Video Game Design as Studio Practice

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1. Introduction

1.1 Abstract

Video game design as studio practice is an approach to game development that valorizes playfulness as the central aesthetic quality of the form. In contrast to ideologies that are suspicious of the activity, video game as studio practice fosters an understanding of play as a fundamental human activity–an event that accepts players subjectivity in wholeness. Philosophical research stands at the center of this studio practice, and makes use of the fundamental qualities of playfulness as tools for critical inquiry. From this perspective, irreverence, emergence, and intersubjectivity are both core aesthetic values of the video game form, and qualities of being in playfulness. Through the exposition of five case studies, this thesis explores the concept of playfulness, and models a method for video game design as studio practice.

1.2 My Background

At the height of the 1982 Mexican economic crisis , my family relocated multiple times in search of jobs. Throughout my childhood, I lived in places ranging from industrial cities to rural towns, and in all of them I managed to find the local video game arcade, and the small communities of children that formed around them. Corner stores, pharmacies and ice-cream parlors in Mexico became the gathering place for kids that shared a *lingua franca* of strategies, lore, and other video game trivia. On top of the social connections they helped create, and the excitement of participating in a popular culture phenomena, video games allowed me to playfully engage with technology: the constant novelty of computerized systems, the pleasure of becoming Others through avatars, and the impish satisfaction of using computers for things other than work. These all became irresistible appeals in childhood, and that continues to this very day. Eventually, these playful encounters would steer me into the exploration of computers as an expressive medium. I owe my career to the implicit message of video games: even in unlikely circumstances, one can find creativity and community while playing.

While I kept on playing video games growing older, the promise of expression through creative engagement with technology wouldn't materialize for years. We did not own a computer at home, and the public schools I attended restricted access to computers, allowing use only within the context of typewriting classes. Computers, it seemed at the time, were meant to be used for productive applications, such as managerial and office work. I eventually studied graphic design in a Mexican state university, where I had a chance to experiment more fully with digital imaging techniques, and other means to be creative with computers. Eventually I got a position in data visualization for an international corporation, where computer programs and databases became the tools for a job that eventually lost its luster. Over the years, creating visually appealing charts, that made it easier for executives to fire employees or sell useless junk, was an exercise in alienation. I had become a skilled operator, but my work was far from that expressiveness I experienced in those childhood video games.

After moving to the United States, I studied Illustration at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt). What I learned there allowed

me to turn experience and observation into gaming experiences, which I had the chance to prove when I got hired as a game artist. Working for Pearson Education I was able to design characters and backgrounds, write scripts and game mechanics, and even illustrate children books. For more than five years I made video games, sometimes to educate, some to entertain, and yet others to market products to them in the form of advertising games. While I am proud of the work I did, I left my game design job wondering how to make games that would elicit that sense of possibility and meaning I felt when I played them for the first time. With a solid understanding of the industry, I decided to investigate the video game as an artistic form in my graduate work at the Dynamic Media Institute (DMI) at MassArt.

The present study is the result of the research I conducted as a graduate student. These findings inform what I call Video Game Design as Studio Practice. This approach to game development is for independent artists and designers who seek to elicit the type of play that is critically engaged, and accepting of player subjectivity. In the following chapters, I will describe the conceptual and technical developments that allowed me to produce this approach. Through a philosophical analysis on the rhetoric of play, and a detailed account of five case studies revolving around a variety of topics, I draw a contrast between video game design as studio practice and more traditional methods. The goal is to chart a path for cultural producers who wish to engage with the medium, while avoiding either narrow instrumental applications, or passive and anodyne entertainment. As the name implies, video game design as studio practice is heavily influenced by the traditional artist studio, and advocates for aesthetic valorization as complementary to rational and empirical ways of thinking about game design

This study begins with a definition of terms. In the section titled *The State of Video Game Design Theory*, I establish some of the parameters of the conversation by reviewing a key debate between video game design theorists. In the section titled *Instrumentality versus Playfulness*, I define the area in which I hope to innovate, namely, the valorization of video games as an aesthetic experience based on playfulness. This in contrast to the recent efforts by designers to turn video game design methods into tools for "gamification."

An important aspect of this study is described in the second chapter. Titled *Frameworks of Play*, this section is a summation of the philosophical research conducted during my three years at DMI. Its first section, titled *Why Philosophical Research*, is a critical analysis of traditional research and development methods in game design. In it, I argue instead for an approach that gets to the root of the themes our games revolve around, through detailed philosophical analysis. The section titled *A Brief Introduction of Play in Western Philosophy* applies said philosophical approach to the subject of play. By leaning on various interlocutors from the western philosophical tradition, I assert that play can be valorized outside mundane material concerns, particularly in the realm of the aesthetic. The following three chapters, titled *Play as Labor*, *Games and Knowledge*, and *Games as Culture* respectively, argue for the value of play in further detail, setting this fundamental human activity in the contexts in which it has the most relevance. Finally, the chapter titled *My Video Game Aesthetics* is a summation of the arguments about play that I produced through philosophy. Specifically, this final section of the second charter expands on how a renewed valorization of play informs video game design as studio practice.

The third chapter, titled *Case Studies: Dynamic Media Institute Games*, uses five projects to illustrate the way philosophical research alters traditional game development. These case studies are titled *The Taste Game*, *Isabella Stewart Gardner Virtual Reality Museum*, *Observed Human*, *Electronic Votive Objects* and *Bodily Autonomy VR Laboratory*. Each of these are presented in sections, beginning with a brief overview, a research component, a description of the production process, and an outcomes section. Using images and text, I hope to convey the possibilities that video game design as studio practice can engender. The final chapter of this study, titled *Outcomes: Video Game design as Studio Practice*, is a speculation on the application of the method beyond the confines of a graduate program.

I came to the DMI to gain the language, both practical and theoretical, that would allow me to argue for the potential for insight in the video game medium. Beyond the philosophical arguments or technical abilities, what I have gained at the DMI is the confidence to return to play as a valid mode of experience. This not in pursuit of nostalgia for the experiences of

childhood, but instead in recognition of the limits that traditional game design methodologies have. As the DMI case studies prove, a play-centric methodology of video game design is the most fruitful when it confronts difficult subjects. It is my great privilege to take the time to study the form, and develop a practice that mixes old passions and new curiosities. I am excited at the prospect of sharing these discoveries with people, not because I think my methodology is the correct one, but because it may be useful to model a critical posture towards this increasingly influential cultural form.

1.3 The State of Video Game Design Theory

For the last 20 years, game designers and scholars have debated two main ways of understanding video games. Ludologists consider games from the perspective of system design. These practitioners believe that games must to be understood primarily as systems, with visuals, technology and sound as supporting rhetoric at best, and decoration at worst. Ludologist prize emergent gameplay above all: the boundless complexity of chess and go, the variety of strategies played by athletes, and the novel stylized behaviors that video game players enact online, are all examples of game systems that produce experiences beyond the designers intent. Emergence is, for the ludologist, the primary responsibility of the game designer, who must use advanced system design techniques to produce engaging dynamics.

Narratologists, on the other hand, are interested in the rhetorical potential of games. While the study of narrative structures reaches far beyond games, the development of video games as complex storytelling devices demands particular study, in the eyes of narratologists. From their perspective, the history of the medium can be understood as the evolution of contemporary interactive storytelling–an effort to deliver the promises of live theatre, call-in radio shows, interactive television, and immersive cinema. This last medium is perhaps the most influential in video game design, according to the narratologist perspective. Video game systems became powerful enough to emulate the look and sound of feature films and animation, with most of the processing power going to the creation of naturalistic tridimensional environments, physics simulation, and complicated artificial intelligence behaviors by non-playable characters. Most narratologists approached the

form by comparing it to film, in large part thanks to the progression from the 90's CD-ROM full motion video to the cinematic trappings of tridimensional, high-definition gaming in the 2000s.

While ludologist and narratologist perspectives are not mutually exclusive in practice, each have been put forward in response to different political and social programs. In the ludologist writing of Eric Zimmerman and Jasper Juul it is possible to detect a technological utopianism, a belief that scientific advances applied to technology will deliver a better future. The ludologist game designer bridges twentieth century modernist universalism, with twenty-first century trans-humanist aspirations. As British Historian Tristan Donovan argues in his 2010 book *Replay: The History of video games*, the virtual spaces in video games become a powerful metaphor for a digitalized and interconnected world (Kindle Loc. 5797). This metaphor, in turn, animates the loftiest rhetoric of tech companies around the world. From the ludologist perspective, the complexity of game systems is the medium's most powerful asset: Algorithmic emergence excites the ludologist imagination, with promises of uncharted universes represented by the high abstraction of game systems.

The game design narratologist project, on the other hand, bridges nineteenth century's morality literature, with a late XX century concern with social structures of oppression. Confident of the unique powers of argumentation in the video game form, narratology-oriented designers turn players into protagonists in interactive stories. Technology, visuals, sound, and writing are deployed to ease the suspension of disbelief that allows the player's embodiment within the fictionalized time and space of the video game. The avatar becomes the central preoccupation of the narratologist designer, because it is through the player's identity formation within the game that the rhetoric of video games becomes effective. Compared to the seemingly disembodied experience of Tetris, for example, the narratologist's video game constantly returns to the body.

As video games gain cultural relevance and are expected to respond to political and social issues beyond the insularity of game design practice, contemporary narratologist designers strive to abandon the essentialist stories of good versus evil that informed early gaming. As American

historian and theorist John Sharp describes in his 2015 book *Works of Game : On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, the history video game aesthetics can be understood as a continuous evolution: Starting first as popular products for kids and young adults, then becoming and exploration of morality within narrow fictional worlds, a finally in the process of gaining awareness of the meta-narratives that form the context in which games are produced, marketed, and played (Kindle Loc. 261). From this perspective, the narratological avatar not only functions as means to suspend disbelief but also becomes a discursive space for issues of representation and embodiment. Race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class pierce through the hermetically sealed themes of early video games, and become the matter at hand in contemporary narratologist design.

The separation between ludology and narratology has been useful in academic analysis, but it has also created a schism of practice, as game development professionalizes. Are gaming only valuable if they deliver effective moral arguments? What happens to a carefully crafted story, when emergence produces behaviors antithetical to its themes? Game designers and writers have named this schism ludonarrative dissonance[1], a term that started as criticism of popular games that had cinematic presentations dissonant with the actions that players could take in them (Bissell p.151). I suspect that some of my contemporary dissatisfaction with video games comes from excesses in both camps: games feel didactic and condescending when their systems are "forced" to deliver some sort of institutional value or message. This eliminates the potential for the insight arrived at through experimentation, which seems the natural expectation of emergence in art and design. On the other hand, the binary nature of digital systems has clearly led to essentialist metaphors. It is no accident that many games produce zero sum narratives, where narrative stakes are as coarse as life and death, mapped on to the zeros and ones of computer code.

Although the ludologist and narratologist perspectives are not new in

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1   The term was first presented by game designer Clint Hocking in his blog article about the 2007 game *Bioschock*, by Irrational games. However, the term gained widespread popularity both in journalism circles and academia thanks to Tom Bissell's 2010 book *Extra Lives*. The critique that Hocking makes, and that Bissell somewhat ameliorates, is that games of the time could not gracefully integrate movie-influenced presentation and narrative style with the inherent freedom that robust game systems afford players.

the literature, the schism between them, and the questions they generated, continue to inform contemporary game design theory. These schisms imply that many games appear successful and insightful within one analytical framework but not the other. This in turn produces writing that praises certain systems despite poor narrative, or solid stories tacked on uninteresting systems. To further complicate the literature, some of the most innovative games are so because of the way people play them. The insights of games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *EVE Online* (2003) cannot be extracted by a ludologist analysis of their systems, or a narratological analysis of their stories[2]. This has been mostly an issue for theorists, however. Game designers are accustomed to produce systems that will be endlessly misinterpreted, misunderstood, modified and challenged.

Lastly, no account of the state if video game design theory is complete without the acknowledgment of the efforts of independent game designers. Indie developers (as they are commonly known) are foundational to the medium, primarily in Europe, where the industry was formed by people selling floppy disks inside plastic bags, and mailed around the continent (Donovan P. 62). In the United States, independent game designers continue to thrive thanks to an emerging generation of players who has grown up into complete gaming literacy. It is in this space of game development where the most exciting theory is forming, with video game theorists such as Jesper Juul, John Sharp, and Mary Flanagan producing lucid theoretical frameworks. In my estimation, the best writing about video game development is breaking the insularity of the narratology/ludology debate, and exploring the social, political and aesthetic dimensions of the forms. I join these efforts with the present study by bringing philosophical research as a tool of analysis and production of video games. It is my hope that my work at DMI can contribute to a more independent, thoughtful, and though-provoking view of the medium.

1.4 Instrumentality versus Playfulness

In the early-to-mid 2000's, a number of video game designers and theorists

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2   Instead, it has been the work of ethnographers like T.L. Taylor has taken the task of analyzing the relational dimension of these games.

promoted enticing arguments for the value of the medium. Authors such as Jane McGonigal[3] and Jesse Schell[4] described a world in which utilitarian video game design would make our lives more efficient, solve intractable problems, and educate the masses. Video games, it seemed, were not the objectionable products of a deteriorating culture, as political watchdog groups had argued for decades. Instead, video games were solutions: to the capitalist failures of alienating work, to the lagging social mobilization around global issues such as climates change, and to individuals' moral failing demonstrated by their inability to exercise or lose weight. "Gamification" became the term used to describe the application of game design methods to non-gaming projects. And gamification also became a lucrative practice for designers, swept by the rhetoric of solutions-based video game design.

Two decades later, unforeseen outcomes in the social and political arenas must temper the enthusiasm of gamification: we have seen how these techniques applied in social media foster political manipulation[5], how popular video games have remained thematically stagnant[6], and how microtransactions and loot-boxes turn casual games into addicting gambling machines[7]. While video games continue to grow in cultural relevance, it is important to reevaluate what video games really do for us, beyond utopian notions of efficiency or productivity. To that end, I define the term video game instrumentality as the use of video game design methods for applications outside of playfulness. From the perspective of the video game instrumentalist, playfulness is a secondary feature, a stepping-stone in the path towards

3   McGonigal, Jane. 2010. "Gaming Can Make A Better World". *TED.com* February 1, 2010. https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world?language=en.

4   Schell, Jesse. 2010. "When Games Invade Real Life". *TED.com*. February 1, 2010. https://www.ted.com/talks/jesse_schell_when_games_invade_real_life.

5   O'Donnell, Casey. n.d. "*Getting Played: Gamification and the Rise of Algorithmic Surveillance*". SS 12 (3), 349-59. Accessed August 20, 2019. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i3.5017

6   Yi Mou,Wei Peng, 2009, '*Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Video Games*', Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education, pp. 922-937

7   https://www.facebook.com/bbcnews. What Happens When You Ban Loot Boxes In Gaming BBC News, 12 Sept. 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-49674333.

some material benefit.

In contrast, the central argument of this thesis is that video games are valuable because they give people an opportunity to play, nothing more and nothing less. While this may sound like a demotion in their cultural importance, I hope to demonstrate that playfulness is intrinsically worth doing, a special type of activity that is fundamental to human experience. By leaning on philosophical research in the western tradition, I assert that video games are aesthetic objects, similar to paintings and sculptures, and that their value cannot be measured purely on the material benefit they produce. Focusing on the embodied experience of play and the meaning it engenders, I aim to engage critically with instrumentalization in game design. As stated previously, the aim of this study is to model a play-centric video game design practice, one that tempers the narratives of deficit that drive large parts of the medium.

Designing video games for playfulness depends on an expanded understanding of the term. True playfulness is a dangerous thing: Play keeps us busy with seemingly unproductive tasks, allows us to make meaning outside of materialistic conceptions of everyday life, and foments and celebrates all sorts of stylized and unusual behaviors. Despite efforts by sovereign entities to limit playfulness to sanctioned time and spaces, and despite narratives of deficit that claim that play should not happen, people find ways to play. That is to say, people take the matter at hand and irreverently engage with it, looking for pleasurable and insightful ways to act, think, and become. Post-industrial societies have recognized the need for a certain degree of leisure: large video game companies are some of many institutions that stem from a communal recognition for the value of playfulness. Nevertheless, there remains a distrust with the human impulse to play, always teetering at the edge between the productive and the futile, the sensible and abject.

In the best of cases, the rhythm of cultural formation integrates what is discovered through risky play into society, as in the cases of carnivals, sports, holidays and religion. But more often than not, we find people engaged in a certain degree of seemingly inconclusive, unsettling, or irresponsible play. As I argue later in this study, true playfulness depends on respecting the subjectivity of players, even when said players behave in ways that are not

deemed sensible. This is because true playfulness can only occur in freedom: Forced play is no play at all. This is the primary reason why instrumental outcomes cannot be the only way in which we measure the success of a game: efforts to control the way players behave in the game, in order to deliver precise meaning, eliminate playfulness.

The video game form is one of the latest iterations of this perennial human activity: As dynamic media becomes the matter at hand, some would use otherwise productive technology to create and play games. Enthralled by the power of algorithmic emergence, people of all backgrounds jump into digital games to find entertainment, and even insights in the virtual worlds created in games. Anxieties about productivity and probity continue into the digital age, of course. And yet, new generations of video game players internalize what they discover in these dynamic media spaces, and produce new meaning in gaming community. From this perspective, the role of the video game designer becomes producing novel and well researched spaces for playful critical inquiry.

After years of working in commercial video game design, I came to DMI in order to rediscover playfulness in my practice. Both theoretical and practical research allow me to conclude that the value of video games is in their potential to fruitfully destabilize prevailing narratives. Philosophical analysis has convinced me that video games, at their best, are some of the visible crest of centuries of play. The practical aspect of my research has convinced me that a different method of game design is possible. Every new discovery in programming, 3D animation, sound design, among others, encourages me to see game design as a tool of the mind. At their best, my videogames elicit critical play: the type of play that puts both players and designers in the position of finding new ways of acting, thinking, and becoming.

2. Frameworks of Play

2.1 Why Philosophical Research

A shift away from an instrumentalist valorization of video games demands a different way to assess their cultural importance. Looking for the root of the medium demands a closer look at a fundamental human activity: play. This chapter is an attempt to study the concept, tracing the value of play from the onset of Western civilization to the contemporary moment.

The concept of play has deep historical roots in western ontological thinking that reach beyond such watershed aesthetic events as the Italian Renaissance, or the establishment of design as an independent discipline in the middle of the 20th century. The topic of play features prominently in the discourse of classical antiquity, and continues as a fundamental subject of debate in a variety of disciplines and schools of thought throughout. At the core of this historical conversation are questions about the proper use of people's time and faculties: What is considered time well spent? How is playfulness useful or constructive? And, why is it that humans manage to play, even in the most dire circumstances?

In an effort to better understand these questions, I shift away from the research methods I had been taught as a graphic designer, and that I practiced throughout my professional career in video games. There are two fundamental changes to the way I approach research in this study: First, I decide that the separation between producer and consumer, foundational to software design, had to be challenged. I value the attitude of service towards users that the best design methodology advocates for, but it is clear to me that most design methods I was taught are informed by narratives of deficit: conceptions of humanity as perennially incomplete. I have little chance to critically engage with the medium of video games if I did not see myself as a player in my own games, addressing questions that arise organically from context beyond gaming. This position is not of the artist proclaiming truths

from the studio either. Instead, I wish to complicate the designer and user separation so that I feel accompanied in my preoccupations.

The second change in my approach to research is in the melding of distinct stages of the design process. As I was taught, producing a game or other similar projects demands an efficient method, where problems are separated and addressed independently. Pre-production, production, and post-production represent a positivist perspective: a belief that gathering and interpreting quantifiable data, such as market research and AB testing[8], produce better outcomes. As a philosophy, positivism depends on the notion of an objective observer–an independent entity that can dispassionately observe problems and deploy solutions accordingly. Positivist development is one in which problems are progressively solved through empirical means until the optimal product is finished. Working for large companies, I found myself many times uncovering questions of method or conception that were critical of the project at hand. In contrast, my work at DMI is characterized by the creative sentiment of "staying with problems" throughout development, even if this comes at the cost of a neatly presented final product. Taking inspiration from Process Art and other contemporary art practices, research and development at DMI has been about questions, rather than answers.

In order to be self-critical about my old design methodologies of user-producer separation and facile solutions, I focus on philosophical research for my work at DMI instead. Rather than deploying the focus groups and market research that sustain popular video game design development, I opt for literature reviews in search of philosophers that could broaden the context of my projects. From inception and through development, these interlocutors guide me in my attempt to break the insularity of the commercial games I have produced in the past. It is an approach that is helpful in avoiding the often-too-narrow perspective of game design studies, turning the practice outward. Thanks to a broader understanding of the philosophical concept of play, I feel confident in switching from analogue to digital tools, from concrete to abstract ideations, and from conclusive and inclusive arguments made through games. A general understanding of the concept

8   AB testing is an experiment where two or more variants of a design choice are shown to users at random, and statistical analysis is used to determine which variation performs better for a given conversion goal.

of play in continental philosophy allows me to temper the enthusiasm of gamification, and to see video games as connected to an ongoing project that predates digital technologies. By questioning key concepts in each project, I aim to use game design not just as means to illustrate philosophical arguments, but to use the unique characteristics of games to form insights.

Two characteristics in particular allow philosophical analysis: first, video games are powered by digital cybernetic systems. Robust enough video game algorithms can produce emergence–the unexpected complexity of independent systems that invites interpretation. Second, and as I will argue in more detail in the chapter titled *Play and Knowledge*, meaning in games is created not through the efforts of the designer alone, but through the intersubjectivity that exists between designer and player. Any conclusions made through the initial states of development are destined to be made fruitfully problematic by player choice and behavior. From this perspective, game design as a studio practice is philosophical research in itself.

Ultimately, it is through philosophical research that instrumentalization is tempered, in favor of broad aesthetic valorization. The fundamental argument made here is that video games are aesthetic experiences, first and foremost. As I hope to prove in what follows, the concept of play has been a key component to some of the most influential aesthetic theories in continental philosophy, becoming a necessary idea to understand artistic expression and cultural production more broadly. Through a brief genealogy of the term, as well as a closer analysis of play and its relationship to labor, knowledge and culture, I will establish the terms that define my own personal aesthetics of video games. While the ideas presented in this chapter may strike an academic tone, they are key to understand the necessary shift in game design practice: The shift that makes playfulness the main reason to play and make video games.

2.2 A Brief Introduction of Play in Western Philosophy

The study of play in western philosophy has been concerned with its utility in social contexts, and its characteristics as an emergent behavior of beings. In terms of utility, theories of play address its purpose in community efforts such as in the formation and stability of the state, the education and

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