above in mind, the legitimation of an individual work or artist, a movement, genre, or group, or an entire cultural form like digital games is achieved in art world assemblages, including the actions and interactions of not only makers but also thinkers, talkers, watchers and players, as well as organizations, places, and objects, and the configuration of their various constitutive elements and processes in relation to one another, to other art worlds, and to society at large (Baumann 2007a, 60). Cultural institutions may evolve to accommodate new art forms, but forms also adapt to the demands of established institutions (Beaty 2012, 13), or even construct new institutions that will accommodate them. As sociologists Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro argue, "art emerges

over time as the sum total of institutional activities, everyday interactions, technical implementations, and attributions of meaning" and legitimation as art (which they call "artification") is "a dynamic process of social change through which new objects and practices emerge and relationships and institutions are transformed." The question, therefore, is not *are digital games art?* But rather *how are digital games being reconfigured and constituted as art?*

There is a popular narrative of cultural legitimation, in which low, folk, or popular cultural forms undergo a Pokémon-like evolution into fine art and are at last deemed worthy of elevation into high culture (Newman & Levine, 8). This evolutionary narrative of improvement focuses on the emergence of new tools and techniques and how these influence the formal properties of individual works over time. This narrative is manifested in the language sometimes used to describe early examples of a form: they are "primitive" or simplistic," juxtaposed against more "sophisticated" and "mature" later works. When a cultural form is sufficiently advanced, so the story goes, it is transfigured into Art. But as I have already shown, a nuanced approach to art must look beyond artworks and art-making, and address the many other actors at work in the art world assemblage, as well as broader social, material, discursive, and institutional shifts (Wasson, 28).

Cultural legitimation is a diverse and wide-ranging process, driven by no singular agent and involving both accidents of history and deliberate efforts (Baumann 2007b, 19-20), through which a new art world is constituted, supporting and sustaining its participants' claims to artistic status, as described above (Newman & Levine, 8). Legitimation can be understood in De Landa's terms as stabilization and destabilization, with some actors mobilizing material and expressive resources (such as energy and money, or solidarity and prestige) to reinforce the established identity of the assemblage as "not-art" (for various reasons), and others working to reconfigure it

as an art world (though there may be divergent notions of what that should look like) (12, 39, 42). This resembles other processes, such as the legitimation of political ideas and the goals of social movements: legitimacy, according to Baumann, can be understood as a "general acceptance" of the ideas and identity of an organized group — specifically, in the case of an art world, its claims to artistic status (48). The form and scale of this "general acceptance" varies greatly depending on the specific context, and may be internal to an assemblage, such as a self-sufficient or localized "scene," or may extend to a whole demographic group or society as in the case of landscape painting, and the material and symbolic benefits of legitimacy vary accordingly (Baumann 2007a, 49; van Maanen, 70).

While it is important to avoid presuming a particular sequence or teleology for legitimation (De Landa, 39), it is productive to examine parallels that can be observed across different historical processes. New art worlds do not emerge in isolation: they must navigate other more stable (but still contingent) systems, trajectories, and strategies, whether by adopting, adapting, or reacting against them. Generally speaking, according to Baumann's "legitimation framework," cultural legitimation involves both changes in the relationships between assemblages at different scales and reconfigurations within assemblages, in particular the discursive reframing of their activities: "Discrete areas of cultural production attain legitimacy as art, high or popular, during periods of high cultural opportunity through mobilizing material or institutional resources and through the exercise of a discourse that frames the cultural production as legitimate art" (60).

Baumann argues that an opportunity space is afforded by "preexisting discursive and organizational resources" outside of new art world, which can be mobilized to enable and facilitate legitimation (2007b, 14). Contextual, external factors and relations constitute the environment in which assemblages emerge and operate, and this context is in turn reconfigured

in its interactions with the new assemblage. As Becker notes, in principle anything can be legitimated as art, but in practice these factors make some candidates for the status of art extremely unlikely (1984, 163), while others have high "aesthetic mobility" (Baumann 2007a, 14). These factors may be material (such as favourable geographic conditions), expressive-symbolic (such as changes in the cultural status of related art forms), or both (such as the implementation of prizes or government grants); some affect the emergence and stabilization of a new assemblage, and others affect its legitimation and the value ascribed to it as an art world; some factors may be known to participants and deliberately exploited, but others may be unknown (Baumann 2007a, 54).

Enabled by the opportunity space, internal changes in the activities, relations, and distribution of resources among participants in an emerging art world, and in the institutional arrangements that organize the production, distribution, and reception of its products, work to legitimate those products as art (Baumann 2007b, 15). By collectively mobilizing specific resources both tangible/material (money, labour, equipment, etc.) and intangible/expressive (knowledge, prestige, traditions, etc.), the activity of an assemblage is reconfigured as legitimate artistic activity. These strategies may be learned and copied from other art worlds, or may take on new and idiosyncratic forms. Resources are competed for, earned, invested, and spent in service of the production of new works, as well as new forms of aesthetic experience and cultural value (Baumann 2007b, 17). The motivation and stakes for these internal changes varies for different participants in the art world, but in part can be attributed to a desire to gain recognition and social validation for aesthetic experiences that are already being produced in the assemblage.

The emergence of critical discourse intellectualizes and provides grounding for the value and legitimacy of an art world (Baumann 2007a, 57). As noted above, expressive and discursive

elements hold a privileged status in social assemblages, and when an art world begins to offer

distinct forms of aesthetic experience and material or cultural capital for its participants, critical

discourse "provides a rationale for accepting the definition of a cultural product as art and offers

analyses for particular products" (Baumann 2007b, 17). What Bourdieu calls the *nomos* of a

field, the right to determine what counts as legitimate art within an art world assemblage and

more broadly, is both a resource and a stake in this process (van Maanen, 63). Theory and

criticism frame the goals, tactics, and activities of legitimation and make them "comprehensible,

valid, acceptable and desirable," either by mimicking established forms of criticism and

appealing to pre-existing values and ideologies (Baumann 2007a, 57-59), or by devising novel

justifications that distinguish the new art world from others (Becker 1984, 156). As I will

demonstrate in subsequent chapters, this often involves theories of formal purity or medium

specificity, the formation of (and debate over) canons of great works, and the nomination and

elevation of author-artist figures.

Needless to say, as in all aspects of art, there is a particular politics to the legitimation of an

art world, and the process cannot be understood exclusively in terms of individual art objects,

art-making practices, and aesthetic experiences (Baumann 2007a, 47). "Legitimation always

works by selection and exclusion," and Newman and Levine stress that cultural hierarchies

operate *within* art worlds as well as between them, through the elevation of certain conceptions

or aspects of their activity as art, at the expense of others (9, 13). Strategies of legitimation often

reproduce rather than challenge established hierarchies of value and dominant ideologies (7).

Historically, legitimation has been tantamount to masculinization, as evidenced by research on

comics (Beaty 2012, 73) and television (Newman & Levine, 9), with popular cultural forms

actively distancing themselves from associations with femininity and passivity, as well as with

the domestic space, the lower classes, and youth. In researching processes of cultural legitimation, as I have argued of art and aesthetics more generally, it is important to examine inequity, distinction, and domination "from the ground up" as concrete effects produced in the manifest social-material operations of specific art world assemblages, rather than positioning dominant ideology as an over-determining force as Newman and Levine's Bourdieu-inflected framework is prone to do.

Conclusion

Art is notoriously difficult to define, much like games. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein resorts to the genealogical notion of "family resemblances" to account for the concepts of both art and games, rather than attempting to outline sufficient criteria for a definition. My conceptual framework is not a way to define art, or speculate on the artistic status of specific objects and practices, or distinguish art from not-art, or encompass all art forms under one set of criteria, and it is certainly not an attempt to prescribe what art should or should not be. These questions and problems are the province of art historians and analytic philosophers (as outlined in Chapter One), and fall outside the scope of this dissertation. As Novitz observes, debates and controversies around cultural and aesthetic legitimation aren't really about definitions of art, but about the actual *processes* by which things come to be understood as art.

Instead of the abstract work of definition and classification, my framework engages directly with the organization and functioning of specific art world assemblages, including the many *different* definitions of art at play in a given context — a crucial part of my object of study is what art represents conceptually and pragmatically for the diverse actors involved, and how that is expressed (van Maanen, 91). For Becker, the sociology of art should describe "what gets

done" under the heading of art, in order to "see how that honorific title — 'art' — is fought over, what actions it justifies, and what users of it can get away with" (1996, 54). Similarly, for Berleant, an empirically grounded theory of art "must establish itself on the evidence of artistic activities and aesthetic experience" (2). The purpose of studying art, as Berleant insists, "is to clarify and explain our experiences with the arts, and all theoretical assertions must stand ultimately on their ability to do this" (18). By observing what art worlds do, and how they make distinctions between what is and isn't art, who is or isn't an artist, and so on, scholars can begin to understand how they work (Becker 1984, 36).

Reading the insights of sociology and aesthetics in terms of De Landa's versatile theory of social assemblages, the conceptual framework for studying cultural and artistic legitimation I have outlined here makes it possible to understand very different kinds of art worlds in relation to one another, ranging from canonical fine art to upstart popular forms like digital games, and even failed attempts at legitimation. These comparisons "across symbol-producing realms" (Baumann 2007a, 61), likewise help to situate art and aesthetics in relation to the complex and contradictory historical, social, cultural, and political processes to which they are inexorably linked. This is not an all-encompassing grand theory of art, but rather is designed to answer a specific set of empirical questions about historically- and culturally-specific legitimation processes. Gaming, like art worlds, is intra-active, not interactive; a contingent whole constituted by the complex relations between its diverse parts in what game scholar T. L. Taylor calls "the assemblage of play" (332). There is no one art world for games (just as there are multiple art worlds for painting, or music), and no fixed end point for their legitimation as art — there are multiple assemblages working to "materialize" the idea of games-as-art (Barad, 66), overlapping and clashing with one another and with more established art worlds. As De Landa argues, the

analysis of social assemblages is "concerned with the discovery of the actual mechanisms operating at a given spatial scale" (31), and beginning in the next chapter, my case studies are designed to discover, situate, and critically evaluate these mechanisms and materializations.

Chapter 3 — Roger Ebert & the Games-as-Art Debate

Cultural perspectives on games have changed significantly in the last 40 years. For much of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the mainstream media has portrayed digital games as potentially harmful to children (McKernan, 3). When journalists did contest these claims or the broader cultural anxiety about games, it was usually in terms of the potential health or educational benefits of games to children or society, emphasizing their instrumental rather than their aesthetic value (McKernan, 15), a strategy Newman and Levine have also noted in historical discourse on television (3). Although the moral panic about games persists into the 2000s, over the course of the last decade or so, coinciding with the economic growth of the game industry and the demographic expansion (and fragmentation) of the audience for games, "an alternative narrative appears […] that characterizes video games as a valuable artistic form" (McKernan, 2). As noted in the Introduction, many game scholars and critics consider the popular debate about the status of games as art to be tiresome, an irritating distraction from more substantive discussions. Nevertheless, as Novitz contends, any widespread debate about the artistic status of a new medium is of enormous social and cultural significance (162).

In this chapter, I will broadly trace the history and context of the popular discourse and debate about games and art, examining a range of arguments and positions. This may seem like a bit of a red herring, as my conceptual framework suggests this is not where the real work of legitimation takes place, but the common sense notions of what art is and how it works reflected in these broad, unfocused debates is a crucial element in the more focused case studies of emergent art world assemblages I will examine in subsequent chapters. Claiming any cultural object to be art or not-art, valuable or worthless, is "a productive cultural moment, systematically

forming the objects being discussed" (Wasson, 27), and furthermore this discursive forming has

material implications for the actors involved, in the form of allocation of social prestige and

resources (Becker 1984, 135), hence their deep investment (Bourdieu, 310). Bart Beaty's

innovative work on the ongoing legitimation of comics as art provides an essential framework

here, due to the numerous historical parallels between comics and digital games, discussed in

more detail below.

I will begin with a brief chronological account of popular film critic Roger Ebert's

(in)famous comments about games, and the ensuing backlash and debate. Although Ebert would

ultimately capitulate and remove himself from the conversation, this high-profile dispute has

been and continues to be a powerful catalyst for both opponents and proponents of games-as-art.

In the rest of this chapter, I will follow its thread, identifying the most common objections and

obstacles to the idea of games-as-art, the most common responses to these objections, and the

different kinds of arguments for games-as-art made by fans, journalists, critics, academics,

institutions, and other invested parties. The chapter will conclude with a summary, derived from

the debate, of the dominant aesthetic concerns in contemporary North American popular culture,

and how this general aesthetic common sense relates to the specific legitimation of digital games.

Roger Ebert versus games

Historically, digital games have occupied a very low place in the cultural hierarchy,

somewhere in the neighbourhood of *Archie* comics and slasher films, and like these other forms

have not historically been part of the institutional Art World (Groensteen cited in Beaty 2012,

19). It is outside of the ambit of this dissertation to examine the roots of this low cultural status in

detail, but I will outline how a number of long-standing cultural and aesthetic prejudices have

manifested in contemporary debates about games and art. Although some aspects of games have been identified as valuable or useful, such as the supposed benefit to "hand-eye coordination" (McKernan, 15), like other popular media the dominant view of games has been "as a waste of time at best, and possibly also a source of serious and widespread social problems" (Newman & Levine, 3). Beaty argues that the cultural "under-achievement" of comics has little to do with any inherent aesthetic shortcomings, "but is rooted in the differential power relations of art worlds competing for cultural resources and prestige" (2012, 44). Arguments against games-as-art from mainstream media pundits like Ebert only really emerge after digital games become more socially and economically prominent with the rise of home gaming consoles and PC gaming over the course of the 1990s, in part because the people involved in making and playing games had not previously solicited recognition or legitimacy outside of the relatively narrow world of gaming (much like comics prior to the 1970s and 80s [Beaty 2012, 24]). Once an aging population of game makers and players begin to push the idea of games-as-art into the wider popular sphere, potentially threatening the established cultural order, a backlash was practically inevitable.

More than anyone else involved, Roger Ebert has come to embody the prejudice against digital games as art. Even today, blog posts and academic articles about games and art habitually include references to the famous critic. Backlash against efforts to legitimate games had been developing for some time before Ebert entered the debate, as an extension of 1990s moral panic about the effects of violent games on children (McKernan, 11) — as early as 2000, *Newsweek* film and drama critic Jack Kroll wrote a derisive editorial about the game industry's pretensions to art, which was met with anger and incredulity on gaming websites (McGrath; Jones 2000). It was not until 2005, however, that the so-called "games-as-art debate" hit the mainstream, when

Ebert published the first in a series of comments about games in movie reviews, answers to fan letters, and blog posts. Whether because of Ebert's high profile and large readership, or because of growing anxiety over social acceptance and legitimacy in gaming culture, Ebert quickly became a galvanizing antagonist for fans. For better or for worse, Ebert established for many the parameters for artistic legitimacy, helping to shape the contemporary discourse on games-as-art.

In Fall 2005, Ebert published a one-star review of the movie adaptation of *Doom*, which contained some vaguely derogatory statements about its source material, and the "video game-like" quality of its narrative and images (2005a). Although the film was poorly received by fans of the game (Aldred), the negative review sparked a small furor over Ebert's apparently low opinion of digital games. Ebert's first direct comments on the subject of games and art were in response to reader letters arguing that his *Doom* review was ill-informed, and were published in his "Movie Answer Man" column. Ebert wrote back that games are an objectively less important medium than film or literature (2005b), and that there are no worthy examples of games that achieve the same heights: "As long as there is a great movie unseen or a great book unread, I will continue to be unable to find the time to play video games" (2005c). Letter-writers complained about Ebert's obvious lack of familiarity with the medium, pointing to the growing body of critical and academic work on games (including the edited collection *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, and Mark J.P. Wolf's *The Medium of the Video Game*), and while Ebert acknowledged the possibility for visual beauty in games, he argued that they are a craft rather than an art form, and ultimately a waste of time (2005d).

The ensuing outburst from enraged gaming enthusiasts in forum discussions and blog posts was small compared to future incidents, but still vitriolic, including many variations on the theme of "Screw you, old man!" (Stealth43 comment on "Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies"). Although

Ebert's website did not yet have a built-in commenting system, his publishers took full advantage of the controversy, publishing some of the more civil responses (for and against Ebert) in a series of blog posts ("Gamers Fire Flaming Posts, E-mails..."; "The Art of the Game 2"; "The Game of Art 3"), fanning the flames of discontent. Many trumpeted the fact that the games are a "multi-billion dollar industry" rivaling Hollywood for dominance of the entertainment business, often suggesting that Ebert's comments derive from an anxiety about film being made obsolete (Sakey). "Are video games art?" articles and editorials became a fixture of gaming news outlets ("Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies"; Reimer) and Ebert's stance on games became part of his public persona and a regular subject in his public appearances (see, for example, Emerson).

One of Ebert's most prominent "opponents" around this time was horror novelist, filmmaker, and occasional game designer Clive Barker, who publicly denounced Ebert's position and argued for the artistic importance of games in a talk at the Hollywood and Games Summit in 2007. Barker drew parallels to the cultural prejudice against the horror genre, stating that, endless debates aside, "If the experience moves you in some way or another [...] even if it moves your bowels [...] I think it is worthy of some serious study" (Barker quoted in Androvich). Ebert apparently could not resist this baiting, and wrote a lengthy, snarky point-by-point rebuttal of Barker's argument. Elaborating on his earlier comments, Ebert proposed that games cannot be "high art, as I understand it," a concession that did little to prevent further backlash (2007). This wave of the debate is similar in character to what came before, with the critically-acclaimed Japanese adventure games *ICO* and *Shadow of the Colossus* cited most frequently as exemplars of the medium's artistic potential, but some counter-arguments also began to focus on the possibilities of non-commercial or independent games ("Feedback: Gamers and Artists"). In the midst of the outcry, *Wired* editor Chris Baker coyly re-published a positive computer game

review Ebert had written for the magazine a decade earlier, a story which was taken up extensively by other journalists and commenters.

Ebert's longest, most detailed, and by far most contentious statement about games and art came several years later, in a blog post provocatively titled "Video Games Can Never Be Art." This time around, Ebert was inspired by a video of a TED Talk by thatgamecompany developer Kellee Santiago, sent to him by fans (*TEDxUSC - Kellee Santiago - 3/23/09* 2009). In the talk, Santiago briefly referenced Ebert's infamous nay-saying, and cited several games (*Waco Ressurection*, *Braid*, and thatgamecompany's own *Flower*) as examples of the artistic evolution of games, looking forward to a bright future for the game industry. Ebert praised Santiago's passion, but stuck firmly to his guns, writing that "I remain convinced that in principle, video games cannot be art […] no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form" (2010b). He went on to invoke both Plato and Aristotle, and critiqued the three games cited by Santiago based on brief video clips and screenshots, concluding that they make "pathetic" arguments for games as art.

This post has produced nearly five thousand comments (later, Ebert said only about three hundred of those were in agreement with his position [2010a]), and countless response articles, blog posts, and forum discussions. As in previous waves of the debate, many Ebert fans expressed disappointment with what they saw to be an unreasonable and unnecessary slight against games. Likewise many critics pointed out that Ebert had never played, and seemed to have no intention of playing, any of the games he was criticizing. Some began to suggest that Ebert was deliberately provoking gaming culture for the sake of page-views and ad revenue, or simply as a cruel joke (see, for example, the comments on Ashcraft). In addition to *ICO* and *Shadow of the Colossus*, a handful of newer games come up repeatedly in this batch of responses

to Ebert, including various iconic Nintendo games, *Flower*, *Heavy Rain*, *Bioshock* (discussed in Chapter Four) and *Passage* (discussed in Chapter Five). The ad hominem insults grew more vicious, often referencing Ebert's struggle with cancer, which had recently resulted in some facial disfiguring and the loss of his ability to speak (Putin comment on Ebert 2010b). The influential (and controversial) gaming webcomic Penny Arcade crudely described Ebert's statements as "reeking ejaculate" and dismissed him as a "wretched, ancient warlock" ("Again With The Art Stuff" 2010).

A few months after this outburst, Ebert published another blog post, entitled "Okay kids, play on my lawn," in which he somewhat unexpectedly conceded that he didn't really know much about digital games, and should not have made such broad pronouncements about them. "I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself" (Ebert 2010a). Ebert wrote that most of the comments and retorts had been intelligent and well-written, offering definitions of art and suggestions on exemplary games to play, but that ultimately he simply wasn't willing to explore the medium enough to properly assess it, concluding he "was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place" (2010a). This was seen as "a major victory" by some fans and journalists, as if Ebert had reversed his position and declared games a superior art form (Kennedy). Most of the comments on this blog post are respectful, praising Ebert for taking the high road and admitting his mistake (Ebert 2010a). This marked the end of Ebert's direct involvement in the games-as-art debate, and he died in 2013. As I will show, however, his comments have had a lasting impact.

Obstacles & objections

In what follows, drawing examples from the 'Ebert affair' as well as from other detractors and pundits, I will outline the most common objections and counter-arguments to the idea of games-as-art. These arguments are not only made by outsiders to gaming culture like Ebert; some gaming enthusiasts don't want their hobby to be "polluted" by the pretensions of art, or see games and art as equally important but fundamentally separate spheres (see, for example, Moriarty). Regardless of their origins, arguments against games-as-art tend to focus on four limitations of the form: a) the fact that most digital games are commercial mass culture; b) the perceived frivolity of the pleasure and entertainment derived from games; c) the association of games with children and moral panic about media effects; and d) their interactivity or non-linearity as works. Although as I will discuss these arguments are unsustainable, my purpose here is not to disprove or dismantle them. Rather, I hope to set the stage for my subsequent analysis of arguments in favour of the idea of games-as-art, which contends with these objections in various ways, whether by addressing them directly, questioning their validity, or simply ignoring them.

Mass culture

The charge that some forms of popular culture cannot be art on the grounds that they are mass-produced and sold for profit has a long history, going back to the Kantian ideal of aesthetic disinterestedness and extending to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer's Marxist critique of the culture industry, in which the consumption of mass culture commodities is a tool of oppression. Commercial industries and for-profit enterprises are supposedly compromised by their "interestedness," driven by material-economic stakes that are seen to be less conducive to the

higher values of art than other more autonomous contexts (Baumann 2007a, 9). Opponents of games-as-art frequently criticize games according to a colloquial version of the mass culture critique, suggesting that the tawdry, immature business of commercial game production is not capable of making meaningful art. One anonymous respondent to Ebert's 2005 post even contrasts the film industry with the game industry, arguing that the latter is much more "adverse to exploration and experimentation," complaining that most people involved in game development are too young to have the kind of meaningful insights found in canonical art films (quoted in "Gamers Fire Flaming Posts, E-mails..."). Elsewhere, games are compared to pornography, on the grounds that both industries trade pleasure for money, and neither should be considered art (Phil Thompson quoted in "The Art of the Games 2"). Game developer Brian Moriarty, who on several occasions has iconoclastically offered apologia for Ebert's arguments, calls games "product art" and "kitsch art," the kind of market-driven low art produced by industries, in contrast to other, "sublime" art forms (2011).

Ebert's own comments frequently return to this point, often with great derision. In his 2007 response to Barker, he suggests that the only way games might enter the realm of art is via an ironic postmodern subversion of their mass cultural origins: "Would Warhol have considered Clive Barker's video game 'Undying' as art? Certainly. He would have kept it in its shrink-wrapped box, placed it inside a Plexiglas display case, mounted it on a pedestal, and labeled it 'Video Game'" (Ebert 2007). This mocking conception of art as whatever a pretentious artist figure puts in a gallery, familiar from countless parodies, speaks to the persistently strong association between the idea of art and the institutions of the Art World. As noted in Chapter Two, however, games and game-based art had by this point already entered the gallery in a variety of ways, and this was evidently not enough to grant them widespread legitimacy. The role

of the institutional Art World in popular understandings of art and the aesthetic is ambiguous (I will return to this point in the Conclusion). Similarly, Ebert openly mocks one of Santiago's slides, which identified areas for the future development of games as an art form: "The circles are labeled: Development, Finance, Publishing, Marketing, Education, and Executive Management. I rest my case" (2010b). Art, according to Ebert, is an individual pursuit incompatible with collaboration and commerce. The irony here, of course, is that the feature films he made a career out of appreciating are no less collaborative and commercial, but as noted in the section on interactivity, for Ebert the individual creative authority ascribed to the director sets film apart from non-linear media like games.

In spite of the general acceptance that technological media like photography and film can (at least in some cases) be art, and the extensive incorporation of technology (digital and otherwise) into the production and practice of all kinds of art, there remains a persistent bias against technology in popular discourses of art. According to some critics, digital games are not "natural" or "organic" in the same way that, say, painting or dance is, and as such cannot achieve the same aesthetic heights. Jack Kroll makes this central to his 2000 *Newsweek* article, emphasizing that "it's human beings who create art, not the polygons and Bezier curves of digital technology" (strangely implying that graphical representation is the agent driving digital technology) and arguing that mechanical processes cannot capture the complexity of human life as befits true art. Moriarty echoes this sentiment, writing: "when I feel the need for reflection, for insight, wisdom or consolation, I turn my computers off. These needs are the ambit of the sublime arts, which are inspired and informed by philosophy, and by faith" (2011). Of course, as Bourdieu demonstrates, this purported distinction between commercial or technological art and "sublime art," and the historically low status of folk and mass culture, has as much to do with

class and cultural hierarchies as it does with aesthetics (485). Rather than proving that games cannot be art, all these critics are really saying is that games (and game enthusiasts) have low cultural status; as the history of film and other popular media suggests, this does not preclude the possibility of legitimation.

Entertainment

Games and play, and especially digital games, are understood by their critics to be primarily a form of entertainment, merely a pleasurable way to pass the time, rather than an edifying or intrinsically meaningful experience. The idiom "it's just a game" is taken to be as proof of this frivolousness. Like the arguments about commercialism and technology described above, the idea that games are inherently frivolous is common even though it is fraught with internal contradictions (chess and some sports are not seen to be frivolous, for example). For Ebert, "video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic" (2005d), and several of his respondents agree, suggesting that games do not "edify and ennoble" or "endure" in the manner of great art (Barton Odom quoted in "The Art of the Game 2"; Kathleen comment on Ebert 2010a). The supposed lack of "serious" subject matter in games (Joe Trotter in "Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies" 2005), and their association with traditionally "low" or "immature" genres such as science fiction and fantasy, reinforces this notion.

Beaty argues that the perceived lack of aesthetic distance in fan cultures, which are grounded in intimate involvement with and affection for their objects, makes it easier for critics to dismiss them according to traditional aesthetic frameworks (2012, 75), and this holds true in critical responses to games. Charges of frivolity and escapism are often presented with a

knowing sarcasm, exemplified by Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones, who mockingly asks, referring to an academic paper on games and art, "what was a professor doing playing all these games?" as if nothing in the world could be more preposterous (2012). Once again there is a classed dimension to this discourse — playing games is, according to critics like Jones, not a pastime befitting the educated elite. In appealing to the weighty, seemingly clear-cut dichotomy between entertainment and art, designating certain kinds of experiences as enduring and valuable and others as transient and frivolous, opponents of games-as-art are reproducing contingent cultural values that originate in the Enlightenment.

Childishness and moral panic

Closely tied to the entertainment argument is the long-standing association of games with children and youth (idle youth in particular), in spite of the fairly obvious fact that games of various kinds are an extremely common activity for adults as well. Although their origins are in university computer labs and bar amusements, digital games are now often categorized with children's toys, rather than with "adult" games like sports or slot machines. One detractor describes games as being "at the level of children's art" designed to produce joy and nothing more, contrasting them against "artful masterpieces" that presumably evoke more adult reactions (Vicki Gundrum comment on Ebert 2010b).[5] Although critic John Constantine points out that the majority of popular gaming franchises might be described as "juvenile" (or at least kid-friendly) in their subject matter, McKernan shows that digital games have paradoxically faced widespread moral panic (like television, comics, popular music, and the novel before them) over their

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5   Around the time that Ebert first spoke out on games, efforts to regulate or censor games were gaining steam in the wake of controversy over a hidden sex scene called "Hot Coffee" discovered by fans in the code of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (see Schiesel) and a growing range of academic psychology literature on "media effects" (see, for example, Anderson 2004).

purported negative effects on children in terms of cognitive development (9), violent behaviour (11) and physical health (13). This contradiction — that games are both childish and dangerous to children — situates digital games firmly as a "bad object" and is a recurring theme in anti-games-as-art discourse.

Belgian comics scholar Thierry Groensteen identifies a similar "handicap" for comics, which have also been historically dismissed due to their association with youth and adolescence (cited in Beaty 2012, 21). In many such cases, Beaty suggests, critics are not talking about actual children, but rather the imagined lower-class mass audience for popular culture, an audience that is infantilized regardless of age (2012, 23). SM Rama for example, commenting on Ebert's blog, finds it "depressing to see my grown up family members at times glued to a video game" (comment on Ebert 2010a) — like the Jones quote above, the implication is that only childish, immature adults play games, or perhaps that games cause adults revert into childishness. Again, here, the opposition to games-as-art is based as much on the presumed audience for games as it is on their formal-aesthetic qualities (or lack thereof).

Interactivity

None of the arguments described above are exclusive to digital games. Although they are inflected with the historical and cultural specificities of gaming, analogues are easily found in discourse on other media. The most contentious objection to games-as-art, however, is somewhat unique. The interactivity or non-linearity of digital games (their capacity for player input and agency) informs most discourse on games-as-art, exacerbating and reinforcing the other objections. Games are seen as meaningless commercial distractions for the juvenile masses, made even more dangerous (especially when it comes to violence) by their addictive

interactivity. The fannish-ness of games, exemplified by the distasteful stereotype of the hypnotized, overly-immersed player, is likewise tied to their interactivity, in stark contrast to the popular Kantian archetype of the calm, disinterested subject in aesthetic contemplation of paintings and landscapes.

Ebert makes a particularly big deal of this aspect of games, arguing that if the viewer changes the art, they become the artist, an ambiguity he considers antithetical to art, which supposedly "seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices" (2007). He also criticizes the goal-oriented aspects of games in similar terms, suggesting that an artwork you can win or lose is not really an artwork (Ebert 2010b). Central to Ebert's resistance to interactivity is his conception of authorship. Player agency or choice is "the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control" (2005d) — interactivity, it seems, is even more problematic for authorship than the commercial production context, in which hundreds of people might work on a single game or movie. Jones similarly harps on interactivity and authorship, describing digital games as code-generated "playgrounds" (again not-so-subtly linking games with children) and declaring this creates a double-bind in which none of the agents involved has any creative authority: "The player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game, while the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one 'owns' the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art" (2012).

Evidently, the long history of interactivity in other forms of art is lost on these critics. As Bourdieu points out, unlike traditional fine art, many forms of folk and popular art, such as theatre and dance, involve varying degrees of audience participation, and have been denigrated on these grounds (487), and as discussed in Chapter One, various movements of the twentieth century avant-garde have ceded authorial control in favour of chance and interactivity. I would

argue, however, that this objection is less about interactive art in principle, and more about a perceived dissonance between narrative and interactivity.[6] For Ebert, art is about storytelling more than anything else (the majority of his counter-examples to games-as-art are novels and fiction films), and storytelling in his estimation is about individual authorship, which appears to be interrupted by player agency. Abstract games such as *Tetris* do not qualify as art because they do not tell stories, while games that do tell stories are disqualified because their narratives are non-linear. Games, like other forms of popular culture, thus represent to their critics a "bastard genre" (Groensteen cited in Beaty 2012, 19) that merges aspects of authored narrative, audiovisual representation, and player agency into an impure hybrid that (supposedly) does not fit within established paradigms of aesthetic purity and separation between forms (Keogh 2014).

As I have argued throughout this section, the objections raised by Ebert and others to the idea of games-as-art are a rehearsal of a common sense understanding of art, derived from a variety of sources with a particular historical trajectory. Kant's ideal of disinterestedness is awkwardly married with Romantic notions of personal expression and emotional resonance, filtered through cinematic auteurism, and positioned against both commercial mass culture (even as certain works of commercial mass culture as elevated as art) and the perceived artistic excesses of twentieth century modernism and post-modernism (as evidenced by Ebert's derisive reference to Warhol). This set of common sense aesthetic concerns, articulated and rearticulated in the discourse and practice of artists, critics, institutions, and audiences, cuts across many different art world assemblages, and represents a powerful expressive resource in processes of cultural legitimation. In the following section, I will demonstrate how it also forms the basis of

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6   Peculiarly, Ebert's arguments about the alleged incompatibility of games and stories are reminiscent of the "ludologist" arguments being made by some early game scholars around the same time.

most arguments in favour of games-as-art.

Legitimation Strategies

The arguments cited above are fundamentally flawed. Indeed, there are countless articles and books in art history, philosophy, cultural studies, and psychology dedicated to exploring and untangling the complex questions and issues that Ebert and others present as reasonable and uncontroversial (the literature on media effects alone is practically a sub-discipline). However, grounded as they are in widely held conceptions of art, these arguments have real power in the constitution of new art worlds, and galvanized efforts to legitimate games as art. The negative public attention to games contributed to a general sense of "oppression" of gaming and gamers by the mainstream media in the early-to-mid-2000s, putting them on the defensive and producing a kind of crisis of legitimacy. As will become apparent below, much of the discourse in favour of games-as-art is just as problematic as Ebert's equivocations, made up of ad hominem insults, vague equivocations, and arbitrarily-assembled lists of good games that should count as art, without any elaboration. But they derive from a strong sense that games not only deserving of artistic legitimacy, but also that they need to be actively valorized and defended against the Eberts of the world.

Game scholar Jesper Juul points out the very personal stakes of this crisis, which has its origins in individual, situated aesthetic experience: "The defense of video games (as of most things) tends to grow from personal fascination. *I* enjoy video games; *I* feel that they give me important experiences; *I* associate them with wide-ranging thoughts about life, the universe, and so on. This is valuable *to me*, and *I* want to understand and share it" (2013, 23, his emphasis). This "legitimizing aspiration," in Beaty's terms, is a central part of pop culture fandom, seeking

external recognition and acclaim, as a way of validating fans' investment and devotion to an object (2012, 84). Since the 1950s, the work of legitimating and canonizing popular cultural forms has often begun with fans and enthusiasts (as in the cases of film and comics), and this discourse helps establish which texts and makers are eventually taken up by critics and scholars — who may themselves be fans using their position and institutional authority to continue the project of legitimation (Beaty 2012, 74). Fannish enthusiasm and aspiration to legitimacy permeate the arguments discussed in this section, regardless of their source.

Although discourses of legitimation often refer to whole cultural forms, they are in fact highly selective, constructing a particular vision of the form through specific examples (Newman & Levine, 35). A common structure of the arguments cited in this section is to highlight a particular feature associated with art (such as personal expression, or formal beauty), and then demonstrate how one or several specific games fit that definition. For example, in a BAFTA-sponsored talk, founders of the popular game studio Bioware Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk loosely adapt a short Romantic definition of art from Leo Tolstoy (essentially that art produces emotions), using it as a template to present their own games, and others published by their parent company Electronic Arts, as significant works of art ("BioWare: Annual Video Games Lecture"). Philosopher of art Aaron Smuts (2005) expands on this basic formula, evaluating three mainstream action games (*Max Payne*, *Halo*, and *Splinter Cell*) according to "every major theory of art," from historical to representational, and in each case finds them worthy of the distinction. This is an ideological as well as aesthetic process, and so it is key to ask what vision of games, and of art, is being put forward in a given argument, and who or what is being omitted. Although many of the same games come up repeatedly (*Final Fantasy VII*, *ICO*, and *Shadow of the Colossus*, for example) I am less concerned for the moment with the specific games or features

of the medium that are being held up as aesthetically worthy, and more with the general form that these arguments take, and how they relate to similar arguments about other media. In subsequent chapters, I will use in-depth case studies to contextualize and make sense of specific instances of legitimation.

In the following sub-sections, citing examples from a variety of sources, and showing how they respond to the objections discussed above, I will outline the most common strategies used in legitimation arguments about games: a) alignment with established forms; b) appeals to medium specificity; c) the identification of author figures; d) the notion that games are a combination of many art forms; and e) populist arguments that position games against high art. I will also address the related discursive move of dismissing the very grounds of the debate.

Alignment

One of the most common ways of defending digital games, as well as other popular media, is alignment with more established art forms (Juul 2013, 23). This is a straightforward but effective strategy that attempts to demonstrate the seemingly-unacceptable new form "is in fact acceptable because it conforms to existing, valid norms, values, or rules" (Baumann 2007a, 49), thus incorporating it into "a longer and more prestigious […] lineage" (Beaty 2012, 31). In a single breathless article, critic Chi Kong Lui exemplifies this strategy, comparing games to Duchamp, Robert Mapplethorpe, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, D.W. Griffith, German Expressionism, Jean Renoir, Fellini, and several other canonical artists and movements in various media, concluding that games aspire to these ideals and are progressing as an art form. Likewise, the maligned cliché of "the game that made me cry" is a form of alignment, suggesting that the emotional affect of gaming is comparable to other art forms (Juul 2013, 28). The

frequently-cited Japanese role-playing game *Final Fantasy VII* is held in high esteem in no small part because of a famously tear-jerking scene in which a main character is killed by the villain, encouraging a degree of emotional investment not generally associated with digital games (Thompson 2005). These appeals for artistic status based on older models are structurally similar, but their particular significance depends on the conception of art employed, and with what other forms games are specifically aligned (Beaty 2012, 31).

By the same token, alignment almost always involves a distanciation from other forms, to "emphasize those elements of their pasts which are most clearly artistic, while suppressing less desirable ancestors" (Becker 1984, 339). Newman and Levine point out that in some cases this suggests that a form can only gain legitimacy when it distances itself from its own low-cultural history, in order to take on "the traits of a more culturally validated form," as when television (or games) are praised for being "cinematic" (29). Consider popular game critic Leigh Alexander's article "Playing Outside," in which she argues that games must "move on" from their traditional emphasis on fun in order to gain the cultural legitimacy and relevance granted to other forms, echoing the charges of entertainment and immaturity discussed above (2013). As the literature review in Chapter One suggests, much of the academic work on games and art also operates explicitly or implicitly in the alignment mode, attempting to construct a version of games that fits within established academic and art historical paradigms.

Unsurprisingly given that some of the most public attacks on games came from a film critic, many alignment arguments centre on film, and to a lesser extent literature (especially novels). According to *Ars Technica* reporter Jeremy Reimer, the best games are "comparable to literary fiction" and "on par with any 'serious' art film." Then-editor of RogerEbert.com, Jim Emerson disagreed with Ebert's assessment and compared *Myst* and other atmospheric mystery-

puzzle games to the films of his favourite director, David Lynch. One letter-writer proclaims that

Doom (the game), contrary to Ebert's derogatory comments, "was to games what [Akira

Kurosawa's acclaimed film] *Rashomon* was to movies," in terms of its lasting influence on the

form and content of the medium (Ebert 2005). Others are more hyperbolic, such as *The Atlantic*'s

Kyle Chayka, who makes a direct comparison between *Pokémon* and *Catcher in the Rye*, but in

each of these arguments, the legitimacy of other forms is taken for granted, and strategically

extended to digital games based on their similarity.

Some of Ebert's opponents concede that most games are not worthy of artistic status, but

argue that the medium is immature because it is still in its infancy and will inevitably become art

over time, following the same teleological trajectory towards greatness and legitimacy that has

been applied retroactively to film and other media ("The Game of Art 3"; Barker quoted in

Sheffield; "Feedback: Gamers and Artists"; Mirasol). Others argue that this artistic destiny is not

a guarantee, and requires significant efforts "to push this young medium from squalling infancy

into graceful adulthood" (Croal), or that art is simply a matter of posterity, and games will only

gain in retrospect the legitimacy they deserve (Cyber Rat comment on Ashcraft; The Faceless

Master post in Jexhius). There remains a clear attempt to situate games in established artistic

paradigms, but they are placed closer to the beginning of a presumed historical pattern.

The most banal form of alignment argument is the "*Citizen Kane* of Games," which

attempts to identify the single greatest game of all time, or the one that best exemplifies the

whole medium, commensurate with the legacy of Orson Welles' canonical 1941 film. Games as

diverse as *Tetris* (jaime kuroiwa comment on Alexander 2009) and *Metroid Prime* (McWhertor)

have been held up as worthy of the *Kane* mantle, for an equally diverse range of reasons (lasting

influence on the medium, audiovisual style, narrative sophistication, emotional impact, and so

on). Like the *Mona Lisa* and other well-known works of art, *Citizen Kane* is so ubiquitously

referenced in popular culture that it has become a kind of stand-in for Art itself, and in particular

popular art that transcends its commercial origins (I will return to this point at the end of Chapter

Four, in my discussion of *Bioshock*). The comparison has become such a cliché that it has

provoked considerable backlash from critics and journalists (Alexander 2009), and it is now just

as likely to be invoked ironically, although it is still used sincerely often enough that the satirical

blog *The Citizen Kane of Video Games*[7] compiles new examples weekly.

Literature and film are obvious points of comparison for the kinds of games most

frequently referenced in these arguments, which emphasize narrative and audiovisual style (Juul

2013, 23). But some critics propose alternatives, arguing that comparisons to film and literature

play into Ebert's hand, devaluing games by imposing unfair criteria. Journalist and critic N'Gai

Croal points to a variety of artistic practices, such as improvised performance and oral

storytelling, which might be better suited to the discussion of games-as-art. "Rather than insist on

exploring aspects of other art forms that videogames don't resemble," Croal asks, "why not look

for those that do?" Similarly, critic Kieron Gillen expresses frustration that games are not

compared to dance and architecture, "which are equally accepted as art forms and don't operate

anything like the silver screen or the printed word" (quoted in "Gamers fire flaming posts, e-

mails…"). Although they reject the comparison to film and literature, these arguments are still

based on alignment, seeking out ways of conceiving games as art based on other forms (though

in doing so, these critics deliberately set themselves apart from less-cultured fans whose artistic

horizons end with *Citizen Kane*). The alignment strategy is an effective way of countering the

objections to games-as-art, and in particular the charge of interactivity. By pointing out that there

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7   http://thecitizenkaneofvideogames.tumblr.com/

are accepted forms of art that involve viewer agency and participation, such as new media and installation art (Haseloff) or architecture and industrial design (Joe C. comment on Ebert 2010a), gaming advocates can deny the validity of the objection entirely (rather than reifying it by emphasizing authorial control, as I argue in the following section.

Medium Specificity

Baumann suggests that legitimation efforts must involve some kind of direct alignment with or justification based on already-legitimate forms (2007a, 49), but this does not reflect the diversity of legitimation discourses. As Juul notes, the downside of aligning games with other media is that it risks making games seem derivative or superfluous, weakening their claim to artistic status (2013, 23). Indeed, Ebert retorts that even if games can do some of the same things film can do, film can do them better (2010b). Other kinds of legitimation arguments involve carefully differentiating features of the unaccepted new medium from existing artistic paradigms, and proposing more-or-less radical changes to those paradigms in order to accommodate a broader range of art (Juul 2013, 24). According to this logic, the concept of art should be accommodated to games, which are understood to transcend established categories, rather than the other way around. In particular, as I will show, the concept of medium specificity is used to respond to and counter the charge that interactivity is incompatible with art.

A parallel can be drawn here between early film theory and early writing on digital games, both of which attempt to account for a new form as art. Film theorists sought to identify an essential, "medium specific" quality in cinema that could not be found in other art forms. This kind of argument posits that art forms differ in terms of what they do best, dictated by their essential formal or physical properties (Carroll 1988, 12). In other words, specificity arguments

attempt to extrapolate from essential features of the medium itself the most suitable structure,

content, or stylistic techniques for an art form (Carroll 1988, 15). This kind of formalist

theorizing actually serves a pragmatic function, highlighting and encouraging particular kinds of

aesthetic strategies that are deemed to be valuable in a given context (and discouraging others).

Many of the early "ludologist" game scholars took a similar approach, identifying interactive

rule-based systems as the medium specific essence of games, in some cases outright rejecting

attempts to tell stories through games, or attempts make sense of them using literary methods

(for an extreme example, see Eskelinen). Game developer Rod Humble writes that "a game

needs nothing else apart from its rules to succeed as a work of art," suggesting that any attempt

to dismiss games as art without considering their essential rule-based-ness is missing the point.

Medium specificity arguments are more common in the discourse surrounding Ebert's

comments than alignment arguments. Many people cry foul on Ebert's comparisons to film and

literature, arguing that it isn't "fair" to compare games directly to fundamentally different media

(GomezGomita comment on Haseloff), rather than evaluating games on their own terms and

embracing their special qualities of interactivity and non-linearity (John Beeler comment on

Carless). Film and games are "apples and oranges" (Janine comment on "Ebert: Games Inferior

to Movies"), and it is a "mistake" for games to emulate movies (Sakey). Some commenters argue

that judging a game by its story is shallow and superficial, like judging a movie based on its

special effects or the beauty of its actors (Isley Unruh quoted in "The Game of Art 3"), while

others simply argue that games tell unique kinds of stories that could not exist in any other form

(Brendan comment on Ebert 2010b; Croal). Journalist Anthony Burch dismisses Ebert's cultural

hierarchies, arguing that "To claim that pre-baked [non-interactive] experiences are inherently

more meaningful than player-created ones is nonsense," calling for a more egalitarian system of

aesthetic judgement that includes both.

In the Ebert debate, the medium specificity of games is often articulated by pointing out things that movies can't do. Movies "cannot offer" the agency, direct emotional connection to a narrative, and cooperative experience that games do (Saul Ortiz, Simon van Alphan quoted in "Gamers Fire Flaming Posts, E-mails..."), which means that certain games, such as the oft-cited *Planescape: Torment*, take advantage of digital games' specificity to tell stories that "could never have been told as a movie or a novel or a poem" (Graham T. Quoted in "The Game of Art 3"). In this framework, rather than being an obstacle, as Ebert suggests, the interactive and non-linear qualities that are seen to distinguish games from other art forms are the very source of their aesthetic value and artistic legitimacy (Glen Isip comment on Preston; Constantine). Locating the medium specificity of games in their interactivity allows that which for Ebert disqualifies games from being art to elevate games to "a whole new dimension of art" (Croshaw), provoking an expansion of the very idea of art (Lantz). This stance positions games not only as worthy contenders, but as an evolutionary leap beyond that which has come before. Games are thus the art of the future, a notion taken up by critics and designers like Eric Zimmerman, who predicts that games will the most important art form of the twenty-first century (2013). Even so, the structure of this argument is adopted from critical discourse on established forms, and reflects a concern for medium specificity and novelty in the dominant popular conception of art.

Authorship

Media scholar Jonathan Gray observes, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, that Roland Barthes' "plot to kill the author" has failed: in spite of the popularity of the idea of "the death of the author" in the humanities, authorship still matters a great deal, and continues to be a primary

mode of engagement with cultural texts, both in and outside of the academy (2013, 88). Authorship, however, far from being a transcendental force, is a "function" in Michel Foucault's terms, meaningless until mobilized in a specific social-material context, and serving particular pragmatic purposes for those who mobilize it (Gray 2013, 89, 91). Most historical attempts to legitimate popular media have involved the nomination of author figures (Gray 2013, 92), with fan cultures endlessly producing and debating pantheons of great artists, in hopes that, as in the historical case of film, "the success of the best and brightest will pave the way for the recognition of the form as a whole" (Beaty 2012, 99). Examining who is given authority, and who is not, can reveal much about the values and organization of an art world assemblage (Gray 2013, 106). In a model established by the rise of essayistic film criticism and academic film studies, authorship serves among other things to justify enthusiast and intellectual interest in commercial and popular cultural forms that are otherwise seen as illegitimate (Baumann 2007b, 84), allowing them to conform to notions of the heroic artist-auteur whose genius transcends the commercial industry (Newman & Levine, 38). Authorship, respectability, and legitimacy are tied closely to masculinization, and this form of recognition has historically rested on "an overt assertion of masculine prerogatives, and the disavowal of the mass cultural, the domestic, and, importantly, the feminine" (Beaty 2012, 73). While I will examine this key aspect of authorship in greater detail elsewhere (see Chapters Four and Five), it is crucial to note this ideological dimension of authorship, and to consider how it plays out in the particular case of digital games, which is already gendered as a masculine sphere.

For those attempting to counter Ebert's assertions, certain kinds of games foreground authorship, with individual author figures elevated over and above the other people involved in game development, and made highly visible across a variety of paratexts, including packaging,

marketing, and promotion. These author figures are often self-identified as artists, making them easy to point to as examplars, meaning that the same handful of names (men like Peter Molyneux, Will Wright, Tim Schafer, Shigeru Miyamoto, and others) appear over and over again in the debate (Korr; Sakey; Chayka). Each of these figures is identified with a distinct imprint, vision, or sensibility that sets their work apart from lesser games, and aligns them with great artists in other forms — according to Matt Sakey, they are "our Fassbinders and Scorseses," serious artists who happen to have chosen games as their medium, and whose genius, like that of great film directors, transcends the limitations of the commercial industry (Baumann 2007b, 177). Later in the debate, independent game developers who work solo or in smaller teams, such as Jason Rohrer, also come to exemplify the possibilities of game authorship outside of the mainstream industry (see Chapter Five).

In addition to countering charges of commercialism and immaturity, these author figures are also used to counter Ebert's suggestion that interactivity weakens authorial control in games, preventing them from becoming true art. There are two approaches to this objection. Some adopt the strategy of denying that games are truly interactive, thus reinforcing the notion that authorial control is central to true art. In spite of the unique modes of engagement in games, the author creates "everything that there is to be beheld [sic]" (Sean Weitner quoted in "The Art of the Game 2"), and predicts every possible pathway through the game ("Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies"). Alternatively, others attempt to reframe interactivity as aesthetically valid (like the medium specificity arguments described above), redefining authorship for games in terms of world-building and designing rule systems that enable the player's free agency, rather than total control (Chayka). Along these lines, game scholar Noah Wardrip-Fruin suggests that games are made up of "author-crafted processes" that represent a unique, medium-specific form of authorial

expression he calls "expressive processsing" (3-4). Authorship is thus mobilized in a variety of ways to support different ideas of games-as-art, all bounded within established notions of the author-artist as primary creative agent.

Exemplification

Many people arguing for games-as-art immediately point out that games include artistic elements, focusing on the creative labour that goes into producing the various discrete parts that make up a game — especially audiovisual assets like character models, music, and environments. This approach, however, is limited, given that Ebert openly acknowledges the potential for audiovisual beauty in games, but argues other media like film and painting easily surpass games on this front. A less common but observable trend in arguments for games-as-art combines aspects of both alignment and differentiation, arguing that games are not only equal in status and value to other art forms, but in fact represent the union and apotheosis of all art. This strategy of legitimation can also be found in the Wagnerian opera ideal of *gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of art" and some early theories of film, which saw the new medium as a hybrid of everything that came before (Paulin, 59). Among the art forms subsumed into games in these arguments are visual art, sculpture, film, music, and literature (Burch) — with the added feature of interactivity to complete the "perfect union" (Crislip). In her TED talk, Kellee Santiago boldly announces games will become "bigger and better" than radio, film, and television combined (*TEDxUSC - Kellee Santiago - 3/23/09* 2009), although in this case she is tellingly referring not only to aesthetics but also to economics.

The Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein made similar arguments about film. According to Noël Carroll, Eisenstein understood montage (the juxtaposition of filmic elements

to produce new meanings) to be the essence of art and culture, and saw cinema as the exemplary medium of montage, and the logical end point of a long historical process. Montage for Eisenstein was not unique to film, but represented "the most articulate and pronounced specification of the montage principle that governs all the arts" (Carroll 2003, 135). An analogue to this argument can be found in arguments that identify storytelling and emotional impact as the essential features of art, and position digital games as "inherently superior to more limited forms of exposition" (Sakey), an exemplary medium that improves on its "static" predecessors by making stories more dynamic and "experiential" for the audience ("Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies"; Chayka). For some, games do more than exemplify — they transcend art entirely, and are deserving of distinct status above and beyond traditional cultural categories (D.A. comment on Ebert 2010b). Needless to say, this strategy does not allow for the possibility that the emergence of digital games is anything less than epochal (which is somewhat ironic, given how often these arguments have historically been used to legitimate other cultural forms).

Populism

A very different way of addressing the barriers to digital games becoming legitimate art is to ignore the rarified canons of established art history and the institutional Art World entirely, and instead situate games within the history and aesthetics of folk, popular or mass art. One of the first academics to develop an explicit argument for digital games as an art form is the influential media theorist Henry Jenkins, in a 1998 essay titled "Art Form for the Digital Age," later republished in 2005 as "Games, the New Lively Art." In response to Kroll and Ebert's objections, Jenkins draws on cultural critic Gilbert Seldes' 1920s studies of popular culture in order to extend his notion of the "lively arts" to digital games. Writing in an era when most

intellectuals condemned popular culture for its crass commercialism and technological modes of production, Seldes argued that popular arts such as cinema, jazz, and comic strips were more democratic and authentic than the "bogus" high and middlebrow art forms, deeply embedded in everyday life and uniquely able to capture the vitality of contemporary urban experience (Jenkins 2005). For Seldes and Jenkins, entertainment isn't the problem with popular art; rather, the denigration of entertainment is the problem with high art. As Brian McKernan argues, most narratives of games-as-art do not challenge the simplistic hierarchical binary of mere entertainment versus serious art (3), and Jenkins' populist argument is in part a response to this problem.

Jenkins suggests that just as earlier forms of popular culture exemplified modernity for Seldes, digital games have the potential to be the exemplary art form of the current digital age, in which computers are so central to everyday life. Jenkins sees the institutional Art World, and attempts to sublimate games into its contexts, as "arid and stuffy […] lifeless and pretentious" compared to the creative energy found in mainstream commercial games (2005). While noting that the fun, active and often silly engagement produced by digital games seems at odds with stereotypical notions of art, Jenkins argues that these things should be central to the art-ness of games, rather than something to be apologized for or purged — like other popular arts, they should challenge the stultified, disinterested conception of art with their vitality.[8] Croal echoes this argument, criticizing Ebert for refusing to acknowledge the possibility of "art that is entertaining or entertainment that is artful."

The populist argument is grounded in the idea that digital games can challenge and change conceptions of art, or even represent an entirely new and different kind of art, rather than

8   This argument echoes Berleant and Dewey, whose aesthetic philosophies are discussed in the preceding chapter.

attempting to situate games within existing forms and conventions of art. Frank Lantz expresses

this idea with much enthusiasm, arguing that the "wildness" of games and their dangerous

"indomitability" should be central to any conception of games as art. Games in this conception

present an important challenge to conventional aesthetics. Like the Fluxus artists who embraced

games for their low cultural status (Pearce 2010), for populists like Jenkins there is an explicitly

political dimension to this project. Ascribing aesthetic value and legitimacy to digital games as

popular art challenges dominant cultural, social, economic and political hierarchies. In rejecting

institutionally-sanctioned forms of art in favour of popular culture, this legitimation strategy

circumvents many of the potential problems and barriers faced by other arguments that attempt

to fit games into the established Art World or vice versa; additionally, the popular culture

argument effectively *redeems* the historically low status of games, which becomes the locus of

their aesthetic value and cultural legitimacy (Beaty 2012, 47). Rather than dismantling cultural

hierarchies and common ideas about art, they are inverted — as an exemplary form of popular

art, games are elevated and juxtaposed against the limiting imagination of the institutional Art

World and its (apparently) clear-cut borders and definitions.

Dismissal

Another of the most common discursive moves in the games-as-art debate is to dismiss it

outright. As noted above, most scholars and intellectual-enthusiast critics react to the popular

debate with eye-rolling and derision, bemoaning the persistence of "the dumb question" (Bogost,

Nitsche & Sharp), the lack of popular recognition that art is not a fixed concept (Preston), or

simply arguing that it is largely irrelevant because *truly* artistic games transgress established

boundaries anyway (Montfort & Consalvo, 86). In spite of its admonition that serious enthusiasts

and intellectuals ignore the debate (Preston), this position of dismissal is a significant contribution to its structure, as it serves to set the sophisticated writer or speaker above such petty popular discourse, establishing parameters for what counts as legitimate engagement with questions of aesthetics.

Many gaming fans adopt a similar position in forum posts and blog comments, but from the opposite perspective, arguing that games should simply be entertaining and that discussions of games and art are at best irrelevant, and at worst "retarded" (Neuman), rejecting the art label and complaining that "games are supposed to be fun, not art" (see, for example, the forum discussion in Jexhius). Some question why fans even care what people think of their hobby (Peter comment on Baker), while others make the well-worn argument that discussions of art are ultimately frivolous, because art is simply a matter of personal opinion (Ashcraft). Commenter Hamster Poop's less eloquent but equally plaintive cry of "WHO FUCKING CARES? Are games art? Are they not art? Who cares? Just shut the fuck up and play the games," reflects a similar exasperation (comment on Ashcraft). Charges of pretentious posturing and affectation are a recurring feature (Lunchbox post in Jexhius; codcommander), as are variations on the embittered theme of "if X is considered art, then art is meaningless anyway." An archetypal example is a comment from Lemcott87, in which a picture of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* urinal is posted with the note "Trust me. Games are art" (comment on Ashcraft). Elsewhere Andy Warhol's pop art ("Wherefore Art?"), modernist action-painting (F comment on Ebert 2010b), and gallery exhibitions of motorcycles (Yellow5 post in BNice) take on the role of The Preposterous Art Object That Proves Art Is Bunk. Like the scholars and critics cited above, these gamers are discursively exercising distinction, setting themselves apart from their foolish peers who get caught up in the debate, and mocking the pretentious elite that deludes themselves into

caring about the nonsense that is art.

Conclusion

After 2010, true to his word, Ebert stayed out of discussions of games and art, although he remains an inescapable presence in the popular discourse. His death in April 2013 inspired further commentary and responses to his earlier position, but with considerably less vitriol — there were more insults and some celebratory grave-dancing, but most commenters expressed sadness and respect. Ebert was eulogized on numerous gaming websites, and held up as a worthy, even *necessary* opponent, however misguided. Journalist Chay Close, among others, optimistically praised the critic for his unintentional positive influence on gaming culture:

> our focus moved away from meaningless definitions and finger-pointing and toward the possibility that Ebert was right. We were considering his questions as legitimate arguments and phrasing our responses with a clarity previously reserved for little but congratulatory navel-gazing. (2013)

In spite of his withdrawal from the debate, Ebert's comments about games are still regularly cited in accounts of games-as-art, suggesting that without Ebert playing the role of the lovable cartoon devil on the shoulder of games-as-art, the emergent art worlds for digital games might look very different.

On all sides of the debate, participants are motivated by deeply held beliefs about art and aesthetics. What is taken for granted in colloquial discussions of art? The cultural objections (commercialism, entertainment, immaturity, media effects, and interactivity) and legitimation strategies (alignment, medium specificity, authorship, exemplification, and populism) surveyed above collectively represent a particular, dominant conception of art — or, more accurately, a set of dominant aesthetic concerns that are reworked and responded to in different ways, by different

people, for different reasons. This popular aesthetic paradigm is not equivalent to the ideas that

circulate in the institutional Art World, and in many ways is actively positioned *against*

contemporary academic and critical notions of art and aesthetics, which in turn regard popular

aesthetic discourse as outmoded and banal. However, these everyday notions of art persist in

shaping cultural frameworks (Beaty 2012, 7). The tacit aesthetic consensus and socially accepted

language employed in the games-as-art debate are rooted in a specific history, and are the

product of the ongoing interactions in complex social assemblages. Critic Jim Preston aptly

describes "the dominant aesthetic posture of contemporary American society" as "a kind of

mainstream Romanticism provided by Rock 'n Roll," a colloquial derivation of the aesthetic

regime that Larry Shiner argues is a historically contingent social institution that only relatively

recently prevailed in the wake of the Enlightenment (Shiner, 3).

This chapter demonstrates that popular conceptions of art are centrally concerned with

authorship and provenance, particularly where commerce and industry are concerned, which has

resulted in a very particular notion of the commercial artist-auteur who has mastered his (and it is

almost always a "him") chosen medium and who works within a popular, commercial idiom but

is not co-opted by its machinations (see the following chapter for a more detailed analysis of this

construction). Art, in this common sense conception, should entertain but also transcend "mere"

entertainment, operating at a disinterested remove from its material context, evaluated according

to a broad, quasi-Romantic ideal of creativity and personal vision, as well as distinctive style and

emotional affect, especially where narrative works are concerned. Given the extent to which this

paradigm has permeated contemporary cultural discourse, it is difficult to articulate a truly

alternative or oppositional aesthetic without reifying the same binaries and hierarchies (see

Chapter 5 for a specific example of this problem).

The Ebert affair, and other events and debates around the same time, produced a highly

public crisis of legitimacy for games, which has played out across a wide range of contexts. In

spite of the common notion that struggles for artistic recognition and legitimacy are "outdated

and superfluous" in the wake of the twentieth century (Groys, 15), Baumann argues that:

> the distinction between art and non-art is still with us, and it is still a powerful
> distinction. We have become more catholic in our ideas of what constitutes art, but
> we have not lost our sense of the potency and authority of art. (2007b, 51)

It is this persistent power and authority that makes the arguments discussed here and throughout

this dissertation — however "dumb" they may be — culturally and historically significant. As

tempting as it is to dismiss the whole thing as petty nonsense, the debate precipitated by Ebert's

off-handed remarks matters (Bauman 2007b, 2). It matters not in terms of its outcome, or in the

answer to its central question, "are games art?" but in the social-material contours of emerging

art world assemblages, and the ways it has continued to shape the discourses and practices that

work to produce games as legitimate art. Only by attending to specific contexts can this process

be properly understood (Wolff, 108), and in the remaining chapters I hope to illuminate some of

the specific sites where games are being constructed as art, and how ideas of games-as-art are

transforming in the wake of the popular debate.

Chapter 4 — Prestige Games: *Bioshock*

"The fact that I can even toss around phrases like 'art' and 'choice is an illusion' with a straight face should tell you something […] Games don't normally warrant the kind of discussions I've had about BioShock. This is something special." (Molloby)

The digital game industry has grown from a niche entrepreneurial pursuit into a multi-billion dollar commercial enterprise, and a central player in the conglomerated and convergent contemporary media and entertainment industry. Along with this growth has come increasing visibility and social acceptance of gaming as a pastime, resulting in a diversification of its market and products (Juul 2012, 7-8). Big-budget "AAA" blockbusters with 300-person development teams stand alongside smaller, digitally-distributed titles, massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs), family-oriented party games, as well as "casual" web and mobile games in the carefully synergized portfolios of developer-publisher-distributor corporations like Electronic Arts, Take-Two Interactive, Activision Blizzard, and Ubisoft. In spite of this expansion of the market, the industry relies on established genre and gameplay formulas, pre-sold series and franchise properties, and emulation of previous successes to ensure maximum returns, particularly in its AAA offerings. This can be seen as a conservative, anti-creative tendency, but it is important to note that, as in other media industries, variation is also essential for product differentiation and marketability (Sicart, 151-152). The products of the mainstream game industry (and their marketing), must balance the commercial imperatives of novelty and familiarity in order to be successful (Burden & Gouglas), and achieving this balance is never easy, whether the game is a AAA first-person shooter or an iPhone colour-matching puzzle.

In this chapter, I will examine some of the ways that games produced in this commercial context have been constructed as legitimate art. Taking *Bioshock* (2007) as my primary example,

I am particularly interested in what I call "prestige games," big-budget AAA titles intended to sell millions of copies, but which are granted special status and are understood to transcend mere entertainment. I contend that prestige games serve to exemplify mainstream games, legitimating the whole industry as art through their (comparatively) high cultural status. Taking advantage of the new opportunity space produced by the increasing prominence of gaming and the expansion of the industry described above, these "triple-A art games" (Statt) constitute an exclusive canon that has distinction from other beloved favourites and bestsellers, bringing prestige and acclaim to the product, its developers, its consumers, and the industry at large. "Prestige games" thus has an intentional double meaning — on the one hand, I am discussing games that produce and circulate cultural prestige, while on the other I am discussing what James F. English calls "the game of prestige," a game played "at every point and position" on the cultural field, in which diverse actors cooperate and compete for cultural and material rewards (11).

Historically, according to Western paradigms, legitimate art is supposed to be produced at a distance from the corrupting logic of the marketplace, and artists are supposed to seek symbolic, not economic, capital (Baumann 2007b, 86). Of course, as I argue in Chapter Two, this has never really been true; art has always been bound up in other systems of value than the "pure" disinterested aesthetic, and the recognition of Hollywood films, pop music, and the products of other industries as legitimate art in spite of their commercial function would seem to have overturned this paradigm. Nevertheless, the conditions of commercial media production are still seen to be less amenable to categorization as art than more "independent" modes of production (Baumann 2007b, 9). Commercial, popular, and "mass" art occupies an uncomfortable position in relation to dominant conceptions of art, and to seek aesthetic legitimacy within this context is an ongoing process of negotiation. As such, an art world must assemble around a prestige text

like *Bioshock* that differentiates it from other commercial products, striking an unsteady balance between art and commerce and generating a cultural and economic profit.

A useful parallel can be drawn between my critical construction of "prestige games" and analogous forms in other media. Oscar-baiting Hollywood event films like *Crash* and *Argo*, critically-acclaimed "smart" TV shows like *30 Rock* and *Mad Men*, and genre-blending pop stars like Lady Gaga and Kanye West are understood to represent the best the industry has to offer, and elevate the production and consumption of its products through their prestigious status, while operating fully within the forms and conventions of that industry and culture. Baumann notes that a certain set of aesthetic criteria are commonly associated with this kind of commercial prestige text, including formal and stylistic beauty (with a particular emphasis on the visual), perfection, combination, or innovation of established conventions, the communication of meaningful messages, and personal expression or vision, usually of individual author/artist figures (2007b, 66). In this chapter I will demonstrate how analogous criteria are applied to prestige games like *Bioshock*. Discussing Hollywood prestige pictures of the studio era, Baumann suggests that major film corporations were "interested in making a certain proportion of their films of higher technical quality, with respectable themes, and often linked to well-known works in other genres," such as big-budget literary and biblical epics with long running times and lavish, polished sound and images (2007b, 92). These films were intended to attract wide audiences and demonstrate, in the face of moral panic and low public esteem, that Hollywood was a respectable and proper industry, by aligning popular cinema with more prestigious art forms and institutions (93). The parallel to digital games' public image is clear, with prestige games serving to counter arguments against games-as-art, as well as threats of censorship and moral panic.

Newman and Levine argue that in many cases, legitimacy for some kinds of texts is achieved only through the exclusion and denigration of other kinds of texts (2). Soap operas and reality programs, as well as most older TV shows, continue to be scoffed at as feminized mass culture while contemporary, masculinized primetime or premium cable dramas like *The Sopranos* are elevated to the status of art (5). This process, they contend, has reinforced rather than challenged established hierarchies of class and gender: "Convergence-era television is masculinized, it is of a higher and more elite class, it is sophisticated and adult (rather than simplistic and juvenile), but still youthfully hip and cool" (36). For those invested in the idea of popular film, television, or games as an art form, the newfound respect and status promised by prestige texts is a long-awaited victory (3), and among critics and scholars, prestige texts are greeted with joy, relief, and even surprise, reflecting a dissatisfaction with the bulk of the entertainment industry's output. Distinctions and hierarchies within cultural forms are thus just as important as the relative status of different forms, with Oscar movies, HBO shows, and prestige games elevated above other, apparently less worthy texts (Newman & Levine, 6).

Feminist game scholars including Aubrey Anable and John Vanderhoef have clearly demonstrated that AAA "core" games are defined negatively against casual and mobile games, which are framed as feminine and frivolous, or simply denied status as "real" games, let alone games-as-art (2013). Prestige games, as AAA titles, are similarly masculinized in relation to casual games, but are also distanced from other core games in terms of their sophistication and maturity — implicitly denigrating other games as juvenile and less mature, setting up one form of hegemonic masculinity against another. These distinctions are precisely those that have denigrated popular media for so long in the first place, associating them with the "bad" qualities of passivity, feminine domesticity, and juvenile, crassly commercial (even dangerous), lowbrow

mass entertainment (Newman & Levine, 3). Furthermore, the special status ascribed to prestige texts belies the fact that they represent just one of many business strategies in a media industry that taps as many different markets as possible in order to remain profitable (Newman & Levine, 22) — indeed, prestige texts *require* other kinds of texts in order for their distinction to be meaningful (Bourdieu, 58). Prestige texts can therefore be understood as complex and multifaceted actors in entangled assemblages of actors, discourses, and practices rather than monolithic works of genius, serving different sometimes paradoxical functions in different contexts.

Different prestige games achieve their status in different ways, and in this chapter I will focus on *Bioshock* as an in-depth case study of how certain kinds of games represent important sites for the legitimation of digital games as art, occasionally referencing other examples for comparison. *Bioshock* has been heralded as "the definitive step of mainstream games toward the artistic and expressive capacities of media like cinema, [and] one of the most significant examples of what the mainstream game industry understand*s* as a game that pushes the boundaries of game design expression, targeting mature computer game players" (Sicart, 152). In what follows, I hope to demonstrate exactly how *Bioshock* has come to embody this exemplifying role.

Bioshock *Overview*

Bioshock is without question a AAA game, developed by a large studio with a huge budget, funded and distributed by a major publisher, released on high-end gaming hardware, heavily marketed to a "core gamer" demographic, and intended become a blockbuster and sell millions of copies. Developed by Irrational Games between roughly 2002 and 2007 (IG Admin), it was

first pitched to publisher Take-Two Interactive's 2K Games branch in 2005, which subsequently

acquired Irrational and funded the production (Murdoch). This lengthy production process,

during which *Bioshock* underwent many revisions (*Bioshock - Making Of*), and a 5.5 million

dollar marketing and promotion campaign "designed to help it overcome a lack of previous

brand awareness" (Aldred & Greenspan, 485) resulted in a high degree of pre-release hype,

especially after the first in-game footage was shown at the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo

(E3) and it began making the rounds on the game industry convention circuit ("E3 06: BioShock

Gameplay Demo Impressions").

    Bioshock is built on a heavily-modified version of the Unreal Engine (a near-ubiquitous

software toolkit for developing 3D games), and combines first-person shooter (FPS) gameplay

with some role-playing game (RPG) elements, including a variety of customizable weapons and

special magic-like powers and enhancements called plasmids purchased with collectible genetic

material called "Adam." The game is set in 1960, and the player takes the role and perspective of

Jack, who is stranded by a plane crash in a crumbling, leaky underwater city at the bottom of the

Atlantic called Rapture. Founded and built in the 1940s by a disillusioned titan of industry

named Andrew Ryan, Rapture was intended to be a free-market capitalist utopia for the best and

brightest in the world, but has fallen from grace after a civil war precipitated by Ryan's business

rival Frank Fontaine. The city is now primarily populated by violent, genetically-modified

junkies called "splicers," creepy young girls called "little sisters" who are tasked (for convoluted

narrative reasons) with harvesting Adam from corpses, and "big daddies," hulking mechanically-

and genetically-enhanced guards that protect the little sisters. Over the course of the game, the

player must navigate the shadowy, retro-futuristic Art Deco halls of Rapture, fending off various

types of splicers, defeating big daddies, and choosing whether to "harvest" or "save" the little

sisters, killing them in exchange for a large amount of Adam, or freeing them for a small amount of Adam and the promise of future rewards (either choice ultimately results in roughly the same amount of Adam by the end of the game).

Much of the game's story is told through "environmental storytelling" or "embedded narrative" (Jenkins 2004), as the player gradually uncovers what happened to Rapture in the course of exploring the game world, through radio communication from non-player characters and collectible audio diaries that reveal both important plot information and flesh out the history of the city and its inhabitants. Guided via radio by an apparent ally named Atlas, in the first act the player must fight through the ruins in hopes of rescuing Atlas' family and escaping to the surface; in the second act, with any hope of escape squashed by Andrew Ryan's murder of Atlas' family, the player becomes an agent of revenge, until it is revealed in a twist that Atlas is in fact Ryan's arch-rival Frank Fontaine, and Jack has been genetically engineered from Ryan's DNA and brainwashed to obey Fontaine's commands. Jack's whole life, all of his memories, and his decisions thus far have been an illusion designed to compel him to assassinate Ryan. In a final, suicidal act of defiance, Ryan forces Jack to murder him in a non-interactive sequence, and in the third and final act of the game the player must overcome Fontaine's mind control and finally destroy him. The game concludes with a brief epilogue that reveals one of three possible fates for Jack, depending on how the player has treated the little sisters.

Matthew Jason Weise situates *Bioshock* as part of a particular strain in the history of first-person game design, demonstrating that it has a common history with Looking Glass Games' *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*, pointing to their similarly hostile dystopian settings, the incorporation of RPG-style upgrades in the form of physical or bio-mechanical augmentation (152), and the use a silent protagonist and fictional audio recordings for storytelling (153). The

fact that *Bioshock* writer and creative director Ken Levine worked for Looking Glass on *Thief: The Dark Project* before moving on to found Irrational Games with two other former Looking Glass developers further links these games together (Weise, 153). Both *Thief* and Irrational's first game *System Shock 2* are widely considered to be classics that defined the stealth/action hybrid genre as a more "intelligent" and "strategic" (and thus more sophisticated) alternative to action-oriented shooters ("The Making Of: System Shock 2"), and *Bioshock is* understood to be part of this lineage (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 194). In particular, it is frequently identified in both official paratexts and popular discourse as the "spiritual successor" to *System Shock 2* (Park; *Bioshock - Making Of*; Murdoch), itself a "forgotten gem" overshadowed by more popular games like *Half-Life* (DeAngelus).

Bioshock* was initially released in August 2007 as a one-year "timed exclusive" for Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Windows platforms (Aldred & Greenspan, 485), and was later ported to Sony's PlayStation 3 and Mac OS. Since its release, it has sold approximately 4.14 million units ("BioShock Global Total"). The game was met with rave reviews, and in spite of occasional complaints about the game's low difficulty level compared to its predecessors, bugs and technical glitches, and its abrupt ending, the game was almost universally acclaimed in the mainstream gaming press, including numerous 9 and 10/10 scores, stamps of approval in the form of "Editor's Choice" and "Game of the Year" awards on various websites, and high rankings on best-of-2007 lists. The game was also cited in many responses to Roger Ebert's 2010 comments, as noted in Chapter Three. Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan point out "BioShock was also conceived as converged content from the start—specifically, as a franchise that would hybridize the FPS and RPG genres, and span multiple games as well as a feature-length film" (485). Although the film project floundered in "development hell" for several years and was later

cancelled (Corriea), collector's editions, merchandise and tie-ins, alternate-reality games (ARG) and viral marketing, as well as two more *Bioshock* games, have borne out this franchise potential. More recently, *Bioshock* has also been included in a number of institutional exhibitions, including The Smithsonian American Art Museum's *The Art of Video Games*, at which Levine was an invited guest speaker.

I contend that *Bioshock* — not as an isolated object, but as part of a heterogeneous assemblage — constitutes a canonical text that serves as a catalyst for discourse, a common reference point in a much broader discussion. *Bioshock* has been taken up so extensively that people writing about the game frequently make self-deprecating or ironic remarks about just how incessantly the game is referenced (Anderson 2009). Jonathan Lupo suggests "the 'power' in determining canonical texts is diffuse; critics, academics, and even the public [not to mention the industry and the makers themselves] all have a 'say'" (20), and so my analysis of the cultural and critical reception of *Bioshock* includes a diverse array of sources, ranging from "official" paratextual materials such as press releases, "behind the scenes" features, and interviews, to popular discourse in the form of journalism and reviews, to institutional discourse and more self-reflexively intellectual criticism and academic writing. After an overview of the textual features most commonly praised in *Bioshock* reviews and criticism, I will discuss how authorship and the notion of "having something to say" have been used to elevate the game as a legitimate work of popular art. The chapter will conclude by situating *Bioshock* historically, in relation to changes in the game industry and gaming culture more generally.

Constructing *Bioshock* as Art

Much of the overwhelmingly positive reception of *Bioshock*, derives from the sense that it

is an all-encompassing work, successful in all its aspects — the game is praised for its innovative gameplay, its distinctive style and setting, and its complex narrative and themes. Leading up to its release, *Bioshock* was framed first and foremost as an innovative, "kick-ass shooter." Journalist Julian Murdoch wryly observes, after a visit to Irrational's studio, "*BioShock* is (as both Levine, the PR people, and the designers reminded me every 20 minutes), a first person shooter." Weise argues *Bioshock*'s innovation is less about challenging conventions, and more about executing established conventions in particularly effective, clever or novel ways (153). As noted above, the concept of innovation is central to AAA game production and reception, but given the commercial imperatives of the industry, innovation is necessarily grounded in previously-successful formulas, and according to Murdoch, 2K wanted it to be strongly identified as a first-person shooter to avoid potentially risky ambiguity about the game's genre in its marketing and promotion.

In the "Making Of" featurettes included with the *Bioshock* collector's edition, Irrational creative director and CEO Ken Levine talks about streamlining their design throughout the long development process to focus on "the heart of the shooter" and trim away unnecessary distractions (*Bioshock - Making Of*). Significantly, Levine says the story and fictional world were developed later in the process, through several iterations, to complement the desired style of gameplay (*Bioshock - Making Of*). Elsewhere, Levine boldly claims that *Bioshock* will "redefine what it means to be a first-person shooter" and "put a stake in the heart of all those [FPS game] clichés" (*BioShock: Developer Commentary*), highlighting the game's elaborate AI ecology and possibilities for emergent gameplay (Park). *System Shock 2*, though a cult hit, had only modest sales, and so it is unsurprising that *Bioshock* — a risky project, given its AAA budget and lack of franchise affiliation (Aldred & Greenspan, 485) — is discursively distanced from its

predecessor's more inaccessible aspects, and in particular its genre hybridity. Reviewers and

critics have enthusiastically taken up this careful categorization, assuring consumers that

regardless of what else *Bioshock* might be, it fulfils the exacting demands of the "hardcore

gamer" for an "intelligent" and "inventive" AAA first-person shooter (Reed). Its overall

greatness is said to derive from its firm foundation in the core game genre (Graduate School

Gamer 2008), and it "makes no qualms about its pedigree as a shooter" ("GameTrailers

BioShock Review"). This language of "cores" and "hearts" and "foundations" has been crucial to

Bioshock's commercial and critical success, imagining it as a layered work that doesn't

compromise on entertainment value and gamer credibility (Gerstmann).

In spite of this focus on gameplay, the "gloss and glorious attention to detail" (Reed) in

excess of the core is equally important to *Bioshock*'s status, setting it apart from other popular

first-person shooters. Members of the *Bioshock* development team discuss the importance

making the game environments ostentatious and rich to reflect the lofty ambitions of the

underwater society, rather than purely utilitarian (*Bioshock - Making Of*), and the resulting

"steampunk" pastiche of Art Deco architecture, film noir tropes, and American pop culture of the

1930s to 1950s is repeatedly showcased as a way of elevating the game above less remarkable

shooters (Sands; DeAngelus), aligning it with other canonical prestige games like *Half Life 2* and

Shadow of the Colossus (deckard47), and justifying its categorization as art (Tavinor 2009a, 92;

Onyett). The sound in *Bioshock* is given much more attention than is common in popular

discourse about games, with reviewers praising the audio design for adding depth and

atmosphere to the murky environments (DeAngelus; Reed). Musicologist William Gibbons

extends this to the game's soundtrack, and in particular its incorporation of vintage popular

songs, which he suggests reinforces the historical setting and provides subtle ironic commentary

on the action.

Bioshock's audiovisual style is inextricably linked in the game's marketing and reception to the city of Rapture's internal coherence, believability, and explorability (Linde). According to the developers, Irrational was aiming for a total simulation of a self-contained world, and as such tried to give all gameplay mechanics and elements a fictional motivation within that world — "Vita-Chambers" built by Rapture's engineers, for example, act as teleporters and respawn points (*Bioshock - Making Of*). One critic argues that Rapture is more than just believable: it "draws you in because it isn't just a game location. No, instead it's absolutely real. When you're playing BioShock, you are IN Rapture" (O'Dell). Other games, these comments imply, feature worlds that are nothing more than banal, unimaginative "game locations," but *Bioshock* is different, special, real. In interviews, Levine stresses that a "believable" world can make or break a game, but that games should strive to reflect a particular perspective on that world: "a great director, like Coppola or even better, Ridley Scott — [has] a point of view on the world, and he sees things a certain way" (quoted in Perry). Ewan Kirkland argues that discussions of form and audiovisual aesthetics in mainstream games often function to align them with more established art forms, by highlighting cinematic atmosphere or painterly style and thus enabling direct aesthetic comparisons (320). Levine's emphasis on a unique perspective and style positions *Bioshock* against the photorealism found in other AAA titles, and allows Levine to align himself with well-regarded popular-auteur film directors known for their combination of gritty realism and audiovisual stylization (a point to which I will return below).

Bioshock cuts across several genres, but it draws significant inspiration from survival horror games like *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*, and its predecessors in the *System Shock* series. Its horror elements are taken up enthusiastically by critics, who link the game's horrific impact to its

evocative world-building (Murdoch). This is also framed in terms of the developers' mastery and control over the game's design and environment: "If you're confused, you're meant to be confused. If your hands are shaking a little when you fumble for a light switch in the game, ditto" (Reyes). Survival horror is something of a privileged genre in digital games (Kirkland), but *Bioshock* is doubly privileged by critics who position its horror as restrained, intellectual, and psychological, against the "cheap" gore and startle-scares of lesser horror games, making it "a mesmerizing masterpiece of horror" (Barratt). In film and other media, psychological or sociallly-conscious "horror from within" is understood to represent a more sophisticated and aesthetically worthy form of horror (McKibbin, 51). Leigh Alexander writes, "The sense of deep dread one experiences playing the game, the revulsion, the strange blend of pity and disgust arises from the humiliation and the fear we feel at seeing our own selves advanced to this eventuality" (2007b) — this is not ordinary fear, but a deep existential horror reserved for serious art.

Of all the stylistic features associated with *Bioshock*, nothing has more consistently been isolated for praise in its pre-release hype and reception than its water effects (Tavinor 2009a, 92). This is seen to be a major technical step forward in rendering dynamic liquid in 3D game environments (Linde; "GameTrailers BioShock Review"), and was a stated goal of the development team, who sought to constantly remind the player that they are deep underwater (*Bioshock - Making Of*). Water is cited by many reviewers and critics as central to their sense of the game's overall achievement, and is positioned as a central metaphor for its oppressive atmosphere (Gerstmann; "GameTrailers BioShock Review"). "No matter where you are, there's always the water, [...] reminding you of your precarious position within this crumbling city being crushed on all sides by an indifferent ocean" (Onyett). There is a peculiar parallel here to early

writing on film, in which writers enraptured by the medium's ability to represent the seemingly-unrepresentable complexity of water in motion frequently return to water, waves, and tides as a metaphor for cinema's emergence as an art form (Marcus, 197). EuroGamer's reviewer is astonished: "Not now. Not yet, surely? But here's BioShock in August 2007, looking for all the world like a game that's landed fully formed from a couple of years in the future" (Reed). Verisimilitude (even in highly stylized fictional world) is evidently a key component in popular conceptions of art, and *Bioshock* is held up as the coming-to-fruition of a long teleological progression towards realistic water and artistic legitimacy.[9]

Ken Levine as Commercial Auteur

Although his name is not printed above *Bioshock*'s title, Ken Levine, the writer, creative director, and co-founder of Irrational Games is an inescapable, structuring presence throughout the game's official and unofficial paratexts, presented and received as the author figure of *Bioshock* and the mastermind of Irrational's successes (and failures). Authorship in commercial contexts is fraught, especially when creative labour is distributed across a large team of people, as in the game industry, film, and other mass media (Baumann 2007b, 6). However, when French film critics began to attribute authorship to the directors of American commercial films (rather than screenwriters, cinematographers, or other workers) in the 1950s they "provided a model for the attribution of artistry and intentionality to collaborative works, particularly those that are products of so-called mass culture" (Beaty 2012, 84). This model ran counter to contemporary mass culture critiques (see Chapter Three) and the more general move *away* from the concept of authorship in other cultural fields, exemplified by Roland Barthes' famous essay on the "death"

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9   Another prestige game, *Heavy Rain* (2010), has a similar focus on realistic water effects.

of the author (Gray 2013, 90). The popularization of the *"politique des auteurs"* in film criticism, however, has had far-reaching implications. With its subsequent importation to North America as "auteur theory" in the work of Andrew Sarris and other critics, authorship has become a recurring feature in attempts to intellectualize works of popular culture and confer upon them the status of art (Newman & Levine, 9). As enthusiast cultures develop around previously anonymous cultural industries, fans, critics, and scholars invest significant discursive energy in identifying and canonizing individual workers who fit the role of the artist (Beaty 2012, 74).

I contend that, although Irrational Games had an established fanbase, it is in the course of the development, promotion, and reception of *Bioshock* that Ken Levine is made into an identifiable author figure in the mainstream game industry. As in other media industries, authors in this context are figures of compromise, and so Levine is constructed simultaneously as a visionary writer (Bissell 2013), a clever game designer (Park), a thoughtful critic (Gillen 2007b), a nerdy fan (Lahti), and a savvy businessman (Murdoch). Jonathan Gray proposes that authorship "clusters" not only around the production process, but around marketing, packaging, reviews, and criticism as well, and it is through these and other paratextual materials that most audiences encounter the authorship of popular texts (2013, 102), which encourages a particular mode of reception and discourse (Newman & Levine, 40). *Bioshock* is framed by its paratexts as Levine's "magnum opus" ("Eurogamer Readers' Top 50 Games of 2007"; Murdoch) and a work of "genuine talent and vision" on his part (Reed). Critic Tom Bissell, an ardent supporter of the game, claims it is "a great work of art" and attributes this to the fact that it was created by a strong individual (2011, 35), and elsewhere compares meeting Levine to meeting the archetypal Hollywood auteur, *Citizen Kane* director Orson Welles (Bissell 2013).

Contemporary conceptions of authorship encourage the attribution of authorship to an

individual, rather than a collaborating team (Newman & Levine, 53). Levine reacts with modest embarrassment when the auteur label is raised in interviews (Gilbert), but in practice he embraces the role throughout the development and promotion of *Bioshock*. He is the figurehead and primary voice of Irrational Games, giving extensive interviews, making public appearances at gaming conventions like E3 and the Game Developers Conference (GDC), narrating gameplay previews, and featuring prominently in behind-the-scenes features. Levine doesn't mince words about his authority: "This is my game, and I love the fact that we [the Irrational team] sit down and chat with each other, but at the end of the day [...] this thing's gotta be my decision" (quoted in Gilbert). When other members of the development team speak about the game, even the most senior workers, such as lead programmer Chris Kline, discuss their contributions in terms of executing Levine's overall artistic vision (*Bioshock - Making Of*), ensuring that his authorship is continually reasserted, a pattern Gray observes in the paratexts of other popular media as well (2010, 99-100).

Levine's involvement as writer and creative director on both *System Shock 2* and *Bioshock* reinforces their "spiritual successor" connection, situating *Bioshock* within a broader oeuvre (a common strategy for articulating authorship in other fields). Murdoch, for example, sees Levine's whole career as a progression leading up to *Bioshock*: "All along, deep inside the insidious mind of Levine, the goal seems always to have been BioShock." Levine's interviews support this narrative: *System Shock 2* provides the template, with its origins in *Thief: The Dark Project*, while *Freedom Force* serves to establish Levine's preoccupation with alternate worlds and totalitarian politics; even less obviously related games produced by Irrational, like the police-themed action game *SWAT 4*, are framed in terms of what they taught Levine and his team about first-person shooter mechanics, and how that experience impacted the development of

Bioshock (Murdoch). It is important to note, however, that Levine only becomes the central character in this narrative with the announcement of *Bioshock*. These other games were not previously understood to be "Ken Levine games," and Levine was more or less anonymous in the industry until the mid-2000s, his writing and creative director credits often displayed after project managers and lead programmers, and his name rarely used by fans and journalists.

The "discovery" of Levine's critically acclaimed oeuvre of cult favourites in context of the development of *Bioshock* retroactively establishes him as a key figure in the recent history of digital games, and reflects contemporary conceptions of what it means to be an author in the game industry. Levine's background is in writing for film and theatre, and throughout the discourse on *Bioshock*, Levine is presented as a visionary writer and storyteller who has chosen games as his primary medium (Murdoch; Bissell 2013). Levine describes being hired as a "game designer" at Looking Glass in the 1990s without really knowing what that meant, and adapting his experience as a writer to the job ("First Person: Ken Levine..."), and elsewhere he compares himself to the chief editor and head writer of a magazine (Gilbert). In this sense, Levine can be seen as part of more general changes in the game industry, with the locus of creative and operational authority beginning to shift towards lead designers, creative directors, writers, and other specialized roles that, in the 1990s, would have been seen as secondary to the programmers in charge of coding the game.

Although in many cases authorship is closely linked to autobiography and personal expression (Newman & Levine, 48), in the mainstream game industry this is not often the case (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of autobiography in games). *Bioshock* is understood to reflect Levine's general intellectual preoccupations, but not his life story. Reviewer Andrew Pfister suggests that to play *Bioshock* is to explore Levine's philosophical obsessions, while critic

Lorenzo Wang argues that Levine has made his "perception of reality into something real and physical so that everyone can see and participate." Murdoch compares Levine directly to Ayn Rand and other writers who use narrative as a tool to express complex philosophical ideas in a palatable form, saying that in another world he might have written a thousand-page opus, but "Instead he's making BioShock." Levine's unique authorial perspective is highlighted, but not his subjective experience of the world.

Of course, the writerly vision ascribed to Levine is only part of what has made him a successful game industry auteur: the demands of commerce dictate that he must also be a corporate executive, managing his studio and reporting to the higher-ups at publisher 2K Games. This tension, familiar from other media (especially film) is at the heart of any effort to locate authorship and artistry in popular culture, and critics situate Levine well within this tradition. According to Bissell, Levine's games "have all the trappings of a blockbuster — in terms of sparkle, budget, and scope — but if you look at all closely, you realize that what [he is] doing is actually quite strange and conceptually audacious," comparing him to acclaimed but reclusive filmmaker Terrence Malick, who has a famously arm's-length relationship with Hollywood (2013). In some interviews, Levine positions himself as a creative fish out of water: "I always look back on BioShock and think, 'I can't believe they gave us all this money to make a game about failed Objectivist utopia,' you know? It's insane" (quoted in Lahti). Despite this posturing, Murdoch calls Levine a "commercial realist" who seems able to make risky, creative ventures marketable, and Levine doesn't mince words when it comes to the commercial imperative: "We have these philosophical notions, but you've got to deliver. You gotta bring home the monsters. You gotta bring home the superpowers" (quoted in Murdoch). Elsewhere he claims that his departure from Looking Glass was in part motivated by that studio's lack of interest in making

commercially successful games ("The Making Of: System Shock 2"). Outside of game

development and promotion, a significant portion of Levine's public work is in promotion,

public relations and damage control: when frustrated PC gamers discovered that the widescreen

mode in *Bioshock* actually reduced the field of view, Levine acted as studio mouthpiece,

apologizing, explaining what happened, and promising to rectify the situation like any good

salesperson (Klepek). It is significant that when Levine compares himself to Hollywood

directors, he first mentions Francis Ford Coppola but decides Ridley Scott is a better fit (Perry).

This is a telling moment: Coppola exemplifies an older model of film authorship, a passionate,

romantic artist clashing with the industry after initial popular success, while Scott is a

commercial auteur par excellence, constructing detailed, stylish, and franchise-friendly fictional

worlds that reconcile creativity and marketability.[10]

Timothy Corrigan argues that in the post-1980s film industry the auteur is no longer an

individual at odds with the industry, subverting or exploiting it for personal expression, but a

"commercial auteur" — a construction of the industry, a self-aware star and master of both the

art and business of mainstream film production (6), combining traditional creative initiative with

corporate management (Newman & Levine, 39). Newman and Levine, discussing the rise to

prominence of the television "showrunner," point out that while in the contemporary media

industry the figure of the auteur is still in part a marker of quality, understood to bear the

responsibility for aesthetic integrity (40, 42), it is also part of a commercial strategy of product

differentiation, meaning that the author is as much a brand manager and celebrity as "lonely

genius" (54-55). Authorship occurs in specific contexts (Gray 2013, 101) and is constituted in the

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10 The developers of *Spec Ops: The Line*, another Take-Two-published prestige game inspired in part by Coppola's
   Apocalypse Now (Lejaq 2012), articulate a much more Coppola-esque narrative of having to fight the publisher
   and grudgingly make compromises in order to execute their artistic vision (Keogh 2012, 56).

manifest operations of art world assemblages. Traditionally, reducing an author figure like Levine to a person simply doing a good job within a complex profit-driven culture industry would subvert the claims to artistic authority I have outlined here, but the expansion and revision of the popular idea of authorship beyond the "guarantee of art" (Newman & Levine, 45) to include the guarantee of sales has allowed Levine-as-auteur to thrive as a fully-integrated part of the game industry.

A Game With "Something to Say"

Bioshock's narrative and thematic content is a key factor in its high cultural status compared to other AAA games, and as noted above Levine's author persona figure hinges in part on his image as a visionary storyteller. Promotional materials stress the game's depth, which the developers argue "had no real precedent" in games (*Bioshock* - *Making Of* 2007). Reviewers are forthcoming with praise for its "compelling" and "brilliantly measured" story (Linde), which stands "leagues above the current competition" (Barratt). Sicart calls the game "a relief in an entertainment form dominated by examples of poor, derivative science fiction narratives" (161). *Bioshock*'s particular mode of storytelling and its integration into the gameplay are also identified as exemplary (Herold); one critic compares *Bioshock* to another canonical game, *Half Life 2*, praising the nuance and versatility of their shared "participant-observer model of video game storytelling" in which the player navigates and interacts with narrative-rich fictional environments (Pliskin 2008a). Tavinor terms this approach "games through fiction," arguing that exemplary games like B*ioshock* (that is to say, contemporary mainstream AAA titles) are "fiction machines" that allow the player to step through a story-world in the course of play (2009a, 94-96).

Part of what sets *Bioshock* apart from the competition is the perception that it is more than just a gripping yarn — it is a sophisticated narrative with a message (Turner) and something to say about serious topics like dystopian literature, Randian objectivism, and Art Deco (Sicart, 161). For Murdoch, *Bioshock*'s hyped shooter mechanics are less important than Levine's meditations on "story, philosophy, politics, literature and the nature of being human." According to many critics, *Bioshock* encourages players to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions about these themes (Gillen 2007a). For Tavinor, the player's response is "part of the art of *Bioshock*" (2009a, 105), while Pfister argues that the game goes beyond its "core" mechanics and "expects [the player] to provide the answers to some relevant and surprisingly personal questions." The "participant-observer" style of narrative supposedly puts the onus on the player's agency (Pliskin 2008a), rewarding deep investment (Barratt). All these elements, animated through critical discourse, work together to deliver a message or experience of significance and weight. *Bioshock* thus becomes a game that matters, a game that is *about* something, and thus a game "worth talking about" (Gillen 2007a).

One of the features strongly associated with art in popular culture is emotional resonance, and the ability of a work to produce an affective response. Promotional materials for *Bioshock* discuss the importance of making an impact on the player by giving the in-game characters believable emotions (*Bioshock - Making Of* 2007). Leigh Alexander, attempting to explain the extensive critical attention given to the game, argues that *Bioshock* is exemplary of "the way games affect us emotionally, what they say about us as humans" (2007c). The relationship between the little sisters and big daddies in particular, carefully designed by Irrational to encourage sympathy (*Bioshock - Making Of*), is a frequently-cited source of pathos (Sands). Critics adopt a particularly affective language to describe this aspect of the game, juxtaposing its

its violence and sadness: "the weird whispery banter between a red-eyed Little Sister and her hulking, shadowy Big Daddy guardian gives the entire bloodbath that's about to follow a melancholic, emotive twinge" (Reyes). One reviewer admits that he wept during the ending, invoking the oft-cited (and derided) criterion for games-as-art discussed in Chapter Three (Molloby).

Playing *Bioshock*, then, is an intellectual, emotional experience for mature and thoughtful, but also hardcore, players. "Beautiful, isolating, and desolate," according to the Smithsonian *Art of Video Games* catalogue book, "*BioShock* manages to deliver an action game that forces the player into uncomfortable situations and requires him or her to think about the implications of one's actions" (Melissinos & O'Rourke, 162). This emphasis on dealing with mature subject matter within an established popular genre and respecting the player's intelligence can perhaps be linked to the ageing core male demographic for AAA games (sometimes called "the daddening of games" [Totilo 2010]), who want to keep playing the same kinds of games, but no longer wish to be seen as juvenile, and so seek greater social acceptance of their preferred pastime through appeals to maturity and realism. Prestige texts like *Bioshock*, and the sustained critical discourse that emerges around them, serve this legitimating function, "the idea being that the text is of such exceptional quality that a larger audience [beyond fans] must necessarily appreciate it" (Newman & Levine, 29). *Bioshock* is an important text for "serious" gamers, critics, and scholars, but it has also been purchased and played by millions of people, and I would argue this has enabled *Bioshock* to quickly become a touchstone in discourses of games-as-art, the game that finally proves games are "growing up" (Sofge). Bissell writes in this vein, "BioShock was the first game that made me stop and say, [...] there's not even a trace amount of shame for all the time I'm spending with this" (2010), though elsewhere he complains that the

game's intelligence is only relative, and "what passes for intellectual subject matter in a video game is still far from intellectually compelling, at least to me" (Bissell 2011, 36). Bissell's self-aggrandizing aside, it is clear that a game with "something to say" like *Bioshock* is a point of pride for those invested in mainstream gaming culture, and its canonization brings prestige to the game and the enthusiast.

Dystopia & Political Critique

Unsurprisingly, many people (scholars in particular) discuss *Bioshock* in terms of the dystopian tradition of inventing fictional societies for satire or other forms of political critique. For Aldred and Greenspan (2011), it is part of a "dystopian turn" in contemporary art and popular culture, in which zombies, societal collapse, and post-apocalyptic wastelands are dominant tropes (480). This kind of alternate-history fiction is worthy of serious attention, they suggest, because it engages real-world problems, while Lars Schmeink argues the game keeps open the possibility for radical change by demonstrating that things could have been otherwise, save for the actions and choices of individuals. In interviews and profiles, Levine shows himself to be an aficionado of dystopian literature, with repeated references to canonical dystopian novels like *Animal Farm* (Dougherty) and *1984* (Melissinos & O'Rourke), and in particular the novel and film versions of *Logan's Run*, which Levine often cites as a primary inspiration for his work (Minkley; Chalk). In aligning *Bioshock* with such well-regarded texts, critics build it up into a work of social relevance and meaning beyond itself, worthy of a specialized kind of analysis and interpretation. Part of what is notable about *Bioshock*'s reception is that it is not only read as a text that symptomatically encodes or reflects contemporary politics; it is also seen to be an intentional political statement. According to critics, the game "engages with

contemporary ethical issues and questions" like stem-cell research and scientific progress, rather than passively reflecting those issues (Melissinos and O'Rourke).

Unlike other kinds of games that are intended to make specific social or political arguments, like so-called "serious games" and "games for change," *Bioshock* must be framed as neutral enough to be widely marketable. Levine takes care to distance his work from more explicitly political games, which are implied to be overbearing and pretentious. "You don't elevate the discussion by saying 'listen to me!'" Levine argues, "You get it by saying 'look this is awesome [FPS], oh and by the way we're also talking about being a human being. We're also talking about power.'" The attractive, marketable gameplay is seen to be a kind of delivery mechanism for the game's subject matter: in this sense, the AAA prestige game purports to be both more entertaining and more effective than other kinds of "games with a message" (Ryckert). Aldred and Greenspan argue that the game is politically ambivalent, sometimes interrogating and sometimes celebrating the problematic ideas it engages (480). The potential cultural capital to be gained in addressing serious, controversial subject matter is limited by the potential loss of economic capital if the game is perceived to be coming down on one side of a divisive issue, or sacrificing entertainment for message (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 196).

Although questions about how to interpret the game come up frequently in interviews, Levine avoids imposing specific political messages on *Bioshock*, saying he is uncomfortable with the idea of making any particular statement (Dougherty), beyond encouraging people to think for themselves (Sinclair) and to be skeptical of absolute truths and ideologies in general:

> If they're about anything they're about not buying into a single point of view. About having a lack of confidence in anything. They're not ever an attack on a single idea. It's a bit of a plague on all your houses. (quoted in Lahti)

Elsewhere, Levine calls the game "a bit of a Rorschach for people," pointing out that while self-

identified objectivists found the game offensive, some leftists thought it was a pro-objectivist game, suggesting that players find their own politics reflected in the game (Lahti). Some critics dismiss Levine's strategically agnostic position, arguing that the game is much less ambiguous in its politics than he suggests (Packer, 210), but others embrace the ambiguity, arguing that this openness to interpretation in fact strengthens Bioshock's claim to artistic greatness (Murdoch; Tavinor 2009a, 95).

Nick Dyer-Witherford and Grieg de Peuter, in their influential work on the political economy of digital games, include *Bioshock* in a handful of examples of mainstream, commercial games that manage to subvert or critique the dominant ideology of Empire from within (194). For Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, the complex plots and thematic links to anti-globalism and critiques of technology found in hybrid stealth/action shooters like *Bioshock* and the *Metal Gear Solid* series make them comparatively more sophisticated and thoughtful than other AAA titles, though they remain somewhat skeptical of the possibilities for radical art within the mainstream industry (194). *Bioshock* is specifically praised for its critique of capitalist hubris, which they find notable for its avoidance of the more familiar and safe trope of the pseudo-socialist/Soviet dystopia, suggesting that in spite of its 1960s setting, it is concerned with contemporary neoliberalism (196). John Lanchester echoes this point in the *London Review of Books* (a strange venue for a game review, which speaks to *Bioshock*'s prestige status), arguing that the game presents a timely critique of Randian objectivism, free-market capitalism, and individualism in an era when these ideologies are not often subject to scrutiny. Critic Lorenzo Wang finds similarities between Andrew Ryan and Charles Foster Kane in that most canonical of films *Citizen Kane*, describing them both as characters "whose great individualism and talent led to great power, influence, and eventually ruin," while Sean Sands sees the city of Rapture

embodying a conflict over the nature of freedom and social responsibility. These philosophical and political themes — worthy subject matter for serious art in any medium — are supposedly "made vastly more complex and nuanced, by the way it is embedded within its ludic mechanisms" (Tulloch). As the subsequent sections will demonstrate, the intertwining of *Bioshock*'s message with its gameplay is of particular interest to critics.

Moral Choice

Some of the most widely discussed aspects of *Bioshock* are its moral and ethical dimensions, in context of broader questions about how morality and ethics are simulated in digital games (Sicart, 152). Around the time of *Bioshock*'s release, offering the player "moral choices" was becoming a major marketing feature and technical goal for AAA games, as well as an appropriately medium specific way of demonstrating the artistic legitimacy of games. Although this device was not new at the time, having been a feature of role-playing games like *Baldur's Gate* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, between 2006 and 2008 a slew of commercially and critically successful AAA titles were released, including *Mass Effect*, *Bioshock*, *Fallout 3*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, that renewed interest in the idea (Pliskin 2008b), and brought it to the foreground of gaming culture (Parker 2009). Tavinor writes that moral choice "is one of the most exciting developments in recent gaming" (2009a, 99), and *Bioshock* in particular became a catalyst for a far-reaching debate about the implications of this development.

Alongside "kick-ass" gameplay and the evocative fictional world, moral quandaries (and in particular the choice of whether to kill or save the Little Sisters) is central to the game's promotional discourse, which often refers to "meaningful and mature choices" (*Bioshock-*

Hunting the Big Daddy Video). Levine states that Rapture is a complex, realistic world made up of moral gray areas, in which "nobody's perfect," there are no benevolent figures like "Gandalf or Ben Kenobi" to lead the way, and everyone is "substantially flawed," leaving it up to the player to decide who to trust (*Bioshock - Making Of*). This appeal to moral complexity as a kind of realism is analogous to what Bordwell observes in modernist art cinema (722), emphasizing subjectivity and ambiguity and echoing Levine's comments about politics. It is also possible to draw a parallel between Hollywood's early attempts to placate moral panic by presenting literary adaptations and morality tales (Wasson, 10) — by purporting that the medium can animate moral and ethical quandaries in a realistic, nuanced, and most importantly interactive way, showing the consequences of the player's actions (Sicart, 154; Travis 2010, 97), *Bioshock* is set up to be an exemplar of the game industry's most noble aspirations in the face of outside criticism.

Journalists and critics are divided on whether the trend towards moral choice mechanics in mainstream games is effective or successful, and *Bioshock* has played a central role in this debate. Pseudonymous critic Iroquois Pliskin points out that art is generally expected to challenge people's sense of morality, but feels that in most cases moral choice mechanics in games are superficial (2008b). Numerous essayistic critics decry *Bioshock*'s perceived lack of follow-through, arguing that the almost-equal rewards (in the form of Adam and extra powers) for saving or murdering the Little Sisters render the moral dimension of the choice moot, because it doesn't represent a meaningful sacrifice for the player (Clarkson 2009a). One critic accuses the developers of "neutering" the mechanic (Riley), which Sicart calls a "non-choice" that serves only to "taunt" the player's values but has minimal impact on the rest of the game (160). Some critics defend the game, however, arguing that it makes a definitive moral statement, despite Levine's insistence that it is open-ended (Koo). Kieron Gillen is emphatic: "Where [other games

with moral choice systems] have teased the idea of good and evil options, pandering to your tastes, BioShock just glares at you. You killed some kids? What Kind Of Person Are You?" (2007a).

Others take a different approach, arguing that the moral choice is meaningful because of its framing within *Bioshock*'s fictional world, rather than its underlying arithmetic, and placing the onus on the player's imaginative and emotional response to that world, rather than the developers (Alexander 2007c; Pfister). Alexander suggests that "to invest in-game choices and behaviours with emotional relevance and deeper meaning can be a deliberate decision on the player's part," and goes on to say that her decision to take the "immoral" path of harvesting the Little Sisters greatly enriched her emotional experience of the game, regardless of the mechanical dimensions of that choice (2007c). In spite of the lack of consensus, the notion that games can be interactive explorations of morality is a highly-prized ideal held up as proof of mainstream games' claim to legitimacy, and is seen to be a medium-specific effect, unique to games among other art forms. Even for those that criticize *Bioshock*'s implementation of moral choice, the game is presented as a bold attempt to achieve this ideal.

The twist and "ludonarrative dissonance"

Bioshock includes a twist about two thirds of the way through, revealing that the protagonist Jack is a vat-grown sleeper agent with implanted memories, who has been mind-controlled into blindly obeying Atlas/Fontaine's orders, just as the player has blindly obeyed the instructions given (seemingly in good faith) by the game. To drive the point home, the game takes control away from the player, who is forced to watch through Jack's eyes as he in turn is forced to brutally murder Andrew Ryan. This sequence has been almost universally praised as a

memorable, defining moment in gaming history, and has in no small part helped secure *Bioshock*'s place in the canon. Although the specific details of the twist were kept tightly under wraps before the game's release, and journalists were careful to avoid spoilers, oblique references to it abound in reviews, and it is discussed at length in critical commentary and scholarly work. Many critics find resonance between the twist sequence and the themes of freedom and control that pervade the game's setting and narrative (Tavinor 2009a, 102; Koo), linking it to the discussion of morality and ethics noted above. Others write that the game throws these themes "back into the gamer's face" (Bissell 2011, 80), challenging the player's sense of agency ("Game Play: BioShock Narrative") and the moral values driving their previous actions (Sicart, 155-157). For Travis, Andrew Ryan's harrowing last words, repeated throughout his brutal death, "a man chooses; a slave obeys," are ultimately a telling obfuscation of the true ethical problem posed by the game, which is "the dangerous illusion of choice," echoing Plato's allegory of the cave (Travis 2010, 99).

Twist endings, unreliable narrators, and the narrative trick of using new information to re-frame previous events is, of course, well-established in other cultural forms, in particular in the tragedy, the melodrama, and the thriller (Tavinor 2009a, 92). Critics use the sequence to align *Bioshock* with other acclaimed texts, including *Citizen Kane*, *Memento* (Dahlen), and *Fight Club* (Park) — iconic, highly-regarded Hollywood films, directed by popular auteur figures whose personae are built on a perceived total mastery over the film form and the audience's experience. In spite of this alignment with other media, the twist sequence is also frequently praised for being unique and specific to the medium of games. For Travis, disrupting interactivity is commensurate with disrupting the real-world illusion of liberal subjectivity and individual agency, making games a particularly potent tool for working through ideology and ethics (2010,

87). According to Aevee Bee, the twist is "important as an example of what games can achieve when they get over their cinematic inferiority complex and stop trying to become a movie anytime they want to tell a story" (2009), while Gillen stresses that the game "never once betrays the medium" (2007a). Tavinor and Bee both suggest that *Bioshock* proves games can produce emotions that are difficult or impossible to achieve in other media, such as guilt and regret (Tavinor 2009a, 148; Bee 2009), allowing the form to be "art of a distinctive kind" (Tavinor 2009a, 92).

In spite of its positive reception, *Bioshock*'s twist sequence precipitated a debate involving a number of matters of concern already simmering in game criticism, including the relationship between narrative and gameplay, and the role of storytelling in games ("Game Play: BioShock Narrative"). The touchstone in this debate is game designer Clint Hocking's 2007 blog post, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." Hocking's lengthy essay critiques key elements of the game and argues that *Bioshock* fails to deliver on its narrative premise, and in doing so breaks a tacit contract with the player, who has willingly suspended disbelief in order to enjoy the game. "The 'twist' in the plot is a *deus ex machina* built upon the very weaknesses of game stories that we — as players — agree to accept in order to have some sort of narrative framework to flavor our fiddling about with mechanics" (Hocking). Hocking sees "a powerful dissonance" between *Bioshock*'s gameplay and its story, and suggests that by deliberately creating an opposition between the two with the twist, the game "openly mocks" the player. Coining the term "ludonarrative dissonance" to describe this effect, Hocking contends that it is unfair and cheap on the part of the developers, weakening all aspects of the game. Other critics agree with Hocking, similarly proclaiming the twist a failure or a missed opportunity (Fyfe). One of the only vaguely negative reviews *Bioshock* received, a shockingly low (by game industry standards)

8 out of 10 score in *Edge*, suggests that the twist seems at first to be a "masterstroke," but ultimately collapses into self-parody (Edge Staff).

Many other critics, however, push back against Hocking's characterization, producing a far-reaching discourse on the topic. One of the most common counter-arguments is to read the twist, and the "dissonance" it produces, as a self-reflexive metacommentary on, or critique of, the artifice of gaming conventions. Bissell and Travis, responding directly to Hocking, both argue that the dissonance "is fundamentally constitutive of the game's meaning and effect" (Travis 2010, 97), and is a way for the game to comment on its own "game-ness" (Bissell 2011, 153-154). This meta-commentary aspect is seen to be an important part of *Bioshock*'s artistic confidence and achievement (Tavinor 2009a, 101), offering players the kind of (post)modernist reflexivity conventionally associated with maturity and evolution in a medium or art form (Pfister; "Game Play: BioShock Narrative"). The idea that *Bioshock* is an artistic subversion of the player's agency — and thus the supposed interactivity of games in general — is summed up nicely in this extended quote, which returns to the idea that the twist is a medium specific intervention:

> I see all this as a parable about gaming. [...] The feeling of empowerment that you get from adjusting to the game's logic and using this knowledge to overcome the obstacles in your way resembles the feeling of free choice, but it not. Games are an interactive medium, but in a real sense the designer of the game is the one who makes all the choices because they are the one who creates all the rules. The genius of Bioshock lies in the fact that it investigates this paradox in the context of the game itself. (Pliskin 2008c)

According to critics, the game "forces the player to seriously think about their own agency. Being betrayed by others is a common twist, but being betrayed by yourself is something else entirely" (Bee). In making players "conscious of how much the game controls their actions, rather than the other way around" (Bee), the game goes so far as to "subvert its own ludic

nature" and challenge player agency in a medium that so often privileges it, which is framed as a "risky" but decisive artistic move (Tulloch).

There is often a sense in the writing about *Bioshock* that it is a powerful entity, imposing critical awareness upon the passive, unsuspecting player. Echoing Adorno and Horkheimer's mass culture critique, in this interpretation players are sleepwalkers, pawns in someone else's game, "unaware of the artifice" until critical reflection is forced upon them by the artist (Tavinor 2009a, 104; Onyett). Clarkson interprets the twist as a critique of the implicit values of mainstream games, in which the player is motivated primarily by self-interest and uncritically obeys all in-game instructions (2009b). Acknowledging these implicit values can produce shock or discomfort, but for Clarkson, this emotional impact is precisely what makes the game an effective commentary on the nature of games. Similarly, Travis argues that what Hocking calls ludonarrative dissonance is in fact a necessary and decisive disruption that produces genuine ethical reflection (2010, 99). Gillen makes *Bioshock* a symbol of the first-person shooter's burgeoning maturity, arguing that it "a game that's furious that it's a videogame" (2007a). The notion that *Bioshock* is a "seething," decisive blow struck against complacency and mediocrity in gaming parallels similar canonical works in other fields (the acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen*, for example, is widely understood to deconstruct and subvert the superhero genre from within).

Bioshock is the archetypal example of this kind of dissonance in games, but similar twists has become a common feature across a wide range of critically-acclaimed games, many of which are habitually cited examples of games-as-art, such as *Braid* (Vadkul) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Hamilton; Keogh 2012).[11] These games have also been the focus of extensive critical discourse

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11 The trope is common enough that it has been the subject of parody – a recent example is Darius Kazemi's *YOU WERE HALLUCINATING THE WHOLE TIME* (2013).

(both positive and negative), and have been widely interpreted to be metacommentary on the internal logics and problematic politics of popular games. The recurrence of this trope in games with high cultural status serves in part to align games with established notions of artistic reflexivity, but its strong association with interactivity also reinforces their medium specificity, a convenient example for developers and critics to point to when trying to distinguish games from other art forms. More pragmatically, however, the fictional reorientation of the twist "inspires a retroactive horror" and forces players to re-think their position, inviting them to look back on the game and consider it in a new light, even to the point of playing it again (Bee). In this sense, *Bioshock* is designed from the ground up to invite sustained reflection, debate, and criticism, evidenced by the countless forum discussions, blog posts, essays, articles, and book chapters it has produced. Prestige games are not just games with something to say, but games worth saying something about — games that justify the whole enterprise of game criticism.

Exemplification and Transcendence

Bioshock's prestige status is always defined in relation to other games; such is the nature of canon formation (Lupo, 221). Prestige texts are designed to appeal to both art and commerce, and are purported to elevate the whole industry from which they emerge (and indeed the whole cultural form of games). In this sense, prestige texts serve an exemplifying function. Critics and scholars are hyperbolic in their praise for *Bioshock*, proclaiming it "a beacon of hope amid a sea of mediocrity" (Reed), a "benchmark against which games for years to come will, and indeed must, be measured" (Onyett), "the masterpiece of recent gaming" (Tavinor 2009a, 91), and "a standard bearer for next generation gaming" ("Eurogamer's Top 50 Games of 2007"). According to the discourse on *Bioshock*, its greatness drags the rest of mainstream gaming up out of the

gutter like the "great chain" of society referenced repeatedly in the game by Andrew Ryan. In many cases, *Bioshock*'s success is tied to its perceived reinvention or reinvigoration of the FPS, a leap forward for the genre (Reed), which is transfigured in Levine's hands into art (Tavinor 2009a, 96). It is also aligned favourably with other "genre defining classics," such as *Super Mario 64* (Linde 2007) and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Alex C. 2008), worthy of praise not only for their individual achievement, but for their broader positive impact as landmarks in the medium's seemingly inexorable progress towards sophistication and artistic legitimacy.

At the same time, *Bioshock* seems to do more than just exemplify what is possible for the game industry, with other comments suggesting that it transcends its lowly commercial origins entirely, leaving the rest of the dreck far below — a "once-in-a-lifetime" game (Alex C.), "much, much more" than "just" a shooter (Gerstmann). True to form, Bissell writes, "Among the games of this era, BioShock has Himalayan stature […] it is a work of anomalous and distinctive excellence" unlikely to be repeated (2011, 151). Onyett sees the game as a "monolithic" symbol of what is lacking in the mainstream industry, calling for gaming enthusiasts to demand "something more from publishers and developers, more than all those derivative sequels forced down our throats year after year with only minor tweaks in their formulas." *Bioshock* has also been made into a beacon to shine on those outside of gaming culture, including its harshest critics: it is "the perfect counterpoint to film critic Roger Ebert's notorious assertion that games ain't art" (Molloby). Many critics anticipate *Bioshock*'s entry into the canon, and its posterity. Sands writes, "if we're still talking about it in eight years, then color me unsurprised" (seven years later, at least, this is certainly true). Others lament that it will be a long time before any other game achieves the same level of excellence (Reed; Reyes), as if it is a fragile, fleeting thing

that needs to be clung to, for fear of losing it before its full potential is realized: "Please don't let this game become that forgotten, one-of-a-kind masterpiece. We need sequels. We need more. Go out and buy it already" (Barratt 2007). Again, it is clear that the commercial and the artistic are closely intertwined in the art world assemblage for prestige games.

Writers who dissent from *Bioshock*'s overwhelmingly positive reception still tend to affirm its artistic and historical importance as a compromised success or missed opportunity, but nevertheless a sign of progress and promise (Riley). Lanchester points out that the game's difficulty and reliance on familiarity with gaming conventions has prevented it from making any kind of wider impact outside of gaming culture (2009), while Barratt suggests, "it may be too unusual, too original, too artistic and too genius to be embraced by the general public" (2007). Nevertheless, if *Bioshock* could be made accessible, these critics seem certain that it would help change the minds of naysayers, as evidenced by a fairly contrived Washington Post feature in which a gaming columnist uses it to "prove" games are art to a Pulitzer Prize-winning colleague (Musgrove). *Edge*'s comparatively negative review calls the game "at once a joy and a disappointment, achingly ambitious and cravenly conservative, and ultimately a complete triumph in one sense and a nagging failure in several others." Hocking's conclusion is similar, though more optimistic: "*BioShock* is not our *Citizen Kane*. But it does — more than any game I have ever played — show us how close we are to achieving that milestone. *BioShock* reaches for it, and slips. But we leave our deepest footprints when we pick ourselves up from a fall." Even in positioning it as a failure, these critics reify the particular vision of games-as-art that *Bioshock* and other prestige games represent: big-budget commercial titles in established genres with novel gameplay, distinctive audiovisuals and world-building, a strong author figure, and a narrative dealing with mature or sophisticated subject matter.

Conclusion

Bioshock won numerous awards, including Spike TV Video Game Awards Game of the

Year (Dobson 2007) and Best Game at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts

(BAFTA) Video Game Awards, one of the few institutions that recognizes games alongside other

media (Sliwinski 2007). It is still habitually listed near the top of "best-games-of-all-time"

compilations (to give but two of many examples, *Empire* ranked it 26th out of 100 ["The 100

Greatest Games Of All Time: Bioshock"], and *GamesRadar* ranked it 6th out of 100 ["The 100

Best Games of All Time"]). Ken Levine has continued to enjoy a high profile in the game

industry, his auteur status secured in the wake of *Bioshock*'s success. The game continues to be

cited often in game criticism, as both a point of comparison and a major influence on other

games (see for example Barsanti; Filipowich). In many cases, it is framed as an epochal game

that irrevocably changed the way games are conceived and designed, as many critics predicted

(Linde). Critic Brendan Keogh calls more recent prestige games that tackle similar themes of

agency and control, such as *Spec Ops: The Line*, "post-Bioshock shooters," suggesting that the

impact of *Bioshock* continues to be felt (2012, 136); this ongoing critical attention reinforces its

canonical status.

Released in 2013, the hotly-anticipated "spiritual successor" *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013)

marked Irrational and Levine's return to the series after five years of development (Levine 2010).

The rhetorical strategy of framing the game as another "spiritual successor" is in and of itself a

way of claiming legitimacy, and of distinguishing *Infinite* from the popular but less critically

successful direct sequel *Bioshock 2*, which was produced at a different 2K Games studio without

Levine's involvement. Like its predecessor, *Infinite* has sold millions of copies, and has been met

with hyberbolically rave reviews; fans and journalists alike have been quick to declare it one of the best games of all time ("BioShock Infinite Metascore"). So far, so prestigious, and *Infinite* seems poised to inherit the canonical mantle of *Bioshock*. However, in the weeks and months following the game's release, a discourse emerged that countered and destabilized *Infinite*'s canonization, with a significant number of essayistic critics and scholars expressing ambivalence and disappointment in the game's attempts to address serious issues like racism and violence from within the confines of the mainstream commercial first-person shooter (see Kunzelman 2013a). One critic goes so far as to dub it "the worst game of the year" for "its lack of humanity, for its fake guilt, for its flat boring gameplay, for its [estimated] 100 million dollar cost, for its cleverness, for its cowardice" (Thompson 2013).

Ironically, these are precisely the kinds of critics that, in 2007, worked to elevate and canonize *Bioshock* and made it so central to the contemporary construction of games-as-art. I would argue that the reception of *Bioshock: Infinite* is a logical extension of what came before, and represents an intensification of the critical conversations catalyzed by *Bioshock*. Much of the discourse suggests that things have not progressed *enough* since 2007, and that the promise of *Bioshock* has not been fulfilled (Golding), or perhaps that its promise was false and misguided to begin with, and critics were blinded by the hype (Brice 2013b; Bogost 2013). Increasingly, it seems that some sectors of gaming culture — sectors with high cultural capital but relatively low economic influence — are no longer willing to accept the kind of compromises big-budget commercial titles are required to make, and this disconnect is reflected in the concurrent emergence of new cultural and aesthetic strategies for games and new forms of distinction, both in the form of competition from so-called "triple-i" or "single-A" indie games with high production values and hifalutin themes, like *Flower* and *Papo y Yo*, smaller-scale artgames in the

vein of *Passage,* and more explicitly oppositional practices like the "queer new wave" exemplified by *dys4ia* and *Howling Dogs* (Keogh 2013).

The controversy surrounding *Bioshock: Infinite* clearly shows how mainstream games produced and received in a commercial context face a particular set of challenges to artistic legitimation. Prestige games must strike an uneasy balance between industrial legitimacy, earning high profit margins to please publishers, and aesthetic legitimacy as works of art, amenable to critical discourse and canonization. Newman and Levine argue that attempting to achieve this balance is in part a strategic business practice (22), and although some of the discourse on *Bioshock* frames it as working against the industry, its appeal to artistic legitimacy without question contributed to its commercial success. According to this popular conception of games-as-art, the cultural and economic capital that circulates through the art world assemblage for prestige texts are (or should be) mutually reinforcing — a great work of art is, in this context, necessarily also a popular and profitable one.

Bioshock's canonical status is secure, having been firmly established as a work of artistic and historical importance, and "required playing" for those invested in gaming as a cultural form. Game criticism and game studies play a crucial role in constructing and sustaining (or deconstructing and destabilizing) this canon, which is not only a set of touchstones for debate and discussion, but also a strategy for legitimating the practices of criticism and scholarship — a pantheon of exemplary games and writing on games that demonstrates the artistic and discursive possibilities of gaming. In this sense, I would argue that the tired "*Citizen Kane* of games" cliché should not be a question of the enduring greatness of a single work that defines an entire medium, but rather a culturally- and historically-specific question about the actual processes of canon-formation. *Bioshock* might well be the *Citizen Kane* of games, not because of its inherent

value, but because it currently occupies an analogous place in the gaming canon, the enduring

"proof" that a commercial work with a strong authorial vision can achieve artistic greatness

within the confines of the mainstream culture industry. However, if art is a historically contingent

assemblage that includes a diverse array of cooperating and competing elements (Heinich &

Shapiro), *Bioshock* may represent a configuration of games-as-art that thrived in a particular

moment, but is not sustainable. As evidenced by the divided reception of *Bioshock: Infinite*, there

is a prevailing sense among critics that the limitations of AAA development are no longer tenable

for the production of games-as-art in any form, and that the mainstream industry is not a context

that can or will support games-as-art (Thompson 2013). Radical game maker porpentine is

succinct in her dismissal of this model:

> The consumer will shoot some mans. The critical sphere will shoot some mans and
> dissect every little thing in the game in hopes that people will read their writing and
> value them as commentators on the great and ancient art of really expensive hyper-
> marketed videogames. (porpentine)

At the same time, journalists have begun to publish articles warning that "meaty, single-player

narrative games" (Bissell 2013) with artistic aspirations are increasingly seen to be an

unnecessary economic risk in in the industry and may not be supported by major publishers in

the future (Statt). In the post-*Bioshock* era, without the economic and cultural support of the art

world assemblage charted in this chapter, it remains to be seen whether the prestige game will

persist in this ambitious blockbuster form.[12]

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12 Case in point, in the weeks before the completion of this dissertation, parent company 2K Games closed
    Irrational Studios and fired most of the studio, but gave Ken Levine the opportunity to start a new, smaller studio
    to focus on innovative author-driven titles. Rather than investing in big-budget blockbuster prestige games that
    attempt to combine massive economic success with critical acclaim, 2K appears to be hedging its bets by
    targeting its future prestige titles at more niche market. This strategy, presumably, will allow them to still benefit
    culturally and economically from Levine's auteur status and pedigree, but with significantly less economic risk.

Chapter 5 — Artgames: *Passage*

Prestige games like *Bioshock* represent a particularly influential conception of games-as-art, but they are one point on a continuum that extends from the mainstream game industry to independent and alternative modes of production, encompassing many degrees between. Although they operate within the same dominant aesthetic frameworks, these other areas gain cultural status and prestige in different ways, depending on the configuration of their elements. In this chapter, I am interested in the emergence of "artgames" as an amorphous but identifiable category, genre, and/or configuration within the larger assemblage of independent or "indie" games, which first came to prominence with *Passage*, and also includes games like *The Marriage* (2007), *The Graveyard* (2008), *Braid* (2008), and *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009). The recognition of artgames around 2007, and the unusually high degree of cultural and aesthetic legitimacy they have gained is another important moment in the legitimation of digital games in general.

Unlike my critical category of prestige games, the term artgame (sometimes "art games" or "arthouse games") originates in indie gaming culture. Although the various games grouped under the heading bear little surface similarity, they are understood to have analogous approaches to game design practice and shared conceptual and thematic concerns. Common features of artgames include: a distinctive or highly stylized audiovisual aesthetic; small (or entirely individual) independent development teams with identifiable author figures; a short duration; free availability; and an existential-poetic point or message, however obscure or ambiguous, that the player is expected to derive and ponder through the game's mechanics. These features are not universal; in fact, for any supposedly defining characteristic of artgames, exceptions can be

found. The audiovisual style in artgames varies greatly; not all artgames are produced by independent companies; not all artgames have an identifiable individual author; not all artgames are short; not all artgames are intended to express a specific existential theme; not all artgames are non-commercial. Evidently, the category is loose and amorphous, and it is not my intention to delineate its boundaries or present a generic taxonomy. Rather, taking into account the insights of genre theory, it is more useful to frame artgames as a site of material and discursive struggle over meaning and value, situated in overlapping social assemblages. Artgames, then, can be productively approached as a genre or cultural category not due to any essential shared characteristic, but to the extent that they are an "active process" (Mittell, xii) deployed pragmatically by different users to different ends (Altman, 207). In this chapter, I will examine the construction of an art world assemblage for artgames, using *Passage* as my primary case study.

Passage popularized the term artgame. It was made by previously unknown game developer Jason Rohrer for the *Gamma256* competition at the Montréal International Game Summit (MIGS) in November 2007, a curated game design challenge that invited independent developers to make games using less than 256 square pixels. *Passage*'s play area is a scant 100x16, with its images and simple scoreboard rendered in chunky, ultra-low-resolution pixels. The player controls a male avatar that visually ages from young adulthood to old age over the course of the game's short duration. The avatar is able to move in four directions to explore a randomly-generated maze of obstacles and treasure chests, which add points to the player's score, and the score also increases gradually the further forward (left) the avatar progresses. Towards the beginning, the game introduces a computer-controlled female companion who, if encountered, moves along with the male avatar and ages along with him. Finding the companion

limits access to certain areas and treasure chests, but doubles the number of points gained by moving forward. The game has no sound effects, and the background music is a slow, repetitive synthesized march. *Passage* lasts exactly five minutes, and renders its fixed time limit visually by showing all past and future areas of the game world condensing on the left and right sides of the screen; at first this distortion effect dominates the right side of the screen, but it gradually shifts to the left (behind the avatar) over the course of the game. After four minutes and twenty seconds, the companion dies, followed shortly by the player's avatar, and the game ends, returning to the title screen.

This chapter will address a series of questions. What pre-existing structures produced an opportunity space for artgames? What institutional changes allowed developers like Jason Rohrer to position their game design practice as art, and themselves as artists? How has *Passage* been canonized as a culturally and aesthetically significant work by critics and scholars? I will conclude with a brief account of how the production and reception of artgames has changed in the wake of *Passage*'s success.

The rise of indie games

Smaller art worlds with restricted influence tend to be more autonomous and less reliant on external support and economic capital, allowing them (in theory) to privilege the production of cultural capital; this has historically made them more readily acceptable as legitimate art than economically-driven forms, as per Enlightenment and Romantic notions of art as disinterested and "for its own sake" (Baumann 2007b, 86-87). Self-consciously oppositional forms of cultural production like indie music and alternative comics initially appealed to higher artistic status and authenticity "based on new relationships between creativity and commerce" that challenged

dominant, presumably stultified, industries (Hesmondhalgh, 35). Of course, this position has always been fraught, and the distinction between indie and mainstream is anything but clear-cut. Nevertheless, the aesthetics and ethos of independence provides a readily available set of symbolic resources for game developers, critics, and fans, and has been readily adopted (at least discursively) in some sectors of gaming culture.

The seemingly meteoric rise to widespread recognition of indie digital games in recent years is the product of a much longer historical process. It is generally accepted as a given that indie games now play an important role in the industry and culture of digital games, but a just over a decade ago there was no such category in popular discourse. Independent game production went by other names (freeware, shareware, amateur, bedroom) and took place in insular, autonomous communities of practice focused on particular game-creation tools or genres, with their own distribution networks, audiences, and systems of evaluation, only occasionally connected with a larger marketplace (Ito, 129-130). In 2002, Eric Zimmerman could provocatively question whether independent games could (or should) even exist, and responding to Roger Ebert's earliest criticisms, Henry Jenkins and others hoped that one day there would be gaming equivalents to garage bands and independent film, to escape the aesthetic constraints of the commercial game industry and usher in a new era of creativity and legitimacy (Jenkins quoted in Leland; Reimer).

Indie games as a category remains far from stable or predicable — it is a complex assemblage made up of many cooperating and competing elements. By 2007, however, Andreas Jahn-Sudmann contends that a "taste public for indie games" had emerged (5), with shared aesthetic values and concerns (Gans, 11), defined by its disposition against a broadly conceived mainstream, as in other indie cultures. Out of isolated, stratified amateur game design scenes had

developed larger and more networked online communities of indie game developers and fans, centred around hubs like *The Independent Gaming Source*, *IndieGames.com*, *The Experimental Gameplay Project*, and, more recently, geographically localized indie development collectives and communities (Montréal's Kokoromi is an important early example of this phenomenon). Facilitated by broadband Internet connections and faster download speeds, the expanded indie games community provides accessible development tools, pre-constituted audiences, critical discourse, reliable distribution networks, and other support systems without which artgames would not have been possible.

Events where indie developers converge, like *The Independent Games Festival*, *Indiecade*, *Gamma* and other festivals, competitions, exhibitions, and design "jams" formalize social connections between indie developers and provide further visibility, support, and resources for the development, distribution, and reception of experimental or intentionally artistic games positioned outside of the commercial industry. In spite of their oppositional stance toward the mainstream, many of these events are co-located or operate under the aegis of larger commercial industry events and institutions like the Game Developers Conference (GDC) and MIGS, which provide space, funding, and access to a wider audience. Likewise, increasingly accessible software development kits (SDKs) for commercial game engines and consoles, digital distribution of games (especially through The App Store, Steam, Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network), and partnerships between indie developers and major game publishers provide explicitly commercial frameworks and resources for the development and distribution of artgames such as *Braid* and *Flower* enabling developers to reach a larger audience (while still allowing them to be distinguished from other kinds of commercial games through marketing, critical discourse, and other forms of paratextual framing – see the Conclusion). In this sense,

certain kinds of indie developers and games benefit from resources and support made available by the mainstream industry, though others may not have access for various reasons (whether practical or ideological).

This stabilization of indie games as a category and as a (sub)culture has also helped to stabilize and professionalize the role of the indie developer, to the extent that making indie games is seen as something more than a hobby, and even as a legitimate career in some cases (whether self-sustaining or as a stepping stone to mainstream industry work). This all contributes to the opportunity space for artgames; if making indie games is a legitimate pursuit, supported by a community of like-minded people and institutions (parallel to indie music or comics), then the product of that pursuit must also be legitimate, perhaps even art. Partially thanks to their privileged status in indie game circles, Rohrer and other artgame developers have been able to make games as a full-time occupation (and in some cases quite a lucrative one — *Braid* made developer Jonathan Blow an overnight millionaire [Clark]). This is an appealing narrative reinforced in cultural representations of indie game development such as the popular documentaries *Indie Game: The Movie* (2011) and *Us and the Game Industry* (2013).

The aesthetics and ethos of artgames

As noted above, the art world for artgames is a particular configuration of resources and practices within the larger assemblage of indie games. The specific textual and paratextual strategies at work in in the invention and legitimation of artgames distinguish artgames not only from the mainstream game industry, but also within the field of indie games in a number of ways. Even more explicitly than other indie games, artgames trade on the high cultural status of their indie-ness. The cachet and presumed freedom, authenticity, and integrity ascribed to other

forms of independent cultural production is used in the development and distribution of artgames to position them as a more aesthetically pure alternative to other kinds of games (including less self-consciously artistic indie games). Produced by a mythical "one-man-band" developer with no budget and no creative constraints save for the rules of the Gamma256 competition, and released as a free download outside the game industry's distribution networks, *Passage* exemplifies the ways in which the independence of artgames is a crucial component in their claim to artistic legitimacy,

The highly stylized, often lo-fi, pixelated, or deliberately "retro" aesthetics of indie games, and their relatively brief duration, simplify the production process and allow for smaller teams, making it easier to map the intent behind a game onto a single author compared to big AAA productions, and thus to understand it as an intentional artistic object (Bogost, 16). This echoes other forms of indie cultural production, in which a pragmatic DIY ethic works in conjunction with a lo-fi aesthetic — consider punk music, or the rough, hand-drawn quality of many indie comics (Beaty 2012, 216). As noted above, artgames adopt a range of aesthetic strategies, from realistic 3D models rendered in black-and-white with high-quality recorded music, invoking art film (*The Graveyard*) to the total abstraction of coloured circles and squares (*The Marriage*). Regardless of the particular style, artgames are distanced from the big-budget hyperrealist spectacles that dominate the game industry, in the same way that experimental film and electronic glitch music purport to present a challenge or alternative to the glossy perfection of Hollywood movies and Top 40 hits. The short duration of many artgames, as well as small download sizes, playability in web browsers, and availability for cheap or free, makes artgames more accessible and balances their esoteric content, encouraging players to share them by circulating links, and reinforcing the idea that these games are meant to be replayed,

contemplated, and discussed. In the case of *Passage*, the game also requires relatively little player skill or familiarity with gaming conventions, opening it up to non-gaming audiences (unlike other artgames like *Braid*, which is more difficult to play and relies on intertextual references to other games). This accessibility also makes artgames more amenable to exhibition in galleries than other kinds of games (see below).

As in other forms of independent cultural production, the subject matter of artgames reinforces their paratextual framing as unique and outside of the mainstream. Deeply personal explorations of well-worn themes of love and death recur frequently, reflecting a distinctly modern conception of art that emerges from nineteenth century Romanticism (Heinich, 123; Shiner 3). Many artgames are explicitly designed to be *memento mori*, offering moody, esoteric meditations on life, relationships, and the inevitability of death — *Passage* is archetypal in this sense. Compared to mainstream games, which tend to be goal-oriented and action-driven, artgames are slow and meandering, and rarely offer the sense of accomplishment and narrative closure provided by traditional games. *Passage*, *The Graveyard*, and *Dear Esther* (2008/2012) all end abruptly with the death of the player's avatar, with no definitive resolution; other games, such as *Braid* and *Every Day the Same Dream* involve complex, non-linear puzzle narratives that similarly contrast with popular conventions. This can be linked to the version of realism Bordwell suggests is central to art cinema, a realism based not in audiovisual representation but in psychological or narrative complexity, and thematic ambiguity. As Bordwell puts it, "life lacks the neatness of art and this art knows it" (722), an apt description of many artgames. Dealing with profound existential themes long associated with fine art and high culture thus works to further distinguish artgames from the juvenile entertainment and commodified spectacle often associated with digital games (as discussed in Chapter Three).

As indie games have gained recognition, becoming less autonomous and more integrated into the industry and gaming culture, however, the boundaries set up between artgames and other games have also become blurry. One of Rohrer's next games was a commission from *Esquire* magazine, and *Passage* was later made available for purchase on Apple mobile devices, and as part of a Nintendo DS compilation cartridge called *Alt-Play: Jason Rohrer Anthology* (2011) in the vein of the Criterion Collection's lavish DVD boxed sets (Ian Bogost took this to new heights with a leather-bound, $500 deluxe edition of *A Slow Year* [2010]). More recently, Rohrer has released commercial games via digital distribution (*Sleep is Death* [2010], *Inside a Star-Filled Sky* [2011], and *The Castle Doctrine* [2013]), and for the Nintendo DS (*Diamond Trust of London* [2012]). Other artgames are likewise not as starkly independent as they might appear — *Braid*, for example, was published by Microsoft and released as a commercial indie game on Xbox Live Arcade, selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

Institutional resources

In spite of these compromises, artgames are able to maintain their independent status and distinction in part by mobilizing material and expressive resources through prestigious institutions and organizations within and outside of gaming culture. Kokoromi's *Gamma* series is an important gatekeeper, identifying new talents like Rohrer and introducing them to a wider audience in a high-profile venue. The members of the Kokoromi collective include not only well-known indie game designers, most notably *Fez* (2012) developer Phil Fish, but also curators of gaming and game-based art events and exhibitions around the world, such as Cindy Poremba, bestowing *Gamma* participants with the approval of both the world of indie games and the institutions of the Art World. In addition to *Gamma256*, *Passage* has been featured in several

festivals, gallery shows, and blockbuster exhibitions, often with Rohrer as an invited special guest. One of the biggest and most prestigious of these was the Museum of Modern Art's *Talk to Me* (2011), which included not only artgames and game-based artworks, but also digital and computer-based art and artifacts from a wide variety of traditions. More recently, MoMA announced that *Passage* would be one of the first fourteen games acquired for their new digital game collection (see the Conclusion) (Antonelli). In addition to providing Rohrer with financial remuneration, the presentation of *Passage* in one of the most famous art museums in the world, alongside other legitimated works of art and design, makes a clear statement about its status and value.

Artgames have also taken advantage of institutional resources in the form of government grants, such as *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery EP* (2011) (Joseph, 92) and private commissions, such as Rohrer's commissioned games for *Esquire* and the 2010 Art History of Games symposium. Allegedly, at one point Rohrer was receiving monthly cheques from a secretive patron, "a wealthy software-industry figure who has taken a liking to his games" (Fagone), an interesting (and no doubt calculated) throwback to patronage practices associated with historical fine art (Becker 1984, 298). Rohrer was also hired as a creative consultant on *LMNO*, a since-cancelled collaboration between filmmaker Steven Spielberg and game industry giant Electronic Arts (Fagone). These relationships provide both material and cultural capital, reinforcing the framing of artgames as works of art worthy of the autonomy afforded by institutional support, while also ascribing legitimacy to those institutions and individuals that are hip and knowledgeable enough to support artgame development. As I have argued throughout this section, this assemblage of conditions and resources, and the new modes of production and distribution that use it to their advantage, helps prime artgames for critical consideration and

reception as legitimate art.

Reception & critical discourse

As noted in previous chapters, over the course of the last ten years, there has been a growing range of critical discourse on games in a variety of venues, including essayistic game criticism modeled on intellectual-enthusiast film and music criticism that reacts against the consumer-review style of most gaming journalism. Like prestige games, artgames like *Passage* provided an ideal object for essayistic critics: a sophisticated, distinguished work that demands sophisticated, distinguished criticism. Indie game development and the practice of game criticism mutually reinforce and legitimate each other, and the importance of critical discourse is not lost on developers. Rohrer published an artist statement entitled, "What I was trying to do with *Passage*," simultaneously with the game's release, ensuring that the game was associated with critical writing and interpretation from the beginning (2007). Additionally, Rohrer quotes and catalogues links to positive writing on each of his games on his website, a reflexive strategy reminiscent of the reviews and accolades used in marketing and promotional paratexts for books and films.

Critical attention to *Passage* spread rapidly after *Gamma256* (facilitated, as I have already suggested, by its brevity and small download size), beginning with a blog post from game scholar (and eventual artgame designer) Ian Bogost that identified *Passage* as a "superb specimen," and the "standout" of the event (2007). The game began to circulate on blogs and online forums dedicated to indie games and pixel art, inciting effulgent praise and angry polemics among players and designers. Mainstream gaming news sites also posted about *Passage*, including *Kotaku*, which dubbed it their "Weird Artistic Timewaster of the Day," a title

that has apparently only ever been used to describe Rohrer's games and jokingly alludes to the tension around whether artgames count as "real" games (see below) (Greene). Other journalists were far more effusive in their accolades: in particular, an article on *Destructoid* by Anthony Burch played a key role in introducing the game to a wider audience, hailing *Passage* as "one of the most clever, meaningful, affecting, and memorable games ever made" (2007). *Passage* and other artgames has frequently been the object of this kind of enthusiastic discourse, and the game has been cited as an important contribution to the artistic advancement of the form by a number of high-profile game developers in interviews and blog posts, including Brenda Brathwaite, Clint Hocking (Totilo 2008a), and David Jaffe (Totilo 2008b). Not long after *Passage* made the rounds in the gaming world, a number of major mainstream news and culture outlets also published articles or features on the game, including the *Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek*, *The Guardian*, and later *Esquire* magazine and *The New York Times*. In the following subsections, I will outline some of the central features of the discourse on *Passage*.

Authorship and autobiography

As noted in previous chapters, authorship is almost always central to the textual appeals of cultural objects seeking legitimation, and to their reception (Newman & Levine, 58), "mediating and containing" cultural works through the lens of an individual artist (Gray 2013, 91), and artgames like *Passage* openly invite players and critics to engage in this mode. The small development teams associated with indie games are granted additional cultural weight in artgames: more emphatically than other game developers, the makers of artgames reflexively identify and promote themselves as artists with games as their chosen medium. This strategy of self-identification has been well established historically in other art worlds (Baumann 2007b,

59). This kind of artist-author is understood to be the organizing intelligence that unifies the text (Bordwell, 655), transcending the limitations of industry, commerce, medium, genre, and subject matter. If an authorial figure is presented or identified, all other concerns fade away in the shining light of its presence. Even in cases where artgame development is a less obviously individual practice, the status of the developers as artists is maintained: *Tale of Tales* is a two-person team, and their games are presented as the product of an artistic collaboration between two strong individual personalities.

Many artgame developers engage directly in this discourse through artist statements, manifestos, post-mortems and other texts that serve to explain their authorial intentions, declare principled stances, and situate their practice as legitimate art. Rohrer's public talks, interviews, and written articles are almost all focused on discussions of digital games as an artistic medium, and the role of the artist-designer (see, for example, Rohrer 2008). As film scholar Barbara Klinger argues, authorial statements about the meaning of texts are a privileged form of discourse, and are often internalized, sustained, and made canonical by critics and scholars, rather than challenged or revised (32). Participation in critical discourse can additionally help raise the profile of aspiring auteurs, by establishing relationships with other influential actors in the art world assemblage. Rohrer's "Creator's Statement" introduces *Passage* as a *memento mori*, and links it directly to Rohrer's personal life and experience: "I turn 30 tomorrow. A close friend from our neighborhood died last month. Yep, I've been thinking about life and death a lot lately. This game is an expression of my recent thoughts and feelings" (2007). The statement outlines the intentions behind each aspect of the game in fairly straightforward terms (the maze represents life, the blurring edges represent the future and the past, the treasure chests represent wealth and achievement but the points are ultimately meaningless, etc.), and these authorized

explanations are frequently taken up and repeated by other critics.

As Chapter Four demonstrates, well-known commercial auteur figures like Ken Levine are certainly understood to express an authorial intentionality and style in their work, but not so much their actual life history or subjective personal experience. By contrast, the authorship of artgames is much more closely linked to autobiography. Autobiography has been a reliable strategy for reinforcing the artistic legitimacy of various cultural forms, including independent film and comics — as Beaty argues, discussing European alternative comics in the 1990s, autobiography "becomes a mode which foregrounds both realism [...] and the sense of the author as an artist demanding legitimacy," rather than an anonymous, compromised worker in a commercial mass medium (2007, 144). Autobiography reinforces authorship by imbuing it with a deeper aesthetic significance.

The autobiographical character of Rohrer's games is well established in his artist statement ("That's me and my spouse in there, distilled down to 8x8 pixels each" [Rohrer 2007]), and as Klinger suggests, this authorized interpretation is frequently taken up and repeated by other critics. In *The Guardian*, Aleks Krotoski attributes the game's impact to the rarity (or perhaps the novelty) of autobiographical games. *Passage* is framed as "a special kind of game made by an unusual kind of game developer" (the99th), and throughout the critical discourse, Rohrer's personal history, lifestyle, and relationships are highlighted. Jason Fagone's lengthy *Esquire* profile argues that "video games need a figure like Rohrer so badly: an auteur. A person of great energy, courage, ego, and, yeah, pretentiousness" and foregrounds Rohrer's eccentric, simple lifestyle: Rohrer lives "off the grid" in a ramshackle house with a meadow, supposedly on less than $14,000 a year, and Fagone points to this asceticism as part of his genius. "If he didn't live this way, he couldn't make the games he makes," Fagone concludes. According to this Romantic

paradigm of the artist, only the passionate, lonely genius can transcend the commercial and popular status of "stupid" popular media to produce art (Beaty 2012, 221). Fagone's descriptions of Rohrer are reminiscent of canonical "back to nature" writers and poets like Walt Whitman, juxtaposing the earthy natural environment with the technological basis of digital games: "Rohrer with a laptop, sitting cross-legged in the dirt, inventing a new way of showing the world what it means to be alive" (Fagone). Stories like this, granted authority by the author himself, are a structuring presence in the critical discourse on *Passage*, bolstering notions of individual genius and personal expression, and setting them apart from other kinds of games.

Ambiguity and interpretation

While authorship and autobiography are common strategies for legitimating artgames as a worthy aesthetic form, appeals to ambiguity and variable interpretation are also effective, especially in gaming culture, which places great aesthetic value on interactivity and non-linearity (see Chapter Three). Rohrer explicitly invites players to come to their own conclusions about *Passage*'s meaning in his artist statement (2007), and almost all writing on the game (including Rohrer's own) begins with a statement encouraging players to avoid "spoilers" and other undue outside influences on their interpretation by playing the game before reading about it. *Passage*'s suppposed ambiguity and openness to interpretation helps situate it within well-established conceptions of the deep, nuanced work of art that requires thoughtful engagement and contemplation on the part of the viewer. Burch is most emphatic on this point, saying that "There is no true 'right' or 'wrong' way the play the game, and much of Passage's brilliance can only be understood through completing it yourself." He goes on to say that his personal reading of the game as an expression of "the lonely, meandering nature of life" is "the only right interpretation

for me, and, hopefully, it is the exact wrong interpretation for you" (2007). As in other cultural

fields, there is great value invested in works that "respect the audience's intelligence" rather than

resorting to manipulative or inauthentic techniques (Newman & Levine, 72). *Passage*'s

procedurally-generated game world and abstracted audiovisual aesthetic serve an important

function in the critical discourse, reinforcing the idea that it produces a unique experience for

each player (Bogost 2009).

However, the notion that Passage's artistic value lies in its openness to interpretation grates

against the discourse of authorship and intentionality addressed above. Elsewhere in his article,

Burch paradoxically states that "whatever emotions you feel, whatever symbolism you notice, or

whatever meaning you derive from the game's movement and visual mechanics, were all totally

intentional" (2007). This echoes Rohrer's artist statement: "There's no 'right' way to play

Passage, just as there's no right way to interpret it. However, I had specific intentions for the

various mechanics and features that I included" (2007). In spite of the discursive emphasis on

ambiguity, as Klinger suggests, *Passage* has consistently been interpreted in precisely the way

that its author intended: as a memento mori and a meditation on love, loss, and priorities.

Rohrer's artist statement firmly establishes the terms for reception and criticism of his work. The

game's intended allegory is not particularly opaque or difficult to decode, and the range of

interpretive possibilities is limited by both the manifest structure of the game and by Rohrer's

statement — Burch's "exact wrong" interpretation is more or less the same as anyone else's. As

Bordwell argues of art cinema, Rohrer and his critics strategically mobilize the tension between

authorial intentionality, "realistic" existential subject matter, and the ambiguity of player

interpretation and agency (which has been so central to debates about games as art),

simultaneously affirming Rohrer's status as artist and aligning *Passage* with commonly accepted

notions of the profound, nuanced work of art.

Emotion and affect

Outpourings of emotion and affect abound in critical writing on *Passage*, which is described as "a pregnant, forlorn sentence" (Johnson 2007) and "an emotional suckerpunch in 256 colours and a midi soundtrack." (Meer 2007). In particular, critics focus on the ability of the game to make the player weep, a cliché notion that has become a sort of litmus test in discussions of games as art (see Chapter Three). In a *Play This Thing* article entitled "A Game That Almost Made Me Cry," the author writes:

> I'm talking about 8-color pixel sprites making me feel something that Final Fantasy could only pull off non-interactively with cheap (read: extremely expensive) parlor tricks of CG and professional voice acting [...] when you see [the death of Passage's female companion] happen, so abruptly, you may feel something more dramatic and real than when Aireth was impaled. (the99th)

The author not only aligns *Passage* with one of the most frequently cited affective moments in the popular gaming canon (the death of Aerith/Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* [1997]), but suggests that *Passage* surpasses it. Rohrer, for his part, also makes emotional impact central in his accounts of the game, laying authorial claim to it: "There have been a number of people who have written stuff about this being the first videogame to make them cry [...] That's definitely what I was trying to evoke" (quoted in Rutkoff). One blogger goes even further: "What I always longed to see was a game that could evoke tears of joy or understanding; the sort of 'beautiful sorrow' that comes with a moment of revealed truth or heartfelt inspiration" (LordRegulus) This is no mere emotional manipulation (or "suckerpunch") being ascribed to *Passage*, but a transcendent, pure affect normally only associated with highest-order aesthetic experiences and the greatest works of art.

Artgames as exemplary

In many cases and much like *Bioshock*, *Passage* is held up as "proof" that games can be art, exemplifying the whole cultural form of digital games. The mere fact that the term artgames (analogous to art film) has been so widely adopted in discussions of games like *Passage* is telling — these, according to developers and critics, are the games that are art. In a flourish typical of critical discourse on artgames, Burch declared upon playing *Passage* that "The 'games as art' debate is officially over," explicitly situating it in the broader legitimation process (2007). Elsewhere, *Passage* is presented as "the simplest, strongest blow struck for the 'games as art' argument in years" (Gladstone & Sharkey), and Nick Montfort frames the game as nothing short of epochal: "[In the future] they will remember [*Passage*] because it showed them, for the first time, how games can model our world and what we care about in it." Some critics align *Passage* with established cultural forms, particularly poetry (Thompson 2008; Fagone), but most (including Rohrer) focus on the specificity of games, arguing that the game's achievements would be impossible, or at least very different, in other media (Totilo 2008b; Brathwaite). As I have already argued, distinguishing artgames from other forms in this manner helps to establish digital games as a separate cultural form, requiring its own art world assemblage and its own systems of criticism and appreciation, and providing a unique form of cultural capital.

As Newman and Levine argue, legitimation also produces "a bifurcation of the medium into good and bad" (7); *Passage* is juxtaposed against more mainstream games, as evidenced by Clint Hocking's complaint, "Why can't 'Halo' make me feel what 'Passage' made me feel? It's clearly not a question of budget" (Totilo 2008a). In much the same way that Newman and Levine describe in the contemporary legitimation of television, artgames, while putatively elevating

digital games, reinforce and reproduce the very forms of distinction that are used to deny other games status as art (their origins as commercial entertainment, their association with children, and so on, as discussed in Chapter Three), distancing themselves from the history of the form. Unlike the populist arguments about games and art presented by Henry Jenkins and others, which explicitly challenge the elitism of high art, the canonization of artgames does not contradict the standard critiques of digital games as childish, sensational low culture, and in fact Rohrer and many other commentators rearticulate these criticisms as the basis for their claims to artistic status. Artgames are art because they are not like other games.

Leading up to 2007, a growing body of scholarly work on questions of art and aesthetics in relation to games from various perspectives (see Chapter One) helped set the stage for artgames by making a space within respectable institutions for the serious consideration and discussion of digital games as art. Artgames are something of a privileged genre in game studies, and *Passage* has been cited in countless academic books, articles, conference presentations, and blog posts. Bogost presents a sustained account of the game across several articles and chapters, using it and other artgames, which he calls "proceduralist" games, to exemplify his theories of fine processing (2008) and procedural rhetoric (2009; 2011). In addition to discussing many of the themes that permeate the critical discourse on *Passage* (including authorship, ambiguity, and emotion), the game is positioned as proof of the viability of these theoretical approaches, simultaneously legitimating the game by demonstrating its value and importance as an object of inquiry, and aligning Bogost's theory (and his own artistic game design practice) with an object already high in cultural capital. Similarly, Miguel Sicart describes *Passage* as "a moral and philosophical game experience" that exemplifies his theory of computer games as ethical objects (82). In both cases, these scholars argue that *Passage* functions through its mechanics,

suggesting that games can be meaningful art as games, as per their theoretical commitments and the conventions of game studies. The role of the academy in art worlds is thus always double: on the one hand, it acts as a gatekeeper institution and confers legitimacy on artgames, while on the other, it gains cultural capital and legitimacy by aligning itself with fashionable new cultural forms like artgames.

Counter-arguments and critique

While the glowing praise discussed above is important, as noted in Chapter Four negative and dissenting voices and debate help stabilize and consolidate social assemblages, by drawing boundaries and galvanizing common goals and opponents for participants in the legitimation process (De Landa, 59). Some critics and commentators have questioned the status of artgames as games due to their short duration and limited interactivity, thus questioning their claim to art and legitimacy (an objection that has persisted in more recent debates around autobiographical indie games, as discussed in the Conclusion). Alec Meer argues that, in spite of its emotional impact, "its credentials as actual game versus interactive experiment are debatable" (2007). If *Passage* and similar artgames aren't really games, then they can't prove anything about the form in general. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Braid*, which is much longer and employs many of the generic conventions of popular side-scrolling platformer games, has not faced similar charges. The simplicity of artgames is also sometimes attacked, in the same terms as the cliché "my kid could paint that" critique of abstract art: "I hate to be a dick but what a complete and utter waste of time. Which part of that was supposed to be impressive?" (Sapiens). Another common criticism is that artgames are impossibly pretentious. Consider this colourful blog comment, which negatively aligns artgames with other cultural forms deemed to be overly pretentious and

self-absorbed:

> Now, to be an indie art-film maker, you have to be pretty pretentious. To be an indie art-game maker is another thing entirely. You have to have your head shoved so far up your own ass that you can eat your heart. Wow Jason Rohr [sic]. I hate you. (quoted in Fagone)

Needless to say, this boundary-construction has political implications. Linked to the charge of pretentiousness is distaste for (and mockery of) the purportedly too self-serious or emotional themes of artgames, which mirrors the de-legitimation of soap operas, melodrama, and other feminized cultural forms on grounds that they are too emotional, too messy, and too overwrought (Newman & Levine, 82). One angry blogger writes, in a lengthy, homophobic, pseudo-intellectual screed, that artgame developers employ "various cunning aesthetic tricks that pander to the sensibilities of women and effeminate males" to hoodwink players into mistaking their work for "true" art (Kierkegaard). These critiques of artgames also take the form of direct parody (affectionate and otherwise), such as the Flash game *Passage in 10 Seconds* (Flash, 2010), which distils its basic elements (the companion, the treasure, and death) into a pithy 10-second game. As De Landa points out, "a [social] movement typically breeds a counter-movement, both of which should be considered component parts of the overall assemblage" (59). Just as the tension around *Bioshock*'s "ludonarrative dissonance" is endemic of broader debates and discussions in game criticism at the time, this backlash against artgames reflects deep-seated divisions in gaming culture, in which narrative-driven, action-oriented AAA blockbusters are privileged over all other forms (even while the industry exploits a diverse range of genres to maximize their profits).

Ideological critiques

More recently, critics have challenged the artgame paradigm in ideological terms. Amanda Lange writes provocatively "Passage Is Not About Me," expressing frustration that such a highly regarded game treats its female character as little more than an accessory. Although artgames react against the traditionally hyper-masculine preoccupations of mainstream gaming (which usually involves burly men shooting things with big guns), they do so instead asserting a quieter, more introspective conception of masculinity. Similar to the indie comics Beaty discusses, canonical artgames like *Passage*, *Braid*, and *Every Day the Same Dream* "mobilize their aesthetic case through the tropes of masculinist modernism, including the feminization of mass culture, a focus on […] 'melodramas of beset manhood', and a romanticization of the straight, white male subject," on the assumption that the thoughtful, melancholy male player matches the thoughtful, melancholy male auteur (2012, 218).

This ideological critique has also developed as part of the "queer renaissance in video games" (Kunzelman 2013a), a new wave of indie games exploring marginal identities and societal oppression, driven by designer-critics like Anna Anthropy and Mattie Brice. Games like *dys4ia* (2012) and *Mainichi* (2012) share *Passage*'s emphasis on autobiography and individual authorship, its lo-fi aesthetics and accessibility in terms of both production and play, and they are often cited together as part of an overarching movement towards DIY, non-commercial "personal games." As much as these games and their reception follow *Passage*, however, they also react against its purported universalism as a definitive account of human life and death. Anthropy points out that the inevitability of the game's ending, in which the male protagonist dies of old age, is "really wishful thinking" for many queer and transgender people, who are habitually

subjected to emotional and physical violence, and Brice says that her game *Mainichi* was intended in part as a critique of *Passage*'s simplistic, linear structure (Keogh 2013). These are post-*Passage* artgames, with all the tension that prefix implies, critiquing the dominant myth of the "struggling indie artist" (Consalvo 2013b, 325).

Conclusion

What is at stake, why, and for whom, in specific processes of legitimation? Why were artgames able to achieve such a high degree of acceptance as art compared to other kinds of digital games, in such a short period of time? With this case study, I have attempted to show that the constitution of *Passage* as legitimate art was "neither simple nor obvious" (Wasson, 2), and must be understood as a convergence of different processes, activities, ideas, and elements. These are not benign, neutral processes. The challenge to the mainstream game industry and its products presented by artgames must be understood in terms of overlapping and interacting configurations of material and expressive resources. The art world assemblage for *Passage* and other artgames has brought acclaim, status, and capital (both cultural and material) to its participants — not only developers like Rohrer, but also players, critics, scholars, companies, and institutions. While I have limited this study to the historical moment immediately following *Passage*'s release, the game has continued to circulate and transform alongside shifting institutions, practices, and discourses, far surpassing other early artgames such as *The Marriage* and *The Graveyard* in prominence and prestige, culminating most recently with MoMA's acquisition of the game and Rohrer's appearance in the *Us and the Game Industry* documentary alongside other a host of other indie game auteurs. Rohrer's subsequent games, in particular *Gravitation* (2008), a free title similar to *Passage* about inspiration and his relationship with his

children, and *Sleep is Death*, an open-ended two-player storytelling game, have been met with acclaim (though not to the same degree).

Since 2007, however, the reception context for small, artistically-minded indie games has changed, as demonstrated by the overwhelmingly negative critical response to Rohrer's most recent game. *The Castle Doctrine* (2013) is a multiplayer game with a persistent online world in which players control male avatars who must defend their homes, wives, and children by building traps to snare other players attempting to steal from them, while at the same time trying to steal from other players. Like his other works, the game is framed by Rohrer as a deeply personal exploration of his own anxieties about protecting his family, and about the social construction of masculinity. Largely based on comments made in a *Rock Paper Shotgun* interview that circulated widely before the game's release, Rohrer was strongly criticized for his apparent obsession with a paranoid masculine fantasy of violence and control, and in particular for the game's troubling gender roles, in which the non-playable "wife" characters are seemingly reduced to their monetary value (Meer 2013). Rohrer has defended the game, arguing that the lack of playable female characters is explicitly because it is about his personal experience as a man, but this attempt to impose an autobiographical interpretation on the game has been met with skepticism and resistance. In an interview and editorial, critic Leigh Alexander laments the "strange, sad anxiety" underlying the game, presenting Rohrer less as a Romantic auteur and more as a talented but deeply misguided man experiencing a mid-life crisis (2013b). Elsewhere, Cameron Kunzelman argues that the game condones and legitimates the violence of white men, and defends his decision to never play *The Castle Doctrine*, concluding "I don't want to play it. I don't want to have any part of it. After I post this, I'm going to do my best to never talk about it again. That's my stance here, and I sort of believe that it is the only ethical one" (2013b) — a

stance that has generated heated discussion among essayistic critics.

Although he has come under fire, Rohrer's authorial intentions are evidently still made central to the reception and interpretation of his games — indeed, the debate about *The Castle Doctrine* is inexorably linked to his auteur persona — but his authorship is no longer seen as a guarantee of aesthetic quality or value, and the game been condemned by the many of the same critics that originally boosted *Passage*. As I argue in the previous chapter with regards to *Bioshock: Infinite*, the downturn in Rohrer's authorial fortunes has as much to do with the changing conditions of production and reception for indie games, and the emergence of a more critical mode of game criticism, as it does with textual differences (as noted above, *Passage* has also been retroactively critiqued in similar terms). Rohrer and his games have played an influential and sometimes controversial role in sustaining a particular conception of games-as-art, and in the entrenchment of indie games as a vital area of digital games and gaming culture. As I will show in the Conclusion, the idea of artgames remains influential, but while in 2007 Rohrer was praised as the "saviour of our souls" (Fagone) and *Passage* seemed to mark a definitive end to the games-as-art debate (Burch 2007), seven years later these ideas seem at best quaint and at worst reactionary, as the contingent assemblage of resources, people, discourses, and practices that made *Passage* sensible as a work of art and granted it such high cultural status and prestige continues to shift and transform.

Conclusion: A Game is Played Through

"A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation." (Dewey, 37)

How are games being constituted and reconfigured as art, where, and by whom? Over the course of this dissertation, I have argued that in order to understand the cultural legitimation of digital games as art, it is necessary to attend to the specific social-material processes through which it is taking place. Identifying a clear gap in scholarly discussions of games and art, I have articulated a conceptual framework for understanding the historical, political, social, and cultural dimensions of art in conjunction with aesthetics, and demonstrated an approach to studying cultural and aesthetic legitimation that recognizes it as a complex, multifaceted process involving diverse elements, interactions, and activities in art world assemblages. De Landa insists that even the most stable assemblages are constantly changing and require ongoing maintenance (38-39). As indicated in my introduction, the story of digital games' cultural and aesthetic legitimation is never truly finished — artistic status, authorship, prestige, critical discourse, and other manifestations of legitimacy require maintenance in the ongoing interactions and activities of the art world assemblages in which they are constituted. In this concluding chapter, I will briefly survey a variety of new and transformed ideas of games-as-art that have emerged since 2010, considering how they overlap with, are informed and supported by, and in some cases react against, the art world assemblages I have traced here, before ending with some final remarks and observations.

My three case studies have shown how different models of games-as-art are configured,

stabilized, proliferated, and contested. These models have continued to circulate, providing

discursive and material resources and strategies that have been mobilized in other contexts. In

spite of his deliberate withdrawal from the debate, the bogeyman of Roger Ebert has loomed

large in virtually all discussions of games and art (including scholarly ones), and the kinds of

objections about interactivity, authorship, and entertainment raised in the Ebert debate continue

to be raised by cultural pundits (though with less frequency). These objections continue to

structure arguments for games-as-art, which still broadly adopt the same strategies: alignment

with other art forms based on games' capacity for narrative and emotional impact, appealing to

interactivity as a form of medium specificity for games, identifying well-regarded game

developers as author figures, and so on. What I have called the prestige game, exemplified by

Bioshock and similar "intelligent" or "mature" AAA games, persists in spite of the significant

backlash against more recent examples such as *Bioshock: Infinite*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *The

Last of Us.* The prestige of these blockbusters seems undiminished in mainstream gaming

culture, based on their near-universal acclaim and accolades, as does the privileged status of

commercial auteurs like Ken Levine, although their economic viability has been questioned

(Statt). Likewise, although Jason Rohrer's status has suffered in the face of recent criticism, the

idea of the personal, esoteric indie game produced by an individual artist-auteur popularized by

Passage and other artgames remains an influential aesthetic ideal for certain sectors of gaming

culture. In spite of their specificities, these three case studies have much in common as well,

constructing games as art largely within dominant Western frameworks for art and aesthetics. I

contend that in order to understand more recent developments in the legitimation of games, it is

necessary to situate them in relation to the "productive cultural moment" of 2005-2010

collectively represented by these case studies.

Changes in game criticism

Essayistic game criticism between 2005 and 2010 was a fragmentary, decentralized discourse, primarily taking place in posts and comment threads on a sprawling network of personal blogs; specialized columns on general interest gaming websites like *Gamasutra* and *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*; a handful of dedicated sites like *Grand Text Auto*, *GameCritics.com* and *The New Gamer*; and spilling over onto social media. Though certain people, including well-known critics like Leigh Alexander, were in some capacity producing essayistic criticism professionally, most were either amateurs, or game developers dabbling in criticism. As evidenced in the reception of *Bioshock* and *Passage*, discussed in Chapters Four and Five, the essayistic writing around this time tends to be text-centric, focusing on close readings and commentary on individual games, comparative analyses, and the mapping of genres and concepts across different games. Much of this body of work is interpretive, attempting to discern and evaluate the meaning and significance of the form, content, and experience of games.

Since then, essayistic game criticism has continued to expand, becoming in some ways more cohesive and stable, and in other ways more fragmentary and diverse. The website *Critical Distance*, started in 2009, compiles links to essayistic criticism from a wide range of sources, and has helped nurture a sense of common ground, shared purpose, and community for game critics (Abraham), while the slickly-designed print journal and website *Kill Screen* has attempted to make game enthusiasm cool by positioning itself as the *Pitchfork* of games (including a direct partnership with the influential music website). Both have proved to be influential, although *Critical Distance* has remained a grassroots effort, and *Kill Screen* is very much a commercial, journalistic enterprise. As critic and game scholar Ben Abraham has demonstrated, Twitter has

also become a key platform for circulating links to game criticism, as well as direct interactions, debates, and community-building among critics, adding a new layer of immediacy to the existing networks of communication on blogs and websites that constitute what he calls "the critical videogame blogosphere" (5).

The Border House, also launched in 2009 in response to a perceived lack of diversity in game criticism and gaming culture, provides a similarly centralized venue for feminist, queer, disabled, and anti-racist perspectives in game criticism. Although it derives from the same enthusiast-intellectual impulse, the safe space and visibility *The Border House* affords to marginalized, politicized voices is part of a more general shift towards ideological critique in game criticism, in contrast to some other critics' more fannish orientation towards the industry and AAA gaming. This shift is frequently cited as evidence of a slow-but-sure maturation of game criticism as a practice, and games as an art form (Lewis). More recently, there has been a proliferation of dedicated game criticism websites presenting diverse critical perspectives such as *Unwinnable* and *Nightmare Mode*, as well as digital and print journals such as *Memory Insufficient* and *Five out of Ten*, and critics have continued to gain visibility and legitimacy. Certain critics and critic-practitioners, such as Anna Anthropy, Samantha Allen, and Brendan Keogh, have achieved recognition outside of relative confines of the critical blogosphere, writing articles for respected non-gaming publications like *The Atlantic* and *Slate*, publishing books, and participating actively in major industry and "alternative" events like the Game Developers Conference and Indiecade. Although essayistic game criticism is still dwarfed by mainstream game journalism, and attempts to monetize and professionalize the labour of critics have been met with mixed success (consider the short-lived *Re/Action Zine*, which hoped to pay its writers, and the various models of crowd-funding being explored [Keogh 2014]), the scope and influence

of this crucial reception context for games-as-art has changed dramatically since the release of *Bioshock* and *Passage* (as evidenced by the negative critical reception of *Bioshock Infinite* and *The Castle Doctrine*, discussed in Chapters Four and Five).

Much-publicized incidents of sexism, racism, and homophobia in the game industry and gaming culture, and in particular the violent and misogynistic backlash against Anita Sarkeesian's "Feminist Frequency: Tropes vs Women in Video Games" videos have significantly amplified and intensified the ideological mode of essayistic criticism popularized by *The Borderhouse*, focused on consciousness-raising and social justice. Unlike the legitimation of contemporary "quality television" (which, as Newman & Levine, contend, is discursively distinguished from the medium's feminine-domestic and lower-class past [5]), the legitimation of games now involves a variety of different orientations (both reactionary and progressive) towards hegemonic masculinity and the dominant ideology, with competing visions of what games-as-legitimate-art might look like. The discourse has also broadened to include a much more diverse array of games, and essayistic critics have played an increasingly important role in promoting indie, amateur, and otherwise non-mainstream games and marginalized developers as an alternative to AAA offerings. This is, in part, a question of competing art world assemblages, and clashes between different political-aesthetic positions.

As noted in Chapter Four, although there have been significant critiques of the AAA prestige game among essayistic critics, in general this configuration of games-as-art remains dominant. "Mature" blockbuster releases such as *Bioshock: Infinite*, *The Last of Us* and *Grand Theft Auto V* are, for fans and journalists, and indeed many critics and scholars, worthy of the highest accolades for their combination of well-established gameplay formulas, distinctive audiovisual style, elaborate fictional worlds and narratives, and their ambitions to have

"something to say." Even ideological critics for the most part do not appear to be ready to abandon the game industry entirely, if only for the (perhaps guilty) pleasure they still derive from AAA games, and the usefulness of blockbuster prestige titles as touchstones for discourse (discussed in Chapter Five). But new venues for game criticism that focus exclusively on indie, experimental, and otherwise non-mainstream games such as *The Arcade Review* are cropping up regularly. Critics and game scholars now more than ever before look to a diverse range of game-making practices to find (or construct) works of aesthetic and ideological value. This, in turn, has helped new art world assemblages for different kinds of games to fall into place.

"Triple-i" artgames

One notable development since 2007 has been a growing game industry interest and investment in indie games, and in particular high profile, polished commercial indie games that occupy a middle ground between AAA prestige titles and the aesthetic preoccupations of artgames. Combining aspects of both, these "triple-i" or "single-A" games have become an identifiable market category, constituting a middle ground that has become one of the areas in which games-as-art is understood to be thriving. Jonathan Blow's time-bending puzzle platformer *Braid* (often cited alongside *Passage* as an formative artgame) is an important precursor to this trend. Although earlier titles such as thatgamecompany's *fl0w* had demonstrated the possibilities for commercial indie games on major consoles, *Braid*'s unprecedented success on the Xbox Live digital distribution service (Blow) helped bring the author-driven model of *Passage* and other artgames to a much wider audience, and demonstrated the commercial viability of indie titles with high production values to the game industry (Clark).

Thatgamecompany's *Flower* and *Journey* are probably the most well-known of the

commercially successful post-*Braid* artgames, and have been held up alongside others like *Papo & Yo* and *Gone Home* as exemplars of games-as-art, especially in the mainstream gaming press. These games combine the cinematic stylistic and narrative conventions and fully rendered 3D graphics found in AAA games with a distinctive audiovisual style (more polished than *Passage*'s pixel abstraction) and familiar artistic themes like humanity and nature, life and death, alcoholism and child abuse, or growing up queer. These titles eschew much of the spectacle and violence supposedly required to make prestige games marketable, focusing instead on meditative pacing and idiosyncratic combinations of simple game mechanics to convey their message or theme. *Gone Home* is a particularly interesting example as it was made by several developers who worked on the *Bioshock* series but abandoned the mainstream industry to form their own independent studio. As many critics have pointed out, *Gone Home* adopts genre conventions from AAA games, in particular the exploration of a ruined or derelict space and the collection of narrative fragments that gradually reveal the fate of the space and its inhabitants,[13] but transposes them onto a domestic environment only metaphorically "ruined" by relatively mundane family strife (Bogost 2013; Short).

The high degree of polish and relative complexity found in mid-level indie games also necessitates larger development teams (though still smaller compared to AAA titles), but authorship is still highly valued. *Papo & Yo* is overtly autobiographical, metaphorically exploring creative director Vander Caballero's relationship with his alcoholic, abusive father, and his authorship has been foregrounded in much the same way as Jason Rohrer in the game's reception (Lejaq 2012b). By contrast, thatgamecompany co-founders Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago are together identified as the primary authors of the studio's work (along with producer

13 See Vella for a more in-depth discussion of these tropes.

Robin Hunicke in the case of *Journey*), but their authorship is distanced somewhat from the content of their games. In profiles of the studio (Bogost 2012) and the documentary *Us and the Game Industry*, which showcases Chen, Santiago, and Hunicke alongside other indie game auteurs (including Rohrer), thatgamecompany's games are discussed in terms of the studio's overall design philosophy (such as their interest in "flow" theory) and their individual intellectual or emotional preoccupations (such as environmental degradation or interpersonal connection) more than any one person's life experience, as in the case of Rohrer and Caballero.

Although they are explicitly called indie games, some of these high-profile commercial artgames are produced in direct collaboration with major publishers and hardware manufacturers: for example, thatgamecompany signed an exclusive three-game deal with Sony [Bogost 2012]). However, this compromise is framed in terms of the industry supporting innovation, allowing these companies to share in the prestige as well as the profits (Santiago 2006). In many ways, this new style of artgame is what games-as-art looks like in popular gaming culture and the mainstream media, brushing shoulders with AAA prestige games in the critical canon of games-that-must-be-played. (Some critics have even begun to complain that "critic-baiting" indie games have become a formulaic genre category rather than an "authentic" form of artistic expression [Swain]). I would argue that this does not represent a shift *away* from the conceptions of art discussed in my case studies, but rather an extension of these conceptions, as the industry expands to incorporate and monetize a gradually wider range of products, either absorbing independent practices or driving them further towards the fringe (Pedercini).

The "queer games scene"

As noted in Chapter Five, another notable development in indie games in the last few years

is the rise to prominence of what has been called, among other things, a "queer games scene" (Keogh 2013) or the "queer renaissance" in games (Kunzelman 2013b), centred mostly on the work of independent queer and transgender developers. This diverse assortment of usually short, usually non-commercial games, often produced using accessible tools like GameMaker and Twine, feature a wide range of audiovisual styles (from retro pixel graphics to colourful abstracted shapes to stark white-on-black text), and use simple game mechanics to reflect upon the experience of marginalization and oppression. They vary from explicitly representational autobiography (Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* [2012]; Merrit Kopas' *Conversations With My Mother* [2013]) to impressionistic and experimental (porpentine's *Howling Dogs* [2012]). Some have questioned whether the categorization is even productive, since it hinges on the gender and sexual identities of the developers in spite of significant differences in their work (Brice 2013b), but the pragmatic mobilization of this category regardless of its accuracy makes it significant. Queer games share subject matter and themes (and presumably an audience) with some larger-scale commercial artgames like *Papo & Yo* and *Gone Home*, but queer games are more overtly antagonistic towards the commercial game industry, rejecting its paradigms and conventions. Oakland, California-based developer and critic Anna Anthropy, who has worked in this idiom for many years, is understood to be progenitor of the nebulous movement, in particular with the release of her guide to amateur personal game-making *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) and *dys4ia* (2011), an autobiographical collection of mini-games about life as a transgender woman. The punk-like "zinester" aesthetic derived from Anthropy's influential work combines traditional notions of Romantic authorship and independent artistic expression (modeled on print zines and punk music) with activist identity politics and a kind of amateur populism, which suggests that game design could be similar to sketching or taking a snapshot, and not the

exclusive domain of specialists (Anthropy 2012, 113-114).

Although they build upon the "games as personal expression" premise of artgames like *Passage*, as noted in Chapter Five, the wide range of games, developers, and critics loosely grouped under the heading of queer games take a somewhat oppositional stance towards earlier artgames, which are seen to represent a dominant white, heterosexual, cis-male version of indie game authorship that purports universalism but excludes difference. According to the zinester paradigm, personal games can be politically radical as well, pushing the autobiographical model of *Passage* beyond the narrow range of experience it is capable of representing. Authorship in this new crop of artgames is as much about the politics of giving voice to people marginalized by a toxic, reactionary gaming culture as it is about appealing to established artistic conventions for legitimacy (an intervention that feminist media scholar Kristina Busse argues is necessary to rehabilitate the concept of authorship [48]). Many of the developers and critics associated with the scene also write game criticism in the ideological mode described above, critiquing mainstream gaming culture and contrasting it to other practices. In this sense, queer games recall earlier attempts to articulate an alternative, politically radical, or critical form of artistic game design, as in Mary Flanagan's work and the various models of serious or persuasive games that attempt to embody arguments and expressions in their rule systems. But this new wave of queer artgames comes from different communities of practice and articulates a distinct aesthetic and ethos, forming new social, material, and discursive networks of support that only partially intersect with previously existing art worlds.

The recent contention regarding the formal status of queer and zinester games as games, on the grounds that they lack some defining feature of game-ness or other usually related to their relatively limited interactivity, echoes criticisms of earlier artgames and game-based gallery art

(see Ligman 2013 for a useful overview). Although it is couched in ontological terms, implying that they do not appropriately embody the purported medium specificity of games, attempts to deny certain works or styles the status of game is a form of border-patrolling that selectively defines a particular vision of games-as-art (Consalvo & Paul). Philosopher Boris Groys argues that the "struggle for [socio-political] inclusion is possible only if the forms in which the desires of the excluded minorities manifest themselves are not rejected and suppressed from the beginning by any kind of aesthetical [sic] censorship operating in the name of higher aesthetical values" (15). As many commentators have pointed out, it is highly suspect that the games most often accused of being non-games are usually made (or primarily played by) women, people of colour, queers, and other marginalized people (Kopas; Anthropy 2013; Keogh 2014; see also the gendered language used to criticize *Passage* in Chapter Five). Evidently, tension over the right to define what counts as a real game — and thus what is relevant to the legitimacy of games as a cutlural form — continues to be entangled in both aesthetics and politics. In spite of these criticisms, however, the conception of games-as-art associated with the queer new wave has become increasingly influential in indie game culture, essayistic criticism circles, and game studies, and is positioned by some as the most promising trajectory for artistic legitimacy for games, and something which needs to be nurtured and promoted widely (see, for example, queer game curator Jaime Woo's comments in Weiss).

Games in galleries and museums

Historically, museums and galleries, as well as less obvious cultural institutions like auction houses, publishers, and festivals, have served an important function, claiming authority and bestowing value on both recognized art forms and newer practices (Baumann 2007b, 54).

These institutions act as both material distribution networks and "webs of interrelated rules and norms" that govern the circulation of art and cultural prestige (Nee, quoted in van Maanen, 43), shaping art not by affecting the production process, but through exhibition and reception (Wasson, 24). Beaty argues:

> More than any other cultural institution, the museum plays a central role in elaborating a definition of artistic works as they are the primary institutions where the public encounters art [...] Simply put, by mounting exhibitions, museums and other gate-keeping institutions, enact their power to define what is — and is not — art. (Beaty 2012, 186-187)

In other words, museums and galleries maintain their authority by producing a certain set of criteria for legitimate art, and then determining what works meet those criteria (Wasson, 28). As Wasson's study of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library and Beaty's work on gallery exhibitions of comics demonstrate, this involves a careful process of selection, exclusion, and differentiation between different genres and types of works within a cultural form, producing and maintaining a very particular vision of the form as art (Wasson, 5).

It is not surprising therefore, that museums and art galleries have participated in the legitimation of digital games as art. In fact, there have been institutional exhibitions involving digital games for many years, going back to at least 1989, when the Museum of the Moving Image showcased a wide range of popular arcade games in *Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade*. Blockbuster exhibitions like *Hot Circuits* are designed to attract a mass audience, focusing on the history, culture, and science-and-technology aspects of digital games (as well as the novelty of presenting games in a museum) more than their aesthetic value (see Kim for a more in-depth history). This model of exhibition continues to be popular and lucrative, as evidenced by the recent touring *Game On* exhibitions. In the 1990s, as discussed in Chapter One, game-based art exhibitions like the influential 1999 show *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as*

Hacker Art at San Jose State University proliferated, explicitly framing their objects as art, but targeting a much more esoteric new media art-savvy audience (Pearce 2006, 87-88). More recently, a number of much-publicized exhibitions at major art institutions of games-as-art (rather than games-as-pop-culture or game-based art, as in most previous shows) have renewed the debates discussed in Chapter Three, bringing the question of games and art once again into the popular spotlight (much to the chagrin of scholars and critics who dismiss these institutional efforts as meaningless [for example, Johnson 2012]).

For many game enthusiasts, big, widely publicized exhibitions (and similar institutional moves such as the US National Endowment for the Arts' 2011 decision to extend funding to "interactive media" projects [Lasar]) are a long-awaited validation of games' ultimate ascendancy to artistic legitimacy and glory. It is important, however, not to frame this institutional recognition (which is, as Christine Kim argues, in no small part a capitalization on the growing popularity of games) as a final stamp of approval or a neat resolution to the unfinished narrative traced in this dissertation. The idea of games-as-art remains controversial (as evidenced by the Ebert-esque op-eds still being published in response to these exhibitions [Jones 2012]), and even if it were not, these exhibitions would still have to be seen as new articulations and configurations with social and material stakes, mobilizing specific conceptions of games-as-art and participating actively in (rather than simply documenting) the ongoing, multifaceted process of legitimation.

The Art of Video Games at the Smithsonian

In 2012, The Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C. opened a new touring exhibition called *The Art of Video Games* (*TAOVG*), which was touted as making history

as the first exhibition of digital games at a major art institution. This is not accurate (as indicated above), but *TAOVG* is certainly one of the most highly publicized blockbuster shows, and is notable for its explicit framing of a wide range of ordinary, unmodified commercial games as art objects. *TAOVG* is also unique in that it partially crowd sourced its curatorial process: a long-list of historically, culturally, and technically significant games was compiled by guest curator and game archivist/collector Chris Melissinos and an "advisory group" including developers, journalists, and critics, and organized into different historical periods, platforms, and genres. In early Spring 2011, fans and museum patrons were invited to vote in an open online poll to determine which games would be included in the final show ("The Art of Video Games"). This populist appeal was framed as an expression of authenticity and loyalty towards "the gamers," presumably to avoid being criticized for trying to represent gaming culture without engaging it directly. This fan-orientation permeates *TAOVG*, from its marketing and promotion to organization of the show itself to the catalogue book, all of which are carefully designed to do right by gaming enthusiasts. In his public appearances during the opening celebrations, Melissinos announced that with the exhibition the Smithsonian has not only embraced (and thus legitimated) games as an art form, but also the fan community.

The Art of Video Games, in its first iteration at the Smithsonian, was comprised of three large rooms. The first room, an L-shaped entryway, included a compilation video of footage from games in the exhibition; several documentary-style videos at stations with headphones showing interviews with game developers, curators, and critics; and short featurettes tracing the history of various "Advances in Mechanics" such as Landscapes, Jumping, Flying and Cutscenes. Also in this first room was a video installation version of photographer Philip Toledano's well-known portraits of people playing digital games (the only example of game-based art in the show), and a

variety of game development paraphernalia, including concept art and sketches from popular games like *World of Warcraft* and *The Legend of Zelda*. The second room, larger and subdivided into five large partially enclosed stations with projection screens, contained the exhibitions only five playable games, one for each Era represented by the exhibition (see below). Chosen by the curators as exemplars of the game, visitors were invited to play popular-canonical titles *Pac-Man*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Myst*, and *Flower* using custom controllers on specially designed plinths, with built-in timers that reset the games periodically, to keep patrons circulating.

The last and largest room featured the most in-depth and component of the exhibition: a chronological history of 21 game consoles and platforms from the Atari VCS[14] to the Sony PlayStation 3, divided into five Eras (Start, 8-bit, Bitwars, Transition, and Next Gen). Each console was presented with its controllers and other accessories behind glass in a colourful display case, with a video screen and back-lit still images of four popular or influential games (chosen in the public poll), each categorized into one of four broad gameplay genres (Action, Target, Adventure, and Tactics). In some cases this required some awkward shoehorning: Tactics became a vague catch-all for many games that did not fit elsewhere, and some games were separated from their original platforms in order to accommodate the neat four-games-per-console framework (the cult PC title *Worms Armageddon* [1999] is presented in its less-popular Nintendo 64 iteration, for example). The games in this section were not playable; rather visitors could use arcade-style buttons to select and watch with headphones short, narrated gameplay videos explaining the game's significance to the history of game design. In the several hours I spent in

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14 Omitting the Magnavox Odyssey, which predates the Atari but is often written out of popular narratives of digital game history.

this area of the exhibition, most visitors did not pick up the headphones, instead admiring the consoles as objects of nostalgia and briefly watching the videos without sound.

The show was somewhat isolated inside the American Art Museum, and seemed to cater primarily to an audience that would not normally patronize art galleries — most of the visitors walked swiftly through the long halls of American art, following posted signs to the games area. (During one of my visits, I did see a few people cautiously investigating a Nam June Paik installation next to the entrance, but this may have been the result of confusion due to the installation's use of pixelated television images.) In the exhibition, its documentation, and the talks and events that marked the opening, there was surprisingly little, if any, discussion of the wide range of other art housed there. The games were presented as art as-is, rather than by alignment with the museum's collection, suggesting as Kim argues of other blockbuster exhibitions that the Smithsonian and its guest curators were more interested in attracting large numbers of admission-paying gaming enthusiasts to the museum than in incorporating games into the institutional Art World.

Becker notes that the kind of narrativization and canon formation found throughout *The Art of Videogames* tends to selectively trace "a steady line of development has led inevitably […] to the present situation of undoubted achievement of high-art status" (1984, 346), but of course this "present situation" is itself a selective construction. Needless to say, *TAOVG* articulates a very specific vision of games-as-art (especially since only five of its games are playable), influenced heavily by the game industry and mainstream gamer culture. The teleological progression upon which the exhibition is organized, with its focus on how successive generations of designer-artists, driven by creativity and ingenuity, took advantage of the technical limitations and affordances of various platforms to expand the possibilities of games, is very consistent with

the dominant industry and fan narratives discussed in Chapter Four. According to this narrative, the whole history of games finds is apotheosis and ultimate legitimation as art in commercial artgames on the most technologically advanced gaming console, with the release of *Flower* on the PS3 (with numerous landmarks, advances, innovations, and firsts along the way).

The legitimation strategies of medium specificity, authorship, exemplification, and populism discussed in Chapter Three are the exhibition's guiding logic, and while it includes a variety of prestige titles and commercial artgames like *Bioshock* and *Flower*, it focuses primarily on less self-consciously artistic AAA favourites and iconic "classics" like *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007) and *Missile Command* (1980). As Mia Consalvo demonstrates, this fannish canon has its origins in the enthusiast press that gradually emerged to sustain a nascent gaming culture after the shift away from public arcades towards home game consoles (2007, 20). This trajectory is reflected in the conspicuous absence of arcade games, most early home computers (other than the Commodore 64), and handheld/mobile platforms (not to mention casual and social games) in the history traced by *TAOVG*. Although the exhibition foregrounds a small handful of women game developers, as Aubrey Anable and numerous others have argued, there is a gendered politics behind what counts as real gaming for real "core" gamers and what is considered marginal. The exhibition also omits many contemporary first-person shooters, presumably to avoid controversy for depictions of graphic violence (even older shooters included in the show carefully avoid showing guns in the first-person perspective). Indie games are not well represented, save for extremely popular recent examples such as *Minecraft*, and no non-commercial games are included. This conception of games-as-art, which will continue to circulate as the exhibition tours major museums and galleries across the United States until early 2016, is commercial, populist, fannish, and decidedly family-friendly.

The MoMA acquisition

An interesting counterpoint to the Smithsonian show is the Museum of Modern Art's 2012 announcement that it would be permanently acquiring fourteen digital games, the first step in an ongoing mandate to add games to its collection. Predictably, this announcement reignited debates about games-as-art in the mainstream media and the popular sphere, with critics like Jonathan Jones and Brian Moriarty publishing Ebert-like critiques of the notion (and being met with similar backlash from fans), producing another wave of eye-rolling and hand-wringing among intellectuals still exasperated by the question. As noted in Chapter Five, the MoMA had previously included games in special exhibitions, but the actual acquisition of games makes a qualitatively different statement about the nature and value of games as a cultural form. The stated criteria of the collection are audiovisual aesthetics and beauty, innovative representations of space and time, and, more vaguely, "the dynamics of player behaviour" (Antonelli). The MoMA's initial collection of games is much more eclectic than the Smithsonian's populist canon, placing acclaimed favourites like *Pac-Man* and *Portal* alongside indie artgames like *Passage* and thatgamecompany's *fl0w*, quirky cult hits like *Katamari Damacy* and *Vib-Ribbon*, and well-known but arcane games with niche appeal like *Dwarf Fortress* and *EVE Online*. Whereas *The Art of Video Games* is reflective of the taste and values of mainstream gaming culture, the MoMA is closer to what I have described as an "enthusiast-intellectual" canon, focusing mostly on titles that have been the subject of significant essayistic critical discourse and acclaim.

The MoMA game collection was first displayed in 2013 as part of an exhibit called *Applied Design*, which showcased a wide range of art and design objects, "ranging from a mine detonator […] to a vessel made by transforming desert sand into glass using only the energy of the sun"

("Applied Design"). Some of the games were playable, though some, for practical reasons of complexity and accessibility, were instead presented as automated demos or pre-recorded videos. Although the collection features games on a diverse range of platforms, from arcade cabinets to mobile devices, the curators made a deliberate decision not to display any of the gaming hardware or paratextual materials, except the bare minimum necessary to play the games, in order to foreground the internal design of the games as software and enable a different kind of appreciation by staging the encounter in an unfamiliar context ("Paola Antonelli: Why I Brought Pac-Man to MoMA 2013"). Senior Curator Paola Antonelli also says that this was a way of distancing the games from the kind of fannish nostalgia that permeated the Smithsonian show, although she is quick to add that "gamers understood" and appreciated what they were trying to do — suggesting that in spite of its less openly populist mandate, the MoMA is also interested in attracting publicity and a new audience with this collection.

In mainstream reporting on the announcement, and much of its reception, the MoMA acquisition has been presented straightforwardly as a famous art gallery controversially declaring games to be art. However, many commentators have pointed out that the department responsible for the acquisition was Architecture & Design, which also features such mundane objects as modernist chairs and the lowly iPod. According to nay-sayers, this departmental locus invalidates the purported significance of the acquisition, further confirming it to be a meaningless publicity stunt into which misguided media and fans were uncritically buying. Even Antonelli expresses somewhat contrived bemusement at the media's focus on the artistic status of games, wondering out loud "Did I ever say they were art?" Rather, Antonelli puts forward a vision of "the age of design," in which this diverse field (including industrial design, graphic design, user interaction design, and a host of other practices) is finally being recognized for its cultural and aesthetic

importance, and expanding beyond the realm of everyday things to supplant art from its traditionally elevated place in Western culture ("Paola Antonelli: Why I Brought Pac-Man to MoMA 2013"). This alludes to a more general blurring of the traditional boundaries between art and design: many of the works of design in the MoMA collection more closely resemble postmodern gallery and installation art than industrial design objects like the oft-cited iPod, and many contemporary artists also work in commercial design. (It is no accident that thatgamecompany's *fl0w* is featured in the collection, given the studio's emphasis on environmental design, user experience, and austere audiovisual style.) Wasson demonstrates that the MoMA has for many decades now played a crucial role in institutionalizing "the relatively novel and modern assertion that in addition to paintings and sculpture, the material of everyday life — buildings, photographs, advertising, machine parts, moving images — constituted valuable sources of aesthetic, historical, and intellectual contemplation" (Wasson, 17). In this context, then, it is insufficient to dismiss the MoMA acquisition as meaningless; as an act of legitimation, it may carry even more institutional weight than the inclusion of games in a traditional art gallery collection. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the legitimation of games is entangled in more general cultural shifts, and events like the MoMA acquisition represent a concerted effort to incorporate games into an increasingly influential art world assemblage and a particular conception of design and the aesthetic.

The "new arcade"

Other recent examples of games in museums and galleries operate at a distance from the giants of the institutional Art World, and can be contrasted against the blockbuster exhibitions described above. The heterogeneous range of interdisciplinary events and practices sometimes

referred to as the "new arcade" or "indie arcade" movement, including New York University's *No Quarter* series, Brooklyn's Babycastles collective, London's *Wild Rumpus*, and Toronto's *D-PAD* and *Vector Game+Art Convergence Festival*, in addition to numerous others, operate independently or ally instead with smaller galleries, artist-run centres, and university art and design departments. New arcade events often taking the form of short-term "pop-up" shows that incorporate aspects of art gallery openings, video arcades, and home gaming parties. The artists and curators of new arcade projects tend to be associated more closely and explicitly with the world of games than with the institutional Art World, and draw on a wide range of indie games (including artgames, "triple-i" titles, and "zinester" games),[15] as well as game-based art (for example, visual art inspired by game iconography, machinima, chiptunes, game-based performance art, hardware hacking, and glitching). Additionally, new arcade events often showcase in-person multiplayer games and site-specific game-performances, transforming the gallery (or the warehouse, or the bar, or the city street, or the gaming convention floor, or the planetarium) into a DIY arcade.

Developers and critics associated with the movement frequently highlight the notion of in-person engagement between players and spectatorship as key to the new arcade (Stein, 67). Rather than focusing on games intended to be played at home without an audience, or game-based artworks intended for contemplation in a traditional gallery, these shows are deliberately conceived with large, often rowdy groups of people in mind. In this sense new arcade is as much a curatorial movement as an artistic one, centred on curators who draw together a wide variety of game-making practices to produce a particular mode of engagement. A growing number of indie

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15 As noted in Chapter Five, these kinds of games are generally more amenable than other games to public exhibition thanks to their accessibility, visual stylization, and usually short duration.

developers now design games with the new arcade in mind, constructing multiplayer game-installations that combine aspects of sports, playground and folk games and direct physical interactions between players with custom, experimental hardware and digital components, rather than standard controllers and interfaces. Probably the most widely-known game associated with new arcade is *J.S. Joust*, a competitive, physical rhythm game in which players must move a motion controller in time to a musical beat, while simultaneously trying to jostle their opponents' controllers. Like the higher-profile exhibitions at the Smithsonian and the MoMA, new arcade is part of an emergent art world assemblage, representing a very specific conception of games-as-art. The new arcade movement shares the oppositional, punk-like DIY ethos of queer games, but is framed less as a form of artistic, political, or personal expression than as a fun, hip, anarchic social happening (in the vein of Fluxus) with games as a catalyst, and a more accessible, open form of game-based art than other traditions (Stein, 73). If new arcade contains an institutional critique, it less explicit than earlier game-based art exhibitions, and it lies in the contrast between the traditional, antiseptic gallery experience and the party atmosphere of new arcade events. The political dimension of these games is located by critics primarily in their reconfiguration of social relations through play (Wilson & Sicart, 5), rather than in their content. (Although some new arcade games do have overtly political content, as evidenced by Anna Anthropy's *Keep Me Occupied* arcade cabinet [2012], which was designed specifically to be played at the Occupy Oakland protests).

In the last few years new arcade-style events have become more popular and widespread, performing an increasingly important community-building and stabilizing function in art world assemblages for indie and alternative games, and producing visibility and legitimacy for this raucous and eclectic vision of games-as-art, while simultaneously reinforcing its borders. Die

Gute Fabrik, the makers of *J.S. Joust*, have been touring the game to new arcade events, as well as gaming conventions and festivals, for several years, and the game is still not available for public purchase. This has produced an aura of uniqueness and scarcity around the game which can be seen also in other new arcade hits like Messhoff's *Nidhogg*, similar to the "limited release" afforded to some prestige films to build anticipation and acclaim. Stein notes that there is a contradiction here between the accessibility and inclusivity of play and spectatorship engendered by these games, and the barriers to entry produced by limited releases and the attendant "enculturation and delimitation" of the new arcade scene to newcomers not already in the know (73-74). Stein's account echoes contemporary critiques of "relational aesthetics" and participatory art in the institutional Art World; in spite of the apparent democratic possibilities of these practices, when framed in context of larger assemblages they are not exempt from the logic of distinction (Bishop, 55-57).

The curious case of Pippin Barr

As one last example of the still-shifting relationship between games and art, consider the curious case of Pippin Barr. Barr first rose to prominence in 2011 with a small browser-based game inspired by the famous performance artist Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*, which was featured at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010. In this highly publicized performance, Abramovic sat almost motionless at a table for 736.5 hours, during which time gallery patrons were invited to sit silently across from her for any length of time, as the art star stared into their eyes. Many participants experienced profound affect, some weeping, and the piece has been written about extensively (in no small part thanks to the participation of pop star Lady Gaga and actor James Franco, which boosted the performance's popular profile significantly). Barr's game,

also titled *The Artist is Present*, simulates the whole experience of attending and participating in the performance, from entering the MoMA (which is only possible in the game during the gallery's actual opening hours), paying for admission, walking through the gallery to the performance, waiting in a very long line, and finally sitting across from Abramovic, all presented in low-resolution pixel graphics reminiscent of early 1990s adventure games like *King's Quest* (1984). Most of the game is spent waiting in line, which takes place in real time over the course of a matter of hours, but requires attention — if the player doesn't periodically move their avatar forward, they will lose their place in line. Unlike earlier representations of art galleries and museums in "art mods" discussed in Chapter One, such as *Museum Meltdown*, which act as iconoclastic critiques of the institutional Art World and its excesses (Cates, 162), *The Artist is Present* is less didactic, equal parts affectionate parody and homage. Barr's self-reflexive commentary on games and art is articulated in his other work as well, most notably *Art Game*, in which the player takes on the role of an up-and-coming contemporary artist and produces works of abstract painting, sculpture, and performance art by playing mini-games inspired by *Snake*, *Tetris*, and *Asteroids*. The resulting artworks are critiqued by a curator and ultimately displayed in an interactive gallery where they receive feedback from gallery visitors and critics. Critic John Brindle describes *Art Game* as "definitely a game, and definitely art; it's a game about art, and it's art about games." Barr's work has been widely reported on by game journalists, and well-received by essayistic critics, helping to make him an identifiable figure in indie game circles.

While Barr's wry use of the institutional Art World as offbeat subject matter for games is interesting in and of itself, it is his unexpected and largely unprecedented acceptance within the institutional Art World that makes his cultural position unique. In May 2013, Marina Abramovic herself played *The Artist is Present*, liked it, and contacted Barr by e-mail to discuss the game.

This initial nod of approval was followed by a Skype conversation and eventually an in-person meeting, from which developed a new collaboration. Barr received a commission to make a game in the style of his previous work that simulates a visit to the Marina Abramovic Institute, a still under-construction gallery in New York dedicated to Abramovic's own work and long-duration performance art more generally. Barr has gone from witty outsider paying playful homage to contemporary art and poking fun at popular discourses of games-as-art, to an active (albeit astonished) participant in the Art World, and one of *Harper's Bazaar*'s "10 Young Artists to Watch" (in an article penned by Abramovic). As Beaty argues of Chris Ware, a comic artist who has received similar recognition outside the world of comics, the institutional elevation of a select few individual creators is often understood to be a singular, monumental leap forward for a marginalized medium (2012, 212-213), but in fact the factors that have enabled Ware's (and Barr's) embrace by the Art World are very much contingent upon the more general process of cultural legitimation (2012, 225). Barr's peculiar institutional success is not a culmination or end point in this process, but rather a new social-material articulation of games-as-art, configured out of elements of other emergent art world assemblages (including aspects of artgames, game-based art, and the popular debates), and producing a new form of legitimacy.

"A consummation, not a cessation"

It is too early to see the long-term significance of these recent developments in the cultural and aesthetic legitimation of games, but this brief overview is intended to show the extent to which the precarious process is still underway, and shows no signs of resolving itself any time soon (whatever that resolution might look like). The idea of games-as-art remains unstable. Beaty notes, "Processes of legitimation and canonization are remarkably prone to changing fads

and fashions," and argues it is not productive to speculate on what the future may hold (2012, 212). Whatever happens next will take place in context of the cultural moment I have described throughout this dissertation, configuring and reconfiguring the diverse social-material elements and resources at play (the terms and stakes for games-as-art described in the Introduction) into new art world assemblages working to constitute games as legitimate art. Moreover, I contend that the conceptual framework and methodological approach demonstrated here is broadly applicable, and enables grounded and critical analyses of the emergence and functioning of these multiple, intersecting assemblages in all their complexity.

The literature review in Chapter One suggests that academic game studies has not sufficiently examined how cultural and aesthetic value circulates in and through games and gaming culture. By focusing closely on specific contexts, as I have shown, game scholars can trace the relationships between the many different elements and actors that are actively constituting games as art, rather than relying solely on art historical analogies. Likewise, an empirical approach that moves away from strict categorical definitions, and instead privileges the actual composition of gaming and art world assemblages can effectively side-step the problems and limitations I have identified in philosophical accounts of games-as-art. Finally, my approach can help draw lines of connection between previous studies of the socio-cultural dimensions of gaming while preserving their empirical specificity, by situating seemingly disparate discourses and practices within the larger framework of cultural legitimation. Reformulating the question of games-as-art in this manner (rather than dismissing it as bunk) can thus help game studies expand its scope towards a broader and more nuanced understanding of its objects.

In addition to addressing issues in game studies approaches to art, this dissertation makes a more general contribution to the study of art, society, and culture. My account of games and art

stands alongside the recent scholarship on film, television, comics, and other media cited throughout the preceding chapters, as part of a growing interdisciplinary body of work on cultural legitimation. In particular, my articulation of situated aesthetic experience as an emergent property of art world assemblages offers a way in to discussing aesthetics that avoids replicating problematic Enlightenment ideals and does not undermine the theoretical and methodological commitments of these studies, as I have argued is a risk of over-reliance on Bourdieu. The wholesale dismissal of aesthetics severely limits the ability of scholars to map and critically evaluate processes of cultural legitimation, and there is significant work left to be done on how aesthetic experience is constituted in, and constitutive of, art world assemblages. Just as play can occur without games, but games enact a framework that produces play (Taylor, 332), aesthetic experience can occur without art, but art enacts a framework that produces aesthetic experience (Berleant, 15). A central challenge for both game studies and the study of art is to explain the latter process without negating the former.

Games are a diverse and vibrant cultural form, conceptually messy and difficult to pin down. The main reason why the question "are games art?" has been so derided by scholars and intellectuals is because it purports to invite a simple binary answer to what is in fact a very complex question. It is my contention that cultural and aesthetic legitimacy is not a singular and transcendent state, nor a teleology, but a multifarious process situated in many different social-material contexts. Taken out of these contexts, ideas of games-as-art appear to have no weight or substance, but the emergent art world assemblages I have traced and analyzed throughout the preceding chapters are empirical phenomena and participants in broad cultural and historical shifts that extend far beyond the idiosyncratic world of games. If I may be permitted a gaming metaphor, legitimation is not a "game of progression" in which players advance through

successive linear challenges towards a definitive ultimate goal; it is a "game of emergence," in which the rules and components generate a wide range of dynamic possibilities with which players much strategically contend (Juul 2005, 5). Moreover, legitimation is a "nomic" game with no defined end-state, and mutable rules that shift and change in the course of play, producing an even wider range of possibilities and outcomes (Suber). In time, the cultural and aesthetic legitimacy of certain kinds of games and gaming will likely be commonly accepted (though I can only speculate on which kinds), and the diverse elements and ongoing interactions that constitute these art worlds will be increasingly naturalized and difficult to perceive. However, even the oldest and most stable assemblages are contingent, and the rules and stakes of the game will continue to change.

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