Videogames as Visual Art: Tools for Artistic and Historical Analysis of Videogames

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In 2000, *Newsweek* published an article written by the film critic Jack Kroll, in which the author denied that videogames could be considered as an art form,[2] giving voice to many other film critics who shared this opinion. Five years later, Henry Jenkins, in his essay *Games, the New Lively Art* argued that:

> Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible. And games have been embraced by a public that otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art.[3]

In 2010 film critic Roger Ebert, in response to designer Kellee Santiago's talk at TED (Technology Entertainment Design) *Are Video Games Art?* claimed on his online journal that videogames can never be art.[4] This statement provoked strong reactions especially between media scholars, spreading a worldwide debate which had started at least twenty years before, when the founder of the New York Museum of Moving Image, Rochelle Slovin, curated the exhibition *Hot Circuits: a Video Arcade* (1989).

A couple of decades after the debate on the artistic potential of videogames started, today videogames are officially considered an institutionalized art form. Nevertheless, though the twentieth-century avant-garde changed our perception on art, suggesting that 'art doesn't have any sort of stable meaning in contemporary culture',[5] there is still no methodology for videogame analysis to which we can refer, at least from a visual art studies point of view.

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[2] Jack Kroll, 'Emotion Engine? I Don't Think So, *Newsweek*, 5 March 2000 <https://www.newsweek.com/emotion-engine-i-dont-think-so-156675> [accessed 25 May 2020].

[3] Henry Jenkins, 'Games, the New Lively Art', <http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/GamesNewLively.html> [accessed 27 March 2018).

[4] Roger Ebert, 'Video games can never be art', <https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-neverbeart> [accessed 27 March 2018].

[5] Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 9.

My research develops some theoretical tools for an artistic and historical analysis of videogames, that are considered as audiovisual objects (*video* objects) instead of *games*. Taking into account expanded cinema theories, videogame play experience is, therefore, analyzed as an audiovisual experience, and the term *videoplay* is used in opposition to the most common (although not accurate) term *gameplay*. On the basis of Mary Flanagan's book *Critical Play*,[6] revolving around the idea of an avant-garde game design which undermines and reworks popular game practices, this part of the project provides a useful framework for the artistic analysis of videogames.

In his foreword to the book *A Game Design Vocabulary*,[7] the director of the NYU Game Center, Frank Lantz, notes that:

> Something is happening in the world of video games, something that is changing the way we think about how they're made, how they're played, and what they mean. The authors of this book are part of a new generation of game creators for whom video games interface fully with all the complex machinery of contemporary culture. For Anna [Anthropy] and Naomi [Clark], video games are not merely sleek consumer appliances dispensing entertaining power fantasies, they are fragments of shattered machines out of which new identities can be constructed; sites where disorderly crowds can assemble for subversive purposes [...] smart machines that allow us to say new things; and, when correctly operated, beautiful machines that kill fascists.[8]

In accordance with Lantz, this research focuses on alternative and underground movements, developers, artists and players using videogame design, videogame modding and videogame play as a means of self and artistic expression. This made possible to detect some groundbreaking milestones in order to develop a videogame art history divided into three periods, following Matteo Bittanti's *Innovazione Tecnoludica*:[9] the 'Experimentation Age', the 'Variation Age', and the 'Subversion Age'.

The main objective of the second part of the research project is, in effect, to construct a videogame art history conducive at the same time to Videogame History and Art History, taking into account technology, specific artworks, artistic and cultural movements, manifestos, and *personalities*, the latter following the Italian Cinema Studies pioneer Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti's writings. A perspective borrowed from media and visual art studies is applied to videogame history, and is argued that videogames could be not only considered in the context of videogame industry, but also positioned under the umbrella-term "video art", according to Michael Z. Newman who wrote that:

[6] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
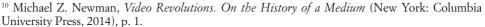[7] Anna Anthropy, Naomi Clark, *A Game Design Vocabulary* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2014).
[8] Frank Lantz, 'Foreword', in Anthropy and Clark, p. xiv.
[9] Matteo Bittanti, *L'innovazione tecnoludica: l'era dei videogiochi simbolici, 1958-1984* (Milano: Jackson libri, 1999).

As tube, tape, and disc are replaced by file, pixel and cloud, the present moment in media history offers a vantage point for regarding video as an adaptable and enduring term that bridges all of these technologies and the practices they afford. At different times video has been different things for different people, and its history is more than a progression of material formats [...]. It is also a history of ideas about technology and culture, and relations and distinctions among various types of media and the social needs giving rise to their uses.[10]

Following Newman, alternative and experimental videogames are seen as a means of artistic video manipulation, just like A. Michael Noll's early computer art or Woody and Steina Vasulka's video art. At the same time, they could be considered a means of artistic game manipulation, on the heels of New Game Movement and Fluxus. Artists like George Brecht and George Maciunas indeed made games that 'break art museum's cardinal rules of no touching and no talking', emphasizing 'joyful absurdity, curiosity, and collective life'.[11] Bearing in mind the dual nature of videogames, this project ultimately embeds videogame in Art History.

[10] Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions. On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[11] The University of Iowa, 'Game' in Fluxus Digital Collection <https://thestudio.uiowa.edu/fluxus/categories/game> [accessed March 28, 2018].