

Could video games represent the art form of the future? Certainly. Why, then, does the mere thought seem to call forth a whole coalition of nay-sayers? Bourgeois audiences instinctively shrink back from the new, and the established arts are repelled by this technologically superior bastard art form. Ultimately – so goes the prejudice – games are nothing but the most vulgar kind of gimmickry, instrumentalized by a profit-hungry industry, to say nothing of the fact that they allow the military-industrial complex to groom willing first-person shooters. Such accusations may contain a grain or two of truth, but the foray into the pandemonium of horrors only serves to blind observers to what is new and innovative about the medium. Such ignorance, however, has a long tradition. One does not have to look far back in history to be reminded that other forms, which we now honour with the title of art (such as photography or film), once suffered from the same taint that serves to stigmatize computer games today.

In the 1940s a master of the cinema like Alfred Hitchcock was still considered a pulp-fiction director, with a disdain that testifies to the dubious character then ascribed to the film medium: a hybrid genre that could only hope to pass as art if explicitly associated with high-culture forms such as literature and theatre. As a result, filmed theatre was welcomed into the ranks of art, while the true principles of *film as art* developed underground. So ignorance of contemporaneous artistic phenomena is by no means new; indeed, Walter Benjamin once skewered it by mischievously asking “what the Germans were reading while their classics were being written.” And since, from this perspective, readers would have had to devote themselves to the Robber Captain Rinaldo Rinaldini, and not to Goethe and Schiller, the typical starting position turns out to be complete blindness to one’s present

time: the inability to grasp the vibrant and ever-changing nature of art.

The computer game as *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Just as one does not ask the empty canvas to reveal what a painting is, speculating on the artistic character of a computer game is useful only with an eye to establishing what new contributions video games have made to art. If one takes an unprejudiced look at this brave new world, a window opens to the future that essentially fulfills all the expectations for an “open work” (Umberto Eco). The medium’s possibilities raise questions that (at least

within itself the possibility of unlimited repetition and variation). And yet, the fulfillment of this longing has generated dismay rather than arousing pleasure. Why? One reason may be that the video game has dissolved the position of the author. Whereas artists could heretofore coquettishly claim that it is the reader or viewer who actually writes a text or develops a point of view, now, with the video game, the inversion of authorship has become disquietingly real. Not only does the author seem to have disappeared, but users navigating a virtual world do not even realize that their movements are nothing more than the implementation of a prefabricated program.

Immersion: total sensurround

If players may falsely suppose that they are in control, we have identified a paradox: the highest art might well consist in the artist’s own disappearance. In fact, this logic of heightened effects had already spurred Richard Wagner to have his orchestra musicians disappear into the orchestra pit – in other words, into oblivion. On the other hand, the artist’s disappearance is the very source of the fascination games exert on many young players: because *they* are now the ones who can descend unhindered into their ludic environment. When the joystick in the hand vibrates like the con-

trols of a jeep, when the bumps in the road are transmitted to the body, when the motor whines and the 3D glasses simulate depth of field, the players are no longer in the here and now but have, like Alice, gone through the looking glass. The technical term for the artistic device that creates this illusion is “immersion”: specifically, the player’s complete engulfment for the duration of the game, the feeling of being in a spaceship or balancing at a dizzying height on the edge of a roof. While representational painting had concerned itself only with *trompe-l’œil*, optical illusion, here the sensory illusion is now complete, comprising not only the sensory apparatus but also memory and human emotion. Essen-

The Art of Immersion

Are video games trash or art? It depends on your point of view. For cultural theorist Martin Burckhardt, the artistic value of games lies in their ability to offer the player the illusion of being surrounded by an imaginary world – an illusion that game engineers are working to perfect by creating ever-more seductive virtual spaces.

By Martin Burckhardt

from the author’s point of view) had never been asked, and provide answers that had never been conceived before. Thus it is all the more astonishing that the discourse associates video games with a fairly asocial role, that of the pariah. This marginality applies not only to the present time, but also obscures the fact that a tradition is being updated. If one lets the history of modern art flash before one’s eyes, it becomes clear that a significant motive is found in the interconnection of artistic media. Seen this way, the video game is the technical fulfillment of the fantasy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the synthesis of all the arts: the revelation of a transmedial, synaesthetic sensory apparatus (which also carries

tially, there can be no more radical aspiration for art than this: the expectation that the soundscape through which players moves may transport them mentally to another world, just as the spaces through which they navigate take on a persuasive verisimilitude of their own.

Engineering genius

Thus while art critics warn of medial anomie, one could just as easily speak of the triumph of art. Because art succeeds at luring the player out of her everyday world into a fantasmatic Wonderland, in which the laws of gravity no longer seem to be in force. At the same time, however, the computer game has less to do with the work of artists than with the genius of engineers: all those nameless souls designing the machines for 3D sound, shading and object tangibility (the physics engine). In dismissing these achievements as mere technology, critics easily forget that Renaissance painting, too, had its technical aspect – and that more than a few painters made use of the *camera obscura*, i.e. artificial optical enhancement. These days, however, we are no longer in the field of manufacturing, but rather on the cutting edge of technical abstraction, and it is no coincidence that the computer game industry occupies an avant-garde position, without which the historical dramas or fantasy films of the past decades would be unthinkable. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy,

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epics like Scorsese's *Aviator*, or even otherwise old-fashioned productions such as Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima* – in every case, the visual believability of these films derives from their virtual spaces, for which they are indebted to the world of computer games, although this believability is usually ascribed to the powers of the film medium.

In fact, the set design (or, to use the technical term, the level design) of the average computer game is the most evident

hallmark of this new world. We may almost literally enter into the images placed before us: because they allow us to penetrate into perfectly elaborated (one might even say *soberly hallucinated*) spaces. Unfortunately, the art scene missed the arrival of this new type of image. One may certainly lament the monotonous game mechanics of a First Person Shooter video game like *Half Life II*; but the way in which the game conjures up post-Socialist *tristesse* is magnificent, as is the resurrection of medieval Jerusalem in *Assassin's Creed*, the spaceship architecture of *Mass Effect*, or the Wild West revival of a new entry in the sweepstakes, *Read Dead Redemption*. While the look of the early computer games was largely inspired by film sets, now things are the other way around. It is not just that completely unprecedented spaces have been created: such spaces, like the Tibetan temple in *Uncharted II*, have the ability to transform themselves into something else besides. In this sense, contemporary games, exhibiting a newly-acquired confidence, are no longer all about emphasizing visual opulence. Instead, the player's experience is clearly at the forefront.

Total seduction

If immersion means being completely submerged in *another* world, it becomes clear that sensory illusions are not enough. Of course, level design is crucial, in order that the illusion may be successful; as important as appropriate music and soundscape, seamless animation and so-called cutscenes (cinematic sequences inserted to break up the game play and advance the plot, much like the way intertitles were used in silent cinema). However, in order to give players the feeling that they are the hero of the story (in other words: the one who is writing it at that particular moment), greater effort is necessary. For the illusion only sets in when the game has succeeded at capturing the player's imagination, without for all that creating a sense of coercion. Such an endeavour points to the genuine artistic question associated with the video game. The question is: how can one tell a story that is not determined in advance, but in which the player's decisions play an important role? Or to put it positively: how is it possible for a player to become the hero of the story?

Here a critic might object that this is exactly the question video games have failed to answer until now. Now, that may be true, but one could just as easily reply that every failure along the way has propelled the art form a big step forward. An interesting example is the French video

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game director David Cage and *Heavy Rain*, his third game to date, which is impressive for Cage's readiness to devote himself to the problem of narrative. While most computer games offer a relatively simple range of options, in which the player's freedom to manoeuvre is central, Cage reduces this control. He systematically forces the player into situations in which he or she must make an ethical decision. And since the player recognizes that this decision is in no way marginal, but will instead play a decisive role in the further outcome of the game, the moment of interactivity becomes morally charged. The stratagem Cage uses here represents an inversion of the previous settings. Whereas *interactivity* was as a rule equated with the removal of inhibitions, with a *license to kill*, Cage now compels his players to make sacrifices: as the father of a kidnapped child, for instance, players are required to cut off one of their own fingers to secure the life of the hostage. In this way Cage turns game mechanics into a moral institution: indeed, into a laboratory in which players can act out various dramas. As a result, the individual player becomes the central focus – as a vulnerable author and not as an emotionless consumer. If the public has responded enthusiastically to this game in spite of all the rules it violates, it is because *Heavy Rain* fulfils a desire: for one's own actions to make a difference. Because, contrary to the assumptions of an industry focused solely on turnover, interactivity does not mean that the user merely wants to push a button and indiscriminately mas-

sacred random enemies. More than anything else, players want to slip into someone else's skin, in order to experience complex patterns of behaviour and interpretation not otherwise available.

The moral dilemmas Cage presents to his players are clearly not the last word. Rather, they are the beginning of a new narrative technique that will avail itself of far subtler means in the future. If, however, the actual fascination stems from immersing oneself in a story, this points to a connection that is often overlooked – precisely

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because of most games' resemblance to the cinema. For the player's retina is not the main organ affected by video games – there is also that oft-neglected thing we call *imagination*. In this sense, the computer game (which we, in perfect misrecognition of this characteristic, call a *video* game) has more in common with a novel than with a film, since it is not the opulence of the surroundings but the feeling of being woven into a particular framework of action and interpretation that matters. And thus computer games can do without the action-packed strategies, such as rapid cutting or high-speed car chases, perfected by cinema; for, unlike film, the computer game has plenty of time – as much time, indeed, as only the novel enjoys. If the classical reader was wont to imagine himself as a character in a novel, the gamer may actually enter into the character of her choice. And that is precisely the innovation of this art form: it is a novel you can step inside.

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