

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 3 *Volume 3 (2005)*

Article 6

2005

Are Video Games Art?

Aaron Smuts

University of Wisconsin, Madison, asmuts@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smuts, Aaron (2005) "Are Video Games Art?," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol3/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Are Video Games Art?

Aaron Smuts

Abstract

In this paper I argue that by any major definition of art many modern video games should be considered art. Rather than defining art and defending video games based on a single contentious definition, I offer reasons for thinking that video games can be art according to historical, aesthetic, institutional, representational and expressive theories of art. Overall, I argue that while many video games probably should not be considered art, there are good reasons to think that some video games should be classified as art, and that the debates concerning the artistic status of chess and sports offer some insights into the status of video games.

Key Words

video games, technology-based art, gamers, game design, game designers, narrative art

1. Introduction

In a *Newsweek* article from March of 2000, Jack Kroll argues that "games can be fun and rewarding in many ways, but they can't transmit the emotional complexity that is the root of art."^[1] Kroll's article sparked a series of angry replies, mostly from gamers writing for industry magazines on the web,^[2] but the controversy was not confined to fan culture and journalism. In an article published in MIT's *Technology Review* called "Art Form for the Digital Age," film scholar Henry Jenkins criticized Kroll for dramatically underestimating the potential of video games.^[3] Outside of academia, Kroll's article was also cited in an amicus brief advising the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals on a case regarding an Indiana video game censorship law.^[4] The extent and diversity of the response indicates that Kroll hit a nerve, and it is worthwhile to dig a little deeper into the issue.

Despite the cultural prominence of video games and technology-based art, philosophical aesthetics has completely ignored the area. Scholars in other disciplines, such as film, have taken the lead in the conceptual debate. This is unfortunate, since seldom are there questions in the philosophy of art that have direct, real world consequences. Philosophical inattention to video games has a *de facto* effect on the multi-billion dollar industry by inadvertently making hasty censorship attempts easier. 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.

In this paper I argue that by any major definition of art many modern video games should be considered art.^[5] Typically, one advances the art status of a purported art form in a deductive fashion, by first picking a favored definition of art, then demonstrating that the candidate satisfies the sufficient conditions for art according to that definition, and finally concluding that the art form in question is art. Rather than defining art and defending video games based on a single contentious definition, I offer reasons for thinking that video

games can be art according to historical, aesthetic, institutional, representational and expressive theories of art. If we can agree that all these theories generally track our intuitions about what should be considered art, then when they are all in agreement we have good reason to think that we have successfully picked out an art form.

My argument proceeds in three major steps: I begin with a brief description of three recent games that have received extensive praise from gamers and game reviewers. I then attempt to situate video games with respect to larger issues about art and games by assessing the relevance of arguments about the aesthetics of sport and chess. Finally, I offer a host of reasons why some video games should be considered art according to several major theories of art. Overall, I argue that while many video games probably should not be considered art, there are good reasons to think that some video games should be classified as art.[\[6\]](#)

2. Three Candidate Games

It will be useful to give a brief description of a few important games from which I will draw key examples. *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), *Halo* (Bungie, 2001), and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft, 2002) are three recent games that have earned significant critical acclaim. The sophistication of these games indicates the promising aesthetic potential of the purported art form.

Max Payne (Remedy Entertainment, 2001) is a third-person shooter, a game where the camera takes a perspective from slightly behind the character, allowing the player to control the direction in which the character looks and moves. *Max Payne* is a *noir*-revenge thriller in which the player's avatar[\[7\]](#) is a rogue cop on a mission to avenge the death of his wife and child. The game employs first-person, voice-over narration, like many works in the *film noir* genre, and it includes periodic graphic-novel cut scenes, inserts that develop the narration between levels or major sections of play. Although the cut-rate Chandler-inspired dialogue and voice-over could use some extensive rewriting, the game makes a great effort to motivate revenge-directed anger by forcing the player to work through hallucinatory flashback episodes in which Max is impotent to prevent the slaughtering of his family. The elaborate plot, complete with double-crossings and evidence of conspiracies spiraling out to the highest levels, helps to evoke classic *noir*-inspired dread.

Halo, the most successful game for Microsoft's X-Box platform, is an elaborate science fiction adventure set in an artificial world. The game mixes play modes, moving from the first-person perspective of a cyborg warrior, to driving and flying modes of play. Like *Max Payne*, *Halo* takes over 20 hours to complete. The levels (or long, goal-directed segments of play) are highly integrated with the narrative, and much of the pleasure in playing the game derives from slowly uncovering the purpose of the world on which your army has crash-landed. The narrative development is highly sophisticated for a video game and involves plot twists, double-crossing and surprise introductions of new characters.

Splinter Cell, also a game for the X-box, is renowned for its

graphics and life-like character movement. In the game's jingoistic narrative, you play a secret operative set to infiltrate a hostile country. As in the other two games discussed, *Splinter Cell* has an elaborate narrative that is tightly integrated with the game play. It is a third-person shooter but requires stealth-like movements. Much of the game play is spent waiting and hiding in suspense. The game features a complex plot, extremely detailed character movements and elaborate lighting effects, which include stunning shadow play and chiaroscuro. *Splinter Cell* is a highly unified effort to provoke the feeling of tension one has when sneaking around and hiding from danger.

These three games represent recent trends in video game design made possible by increasingly sophisticated technology. All feature integrated narratives, graphics nearing photo-realism and elaborate three-dimensional worlds with rich and detailed textures. I do not claim that any of these games are great art, but they are all adept at achieving the goals they set for themselves, goals of provoking specific emotions that are typical of similar genres in other art forms.

3. Where's the Art?

In order to determine whether video games are an art form, we first need some idea of where the art might lie. Video games combine elements from narrative fiction film, music and sports. They are arguably an art or sister art of the moving image, specifically, a form of digital animation. The code is like musical notation that is performed by the computer, and the games are played like sports. As we shall see, the debates concerning the artistic status of chess and sports offer some insights into the status of video games.

In the philosophy of sport, David Best makes a distinction between sports that are evaluated aesthetically (aesthetic sports) and those that are not (purposive sports).^[8] Although we may say that a baseball pitcher has a beautiful arm or that a boxer is graceful, when judging sports like baseball, hockey, soccer, football, basketball and boxing, the competitors are not formally evaluated on aesthetic grounds. However, sports such as gymnastics, diving and ice skating are evaluated in large part by aesthetic criteria. One may manage to perform all the moves in a complicated gymnastics routine, but if it is accomplished in a feeble manner one will not get a perfect score. Best argues that "an aesthetic sport is one in which the purpose cannot be specified independently of the manner of achieving it."^[9] One might argue that such sports are so close to dance that they are plausible candidates to be called art forms.

One objection to calling sports such as diving art forms is that they are competitive. If this objection holds, then perhaps video games are not art works either, since they are essentially competitive. Competition is considered inimical to artistic creation because it locates the purpose behind the production in non-aesthetic goals. However, it is fairly obvious that competition does not deny something of art status. Greek tragedies were explicitly entered into competitions, but no one seriously denies that they are art because of their competitive provenance. One can compose a poem with the intention of submitting it to a contest without its ceasing to be an art

work. The same can be said of any kind of art, and there is thus no reason to think that competition is incompatible with other aesthetic goals.

One might argue that the situation is somewhat different with video games, since they are experienced competitively and there are no uncontested art forms where the audience's experience is itself competitive. This line of objection fails to account for the competitive aspect of the plethora of fictions that are centered around competitions. *National Velvet*, *Sea Biscuit*, *The Karate Kid*, and numerous other fiction films that we might consider art encourage the audience to root for one side of a competition, making the experience of the fiction competitive. If one takes issue with my examples, any suspense-generating fictional example will do. Does *Hamlet* cease to be art because the audience is encouraged to side with Hamlet against his father's killer?

One might respond that although we may find ourselves rooting for a fictional character in a novel, play or film, this experience is far different from that of rooting for our own success in a game. The objection may conclude that being involved in a competition precludes aesthetic experience; however, this objection is beside the point. We should not confine the audience of video games to players, since often games are played with an audience. There is no radical difference here between video games and dance contests or poetry slams. Although playing video games usually involves a smaller audience-to-competitor ratio, there is no reason why the audience watching someone play a game must be smaller than the audience of non-competitors at a poetry slam.

Nevertheless, we should not ignore the aesthetic experience of the performers of art works. The video game player can plausibly be considered a performer in a larger video game performance. Since the primary goal of most game design is to enhance such aesthetic experiences, it would seem that we have good reason to evaluate games as art works. Unfortunately, the philosophy of art and aestheticians appear oblivious to the aesthetic experience of performers of art works. However, we must ask, does not even the amateur musician have aesthetic or artistic experiences?

Though video games share a competitive aspect with sports, the comparison between sports that may be art and video games does not bring to light any other important similarities. Indeed, video games and art-candidate sports are different in an important way. Unlike sports that are evaluated on aesthetic grounds, the playing of video games has not been considered an art form. It is true that recordings of game play have been taken and pieced together to make digital video art. In addition, some games allow the player to save and distribute instant replays. However, the performance of a video game is not normally evaluated aesthetically. Perhaps someone will make an argument that playing a particular video game is an art, but I do not wish to make such a claim here. A player can be evaluated for a form of athletic quickness, but not usually for grace or other aesthetically relevant features of play. Surprisingly, this is not the case in a chess performance.

A similar question has arisen regarding the artistic status of

chess.^[10] Some consider chess to be an art form, much like the aesthetically evaluated sports. One might think it is difficult to call chess art and exclude things, such as crossword puzzles, that we do not normally consider art works; however, insofar as crossword puzzles only possess one solution, there is no such thing as an elegant or otherwise aesthetically qualified property of their solution.

There are two primary reasons why someone might argue that chess is an art form. In major competitions, there are often two prizes: one for the winner and one for the best game. The best game is determined in part by the elegance of moves, the originality of solution and the difficulty of play. Whether this earns chess the status of art has centered around the question of whether elegance is a goal of the players. Even if it is not a primary goal, one can argue that elegance and simplicity play a role in the choice of moves. Perhaps the aesthetics of a move serve as heuristics that optimize selection. If this is the case, then aesthetic concerns can become part of mastery of the game itself, adding support to the idea that playing chess is an art form. In addition to judgments of the most beautiful game, end-game solutions are often evaluated for their formal simplicity and elegance. This is a more controversial basis for calling chess an art, since if end games should be considered art, then logical and mathematical proofs would become candidates.

As stated previously, unlike chess and gymnastics, the playing of video games has not been proposed as a candidate for art status. One reason that video game play is not considered an artistic performance is that video games are numerous and the technology has changed rapidly over the last few decades. As such, there is no one video game around which players have focused on for extended periods of time. Though video games appear to be performative, what might count as the performance--*the playing*--is not considered art. Perhaps this is because the games themselves draw more attention than the players. Unlike video games, non-electronic games such as poker and football are just rules of play: they describe penalties and goals. Electronic games are different in that they are much more than rules:^[11] They include narratives, graphic design, characterization, dialogue and more.

Having looked at the relevance of the aesthetics of chess and sport, we are in a better position to understand where the art of video games might lie. Unlike chess and sport, the art is not only in the playing; as in film, the type of art that should concern us in video games involves not the playing but the making.

4. Video Game Art: A Historical Narrative

Today, the question "Is it art?" arises most commonly in response to single art works whose art status is in dispute. Noel Carroll has offered a compelling account of how such disputes can be, should be and are resolved. He advocates a narrative approach to resolving such disputes, whereby a candidate artwork is assessed by whether a story can be told linking the problems and goals of recognized artists at a previous period to those of the artists whose work is in question. Although we seldom have an opportunity, the narrative historical account can be also applied to art forms or

representational systems as a whole. I will attempt to provide a brief sketch, that could be fleshed out into a more comprehensive story, of the relationship between video games and other mass art forms.

Advances in computer technology over the last 40 years provided the means whereby artists could attempt to solve a recurrent problem at the heart of modernism: How to involve the audience in the art work? Those working in theater and performance arts experimented with happenings and participatory theatre, trying to bring the audience into the performance. However, the problem was more difficult for artists working in film and literature, where we find novelistic experiments such as Cortazar's *Hopscotch* struggling with the limitations of the medium. Video games allowed artists to tackle a more difficult sub-problem facing non-performed arts, the problem of how to involve the audience in mechanically reproduced art.

In the last chapter of *Principles of Art*, Collingwood complains that mechanically reproduced art is essentially flawed because the medium of transmission prohibits art works from being "concreative." Collingwood argues that in mechanically reproduced art:

"The audience is not collaborating, it is only overhearing. The same thing happens in the cinema where collaboration as between author and producer is intense, but as between this unit and the audience nonexistent. Performances on the wireless have the same defect. The consequence is that the gramophone, the cinema, and the wireless are perfectly serviceable as vehicles of amusement or of propaganda, for here the audience's function is merely receptive and not concreative; but as vehicles of art they are subject to all the defects of the printingpress in an aggravated form."[\[12\]](#)

This is the first and only time Collingwood uses the term "concreative" in *The Principles of Art*, and just as Collingwood himself left the notion somewhat unexplained, concreativity has been almost completely ignored in the philosophy of art.[\[13\]](#)

In *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, Noel Carroll makes one of the few contemporary references to Collingwood's term.[\[14\]](#) Carroll sees Collingwood's criticisms of non-concreative art as one species of the passivity charge against mass art, the claim that mass art is inherently defective because it reduces the audience to mindless drones, thereby prohibiting the free play of the imagination that genuine art provokes. On this reading, Collingwood is complaining that the audience is made a mere receptacle by mass art and that mass art is defective by virtue of its pacifying effect. Although this may be part of Collingwood's criticism, I think his emphasis lies elsewhere. Rather than criticizing mass art for its pacifying effect on the audience, Collingwood is diagnosing what he sees as a source of limitation on the expressive potential of mechanically reproduced art. It is not the art work's supposed deleterious effects on the audience that is at issue but the inability of the audience to provide feedback to help the artist create the most effective work possible.

On my reading, Collingwood is pointing out a feature of mass

art that Walter Benjamin noticed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written in 1935, three years earlier than the publication of *The Principles of Art*. Benjamin argues that in mechanically reproduced art the potential opens up for the art work to fall out of step with the audience, losing its immersive grip and thereby providing conditions likely to spark a critical attitude. He says, "the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic."^[15] Rather than playing up the supposed politically liberating potential of this limitation of mechanically reproduced art, Collingwood laments the handicap.^[16]

We often hear it said that films can "break the fourth wall" through techniques such as directly addressing the audience, but the wall remains. It is ontologically impossible for the audience of a film to break the wall. Video game technology has allowed artists to experiment with solutions to the problem of how to make an interactive movie: Video games are the first concreative mass art.

5. Video Games and Every Major Theory of Art

In this section, I argue that according to most major theories of art, many video games should be considered art. I do not offer detailed definitions of each theory of art, since every theory has various contentious formulations, the major variations are familiar to most readers, and to outline in detail the specifics of every theory would require much more space. Instead I operate with informal glosses of the theories that are adequate for my purpose.

As the classical film theorists focused on the relationship between cinema and photography and theatre, one may think that the best way to approach video game art is to find its differentiating features with a similar art form. In the case of video games, the sister art is cinema. However, in defending the art status of games, the opposite may be more useful: Examining just how close video games are to animation and digital cinema may be more productive.

Almost anything said about video games is controversial. Some game developers even scoff at the idea that video games are an art, as do certain filmmakers, even distinguished ones. Theorists who call themselves ludologists argue that video games should not be considered just another narrative art form, but a form of play. Other theorists, narratologists such as Janet Murray, argue that video games can and should become more narrative-driven in order to realize their artistic potential. This seems to be the path game developers have chosen. Current video games have highly integrated narratives that are often far more complex than the most sophisticated *noir* plots. Even if you can remember the details of "The Big Sleep" (Howard Hawks, 1946), you will never be able to recount the details of most modern games. As mentioned previously, many narrative games can take upwards of 20 hours to complete.

For the past decade, there has been a moderate amount of influence between film and video games. Although most of them are awful, several films have been made based on video

games. More commonly, video games are made based on film subjects. Many readers of this article will think of PacMan or Pong when they hear of video games. If so, then the possibility of creating a narrative film on a video game story should sound surprising. As my examples indicate, recent games are far more complex than PacMan; they often involve complex stories and characterization. For those who have not played heavily narrative-integrated games, the possibility of basing a narrative of whatever sophistication on a game should indicate the level of narrative complexity already to be found in the medium.

Game designers often try to make their games look more like film by including cut scenes and imitating other cinematic features. Most narrative-driven games are heavily interspersed with full-motion video sequences called cut-scenes. The game called *Splinter Cell* is typical. In this game, cut scenes are encountered frequently on various missions. After major events and before new episodes, a cut-scene will be introduced to indicate the goals of the level and the objects for which one should be on the lookout. In addition to including these small digital movies, games often attempt to emulate the look of film. In the popular game *Halo*, for example, if you look up towards the sun, the glare produces nested circles, as if the player is controlling a movie camera. This is inconsistent with the perspective of the player who is not looking through a camera, but the reference to cinema is intended to enhance the realism, as if the game were a documentary. Such techniques are clear examples of game designers trying to situate their work in the tradition of cinema. For such reasons, any historical theory of art that admits film as an art form would most plausibly admit video games.

Through repeated allusions and attempts at emulating the moving image, game designers intend that we appreciate their games as we do digital animation and video art. Modern video game designers are deeply concerned with traditional aesthetic considerations familiar to animators, novelists, set designers for theater productions and art directors for films. The development of game environments is an intensive process involving the creation of level maps, lighting sources, setting detail and visual texture complexity. As the author of a realist novel or the set designer of a film might place props in a room, level designers aim for the consistent incorporation of details to flesh out the world of the game. Character movement is another area of design in which video game designers share goals with animators. For example, the designers of *Splinter Cell* carefully created hand-animated movement studies for the player-character to add richness and a life-like feel to the textures. From set design to lighting techniques, games largely draw upon the aesthetic toolkit available to filmmakers. Any aesthetic theory of art that acknowledges the art status of animation would also recognize many contemporary video games, since the intentions of the creators and the variety of aesthetic experience the two art forms admit overlap considerably.

A strong case can also be made for video games on institutional grounds, since there is a developing art world for video games. Over the past decade, there has been a variety of museum exhibits of video games, ranging from

technological development lessons to explorations of the influence of video games on digital art, as well as stand-alone exhibits of the emerging art form. Although not exactly an art museum, from June 6, 1989 to May 20, 1990, the American Museum of the Moving Image featured a show called "Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade" that brought a collection of arcade games for visitors to play first hand. The show traveled to 10 other locations throughout the country from June 1990 to September 2003. Since this show, the museum has had several other major video game exhibits and has almost always had a video game exhibition on display.

In July 2001, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted a symposium entitled "ArtCade: Exploring the Relationship Between Video Games and Art," where recent video game-inspired artworks were presented alongside a selection of video games from the 1970s to the present.^[17] In the same year, over a dozen art exhibits featured video game-related art work. Video games are appreciated as both art forms in their own right and as tools for the creation of art works such as "Machinema" or the video loops of digital artists who use clips from games to construct avant-garde video art. In the spring of 2001, the Whitney Museum of American Art housed a video game-art exhibit called "BitStreams," which featured video game-influenced works. Recent biennials have also incorporated interactive digital artworks, and video games and digital art are a growing presence in museums.

Not only are video games gaining recognition from museums of art, fine arts programs are springing up focused on the graphic aspects of video game design. MIT, NYU, Carnegie Mellon and CalArts all have programs concentrating on entertainment technology, and the University of California at Irvine is creating a MFA program devoted to interactive media. Georgia Tech recently created a PhD in interactive media that merges communication studies and computer science.

Outside of art world and academic contexts, video games, like other mass art forms, are the subject of popular aesthetic evaluation. In December of 2002, the National Network, a unit of MTV networks, announced that it would be creating an awards show dedicated to video games. The show will offer awards for categories such as best villain and best movie adaptation. A digital cable channel devoted to video games called G4 was launched in 2003.^[18] Several newspapers, including the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times* have started publishing game reviews. The web site www.metacritic.com posts summaries of reviews for three popular art forms: movies, video games and popular music.

The institutional credibility for attributing art to video games is improving. There is clearly a burgeoning art world for videogames, and one need not wait for every modern art museum in the country to feature a dedicated exhibit before feeling comfortable in calling video games an art form. As indicated by the ties between animation and video game design, a persuasive story can be told that links the goals and features historically attributed to art works to those of video games. Much like film production, game design is an expensive, collaborative project. Several groups within the production process pursue aesthetic goals common to other

arts.

There are also video game *auteurs* who imprint a creative stamp on a series of games that show artistic distinction. Shigeru Miyamoto, the designer of "Mario Brothers," "The Legend of Zelda" and other popular games for Nintendo, is considered the Eisenstein of video games. He is the subject of several popular articles and is often a hero in books devoted to the history of video games. Miyamoto is praised for his ability to create original stories, characters and the look behind captivating and complex games. Today there are hundreds of game designers working with programmers, producers, level designers, dialogue and script writers, balancers who adjust difficulty to skill and a variety of other specialists who contribute to a finished game.

In addition to the similarity between film directors and game designers, the history of video games can be tied to other arts. Much as film grew out of photography and drama, video games grew out of digital animation. Beyond the goals of verisimilitude, games share narrative themes and expressive goals with the history of Western literature and theater. In the Seventh Circuit Court decision for *American Amusement Machine v. Kendrick*, Richard Posner argues that the video game should be considered an art form, since it shows thematic and expressive continuity with herald literature and is at least as effective as much in the popular arts that is considered protected speech. Posner defends what is considered by most standards a mediocre game:

"Take once again "The House of the Dead." The player is armed with a gun--most fortunately, because he is being assailed by a seemingly unending succession of hideous axe-wielding zombies, the living dead conjured back to life by voodoo. The zombies have already knocked down and wounded several people, who are pleading pitifully for help; and one of the player's duties is to protect those unfortunates from renewed assaults by the zombies. His main task, however, is self-defense. Zombies are supernatural beings, therefore difficult to kill. Repeated shots are necessary to stop them as they rush headlong toward the player. He must not only be alert to the appearance of zombies from any quarter; he must be assiduous about reloading his gun periodically, lest he be overwhelmed by the rush of the zombies when his gun is empty.

"Self-defense, protection of others, dread of the "undead," fighting against overwhelming odds-- these are all age-old themes of literature, and ones particularly appealing to the young."

Posner clearly sees the thematic and expressive continuity between literature and a mid-level genre video game. Though this may not be an example of great art by any acceptable standards, nothing inherent to the video game rules out its artistic potential, here the arousal of emotions through an interactive narrative. It should be clear that a strong case can be made that most expressive theories of art would have to include video games if they include film and literature.

As Judge Posner notes, video games excel when they are about struggle. Although many games are more clearly about

triumphant victory in battle, there is nothing stopping game designers from creating a game about the horrors of warfare. As should be apparent, current narrative-based video games can easily meet neo-representation theories of art such as Danto's "aboutness" criterion, where an art work is roughly something formally appropriate to what it is about. By putting players in the position to make decisions affecting the lives of simulated civilians and troops, games could potentially be the most formally appropriate way to comment on war via a fictional representation.

The art status of video games has much stronger support from representational theories of art than do other disputed art forms. In *The Philosophy of Human Movement*, David Best argues that there is a crucial difference between sports and art: Sports fail to meet basic representational criteria. Putting the contrast nicely, Best says that "whereas sport can be the subject of art, art could not be the subject of sport. Indeed, the very notion of a subject of sport makes no sense."^[19] In this way, the distinction between sports and video games is profound. As such, video games are much more plausible candidates for art than are aesthetic sports or chess.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I provide several reasons for thinking that some video games may be art. Clear thematic continuities tie video games to the history of western literature, and games share expressive goals with other recognized art forms. Museums and art programs have begun to incorporate video games into their exhibits and curriculum as games begin to achieve recognition in the art world. Like the great figures we expect to find occupying key places in an artistic canon, there are game designers who have reached *auteur* status. Similar to other burgeoning art forms, there is a quickly growing body of recognized major works in video games. In addition, game designers have used the medium to tackle previously unsolvable artistic problems facing film and literature, linking the art of video games to the problems facing modernist film and literature.

Although all video games should not be considered art, recent developments in the medium have been widely recognized as clear indications that some video games should be regarded as art works.^[20] Of course, the status of an art form is never decided apart from its products. Without masterpieces, arguing that video games can be art seems premature. "Max Payne" and "Halo" are two of the best games ever produced, but they are not great art. I expect that in the course of time current video games may seem as artistically insignificant as *Lumière actualités*, with little more than historical significance. Perhaps it is a trivial feat, but several recent games have reached levels of excellence that exceed the majority of popular cinema. The potential of the medium seems clear: good if not great video game art is in the near future.^[21]

Endnotes

^[1] Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*, March 6, 2000.

^[2] Numerous web pages are devoted to criticizing Kroll.

[3] Henry Jenkins, "Art Form for the Digital Age" (*Technology Review*, September/October 2000); see also Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art," forthcoming in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.), *Handbook for Video Game Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

[4] See the IDSA's (Interactive Digital Software Association) *amicus brief for American Amusement Machine Ass'n v. Kendrick* (2000).

[5] A set of necessary conditions for something to be a video game might look like this: Something is a video game only if (1) it incorporates a visual display (2) allows for user input that can (3) change aspects of the visual display, (4) giving the impression of movement (5) for purposeful, internally indicated progressive action (6) in face of some difficulty (7) that exists apart from any conventionally (externally) established rules or goals.

[6] There is nothing unusual about the suggestion that some video games are art and others are not. We make a similar distinction for most every major art form. Many do not consider the photographs in grocery store circulars to be art, but most think some photographs are art. Most people do not consider the jingles in commercials to be art, but almost everyone considers some pieces of music to be art. . . .

[7] The player-controlled characters in games are called "avatars."

[8] For more on the sport-as-art debate, the following sources are useful:

Louis Arnaud Reid, "Sport, The Aesthetic and Art," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 18, Oct. 1970, pp. 245-258.

Maureen Kovich, "Sport as an Artform," *JOHPER*, vol. 24, Oct. 1974, p. 42.

Paul G. Kuntz, "Aesthetics Applies to Sports as Well as to the Arts," *Philosophic Exchange*, sum. 1974, no. 1, pp. 25-39.

David Best, "Art and Sport," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 1988, vol. 14, pp. 69-80.

S. K. Wertz, "Are Sports Art Forms?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1979.

[9] David Best, *The Philosophy of Human Movement* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 105.

[10] There is only a handful of articles on the chess-as-art debate. I provide a small annotated bibliography in this note, for those who might be interested.

In one of the earlier articles on the subject, Harold Osborne argues that chess can be considered an art form since it affords the possibility for the creation of objects of intellectual beauty. Harold Osborne, "Notes on the Aesthetics of Chess and the Concept of Intellectual Beauty," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 4, no. 2.

Rachels argues that not only do we appreciate chess games as

aesthetic objects, they are played / created with aesthetic goals in mind. James Rachels, "Chess as Art: Reflections on Richard Reti," *Philosophic Exchange*, 1984-5, vols. 15&16, pp. 105-115.

Lord argues that though chess games may be objects of aesthetic contemplation, they are not art works. Museums include aesthetic objects that are not art, to follow the institutional theory of art and call such things art would be to gerrymander the concept. Lord endorses something like an expressive theory of art. Catherine Lord, "Is Chess Art?" *Philosophic Exchange*, 1984-5, vols. 15&16, pp. 117-122.

Humble argues that chess playing should be considered an art form. He argues that the competitive aspects can contribute directly and indirectly to the aesthetic value of the game. Though chess may be an art form, he concludes that its masterpieces are only minor art works in the grand scheme of things. P. N. Humble, "Chess as an Art Form," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1993.

For a consideration of the composed chess problem as art, see C. P. Ravilious, "The Aesthetics of Chess and the Chess Problem," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 2, July 1994. Humble offers a defense against Ravilious's objections that he should have talked about composed chess problems rather than competition chess and that he over emphasizes the role of competition. P. N. Humble, "The Aesthetics of Chess: A Reply to Ravilious," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1995.

[11] I would argue that video games are unlike other formal games in that they lack rules altogether. As the old saying goes, "Rules are made to be broken." We would not say that the law of gravity is a rule governing our behavior; rather it is a brute physical limitation. In video games, the supposed "rules" are much more like physical laws than rules which one must follow or face penalty. In a video game, one simply has no choice.

[12] R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 323.

[13] In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey developed his theory of the "esthetic" by reference to certain unified and complete experiences that creatures have with their environments. He calls such an experience "an-experience." An experience only becomes "an-experience" for Dewey when it involves doings and sufferings and is marked off from the rest of our experiences as unified and complete. One might say that Dewey thinks "esthetic" experience is best had from interaction or interactivity, and that anesthetic experience results when people become dominated or underwhelmed by their environments. For more on Dewey and anesthetic experience, see Aaron Smuts, "Anesthetic Experience," *Philosophy and Literature*, 29.1, 2005, pp. 97-113. More remains to be said about how Dewey reconciles the success of non-interactive artworks with his interactive theory of "esthetic" experience.

[14] Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 102.

[15] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 672.

[16] In this article, I am not concerned with whether or not Collingwood's remarks on the value of concreativity are consistent with his larger theory of art.

[17] See Kendra Mayfield "Once It Was Atari, Now It's Art," *Wired*, 19 July 2001.

[18] Reuters, "Video Game Industry Gets TV Award Show."

[19] David Best, *The Philosophy of Human Movement* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 122.

[20] One may ask why the art status of video games is an interesting issue. Beyond the practical consequences the art status of video games may have on censorship attempts, the question "Are video games art?" has inherent interest. It is essentially the same question as "What is art?"

[21] I would like to thank Noel Carroll and Heidi Bollich for excellent comments on an earlier draft of this paper, Lee Brown for commenting extensively on a shorter version of the paper at the ASA Eastern division meeting in April 2005 and the two anonymous reviewers for *Contemporary Aesthetics* for their very helpful suggestions.

Aaron Smuts

Department of Philosophy,

University of Wisconsin, Madison

asmuts@gmail.com

Published November 2, 2005