LEVELING UP: A STUDY OF PREMISE AND PRODUCT IN CONSIDERING GAMES AS ART

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ABSTRACT

At long last, the game industry is beginning to take itself seriously as an art form or, if you will, it is leveling up. Such is increasingly evident in the writing and work of game designers like Tracy Fullerton, Jonathan Blow, and Jason Rohrer. In this article I consider art as defined by various great visual artists and show how their works express their artistic premises. I will use their examples as templates for the evaluation of alignment of premise and product in the game medium. I skip over the current popular debate as to the ontological status of games as art and take it as given that games are an artistic medium. When using the same methodology and standard of excellence as found in the art community, how well do games fare?

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 I made the artistic decision to change my medium from painting to games. The reasons for this transformation are complicated and I will not go into the nuances of my creative decision in this writing. At the time I made this leap of faith, the reactions that I received from the art and game communities were not encouraging. The art community, on the one hand, dismissed the game medium as a viable one and the game community, on the other, disparaged the idea that games should even try to be art. This latter attitude is represented by Tim Schafer of Double Fine Productions with his now famous comment, “Are games art? Oh man, who cares?” Though alone, I persisted in believing in the viability and power of art games as an untapped medium. In 2011 my convictions were further challenged when Roger Ebert wrote a blog titled “Video Games Can Never Be Art” that prompted a flurry of discourse about the ontological status of games. Kellee Santiago of That Game Company countered Roger Ebert in her TEDx talk, “Video Games Are Art – What’s Next?” Brian Moriarty of Worcester Polytechnic Institute posed the question in his lecture, “An Apology for Roger Ebert”, “Why are some people in this industry so anxious to wrap themselves in the mantle of great art?” Further evidence of this discourse is abundant. In “Critical Play” Mary Flanagan asks, “What if certain games were something more than this… (entertainment, diversion, relaxation, fantasy).” Tracy Fullerton explores transcendental artwork in her games “The Night Journey” and “Walden.” John Sharp considers “the secret art history of games.” Additionally, Richard Rouse III asks the question, “can games be moral?” in his game design, and Brenda Brathwaite is prototyping human tragedy. Finally, one of the most poignant voices in the dialogue, Jonathan Blow, when talking about his game Braid, a thoughtful exploration of learning from your mistakes, says, “it’s about the process of asking the question [of the human condition] seriously.” All of this work and emerging discourse makes it safe to say that I am no longer alone in my convictions and that the path is clear to begin to consider games as art. I will begin with a description of my methodology and then discuss what art is in order to provide a starting point.

Methodology

In the consideration of games as art, I am using the following methodology. There are three pieces in this reflection: (1) the development of a personal definition of art and artistic premise that is an extension of the definition; (2) the expression of the premise in the work; (3) the evaluation of how well the premise manifests in the work. In determining the soundness of the representation of premise in the work I will examine formal tactics used by the artists to convey their premise. I think it is important to comment on what I am not trying to do. I am not trying to fit every artist into the same conceptual container. Instead, I am using this framework to understand how each individual artist is realizing their task of making art according to their own criteria.

WHAT IS ART?

This question has plagued many philosophers and artists for centuries, and I will not attempt to impose any one definition here. It is my experience that art is constantly being redefined by the work that artists create and the dialogue that they have with their audience. Having said that, I think it is important for anyone who sets out to create art to define it for him- or herself so that the artist knows what it is he or she is doing when working in the studio. Before considering the work and definitions of artists from the game industry, I will examine some great artists’ bodies of work and compare them to their
definitions of art in order to set the template by which to evaluate the work made in the game medium.

“It’s art because I say it’s art.” – Marcel Duchamp

What Marcel Duchamp meant when he uttered these famous words was not that he was going to do whatever he wanted but, because he was an artist, he would determine what art would be through his work. His definition redefines what qualifies as an art object and shifts what we think to be art from being a craft to an intellectual pursuit. When considering his definition, one of his most famous pieces, a urinal placed on a pedestal in 1917 titled “Fountain” attains deeper significance and meaning. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, Fountain (1917) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

“A painter is a choreographer of space.” – Barnett Newman

Barnett Newman’s definition dances across my mind’s eye. I remember standing in front of his canvases in various museums, being taken across the space at his bidding, being invited to regard a “zip” for a moment, and then being returned to tranquility. I always feel as if I am waltzing across the canvas with him. Every once in a while, he will dip and then effortlessly turn and flow with his audience, as dancers do when they are in perfect harmony with each other. His paintings, of which “The Stations of the Cross” are an example, (Figure 2) are a brilliant physical manifestation of his definition.

Figure 2: Barnett Newman, The Stations of the Cross (1958-1966) Image Licensed under Creative Commons with attribution rights by flickr user JoetheLion

“Art is art; everything else is everything else.” – Ad Reinhardt

When I first encountered an Ad Reinhardt painting, it seemed to tell me to accept it on its own terms and to let go of all of my prejudices and expectations. The painting did not need other paintings in the series to validate it or the company of like-minded paintings hanging next to it. The seemingly black square on the white wall beckoned me nearer, and, as I stood mesmerized by it, an image emerged from the darkness. Since it is impossible to photograph this experience, and it can only be understood in person, I have not included a reproduction of a painting of his in this writing. Ad Reinhardt’s paintings, like his definition insists, have to be taken in on their own terms and in their own space.

“The painting has a life of its own.” – Jackson Pollock

Jackson Pollock was nicknamed “Jack the Dripper” in 1956 by Time Magazine. While his drip visuals are extremely compelling, I think the writer missed the point. Pollock wanted his audience to drop all notions of trying to find recognizable imagery in the painting. The painting is not representational of something but is a thing unto itself. Pollock numbered his paintings rather than titling them to drive home his point. His definition means that the painting has an existence apart from us (the maker and audience), and we need to give ourselves over to the experience that it offers. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Jackson Pollock, Number 1, 1950 via Wikimedia Commons

“Art is what you can get away with.” – Andy Warhol

Just as Andy Warhol’s artwork gave us appropriated images to think about (Figure 4), his definition is itself appropriated. This statement, “Art is anything you can get away with,” originally appeared in 1967 in Marshall McLuhan’s book The Medium is the Massage. This is fitting because Warhol’s work could be thought of as an extension of McLuhan’s ideas. In a 1969 interview, McLuhan says, “The transformations are taking place everywhere around us. As the old value systems crumble, so do all the institutional clothing and garb-age they fashioned.” Warhol elevated commonplace images and made the audience question why one image should be privileged over another. Arthur C. Danto observes in his 2009 book Andy Warhol, “The commonplace world of everyday industrial objects has of course been looked down upon, aesthetically, by those who cherish good taste.... All at once in the early 1960s there
were real artists who took the contrary position…The tastes and values of ordinary persons all at once were inseparable from advanced art.”

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Figure 4: Andy Warhol, Kellogg’s Corn Flake Boxes (1971) Image Licensed under Creative Commons with attribution rights by flickr user Tom Ipri

THE FRAGMENTATION OF ART

Before I continue on to comparing the definitions of art offered by game designers with the works they produce, I think it is important to note the point at which games are entering the art community. Until 1980 or so, the development of art was linear, as if we were all trying to write the next chapter in the book of art history. Around that time, the art world exploded, and the task for artists changed from discovering the next chapter to positioning themselves in a conceptual and/or expressive conversation. I was an art student in the 1980s and 1990s, so I had the benefit of the confusion that this shift created as a part of my education. My professors were embroiled in a debate as they tried to teach. My early education was riddled with questions: Was painting dead? What, after all, was this theory called Postmodernism? I remember the struggle and was relieved to discover Arthur C. Danto’s book After the End of Art published in 1996 in which he cuts through the cacophony. Danto offers up Mike Bidlo’s work as evidence of the shift from a linear development to a non-linear one. In the work pictured below, (Figure 5) Bidlo has entered into the appropriation conversation. He has appropriated Marcel Duchamp’s work, which is itself an appropriation of Leonardo DaVinci’s painting. It is, in other words, an appropriation of an appropriation. Bidlo’s work simultaneously converses with the artists that have gone before him and invites us to enter the dialogue and ponder the meaning of a copy of a copy.

My point is that any artist is faced with having to deal with the current state of the art community. The game artist must likewise become aware of the conversations that are currently taking place and of his or her participation in one or more of them.

A CRITIQUE

The following section is a critique of current games in the public domain that have backed themselves unwittingly into the art conversation. I make a note at this point that a critique in the art community is a constructive process that artists engage in, intended to help one another grow, to push the creative envelope so to speak. I once received a thank you from a friend that I have included in this article as an indication that constructive but sharp criticism is commonly practiced and valued among artists. (Figure 6)

It is important to point this out because the rest of this article may seem harsh at times. This critique is not intended as a creative bloodletting, but as a useful exercise to help game artists embrace the full potential of their vision and understand the perception of their work as it is placed in the art community for consideration and validation. In the following paragraphs I will pursue the same study of the definition of art put forth by game artists with the work they have produced in order to elucidate their premises, how the premises manifest in the work, and how well game artists have done the job of exploring the premise in their work.

ACCIDENTAL ARTISTS

As the debate of the ontological status of games continues, some publications have asked game designers to define art, and these interviewees, woefully unprepared for the question, have walked, one by one, into a hornet’s nest. These game designers, though technologically brilliant, are about as conceptually sophisticated as freshman art majors, and charmingly unaware of their naiveté. In involving themselves in the art conversation, they open their work up for scrutiny under the lens of artistic criticism. It is important to remember that the games they created were not intended to be art when they were produced. It follows that the work

Figure 5: Mike Bidlo, Not Duchamp (1987) via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 6: Thank you note; Collection of the Author
suffers from the same shortcomings as its creators; it knows neither how to stay out of nor commit itself to the art conversation.

“Games are art. Art is in the eye of the beholder and I have had emotional experiences playing video games.” – Ben Matte

Ben Matte has fallen victim to a 1945 approach to art education that has entrenched itself in the American school system. He thinks that art is an emotional experience, and if that experience is not replicated in the audience consistently, that is ok, because, after all, “art is in the eye of the beholder.” This definition reflects the general public’s rationalization of the at-the-time emergent abstract expressionist movement. The audience was struggling with understanding the work of artists like Willem deKooning, Jackson Pollock, and Arshile Gorky. The attitude “my-two-year-old-could-do-that” surfaced, and the art world found itself in a precarious position. Since the audience was unable to truly comprehend the work, and the art community could not articulate adequately what it was up to, the audience turned away in droves, the intellectual equivalent of a dismissive shoulder shrug.

When I compare Ben Matte’s definition with the game he produced, Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands, I find a glaring disconnect between his definition and his work. The game is not about creating an emotional experience. It is a dramatic action adventure with platforming and combat mechanics which makes it a ton of fun to play. But Prince of Persia was never intended to be a work of art, as its original author Jordan Mechner would admit, and is certainly not an emotional experience like those engendered by Shadow of the Colossus, Final Fantasy VIII or Legend of Zelda. But the piece is beginning to take on another dimension altogether with the tag line: “To set the wrong things right.” Since the setting is Middle Eastern and we are post 9-11, this branding phrase opens up a political Pandora’s Box. America is struggling with understanding Muslim culture, and this confusion is manifesting in an ugly “war against terrorism” fought on our soil as we detain and deport people unfairly and on their soil as American troops commit “collateral damage” to innocent by-standers and personal property alike. This game has tremendous potential for investigating these deep issues and exploring the difficulty that the Muslim and Christian worlds are having understanding each other. This game could help promote peace, tolerance, and maybe even acceptance between the east and the west, an achievement that has not been realized since Alexander the Great burned Persepolis to the ground. (Ironically, burning the Persian palace occurred after a night of games to celebrate his victory.) The Prince of Persia franchise has tremendous potential to lead the way in political art in the same way that Goya’s paintings exposed the Spanish Inquisition and Picasso’s Guernica mural stood as a statement against war in 1937. I hope that Ubisoft will listen to the direction in which the work wants to go, and, as Jackson Pollock taught us, facilitate this exciting body of work to take on a life of its own. If they do so then they could help take the entire world to the next level of tolerance and understanding.

“Art exists only for itself. It has no other useful purpose.” – Todd Howard

At the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, three forces formed a perception of art similar to Todd Howard’s. These were: (1) the Industrial Revolution; (2) the political shift from monarchies to democracies; and (3) the rise of Romanticism. Since the world of the nineteenth century was very different, it is curious that this view of art has persisted into the twenty-first. When you take Todd Howard’s work into consideration, his definition and the games he creates become disjointed. For example, Fallout 3 does not exist only for “itself”; it is fraught with existential and ethical questions and its identity is a vehicle for them. The game has many points at which deontological and consequentialist ethics are in conflict with each other, as in the town of Megaton, when the player is asked to detonate or disarm a nuclear bomb that was left unexploded during the Great War. The overall message that I get from the game, in the final analysis, is the pointlessness of fighting with each other at all. Fighting for survival in a post-apocalyptic world exhibits elements of the absurd. This absurdity is strengthened with the game design team’s choice of juxtaposing idyllic 1950s imagery and music with this destroyed and desperate world. At one point or another, usually at the threshold of exhaustion, any soldier will pause and ask, “Why am I still fighting?” The same holds true for players. By the same token, why are we still fighting? It seems that the world has fought enough and, after so much suffering, could think of better ways to resolve conflict. I think this game has tremendous potential to become a great work of art if this emerging premise is strengthened. Fallout 3 has a conceptual kinship with Joseph Beuys in that they share the same longing for understanding in a post-war world. Beuys explains his piece How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (1965) thusly: “even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality. The problem lies in the word ‘understanding’ and its many levels which cannot be restricted to rational analysis.” Todd Howard and BethSoft could take the next Fallout game to a whole new level of expression if they embraced what the franchise is begging them to do and explore its premise as if Joseph Beuys were at the design table with them.

PURPOSEFUL ARTISTS

There is a small movement of creators who are beginning to seriously and purposefully explore games as art. I will begin my study with one artist who has experimented with the medium collaboratively and then examine the work of five game designers as emergent artists.

“It’s about not knowing.” – Bill Viola

“The Night Journey” is a game that Bill Viola collaborated with Tracy Fullerton at USC. When I first heard of this game I was skeptical. Trained as a painter, I am coming to games from the same world as Bill Viola, and I know the effort that it takes to adopt this new medium. In general, there are many formal issues to understand when changing media, and games are especially complicated. I tried to imagine the relationship
of Viola with his collaborators, and the closest correlation I could muster is the relationship of an artist with a master printer, but how could he know enough about the medium to direct the outcome of the piece, as an artist does with a master printer? The piece had to have the game designer’s ownership as well. In March 2012 I had the opportunity to ask Tracy Fullerton in an informal conversation whose piece it was. “It is, of course, Bill’s concept, his work, but it is a true collaboration. The game would not exist without both of us.” Bill Viola has been exploring spirituality and metaphysics since the 1970s in the video and installation media. His work takes influences from a wide range of spiritual traditions, ranging from Buddhism, to Islam, to Catholicism. The work on the game began in 1998. The result is an “explorable video,” as Tracy puts it in her article, “Reflections on the Night Journey: an Experimental Video Game.” I examined the game through her documentation to compare it with what I know about Viola’s work. The mechanics that were developed are an interpretation and extension of Viola’s previous work. Tracy and her team of designers joined the project in 2005 and have spent considerable effort discovering and creating the mechanic of enlightenment. In the game there is a mechanic termed “reflection.” To “reflect,” the player depresses the “X” button on the game pad. “When players choose to reflect, the world ‘transforms’ under their gaze. Reflecting also transforms the player, though they may not realize this immediately.” The work is solid. “They did it,” I thought to myself. “Bill Viola and Tracy Fullerton have successfully pulled off a piece that is about ‘not knowing’ and have proven that the game medium can produce a high quality fine art piece.” (Figure 7)

![Image of Bill Viola and Tracy Fullerton](image_url)

**Figure 7: Bill Viola and Tracy Fullerton, The Night Journey (2005-) Reprinted with permission from Tracy Fullerton**

“Art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions.”

– Kellee Santiago via Wikipedia

When I was in art school, it was sometimes considered smarter to know when to keep your mouth shut. Kellee Santiago didn’t. This is unfortunate, because she has yet to discover her artistic premise. This is evident in that she gets her definition of art from Wikipedia, and she does without irony in her rebuttal of Ebert. The truth about the work of Kellee’s company, That Game Company, is that she and her colleagues had a great experience working with Bill Viola on his game in collaboration with Tracy Fullerton at USC and were strongly influenced by it. They adopted his premise and have produced three games that explore the spiritual. Now they claim they are “defining” the Zen genre. It is evident from their work, though, that Bill Viola comprises the extent of their experience with the spiritual in art. Have they: (1) read *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* by Kandinsky; (2) been to the Rothko Chapel in Houston; (3) spent much time with non-objective art like the paintings of Ad Reinhardt or the sculpture of Donald Judd? Isn’t there more to explore in the metaphysical conceptual space than Zen beliefs? I know they have read the *Upishads* and the works of Rumi, but have they internalized these writings, as Bill Viola did? When I experience their work, I am struck by its lack of exploration of the very questions they pose in it. It is as if they decided ahead of time what it is to be spiritual and have forgone an exploration of the spiritual itself. They seem to want to “tell” the audience what spirituality is, rather than setting the player on a path to “discover” what spirituality means to him- or herself. There is a presence of the intellectual comprehension of spirituality, but there is not the same presence of heart knowledge. This lack of sophistication holds their work back. I love their games and have enjoyed them tremendously, but I would encourage them to continue to become acquainted with their interest in the spiritual and to explore all of the works and writings of the multitudes of people who have gone before them who have also been interested in metaphysical questions, if they truly hope to reach the level of sophistication to which they aspire. Given a more disciplined and comprehensive study of spirituality, I am confident they will “level up” and someday make Bill proud.

“Art is the still evocation of the inexpressible.” – Brian Moriarty

At the end of his lecture at the Game Developer’s Conference in 2011, Brian Moriarty delivered his definition of art to the game community with the expectation that everyone would adopt it in lock-step fashion. While I understand the impulse to “just tell” everyone what art is in order to circumvent the confusion that the task of defining art brings with it, I find it erroneous and presumptuous to tell anyone what art is to him or her. Defining art is a personal journey, and it takes time and thought to reach an individual definition. There is no shortcut. Professor Moriarty has reached a definition, a room of his own, and it is a solid one. His game *Wishbringer: The Magick Stone of Dreams* is the piece that most closely exemplifies it. (Figure 8)

In this interactive fiction (text-based) game, the player is inducted into the character of a postal clerk in the village of Festeron. The story is engaging, but it is the game mechanic that manifests the professor’s premise: the wisdom of wishing your way out of a predicament using a magic stone is problematic. The professor says it best himself: “Most of the problems in the story have two or more solutions. The easy way out is to use Wishbringer. If a beginner gets frustrated, he can whip out the magic stone, mumble a wish, and keep on playing. Experienced players can search for one of the logical solutions - a bit harder, perhaps, but more satisfying. It's possible to complete the story without using any of the stone's seven wishes. In fact, that's the only way to earn the full 100 points. The puzzles are highly interconnected. Once you start wishing your problems away, it's very hard to
continue playing without relying more and more on the magic stone. The impotence of idle wishing - that's the moral of Wishbringer.” This game is a beautiful example of the still evocation of the inexpressible. In this case the inexpressible is “you can’t wish your way out of your problems, no matter how badly you may want to.” The game communicates this premise viscerally because wishing our problems away is an impulse we all share on a human level.

“We really need art to help us express these things that we cannot express in any other way.” – Jason Rohrer

I can only speculate what Jason Rohrer means by “these things,” but I take it to mean the indescribable. Rohrer’s definition is a kindred spirit with Moriarty’s: art, once again, is an expression of the ineffable. When I experience, play, and examine Jason’s games, however, his premise is much more specific. He seems to be obsessed with hypothetical situations. His games constantly ask, “What if?” In his game Passage, the player is asked to make life choices. What if I stay single and search for treasure? What if I get married? What if I get married and search for treasure with my wife? In another one of his games, Idealism, he asks, “What happens when your ideals … stand in the way of one of your goals?” Immortality is a game in which he posits, “If you could choose immortality, would you?” Each of his games has a built-in conundrum, and in each of these games one choice does not give a better outcome than another, just a different one – or maybe it makes no difference. I wish that Jason would “level up” to a more specific definition for art, because his work is very specific and consistent. He shares something in common with Rene Magritte, who asked “What if?” in a different way with different outcomes than Jason, but with the same poignant juxtaposition of possibilities. So, what if Jason Rohrer’s definition of art were something like: “Art is the space in which multiple possibilities can be explored?”

“[The goal is to make games that] speak to the human condition.” – Jonathan Blow

Spoiler Alert: if you (the reader) have not played Braid to the end and would like to experience it for yourself, skip over this part of my article. Braid is conceptually a brilliant piece that exemplifies Jonathan Blow’s premise to a tee. In the game the player is at first allowed to learn from his or her mistakes and replay the game with the new knowledge and then, later in the game, the player realizes that he or she must learn from his or her mistakes in order to win. The storyline in the game is about a relationship that ended, and the main character laments and obsesses about being able to go back in time and fix the relationship. You navigate your way through the entire game thinking that at the end the character will reunite with the girl, but when you get to the conclusion, you discover that the character has not been chasing a lost love but humanity’s relationship with the atom bomb that has gone awry. When you realize that you have been chasing the atom bomb, the game mechanic of learning from your mistakes takes on a whole new dimension.

Conceptually, the piece is brilliant. Formally, Braid has some problems. First, the aesthetic choices are incongruent with the concept. Jonathan Blow and his illustrator David Hellman made the choice for the visuals to teeter between impressionism and romanticism, but leaning more in the direction of impressionism. I do see enough of an influence from William Blake to speculate that David Hellman must have seen Songs of Innocence and Experience, because there is a direct appropriation of the lion image in The Little Girl Found from 1794 for one of the Braid enemy characters. (Figures 10 and 11).

Jonathan needs to understand a lesson that artists learn from the Bauhaus: “form follows function.” The function that he needed to recognize and strengthen to “level up” the piece is that it needed to start out romantic and end in tragedy, and the visual choices needed to inscribe this trajectory. This is the second formal issue in the game. Because of the conceptual journey from romantic to tragic, a better choice would have been to start with a William Blake inspired environment and then end in a darker Anselm Kiefer type of environment. I think that there should have been a gradual
change from a saccharine romanticism to a Kiefer-esque neo-expressionist darkness and grit. This choice of visuals would have foreshadowed the bomb message and made the player aware earlier that things were not all that they seemed.

“Art enables us to see the mystery in the mundane and to recognize the unfamiliar.” – Aureia Harvey & Michaël Samyn

Aureia Harvey has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture from Parsons in New York and her partner Michaël Samyn is trained as a graphic designer. Together they formed Tale of Tales, a video game company in Belgium where they have been creating art in interactive media. At the Art History of Games Symposium in 2010, Michaël stated that “Games are not art, have never been art, and will never be art. …This technology has so much more potential for doing things that are really, really, important and that is what we should be doing.” They and their work have a degree of creative sophistication because they know that “if it looks like art, it isn’t” and their goal is to level up or transform the world through art. Their portfolio includes pieces like Vanitas and The Graveyard, which contemplate death and the fleeting nature of life. It also has pieces about the disquiet prompted by choices in life. I find their piece, The Path (Figure 9), particularly fascinating because it seems to have mimicked the path that the game creators have themselves chosen. Anything off the beaten path in the artistic world is just as fraught with danger as the narrow path the Little Red Riding Hood figure must traverse through the woods. For that reason it appears to be autobiographical.

![The Path](Figure 9: Aureia Harvey & Michaël Samyn, The Path (2008) permission via The Path Fan Kit)

“The teenagers are instructed to go to grandmother’s house deep in the forest and, by all means, to stay on the path! Wolves are hiding in the woods, just waiting for little girls to stray. But young women are not exactly known for their obedience, are they? Will they be able to resist the temptations of the forest? Will they stay clear of danger? Can they prevent the ancient tale from being retold?” Like the characters in their game, Aureia and Michaël have wandered off the path for both the art and game communities. By redefining the location of their artwork, away from the brick and mortar gallery system, they have joined the political avant-garde in the art community. In doing so, they have discovered the discomfort and at times the horror that this type of straying brings. They are gaining the wisdom from all of the rewards and challenges of pioneering a new path.

After examining their work, though, I think that they have their definition of art backwards. They are really interested in the mystery of the extraordinary and in recognizing the familiar. Life is an extraordinary experience, not a mundane one. In games like Vanitas and The Graveyard they explore this through death. In The Path they rediscover the familiar in a true familial sense. As the relationship with grandmother in the game exemplifies, they are struggling against the confines of established art practice.

“Art is that which can make at least one person a better human being.” – Rod Humble

This definition suggests that art’s value lies in its potential transformative capabilities. It is an example of Aristotelian virtue ethics, a game developmental exploration of the idea that, if it is good for me, then it is good for you. Rod Humble’s work as demonstrated in one of his games, The Marriage, does strive for self-awareness with the cloaked assumption that self awareness will foster tolerance and personal growth. Rod states, “The game is my expression of how a marriage feels. The blue and pink squares represent the masculine and feminine of a marriage. They have differing rules which must be balanced to keep the marriage going. ... You are playing the agency of Love trying to make the system of the marriage work.” The Marriage is a very delicate and fragile game, as is a balanced household, and as I compare the game to Rod’s definition of art. It does seem as if he has hit his transformative goal. I don’t think there is any evidence to prove it, but his game just may create the level of self awareness needed to strengthen a marriage.

CONCLUSION

The next step for these new artists is to become critical of their work and of their own definition of art so that they may continue to grow creatively. They need to ask for thoughtful, critical, and constructive criticism from the art community and use this feedback to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses in order to grow their vision. This vision, once realized, is worthy our most respected of art museums. (Figure 12)

![The Art of Video Games](Figure 12: Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Art of Video Games, Exhibition entrance (2012) Image Licensed under Creative Commons with attribution rights by flickr user blakespot)
Just as there are many more artists and their definitions to explore, there are many more game artists to investigate. I have yet to write about the work of Mary Flanagan, Brenda Brathwaite, and Richard Rouse III. That business is for articles to come. Additionally, Jonathan Soderstrom and or Erik Svedang have been helping to push the boundaries of games in Europe, and their work indicates that the indie game scene across the Atlantic is flourishing. The trickle of game artists is turning into a wave, and soon it will be (if it is not already) a full-blown movement. The coming decades will be an exciting ride for the creators of the art game movement and the innovations that we (I am including myself) produce will “level up” games and art forever.

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