The Possibilities of the Video Game Exhibition

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The Possibilities of the Video Game Exhibition

by

Elizabeth Legere

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College
The City University of New York

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Iris Barry, the founder of MoMA’s Film Library in 1929 and the Film Department at MoMA’s first curator. She led the Film Department at MoMA to incredible success despite initial skepticism from the greater public. Her pioneering in promoting Film as a legitimate art form to the greater art world has inspired many of the ideas presented in this paper, and has encouraged me to dream bigger with regards to the future of the relationship between video games and art museums.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my primary advisor, Joachim Pissarro, for being willing to take on an unconventional thesis topic, and for inspiring me to push the boundaries of what I imagined I could accomplish.

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Thank you to my boyfriend, Steven, and our cat, Spock, for always being there for me, and for being my videogaming partners always.
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INTRODUCTION

Despite the computers that host them, despite the futuristic and mechanical fictional worlds they often render, video games are not expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become.¹

Art museums are always looking for innovative new artists and mediums to challenge the limits of their collections. With the prevalence of new media and digital art, many art galleries and museums are facing the rather daunting task of incorporating these technological and often interactive artworks into their collections of traditional art. In the same vein, some museums have begun to include video games into their art collections, to varying degrees of success. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City is probably the most well-known museum that has begun incorporating video games into its collection. These reside under the departmental roof of the Architecture and Design collection. The museum has chosen to collect games based on their perceived technological or conceptual innovations, including games like Portal (Valve, 2007), Minecraft (Mojang, 2011), and Street Fighter (Capcom, 1987). Many art curators would seem to be skeptical about the inclusion of video games in their art collections, especially these more commercially successful titles. Ian Bogost addresses this attitude:

Instead of chasing after a mythical videogame Citizen Kane or trying to reconcile all video games with one monolithic set of laws for design and reception, what if we…allowed that video games have many possible goals and purposes, each of which couples with many possible aesthetics and designs to create many possible player experiences, none of which bears any necessary relationship to the commercial video game industry as we currently know it. The more things games can do, the more the general public will become accepting of, and interested in, the medium in general.²


² Ibid., p. 153.
Like digital and new media art, videogames pose an interesting challenge to the traditional gallery in terms of technological demands, as well as interactive requirements. Video games have come a long way from their simple, eight-bit roots. Technological leaps in computing and programming have allowed modern game designers to produce narratively and graphically sophisticated products, with complex and unique aesthetic elements that set them apart from traditional art forms. From classic titles, such as *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo, 1985), to modern works like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), videogames are uniquely able to utilize player interaction to facilitate aesthetic experiences which effect real emotional reactions to the situations and characters within them. It is important for video games to have a separate space, designed to accommodate them, and for the people responsible for collecting and exhibiting them to understand their nuanced aesthetic qualities. MoMA in particular is facing the difficult challenge of trying to fit new videogame acquisitions into an already existing curatorial department, and of basing curatorial decisions on strategies learned from exhibiting more static artworks in the Architecture and Design collection. The Smithsonian museum took a step in the right direction with their 2012 exhibition *The Art of Video Games*, by adopting a more arcade-like style for displaying video games. However, the decisions of the exhibition’s curator, Chris Melissinos, left much to be desired when it came to highlighting interactivity and gameplay. In the first section of this examination, I will address the positives and negatives of Melissinos’ contributions to the Smithsonian’s exhibition. In the second section of this paper, I will look more closely at MoMA’s attempts at integrating video games into its collection, and the museum’s first try at highlighting them in an exhibition. The art museum-video game experiment will only be successful if both the attitudes towards curating and exhibition are completely reimagined.
Situating video games in a greater art-historical context might help art curators and lay people to understand and appreciate the games’ value in terms that are not so technologically dependent. The history of video games is most frequently looked at as a history of technological moves. Successive developments in computer and console hardware, as well as in programming and software, have shaped what video games have looked and felt like from the beginning. *Pong* (1972, Atari) was the first game developed by the video game development company Atari. *Pong* is a very minimal ‘tennis’ game, in which two players each control a paddle, which travels horizontally along the left and right edges of the screen. The objective is to bounce a ‘tennis ball’ between the two paddles. If a player misses the ball, their opponent gets a point. *Pong* is both conceptually and graphically simple; the paddles are simple gray lines, and the ball is a small pixel dot travelling across the plain black backdrop. The primitive software available at the time made it impossible to create anything more complex on the arcade cabinets available at the time. Allan Alcorn, an engineer who worked on the game, explained the creation of the game’s sounds:

People have talked about the sound, and I’ve seen articles written about how intelligently the sound was done and how appropriate the sound was. The truth is, I was running out of parts on the board. Nolan wanted the roar of a crowd of thousands…Ted Dabney told me to make a boo and a hiss when you lost a point…. I said, ‘Screw it, I don’t know how to make any one of those sounds. I don’t have enough parts anyhow.’ Since I had the wire wrapped on the scope, I poked around the sync generator to find an appropriate frequency or a tone. So those sounds were done in half a day. They were the sounds that were already in the machine.\(^3\)

This example demonstrates the extent to which video games have always rely on computer hardware and software development to shape aesthetics. It also provides a link, albeit

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a loose one, to connect video games to the history of art. In both video games and more traditional art works, the material used for creation (what art historians call the ‘medium’) determine the aesthetic particularities of the finished product. Video games can thus be examined under the same history as most of art. The genre appears to fit cozily within what has been dubbed “participatory art,” after experiments by artists like Allan Kaprow in the 1950s and 1960s, and Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” in 1938.

“Happenings” are difficult to define. They can take place in any location, with any number of unspecified participants, and with any kind of narrative or set of instructions being followed. They can even have no defined activity at all. The most important thing about “Happenings” is the emphasis on the participation of the audience in the artwork. Allan Kaprow first defined “Happenings” in 1958, in an essay titled The Legacy of Jackson Pollock. He spoke about the effect Jackson Pollock’s work left on modern art and what that legacy meant for the future of artistic practice:

What we have, then, is art that tends to lose itself out of bounds, tends to fill our world with itself, art that in meaning, looks, impulse seems to break fairly sharply with the traditions of painters back to at least the Greeks. Pollock’s near destruction of the tradition may well be a return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic, and life than we have known it in our recent past…. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art.4

This last sentence seems to directly presage the birth of video games fifteen years later.

The emphasis on “sight, sounds, movements, people” relate exactly to the type of total immersion one experiences within the world of a video game. Kaprow emphasized the blending of art with everyday life, creating an immersion in art that cannot be experienced through the flat

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surface of a painting hung on the wall. What became more important as he expanded upon the idea of the Happening is the participation of the audience in the work. While the artist designs or chooses the environment and general outline of the Happening, the Happening as a work of art is not fully realized until the audience participates in or acts upon the space. While “Happenings” played with artistic conventions to create a state of perfect audience participation and interaction, the artists involved in the movement could not have dreamed of the total immersion that video games would later bring. No form of art requires and depends more on a full emergence and participation of the audience into the work than video games. Kaprow called for the eradication of the passive audience in another essay titled *The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!* (1966):

The fine arts traditionally demand for their appreciation physically passive observers, working with their minds to get at what their senses register. But the Happenings are an active art, requiring that creation and realization, artwork and appreciator, artwork and life be inseparable…. It follows that there should not be (and usually cannot be) and audience or audiences to watch a Happening. By willingly participating in a work, knowing the scenario and their own particular duties beforehand, people become a real and necessary part of the work. It cannot exist without them.5

Like video games, “Happenings” are only half realized through their aesthetic and artistic design. They require an actively participating audience to complete the artist’s vision.

Interaction and immersion in the world created by the designer is the only way to experience the artwork in the way it was intended to be experienced. Without this interaction, an audience will have an incomplete understanding of the work. To illustrate this point, Kaprow spoke of Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell6’s Happening work called *Berlin Fever* (1973, West Berlin). *Berlin Fever*

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6 Wolf Vostell was a German artist; originally working with painting and sculpting, he later experimented with performance art and Happenings.
involved around one hundred participants, and guided them through a long list of actions, starting with a drive to a large open field, in which they carried out several actions involving their vehicles. Some examples of the types of tasks they were asked to perform were:

Take up a position with your car in rows of ten each, as thickly as possible, with the cars next to and behind one another; At a signal start all the cars and try to drive as slowly as possible; After 30 minutes of this extremely slow driving, get out of the car (turn off motor) and off to the trunk…. There open and close the trunk lid 750 times; Take a handful of salt out of a bag beneath the biggest nearby tree. Pour it onto a…plate; lick the hand you previously held the salt in…

Kaprow differentiated between the people participating in the work itself, and the audience that gathered to observe the event taking place:

I have spoken of the casual passerby. But not even intentional watchers could have experienced this drama or these references without literally opening and closing a car trunk 750 times, without tasting the salt on their own hands, without actually feeling and hearing the plates crushed under their own cars…. The internalization would escape such an observer. But that is what Vostell was seeking, not esthetic detachment.

Likewise, the video game cannot stand “aesthetic detachment.” In fact, the video game dies as a result of aesthetic detachment. The exact same argument can be made about a player versus a casual observer of the game *Pong*. Those watching the gameplay cannot comprehend the complexities involved with the act of playing the game without themselves handling the controllers, without using the control interface to move the paddle up and down the screen, without feeling the thrill of scoring a point or the dejection involved in losing a point, without feeling the adrenaline rush as they and their opponent battle back and forth. The art of

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8 Ibid., p. 165.
interactivity is a theme that feels directly traceable from the artists participating in “Happenings” to the design of the modern video game.

Prior to “Happenings”, the concept of the “Theater of Cruelty” devised by Antonin Artaud, forcefully called for an immersive and even hypnotic theatrical experience, which led spectators to be surrounded by, and assaulted with, the action of the production, rather than watch passively from their seats. Antonin Artaud was a French playwright and theater director who published a book of essays that attacked the traditional passivity of the bourgeois theatrical experience. In this much-praised book The Theater and Its Double (1938), Artaud denounced the traditional separation between theatrical production and audience experience, and attempted to create a new kind of theater experience which would immerse the audience in the production. This became the “Theater of Cruelty”:

In the ‘theater of cruelty’ the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him. In this spectacle, the sonorisation is constant...light which is not created merely to add color or to brighten...after sounds and light there is action, and the dynamism of action.... I propose a theater which...abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection. A theater that induces trance.9

Artaud envisions an audience that is completely entranced by the action happening around them. If the reader of this paper has ever visited a video game arcade, he or she will know exactly what Artaud’s vision feels like today. What he describes as the ‘spectacle’ surrounding the spectator – the lights and sounds and action – can be seen as the theatrical version of the videogame world which surrounds the player as they move through the game space. The states of immersion and flow, which I will explain in detail in the third chapter of this paper, are defined by the total absorption of a player into the world of a video game. States

of immersion and flow occurs when a player is so focused on the video game that nothing in the real world feels of any importance, and mastering the puzzles put forward in the game, or interacting with the game’s characters, becomes a new reality. A player totally immersed in a game might genuinely laugh, cry or scream in anger in reaction to the game’s events. This total immersion is what Artaud desired for the audience in his “Theater of Cruelty”. In his first manifesto on the “Theater of Cruelty” he expresses his desire to engulf the spectator within the action of the stage:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site…. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.10

Video games are carrying on the legacy of these artists who placed so much importance on the total immersion in an artwork, and on the involvement of the audience in their work. This emphasis on participation and immersion is one of the most important factors that must be considered when interacting with a video game, and especially when considering the aesthetic and technological possibilities of the video game as a distinct artistic medium.

The importance of medium specificity and emphasis on the interplay between medium and interactivity is another thread that will run through this examination of the deficiencies in museum exhibitions, as well as through the posturing on more successful modes of presentation. Video games, like some other kinds of technologically based new media art rely on their medium not only as the delivery tool, but as the point of interaction between audience and art. In his essay, Media Aesthetics, Dario Marchiori expands upon this idea:

Media become their primary tools: media is the medium. Media art manages

transformations, passages, compositions, and blurs between mediums as its material, and it encourages us to wonder about the status and effects of these new significant and sensitive circulations through media.\textsuperscript{11}

The medium in the case of video games can mean a number of different things. The type of console, or platform, the game is designed for (PlayStation, PC, XBOX, etc.), and the type of input device (often defined by the type of console; controller, mouse/keyboard, joystick, etc.), are the two most important elements with regards to interactivity and the feel of play. A game engine is the software that usually contains several development tools with which to build a game from the ground up. It can be thought of as a game’s creative tool, like a certain camera type for a photographer or paint and brush for a painter. The game engine informs things like what/how the graphics will look, how characters will interact, how the game sounds, how the game's physics work, and which platforms the game will run on. The interconnectedness of media and medium in video games not only blurs the line between media and medium, but also between artist and audience. The game designers are the artists behind the media. However, their full vision cannot be realized until an active participant interacts with the work in a meaningful way. Someone needs to take the input device, and begin to explore the game world, in whatever way the game engine allows them to do so. Only then can all the complex pieces of code, art and engineering come together to create the game experience as imagined by the designers.

Many things, from video game theory to the firsthand experience of playing these games in their original states, are important factors to consider when deciding the best way to present video games. In the third section of this paper I will examine the features of video games that

should be focused on when emphasizing them as aesthetic objects. The creators of video games "stand at a creative intersection of math, science, writing, music and art... [and unlike traditional art forms], none of it matters without the player.... Ultimately it is the element of human interaction that makes video game creation one of the most complex forms of art." This interactivity creates the basis for the study of video game aesthetics, and also creates the biggest problems for display in a museum environment. Along the same lines, the time-based nature of the interaction creates huge issues. Some video games can take upwards of ten, twenty, or even greater than thirty hours to complete; gamers can easily spend ten or more hours engaged in rapt game play in a single sitting. This is an impossibility in a museum gallery space; a compromise must be made with regards to interaction time in an exhibition, where the time spent is meaningful, but is still limited to a reasonable duration for the environment. Perhaps a new space altogether needs to be designed to accommodate the more intense interaction video games require. As it stands, there is no definitive solution to these problems. On one hand, it can be considered a victory that major art institutions are acknowledging the accomplishments of game designers. At the same time, it is also a victory that opens the door onto a new series of questions. It is time to rethink some of the curatorial and exhibition practices of contemporary institutions to make way for this digital art of the modern age. In the fifth and sixth chapters of this paper, I will attempt to come up with modes of exhibition and curatorial practice that might assist in reconciling video games with the institutional space of the modern art museum. This topic can be examined by looking at existing examples of museum exhibitions featuring video games, and by critiquing the methods currently in place of importing the games into an institutional setting, and the institution’s interpretation of where video games fit into an art

museum. Using a general understanding of video game theory and aesthetics, it might be possible to begin to look at solutions to the issues posed by current methods of presentation and interpretation, and to examine whether video games’ complicated aesthetic and artistic importance can be better highlighted by a hybrid mode of display that would allow for a better framework for institutional representation and viewer appreciation.
CHAPTER I

THE SMITHSONIAN’S ART OF VIDEO GAMES

Video games have made their way into museums not as art, but as popular culture, and... this is an act of appropriation on the part of museums, rather than something that has arisen naturally out of gaming culture.¹³

The Smithsonian Institution’s 2012 exhibition The Art of Video Games put eighty games on display, representing selections from almost every major console¹⁴, from the Atari VCS (1977) to the Xbox 360 (2005) and PlayStation 3 (2006). The museum brought in Chris Melissinos to oversee the development of the exhibition. He had worked for technology companies for most of his career, most notably as chief gaming officer at Sun Microsystems for fifteen years, and as founder of PastPixels, an organization focused on the long-term preservation of video games and video game related materials. His actual curatorial qualifications in traditional museum terms are nonexistent; however, he is a visible and outspoken member of the gaming community, and has frequently contributed to technology and game conferences throughout the years. This seemed like a smart choice by the Smithsonian; by bringing in someone experienced with the games themselves rather than with traditional art, they appeared to be aiming towards a more experimental direction with regards to curatorial decisions. Melissinos and an advisory board that consisted of game designers, developers, journalists etc., created a list of two hundred and forty ground breaking and/or historically important video games, which were compiled into a list to be voted on by the public. The public vote narrowed the list down to eighty, and determined which games would be exhibited. This was an


¹⁴ A console is the piece of hardware that physically runs the game: examples would be a PlayStation, Xbox, Wii, etc.
interesting way of 'crowd-curating' the content of the exhibition. For an intrinsically interactive medium, incorporating a form of interactivity into the curatorial process is a kernel of an innovative strategy for translating the video game from the living room to the museum space. According to Georgina Goodlander, one of the assistant curators on the exhibit: "The voting component was very important to us. From the beginning, we talked about the importance of the player in the video game - so by extension, we wanted the video game community to become a part of the exhibition development."15 People, especially when it comes to something like video games, will often end up voting for their favorites, and not necessarily the best examples of what the medium can accomplish. The exhibition design tried to create an 'arcade' feeling, with artificial blue tinted lighting, eight-bit music playing, and projections of a circuit board pattern onto the carpets; even many of the display cabinets were created in the approximate shape of an arcade game. In the first room, visitors to the exhibition were greeted with a set of three screens. On each screen was a close-up of the face of someone engaged in playing a game. Visitors could not see or hear the game they were playing, only their intense concentration, emotional responses and movements in reaction to the games. Ken Levine, the Creative Director and Writer of the BioShock (2007, Irrational Games) games said in an interview:

I think what's unique about [games] is that the player is part of the experience.... One of my favorite things to watch...to watch their level of engagement, interaction...to watch their face and then watch them try to suss out their feelings and their experience, you don't really have that in any other media, and that's because with a game they're part of it...making an experience that is uniquely their own.16

More than anything else in the exhibition, this display captured what makes the video

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game such a unique and important kind of art. Chris Melissinos accurately expands upon the importance of the player's role as co-author:

We, as players, bring to the experience our own moral code, our own experiences, our own desires and tastes; what comes out of the experience is very personal and unique for every single person who plays the same game. You and I could both be playing “Uncharted,” and you might say, “Did you explore this one area?” And I could say, “No, I explored this area instead.” But we still both arrived, at the end of the game, at the same place the author intended. So, video games allow the authority of an author to remain, while still allowing for this lateral exploration by the players themselves, within that narrative arc. That’s what’s different about video games; that’s what makes them so compelling as an art form.  

Unfortunately, this initial emphasis that the Smithsonian put on the player’s experience was severely lacking in the remainder of the exhibition. The aesthetic of interactivity is what really separates video games from other forms of art. However, the exhibition did not focus on that aspect. There were only five playable games out of the eighty exhibited: Pacman (1980, Namco), Super Mario Brothers (1985, Nintendo), The Secret of Monkey Island (1990, LucasArts), Myst (1993, Cyan), and Flower (2009, Thatgamecompany). Each game was supposedly running on the original hardware. According to Georgina Goodlander:

[As] with all artworks, we try to display them as the artist originally intended...we had a lot of discussions about whether the early games should be displayed through CRT televisions.... [however,] using original hardware [for everything] would have presented too many challenges with putting the show on the road.... It was very important for us to use original hardware to run the games, however, since we wanted the experience to be as close as possible to the real thing. That was the single biggest challenge of the entire exhibition…. All five of the playable games run off the original hardware – so behind Pac-Man there is a 30+ year-old arcade circuit board, and behind Super Mario Brothers is the original NES, and so on.  


This is a very important point to reflect on. Video games are inexorably tied to their respective hardware. *Pacman* is known for being the bestselling coin-operated arcade game of all time, *Myst* is the quintessential PC, mouse controlled, point-and-click game, *Super Mario Brothers* and the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) are rarely mentioned one without the other. The apparent awareness on the part of the curators of the importance of maintaining the original hardware and interfacing, especially with the playable games, is puzzling, since in execution, the games are completely separated from their hardware. The audience could only see the projection of the game being played on a screen, completely divorced from the physicality of the system, and for some of the games, even divorced from their classic interfacing devices. *Myst*, for example, is controlled with a large trackball device, with arcade style buttons on either side, rather than a computer mouse; an inauthentic way to display the game. *Myst* is a PC game, originally released on the Macintosh computer in 1993. The original control device was a PC mouse; the only button used is the mouse left click, which is used for all navigation and interaction within the game. This genre of game is known at a ‘point-and-click adventure.’

Following *Myst*’s incredible popularity (it held the title of bestselling PC game of all time until 2002, when *The Sims* surpassed it) there was a huge surge in the creation of ‘point-and-click’ games. To present the game with only a trackball presented a re-imagined way to interact with the game, different than what was originally intended. This dichotomy should at least be pointed out and explained somewhere within the display, so audience members are not left with the impression that their experience playing *Myst* represents the game designer’s original intentions. *Super Mario Brothers* was shown with its original NES controller, which was its correct original control device. However, it was still shown without the NES console that originally ran the game’s software. The original *Super Mario Brothers* was released in a bundle with the sale of
the NES console in 1985. The release of the NES console came right after the North American video game market experienced a crash. Blake Harris explains Nintendo’s impact on the early years of video game history in his book *Console Wars*:

Nintendo was a small but ambitious Japanese company that, in 1985, dared to try to resuscitate the videogame industry in the United States where it had been dead since the failures of Atari and Mattel. Against immense resistance, the NES [and *Super Mario Brothers*] finally knocked down the fickle walls of pop culture and proved that videogames were not a fad...by 1990, less than five years later, Nintendo owned 90 percent of a $3 billion industry.  

The NES and *Super Mario Brothers* are not only related through the essential hardware/software relationship, they are also historically tied together as saviors of the video game industry and as catalysts for the immense early success of Nintendo as a company. Looking at these examples, we can begin to see why video game cannot be separated from its hardware and interface, and therefore be completely understood or enjoyed. The components of videogame hardware and software are inexorably tied together; an essential part of the video game's medium. Using the large projection screens turns the gameplay into a spontaneous performance. It is the beginning of a great idea regarding the exhibition of interactive media like video games. Unfortunately, each gameplay session is limited to only a few minutes before resetting for the next person in line. This time restraint is not an acceptable limitation for an intrinsically interactive, time based, and immersive medium. A few minutes is not enough time to appreciate the intricate mystery of the story of *Myst*, or the iconic story tropes and iconography that spawned from *Super Mario Brothers*. These issues are a detriment to the audience's ability to appreciate the games. It is true that thy time-based limitation posed by a

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museum exhibition is a huge issue with regards to video games, which require prolonged, individual interaction while being displayed in the public space of the museum. There might be ways to work around it that still allow for a fulfilling interactive experience, and that give the audience a fuller understanding of what the game is all about. The time based and interactive problems of display will be addressed in depth later in this paper.

Beyond these five games: *Pacman* (1980, Namco), *Super Mario Brothers* (1985, Nintendo), *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990, LucasArts), *Myst* (1993, Cyan) and *Flower* (2009, Thatgamecompany), there is no other opportunity for interaction with the remaining seventy-five games. The rest of the Smithsonian exhibition was made up of cabinet displays, one for each major gaming system, along with screenshots of four of games that were meant to represent the important features of their specific platform (with varying degrees of success). For example, the Win-PC (Windows PC, or modern Windows computers, as opposed to MSDOS Windows, which was the early version) display was paired with *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda, 2008), *Portal* (Valve, 2007), and *Flow* (Thatgamecompany, 2006).

*Minecraft* makes sense in this category; although currently released for almost every platform available, including mobile phone and iPad devices, it was originally a PC only game, and originally gained traction within that platform, leading to its becoming the second bestselling video game of all time (behind only *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984)). *Portal* also belongs here, due to its developers, Valve, being hardcore promoters of PC gaming (as opposed to gaming on a console, like the XBOX or PlayStation). I will discuss *Portal* and Valve more in the MoMA Chapter of this paper. *Fallout 3* however, has nothing specifically to do with PC gaming; it was released on multiple platforms simultaneously, with no single platform edging out the others by much. The display should have mentioned the fact that the main difference seen in the PC
version of *Fallout 3* is the ability for players to make use of modifications (mod for short). A mod is usually a player-created addition to a game, that modifies certain aspects of gameplay. For example, a modification of the environment that makes the weather rainy all the time, or a modification of the player’s character that gives them a new outfit to wear. Mods are usually limited for use on PC rather than console because of the open software environment of a PC: the control is in the user’s hands. Consoles are strict proprietary environments, where the creators of the console (for example, Microsoft with an XBOX) have complete control of the platform and apply strict minimum standards for anything running on their console to ensure that everything runs smoothly. *Flow* seems strange in this category as well; it was released to the public on the PlayStation console, not the PC. It originated on PC, as a part of Thatgamecompany’s founder Jenova Chen’s master’s thesis, however it was not available as a playable product until it was remade as a PlayStation 3 game and released in 2007. Any person who has played *Flow*, has played the PlayStation version. None of these games in the exhibition were playable in any way. The only form of interaction was the ability of the museumgoer to press a button to play a brief and often incomprehensive video detailing some of the gameplay and the importance of each title. Raiford Guins, in his book *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*, views the video game as both activity and artifact, and explains the importance of including both aspects in any kind of display or exhibition of games:

> Activity-artifact, with both conjunctions removed, works best if ascertains as an articulated relationship, a process for creating connections for experience via machine and software. In the absence of either, if ‘activity’ cannot be joined or teamed with its original ‘artifact’ and vice versa, then each alone must work harder. Or another possibility exists: in disconnection, we see differently.20

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The hardware of each gaming system was displayed behind glass. At least here we could see the hardware next to the games, creating a relationship between artifact and software, or activity. The games were represented with either static screenshots or portions of cut scenes (animated, unplayable sequences that are used in games to advance the storyline; a selection of mini-movies interspersed throughout the gameplay) rather than the actual gameplay or user interface. Graeme Kirkpatrick expresses the problem with this type of display:

Individual screenshots are in themselves rarely fascinating...They lack substantial compositional order and form. However, they never stay still for long. The video game is an invitation to spend time and its form is elaborated only when the player finds the rhythmic associations necessary to reveal its possibilities.\(^{21}\)

This creates another kind of separation between the games shown and the hardware they should be so closely linked to. By leaving out the interaction and the interface it leaves one without any game at all. It becomes merely a video, to be watched passively. Also puzzling were the chosen video sequences. The wall text associated with each game often failed to mention what is truly memorable or important about each game: the Starcraft (1998, Blizzard) video did not mention the fact that it spawned a massive, competitive e-sports scene,\(^{22}\) with gaming competitions that happen year-round, often with prize pools of over a million dollars.\(^{23}\) The role of the Doom (1993, Id Software) and Doom II (1994, Id) games in shaping game design, and especially in getting the players involved in level design, was also not mentioned. Roberto Dillon explains the


\(^{22}\) E-sports are competitively played video games, either on teams or solo (depending on the type of game). There are professional e-sport organizations, much like traditional sporting organizations for mainstream sports. The players can win cash prizes and trophies, and the tournaments are often held in stadium environments with crowds of fans cheering the players on.

\(^{23}\) The largest e-sports prize pool was seen in 2016, at a competition between teams playing the game DoTA 2 (Valve, 2013) called ‘The International.’ The total prize pool was $20,770,460 (http://dota2.prizetrac.kr/international2016).
impact of the *Doom* games in his book *The Golden Age of Video Games*:

By distributing a level editor (aptly named DoomEd), players were allowed to become level designers and make their own maps. While *Doom* wasn’t the first game to do so, now, thanks to the Internet, people were able to easily share their own levels with friends and strangers alike, making the whole creation process much more fun and rewarding. Indeed, the roots of many game designers of today can be traced back to designing levels on DoomEd.²⁴

There was often no mention of the social impact, the difference between multiplayer games and narrative games, or professional competitive gaming. These failures were detrimental to the exhibition. The importance of many of the games exhibited, and many games in general, is not quantifiable in terms of visual aesthetics; rather, their importance comes out in the social interactions, and is linked to the visceral experience of the player. This aspect of video games makes them such a unique and important art form, and unfortunately for an exhibit titled *The Art of Video Games,* these aspects were not explored in depth.

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CHAPTER II

MOMA’S APPLIED DESIGN

MoMA's *Applied Design* exhibit was on display from 2013 to January 2014. The exhibit was focused on 'interaction design' in general, so there were other objects besides just video games on display. Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator of the Department of Architecture and Design had this to say about the curatorial process of organizing the exhibition:

The games are selected as outstanding examples of interaction design. The criteria, therefore, emphasize not only the visual quality and aesthetic experience of each game, but also the many other aspects—from the elegance of the code to the design of the player’s behavior—that pertain to interaction design. Among the central interaction design traits that we have privileged are...Behavior [elicited from the players] ...Aesthetics...Space...and Time.25

The exhibition, and the display of the games, were both minimalist in style, inspired by Philip Johnson's 1934 exhibition *Machine Art* in which he displayed objects like propeller blades and engines completely divorced from their conventional uses and counterparts, to emphasize their aesthetic qualities, completely unfettered by any trappings. The decision to use a minimalist theme missed an opportunity to explore the essential connection between video games and video games’ various and often fetishized hardware (like controllers, consoles, graphics cards, monitors26), and created a problematic separation between the game and the gaming system that weakened the entire presentation. There were fourteen games on display, with nine of them playable. The other five - *Myst, SimCity 2000* (1994, Maxis), *The Sims* (2000, 25 Antonelli, Paola. Video Games: 14 in the Collection, For Starters. *Inside/Out*. MoMA/MoMA PS1, 29 Nov. 2012. Web. 2 May 2014.

26 People will spend upwards of thousands of dollars on these items either for their own gaming systems or for a collection to display. Often, they will line up for midnight releases, or pre-order the items many months in advance to secure their possession of them.
Electronic Arts), *EVE Online* (2003, CCP Games), and *Dwarf Fortress* (2006, Bay 12 Games) - were displayed as video excerpts or demonstrations. The playable games were displayed on uniform, small screens, around twenty inches at the most, and were separated from any hardware. Many of the games were running on emulators rather than their original systems. Emulation is the process by which a piece of software (in this case a video game) is made available on a computer system or game console for which it was not originally designed. Raiford Guins describes emulation in his book on videogame preservation, *Game After:*

> “Emulation aims both to preserve and enable the experience of game play (its ‘look and feel’ along with interactivity) when original hardware platforms continue to age, becoming increasingly inaccessible and inoperable, and dwindle in number. Emulators are not bound to the original platform that they mimic or simulate. They are designed to execute on later generations of computing architecture. The case studies conducted on emulation demonstrate some of the challenges confronting emulation as a viable digital tool for game preservation. For example, what version of a game should be emulated if the concept of a ‘fixed version’ of software has been destabilized, what are the criteria for discerning the significant properties of a particular game for purposes of emulation?”

The use of modern consoles or hardware to run older game software is sometimes inevitable, so emulation will always be a factor when trying to interact with games whose hardware has become obsolete, however compromises can be made that keep the interactive tools intact. Gaby Wijers expands upon this point:

> “The significance of the equipment can be deduced from the meaning and value of the work. Some of the components may have significance beyond a purely functional level… [there was a] clear distinction between the significance of the playback and display equipment. The general tendency is to replace [background] equipment or components with the same mass-produced model or with equipment that has the same functionality…. Display equipment is more problematic, however. Replacing monitors and interactive features has the greatest impact on the artwork.”

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Maintaining the original controllers and display screens, and pairing them with the emulation device would be the ideal scenario here. Older gaming systems might become non-functional, but it is almost always a possibility to play a game running on an emulator with the controller it was originally designed for use with, using adaptors or rewired originals. Keeping the original state of the game, and intent of the game’s designers in mind is crucial when successfully running a game on an emulator.

The controllers paired with the games in Applied Design were chosen with the intent to give no hint as to the original gaming system, purposefully eliminating any nostalgia associated with the game's accessories or hardware. They were all generic controllers, meaning they had no relationship to any hardware system, but instead could be used interchangeable with a variety of systems. This was a strange choice, and in this case, an intentional decision by the curators, that they explained by saying:

"We are going to acquire the hardware, because it’s important to have it, but at least at first, we’re not going to show it. We’re going to have screens that are as close as possible in size to the original screens, and of course, we’re going to have the controllers. The controllers are very important, but my dream, and I don’t know yet if I’ll be able to do it, is to have controllers that are all made with the same plastic in the same color. Of course, they have whatever joysticks or buttons they need to have. It’s important to have those. But I would like to kind of make everything that has to do with the hardware as abstract as possible, so that people can concentrate on the interaction. I want to create that distance, so that people can really understand what we mean by these games being masterpieces of interaction design." 29

It seems like the curators were focusing more on the visual aesthetics of the display and the look of the video games in their gallery, while suppressing the ludic features that separate video games from any other artworks that might already be in their collection. The curatorial

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decision making appeared to be an attempt to justify the presence of video games in this department, rather than an attempt to understand and appreciate the artistic and aesthetic inherent value of the objects as games. This is not to say that some aspects of design do not apply to video games, but focusing only on design features provides an anemic display.

The lack of faithfulness to the original experience of playing the exhibited games was also problematic. Uniformly small sized screens stretched and shrunk the visuals of some of the games, while the generic controllers only served to confuse those familiar with the games, and provided newcomers with an interaction divorced from the game artifacts that contribute so much to the overall experience. Jon-Paul Dyson, the Director of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at The Strong Museum in Rochester, NY, stresses the importance of combining game interactivity with the original game artifacts:

“Placing a coin-op arcade game on the exhibit flow for direct public access, or providing game stations with original hardware and software, is in keeping with the Strong’s triangular model for curation: Artifacts, interpretation, interactivity. ‘Most museums do two out of three. An art museum may cover the first two, while a children’s museum may only stress the third with a few artifacts. A history museum would certainly invest in the first two while interactivity is rare. Science and natural history museums would be closest in combining all three. Our goal is to combine all three. Within this model and when doing an exhibit on video games, you need to have the games available. There is such a separation between the experience of playing the game and the game itself.’”30

A strange example of the disconnect between the game and the game system presented in *Applied Design* was the fact that some of the controllers were coated with a rubber shell, keeping any familiarity with the feel of the controller at bay. Presenting these games completely divorced from their hardware, with altered, awkward, interfacing devices, did not allow the museum visitor a full experience of the games. Raiford Guins expands on the problem of

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displaying game experience without artifact, or vice versa:

“The museum [has the opportunity to] present multiple contexts: access to game play will reveal the experience of the game, and with original hardware resting nearby, we can link the experience of emulation to its previous source. But without such a connection engendered for us, we are left in a semiotic and material lurch.”

Cory Arcangel is a fine artist who often works with video games and video game materials. His artwork I Shot Andy Warhol (2002), is a hack of the Nintendo Entertainment System's game Hogan's Alley (1984). This game used the NES’s light-gun (an extra type of controller resembling a toy guy, that could be plugged into the NES console and used by pointing and shooting at the TV screen) along with the original controller, which could be used on old CRT TV's to point and shoot at things in the game. The light-gun does not work on modern TV's at all. Arcangel hacked the cartridge to cause the characters in the game to be replaced with images of pop culture figures like the Pope and Flava Flav, and replaced the image of the villain with that of Andy Warhol. Since the game uses both an old console and an obsolete input method, Arcangel rightly expresses the importance of using the original hardware rather than emulation when displaying it:

"The impact of...the...original intervention, hacking an obsolete game cartridge at the level of hardware, would be lost in an emulated version. 'For me the whole point of the work was the hardware intervention, the fact that I slaved over this ridiculous 6502 Nintendo language. If I hadn't been able to make a cartridge that ran the original code, I wouldn't have made the work.... In thirty years, a laptop running that game is going to mean nothing to the public. So I want I Shot Andy Warhol to be exhibited with a real light gun, the Nintendo, and preferably a period TV set.'"


The game designers behind real video games do not have any input in so far as the exhibition of their games in a museum. The curatorial decisions seemed to value a simplification of the experience over a loyalty to the source material. There was a clear lack of understanding in the MoMA show of the inseparable nature of the game and control device. The curator's dream of making the hardware 'as abstract as possible' in order to appreciate form over function might be effective in their experience working with actual architecture and design objects, but the same does not apply to video games.

*Applied Design* was a perfect example of the problems that arise when trying to force the aesthetic values of another medium onto video games. It is important to consider how the game runs and responds on the hardware it was designed for, as well as how it feels to play with the controller it was designed to be played with. As defined by Graeme Kirkpatrick, the "'game feel' is the tactile, kinesthetic sense of manipulating a virtual object. It's the sensation of control in a game."\(^{33}\) It is an important part of understanding the video game as a work of art, because "the experience gamers have with video games is aesthetic...Primarily, it is what games feel like to the players that matters, both in the sense of explaining why players play and of accounting for the importance of video games in contemporary culture and cultural theory."\(^{34}\) Each game has a unique interface, unique controls, and is designed to be played with a specific control device. The interaction between hardware and software is intricately programmed to give the player a unique way of interfacing with the game, which is inextricably bound up with the active gameplay and game narrative; you cannot have one without the other. Altering the interfacing device to better fit into the institutional space of a 'design' collection created an experience that

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 33.
might have been interesting in an experimental or conceptual way, but was in no way representative of the true nature of the game.

Another set of problems that befall video games when translated to a museum context, is that the playable games are only 'playable' for a few minutes. The sections of the games chosen for this demonstration seemed randomly picked, and were often not representative of the larger themes of the games. Inevitably, as video games transition into the institutional space, it is difficult for the curators to come up with a way to maintain the games’ cultural and historical integrity, while still honoring their interactivity. J.P. Wolf explains the issue of time with regards to video game play:

> Whereas movies are generally no more than a few hours in length, video games...can average forty or more hours to complete, not including all the possible endings they may contain. Sometimes it is not even clear how many choices a player has, and discovery of alternate narrative paths or hidden features is also a part of game play.\(^\text{35}\)

The estimate of forty hours to complete certain video games is not an exaggeration. I, and many people I know, have spent (and continue to spend) over one or two hundred hours with certain games. The time factor is one of the largest issues facing the exhibition of video games in the institutional environment. I will address this in greater detail in the later chapters of this paper, where I will attempt to come up with a solution that allows for adequate player interaction within the museum space.

Valve's *Portal* (2007) was one of the games that was exhibited. It illustrates a combination of the issues with *Applied Design*'s treatment of the displayed games. The first issue with MoMA's display of *Portal* was the use of a generic controller as the interfacing device. Although it was released for both PC and console platforms, Valve is a company that is

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praised for its innovations in the realm of PC gaming; outside of their games, they are best known for their PC gaming software. It would have been more authentic to display *Portal* with a mouse and keyboard, with wall text explaining the importance of Valve in the realm of PC gaming, but it seems that either out of ignorance or more likely aesthetic concerns, a generic console controller was chosen instead. *Portal* is also a game with an extremely convoluted and multi-layered narrative, with important hidden storylines that are discoverable only through extensive exploration and mastery of the game mechanics. *Portal* is an adventure game that is framed as a puzzle game.36 Playing the game for a few minutes might give a sense of the innovations *Portal* made in the genre of the puzzle game, such as using a unique teleporting system to move the player around the puzzle rooms, however the real importance of *Portal* comes from the blending of gameplay and narrative to trick the player into believing they are playing a more straightforward game. The essence of *Portal*’s narrative comes from unraveling the mysterious motivations of the artificial intelligence, GLaDOS (Genetic Life-form and Disk Operating System), who guides the player through the game environment (a scientific conglomerate called Aperture Science Laboratories) and encourages them to solve various puzzles in ‘test chambers.’ Steven Poole discusses the importance of games like *Portal* in his book *Trigger Happy*, which discusses the aesthetic nature of video games:

In this sense [games like this] are meta-games: the manipulation and achievement of such visual, dynamic and cybernetic rewards is another, higher level game in itself. A well-designed videogame...can approach the condition of a work of art simply by virtue of the way such rich, protean transformations in the game's very structure are linked together for the game player's pleasure.37

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36 An adventure game is usually a single player game in which the player takes control of a character to embark on missions that advance a specific storyline that is being told. A puzzle game is a game in which story may or may not matter; the puzzle game is more of a strategy game in which the most important aspect is solving puzzles.

As the game progresses, cracks slowly begin to appear, both in GLaDOS’s explanations, and in the literal walls of the test chambers, as they go from brand new and bright to more dilapidated and run down. The disorienting and paranoid feeling that builds as one plays through the game is intense and unparalleled in gaming, and it is impossible to grasp these layers of emotions from such a limited and poorly displayed demo. Even the wall text for this game did not mention any of these aspects, perhaps for fear of alerting the museum goer to the paucity of the display itself; the text only highlighted the clever puzzle aspects of the game, and failed to mention its revolutionary narrative structure. Because of their immersive and interactive nature, video games can change people's lives in a much deeper way than a profound film or painting is capable of. In Portal and other narrative-driven games, the deep immersion facilitated by the games’ mechanics can create realistic experiences that affect the players on a deep and real level. In her book Hamlet on the Holodeck, Janet Murray explains how game mechanics and narrative can work together to provide meaningful commentary on real life struggles:

Just as Kafka used the conventions of the fable to convey the profound depersonalization of modern life and Art Spiegelman used the format of the comic book to tell the story of his father's Holocaust experiences, a digital artist might use the structure of the adventure maze to embody an individual's confrontation with [difficult decisions that call for powerful personal reflection].

The attempt to fit video games into the category of 'interactive design object' seriously stifles the more stimulating aspects of what makes games worthy of artistic, or any serious intellectual discussion. At the very least, video games would benefit from inclusion in a ‘New Media’ art department, that focuses on modern digital art forms like internet art or computer generated animation as well as other interactive art; art forms that have the qualities of

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interactivity and audience participation in common with video games. The curators in this type of department might be better versed in the technological requirements of displaying virtual and digital art of this type, and could take steps to use their expertise to brainstorm better modes of presentation for video games in the museum environment.

The five games shown in *Applied Design* that were not playable were deemed by the curators "too complex or time consuming to be experienced as an interactive display" or would "take years and millions of people to manifest fully." These were shown through video clips and/or screenshots. The games in this category were simulation games (*The Sims 2000*), open-ended games (*Minecraft* and *Dwarf Fortress*), and massively multiplayer online (MMO) games (*EVE Online*), as well as role-playing (*Myst*). *SimCity 2000* is a simulation game, in which the player takes on the role of city planner, architect, and absolute ruler. Ian Bogost explains why simulation is such a stimulating and addictive genre of video game:

> They create...an aesthetic of cognitive mapping: a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system. Playing a simulation means becoming engrossed in a systemic logic which connects a myriad array of causes and effects.

Playing a simulation game engages the player more directly with the underlying game design and operations than any other genre. Will Wright, the creator of *SimCity* says of the gameplay:

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40 A simulation game is a game designed to simulate real life activities, or close to real life activities, in a virtual space. An open-ended game is a game that has no set storyline to follow or end goal, a player can play for any amount of time they desire. An MMO is an online game in which any number of players can play together in the same world.

With current technology, there are a lot of limitations in terms of what we can do with character simulation. So, to me that seemed like a really good use of abstraction because there are certain things we just cannot simulate on a computer, but on the other hand...people are very good at simulating in their heads. So we just take that part of the simulation and offload it from the computer into the player's head.\footnote{Bogost, Ian. \textit{Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism}. MA: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 85.}

In some ways, \textit{SimCity} is a psychological experiment enacted by the game designer on the game player; setting up a system that will present certain intellectual, emotional, moral, economic, or mathematical questions, as most artwork strives to do, only in this case it is through intricate code, interface design and hundreds of hours of gameplay rather than paint or film. No two people’s experience playing \textit{SimCity} will be the same. It was impossible to appreciate the complexities of this type of game, and the extreme variation that exists from one player's experience to the next, via MoMA’s chosen mode of explanation which was a simple, short video display.

In the case of \textit{EVE Online} (2003), the game was displayed as an info- graphic map and a few videos of gameplay, despite the promise upon its acquisition to "work with players and designers to create guided tours of these alternate worlds, so the visitor can begin to appreciate the extent and possibilities of the complex gameplay."\footnote{Antonelli, Paola. Video Games: 14 in the Collection, For Starters. \textit{Inside/Out}. MoMA/MoMA PS1, 29 Nov. 2012. Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/} \textit{EVE} is an extremely complicated, online, multiplayer game with a devoted player base and massive open world. In an article examining the beginnings of the museum video game experiment, Michael Thomsen explains what makes MMO games like \textit{EVE} unique:

So much of what happens is emergent from the social interaction -- you can't even reduce it to gameplay, really -- it's a lot of complicated interactions among people.... Treating games as self-contained creations short sells many of their most vibrant qualities,
including both the possibility that the art in them owes as much to the individual players as it does to the creators.\textsuperscript{44}

CCP Games, an Iceland based game development company, and the developers behind \textit{EVE}, create the large world of the game, but it is the player community that organizes into coalitions, creates the gameplay, game history, economy, lore and story. Displaying \textit{EVE} through a video montage and map deprives the museum-goer of any sense of its massive community, strategy or complex player-run world. Although the wall label acknowledged that “MMOGs live, grow, and evolve following their own rules and collective instincts the player experience cannot be achieved in any other form of art or entertainment,” it is hard for someone unfamiliar with these types of games to really understand what this might mean, or what it looks like from a player’s perspective. MMO games like \textit{EVE Online} have their own social hierarchies, ruling bodies, economic powerhouses and moral codes. One can't begin to imagine "what kind of socio-aesthetic exchange goes on...with [so many millions of] players. These games are not only the future of gaming, they are huge social experiments that will affect and shape the future of human communication.”\textsuperscript{45} In this sense video games in the museum follow a similar philosophy to the theory of relational aesthetics defined by Nicolas Bourriaud. Notably, the way in which:

Relational art works seek to establish inter-subjective encounters in which meaning is elaborated \textit{collectively} rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption. Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience... relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective,


\textsuperscript{45} Harrigan, Pat & Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, eds. \textit{First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game}. MA: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 54.
social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.\textsuperscript{46}

The worlds established in MMO games start to mirror real world societies; it is not uncommon to stage in game weddings, funerals or wars, or for a handful of players to create monopolies on certain corners of the market, driving up the prices of in-game goods to absurd heights. For example, the \textit{EVE} Battle of B-R5RB was a massive space battle between groups of \textit{EVE} players, which erupted over a missed rent payment on the B-R5RB star system. It lasted twenty-one hours from January 27 to January 28, 2014, and holds the title for largest PVP (player versus player, where players of the game battle against each other directly) battle ever carried out in an online game. The battle involved over seven thousand individual players over the duration, and resulted in the in-game loss of the equivalent of three hundred thousand real life dollars.\textsuperscript{47} After the fight, the game creators, CCP Games, erected an in-game monument known as 'The Titanomachy' (named after the seventy-five Titan ships lost in the battle, and created from the remains of the dead ships) in the B-R5RB sector. CCP Games also recently erected a real-world monument outside of their headquarters that displays the character names of all currently active \textit{EVE Online} players. In a blog post on the unveiling of this monument, Hilmar Veigar Pétursson, CEO of CCP Games, eloquently described the incredible collaborative artistry that creates the world of \textit{EVE}:

\begin{quote}
The cumulative destructive power displayed in game over the years holds the same sort of beauty as a violent volcanic eruption, a creative destruction. Beauty between millions of players woven together in an infinitely complicated narrative that, at its base, exists as \end{quote}


\textsuperscript{47} In this battle, many of the spaceships that were destroyed were called Titans. These Titans are the largest ships in \textit{EVE}, and take weeks to build, at a cost of hundreds of billions of in-game currency. The real-life money value can be calculated from the game’s payment model. Players pay a monthly fee to play \textit{EVE}, either through real life money, or with in-game money. The transfer rate between these two types of money helps to come up with the real-world money value of the ships lost in this battle.
1s and 0s but truly is birthed upon the imaginations and inventiveness of human beings who are worlds apart. There is beauty in each player’s odyssey and there is beauty in the fact that no two journeys are alike. This beauty is a new form of art. A form that is only starting to be noticed but one we’ve known has been here all along. Everyone who has touched EVE over the years has been witness to this art and has helped to create it. Some of them were prolific painters, dashing bold colors across the canvas of the universe. Others humbly scribbling in solitude in an empty solar system. Some were art dealers and of course others were critics. But every single contributor to EVE is undeniably part of this beauty. Each an artist.48

The massive scale and investment by players in this battle is only one example of the potential for MMO games to produce intense and dramatic situations for the players. Online video streaming services like Twitch.tv allow people to live stream themselves playing various video games to a public audience, and many EVE players were live streaming during the battle. I was watching one of the many live stream of the battle on Twitch.tv along with a few thousand other people. There is nothing like seeing the very real emotions brought out in players that have invested so much in a game, during a situation where they are on the verge of losing it all. Perhaps MoMA could use recordings of the live-streamed videos to enhance the game’s display. The unfulfilled idea to create ‘guided tours’ with developers and players of the games would have also been an effective way to introduce museum visitors to EVE’s world and players. Hearing from the people who are invested in the game, and spend their time within the world of EVE, might be helpful in giving a museum audience an idea of how rich the social aspects of this type of game can be.

The communal aspect of MMO games like EVE highlights an important difference between single and multiplayer games, which creates another hurdle for the institution to deal with. It is difficult enough to effectively exhibit a single player game with a contained story and simple gameplay in a museum space, but situating the complex and communal atmosphere of

48 https://www.eveonline.com/monument/
these large multiplayer and online games within the modern institutional space seems impossible without a drastic renovation of the current museum model. Large, collaborative communities like *EVE* also bring up issues of a gray area of game authorship and artist attribution that an institutional space might be uncomfortable with. Video games are made by teams of people, often very large groups that include game designers, artists, engineers, programmers, voice actors, motion capture artists, and many other specialists. Each one of these positions plays an integral role in the creation of the game. One artist or creator cannot be pointed to as the artist of the work; video games are at all stages, collaborative works. All video games also require collaboration between game designers/artists and player; in order for the work to reach its full potential, a player must interact with the work. In large, online, multiplayer games like *EVE*, the world is inhabited in and shaped by the players in a more direct way. The collaboration here becomes even more intimate; without the contributions of the players to the online game world, the game would become an empty shell. The goal of an MMO game like *EVE* is to create an environment in which the game design enhances the social and political organization of the players. Without one or the other, the full richness of the game world cannot be realized; game designer and player become dependent on one another for the game to come alive.

The truth is, these artists and designers probably never intended for their creations to be displayed in an institutional context. This puts even more responsibility in the hands of the institution to translate games into this new space in a respectful and knowledgeable way that highlights the unique artistic possibilities that separate games from other art forms. Janet Murray, a professor in the School of Literature Media and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a pioneering digital media theorist, poses a vision of the possible future:
Future audiences will take it for granted that they will experience [an artist's] vision by acting within the immersive world and by manipulating the materials the author has provided them rather than only reading or viewing them. They will welcome choice point in the narrative.... They will accept their exercise of agency as part of the aesthetic experience in the same way that we now take it for granted that we have to walk around a Degas sculpture to experience its full beauty rather than merely stand in front of it as we do with his paintings.

How do we get to this point? To start it is important to look at the aesthetic qualities of games that separate them from other artistic mediums, and use that knowledge to come up with a better theory of curatorial process and understanding with regards to digital media, and video games.

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CHAPTER III
THE AESTHETICS OF VIDEO GAMES

Instead of trying to fit games into a conventional field of study, or a conventional museum department, a separate sector of video game/art study needs to be formed. Until recently, the field of game theory has been divided into two camps.\textsuperscript{50} The 'narratology' camp advocates analyzing games as the next step in evolution for the story telling medium through the frameworks set up by other story-driven disciplines, like literary and film criticism. Theorists like Janet Murray, in her book \textit{Hamlet on the Holodeck} (1997), explore the importance of a narratological analysis of video games and other new media.

The 'ludology' camp believes that game study should be separate from any other discipline, and should focus only on the aspects of 'play' and interactivity that separate video games from other mediums. Espen Aarseth, Principal Researcher at the Center for Computer Games Research, the IT University of Copenhagen, pioneered the discussion on ludological study in his book \textit{Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature} (1997). Ideally, a hybrid of these is necessary to move forward. The study of video games can borrow from other fields, but, as Ian Bogost explains:

Such a criticism would focus on the aesthetic meaning revealed by a [game's] parts... [for example]: what do video games do, what happens when players interact with them, and how do they relate to, participate in, extend, and revisit the cultural expression at work in other kinds of artifacts?\textsuperscript{51}

The study of a combination of a game's systems (hardware, code and engine), rules


(gameplay), user interface, and narrative aspects (plot, story 'Easter eggs', exploration, time and space, etc.) provides a more complete picture of the aesthetic and technological possibilities of the video game as a distinct artistic medium, and gives insight into how best to present it to a museum audience. Even though bringing in interpretations and insights from other disciplines is unavoidable with such a diverse medium (which incorporates aspects from almost every other artistic and many technological, sociological, economic and philosophical areas of study), it is necessary to maintain a separation, to put a greater focus on what makes games unique.

One of the most important distinctions between video games and traditional modes of creative expression is the way the creative tools of game engine and programming inform the game’s genre. Like a novel or a film, a game's genre has to do with its story and general theme, but it is also informed by the game engine's behavior. Ian Bogost clarifies this distinction in his book, *Unit Operations*:

Game engines are no more transcendental than genres, in the sense that one cannot play a game engine but only a game that encompasses and integrates that engine to create a work. However, game engines do enjoy a different status with respect to authorship and criticism. The first-person-shooter is clearly a genre of video game.... But the first-person shooter game engines construe entire gameplay behaviors, facilitating functional interactions divorced from individual games. Genres structure a creative approach to narrative; they describe a kind of story.... Game engines differ from genres in that they abstract such material requirements as their primary - perhaps their only - formal constraint.53

A first-person shooter's game engine might allow for the creation of a war themed game with hyper-realistic graphics, quick movement, accurate gun-shooting, voice chat and a minimal, unobtrusive on-screen interface. Alternatively, a fantasy role-playing game's engine could allow

52 Hidden surprises like messages or secret areas within games that developers leave in as a reward for players who want to put in extra time and work to find them.

for a stylized, more impressionistic graphical style, a complex interface with a lot of information on display, turn-based play that allows for pausing of the game and taking the time to strategize combat moves, the use of magic spells, and complex interaction with NPCs (non-player, or automated, computer controlled characters) that might allow for friendship or even romantic relationships to evolve.

The game engine is not only informed by the genre, but also by the game's particular hardware and control interface: "As a media form, games have perhaps the closest relationship between advancement of the medium and advancement of its underlying technology and production processes." Different game engines and systems require the player to handle the controller in unique ways in order to affect change within the game world. Because a video game’s hardware and software work together on this deep design level, the need for a player (especially an unfamiliar player within a museum context) to experience an authentic interfacing experience cannot be stressed enough.

There are also constraints on the visual and functional aesthetics of the game. Ian Bogost reflects on this relationship with regards to the Atari VCS, which was the first home console, released in 1977, and known originally for the vehicle combat game *Combat* (Atari, 1977):

Memory architecture and hardware register settings provide access to a playfield backdrop, two player sprites, two missiles and one ball.... These constraints are not only physical...but also conceptual: the hardware was designed for games like *Pong* and *Combat*, artifacts based on tennis-like attributes....The VCS offers a striking example of how the structure of a technology platform exerts expressive pressure on the software created to run on it. 

Early developers were forced to innovate within extremely restrictive parameters because

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55 Ibid.
of the technological restraints inherent in early hardware. Now, the eight-bit, blocky, minimal aesthetic style of early video games holds a nostalgic appeal, but the origin of the style is rarely taken into consideration. Because of the unavoidable constraints, early games became abstracted versions of the game developers' artistic visions. Game designers had to be as creative as possible with the limited technology of the time, and ended up with an iconic graphic style that is immediately recognizable even to those unfamiliar with the games themselves; even those people least interested in gaming recognize characters like Mario or Pac-Man. This interdependent relationship between narrative, visuals, software, and hardware is unique to video games as a medium, and must be the focus when analyzing individual games in an artistic context.

Since the experience of video game play is not based solely on visual elements, it takes direct interaction with a game to fully understand the expressive values and artistic form of a video game. Graeme Kirkpatrick compares the experience of video game play with the experience of viewing a traditional work of art:

Examples of form in video games are not to be located simplistically in the patterns that appear on the game screen...often however...game designs articulate these symmetries in the visual aspects of the game to player actions and to other sensory stimuli in ways that are fascinating and challenging. It is when order emerges in these complex force-fields, the ebbs and flows of gameplay, that we can find a variant of the experience that is grasped by the concept of aesthetic form. Whereas with the traditional artwork the core dynamics of this are internal to the subject, with video games form is experienced as extruded, in the physical actions and behaviors of the player...what we find in video games is something like the raw material of art surfacing in another dimension of culture.56

The best way to begin to understand these intricate interconnections is to allow a museum audience to interact with the games in an authentic way; that is, to keep the original and intended experience intact (or as intact as is currently possible), while placing greater emphasis on the

technologies that allow the game designer to enact their artistic vision onto the player, and the unique ways each game's interface allows the player to carry out their own intentions into the game's world.

When talking about video game aesthetics, I am speaking of any part of the game that can be acted out or experienced in some way; not only the tangible components like graphic and audio quality, programming rules and restrictions, interface design, the controls and use of physical controller hardware or the platform (usually PC or game console) but also art style, character design, level and zone design, game story and mission design. Anything that contributes to the user experience and creates the overall feel of the game and gameplay makes up the general content of video game aesthetics. The typical video gaming audience seems to have a vested interest in enhancing the aesthetic quality of their gaming experience. Many will spend high sums of money on parts like video cards, keyboards, monitors (the display screen), headsets (usually headphones with a connected microphone), consoles and controllers, in order to experience the full aesthetic potential of a game, and to immerse themselves in the game world and design as fully as possible. The ability of the player to use these outside enhancements to contribute to their own aesthetic experience is unique to video gaming. When I put together my own gaming setup, I chose to have the following: a very powerful video card, a mechanical keyboard, a mouse with extra buttons to bind keys, a headset with surround sound that is cushioned on the inside to make it comfortable for long periods of wear, and two

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57 A piece of hardware in a computer that creates the images you see on the screen. More powerful video cards will enhance the images on the screen, and allow for better looking graphical images than a lesser card. A very powerful video card can cost upwards of $1000.

58 A keyboard that uses mechanical switches under the keys, giving the keyboard a more responsive ‘clicky’ feel.

59 Certain video games allow the player to alter the control scheme. For example, if a game has the button ‘X’ on a keyboard that corresponds to the player’s character shooting their gun, the player would be able to go into the game’s settings, and instead assign the ‘shooting gun’ control to one of the buttons on their mouse.
monitors (so I can play a game on one screen, and watch a movie on the second screen, for example). All this allows me to take ownership over my own gaming experience. I may not know if the game I am about to play will be good or bad, scary or funny, but I know that it will look and sound as good as possible, since my computer is able to maximize any game’s capabilities (most games will have a range of settings, allowing for lower end computer systems to run the game with lower graphic settings, and higher end systems to maximize those settings).

The fact that the audience of the work becomes an actual and full-fledged performer as well as co-contributor both complicates and enhances the understanding of video game aesthetics. This, in addition to the fact that each person’s experience with a game might vary wildly, complicates the evaluation of video games for any outsider (curator, theoretician) who might attempt to produce an aesthetic evaluation of the product. The typically ludic qualities of interaction - immersion and flow - are what makes them such a distinctive mode of expression, both for artist and player, and these are the things that should be focused on when analyzing video games as aesthetic objects. The act of play itself can be aesthetic on its own, per Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, his groundbreaking study on play:

Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly...the valuations of vice and virtue do now apply here.... If therefore, play cannot be directly referred to the categories of truth or goodness, can it included perhaps in the realm of the aesthetic? For although the attribute of beauty does not attach to play as such, play nevertheless tends to assume marked elements of beauty...In play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man. Many and close are the links that connect play and beauty.60

*The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015) is a game that emphasizes the creative power of ‘play’, and many of the other elements that make up video game aesthetics,

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and presents them to the player in creative and innovative ways. From gameplay to game design, every aspect of *The Beginner’s Guide* emphasizes the artistic possibilities of the video game medium, and can be used here as an example to showcase the ways game designers use game mechanics to alter the aesthetic experience of the player.

The designer of the game is Davey Wreden. He had previously released only one other game, *The Stanley Parable* (2013), at age 22, which was a surprise critical success. In many ways, *The Beginner’s Guide* feels like a reflection on the crisis he was experiencing between creativity and success. The game begins with the narrator, who is also the game designer (Davey Wreden) directly addressing the player. This is very unusual; usually the voice of the narrator in a video game is the voice of a professional voice actor. I cannot name any example of another game where the designer of the game steps into the narrative role in this way. At the start, the player is dropped into a generic looking attempt at a *Counter Strike* (Valve, 2000) level’s design. Wreden explains that this *Counter Strike* map is the first 'game' designed by his friend, who he refers to as ‘Coda.’ He explains that Coda designed a number of short games between 2008 and 2011, none of which he ever released or even showed to anyone outside a very close group of confidants, and after that he abruptly stopped creating them. Wreden feels so strongly that Coda’s games are important, and that they should be played, that he was compelled to create *The Beginner’s Guide* to take people through each of Coda’s games. He also hopes, as he says, that *The Beginner’s Guide* will show Coda that people will like his games and hopes it will convince him to start creating again.

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61 *Counter Strike* is a multi-player, shooter game, in which players are put on teams of either terrorists or counter-terrorists, and fight to the last man against each other. Valve made the developer’s tools available to the public, so players of the game can design their own maps.
All the mini-games that make up *The Beginner’s Guide* are created with a game engine known as the Source engine; the engine used to make classic games like *Counter Strike* (2000) and *Half Life* (1998). During his commentary on one of the games titled *The Great and Lovely Descent*, Wreden comments on the use of the Source engine, and on the effect of the game engine on the creative process. By directly addressing the player about game engines, he is bringing to light a mechanical, behind the scenes aspect of video game design that directly affects the visual aesthetics of the game world, but is not generally thought about while inside the game world created by it:

Every video game runs on what’s called an engine, which determines what the game can and cannot do. To make all of these games, Coda is using an engine called Source. Like all engines, Source has certain things that it does well and it has certain things it does poorly. One of the things that it does very well is boxy, linear corridors. That is why so many of Coda’s games are set in these large, flat, empty rooms, just because he’s working with that the engine does well. The tools available to the creator shape what kinds of creative works they’re going to end up making.62

In *The Beginner’s Guide*, attention is drawn to the capabilities and limitations of the engine being used, so that after this point in the game, the player takes note of all of the things he or she can recognize as being a result of the game engine’s effect on the creative process. The look and feel of this particular engine is instantly recognizable and nostalgic to gamers who have experienced it before, and after this point in the game, new players start to understand what makes the Source engine unique.

Often, *The Beginner’s Guide*’s games make creative use of the simple player movement allowed by the Source engine. At the start of one of the early games, titled *The Past Was Behind Her* (Figures 1 and 2), the players find themselves rooted to the ground, unable to

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move forward when pressing the ‘move forward’ control. When playing through this section, and after some frustration, I experimented with turning around to see if I was missing something. Upon turning around so I was facing the wall behind me, I saw a message written on the wall that I would not have seen had I been able to simply move forward: “The past was behind her.” I instinctively hit the ‘move backwards’ key to get a better view, and I was freed from my rooted state. The player in this game is only able to move backward. Wreden describes it as: “a short and relatively minimalist experiment combining motion and narrative.”

Backing up from the first message reveals further messages written on the back sides of the walls: “But the future could not be seen,” and “Why does the future keep changing?” After managing to navigate a set of stairs, basically by walking backwards and turning around every so often to look at the direction I should be going, I saw a doorway at the top of those stairs. The messages along the stairs read: “But if the future is always behind her, how will she find the strength…”, and suddenly I had backed up into the wall containing the door. I turned around, and the door had been replaced with a solid wall with the final message: “…to confront it?” This game is simple, but cleverly weaves together the interaction of the player with the game designers’ intended narrative message. It shows how control and interface can be used to affect the narrative content of a game, rather than just being a tool for interaction.

As the player goes through the various games, they become bizarre and disturbing, and the reality of Wreden and Coda's relationship becomes convoluted and troublesome. Watching Coda's descent into what appears to be self-doubt, depression and social anxiety through the content of his games becomes increasingly uncomfortable. Hearing Wreden reflect on these games, which were clearly created when Coda was going through a dark period in his life, is

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both disturbing and illuminating. In one of the games, titled *This Game is Connected to the Internet* (which is not actually connected to the internet), the player traverses a cave-like environment, in which hundreds of notes are left scattered on the ground, all throughout the level (Figures 3-4). The player can use the controls to move close to each of the notes to activate a text box that will pop up to display its message. The game deceitfully informs you that each note is left by another player who had previously completed the game, and that each note is a clue or hint about how to complete the level. In reality they are all written by Coda: the game designer. The notes say generic things like "this game sucks" and "how do u beat this game," but also insightful and sometimes melancholy messages like "next time I will do better," "I need someone to talk to," and "I would very much like to be desired." Wreden's narration in this section describes how he feels about this particular game:

I see this person who's filled with thoughts and feelings and beliefs, and has no way to express them except as scattered and unheard voices in a game that wasn't meant to be played. But it's ironic, isn't it, that in playing this game and seeing how alone Coda often felt, that we get to know him better, and actually kind of connect with him. And I have to be honest with you, this idea is really seductive to me! That I could just play someone's game and see the voices in their head and get to know them better and have to do less of the messy in-person socializing. I could just get to know you through your work. I think this is why I always liked Coda's games so much…. I felt like they let me have that connection.  

Activating the notes involves only a simple interaction of standing near them; however, it draws the player forward through the environment, and creates a rudimentary narrative that becomes increasingly melancholy as the realization is made that the notes are actually all written by the game’s designer, as a window into his state of mind.

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Wreden recalls that he and Coda often argued over the question 'Do games have to be playable?' Are developers beholden to the whims of the player, even when those whims corrupt the creative process? Coda was clearly struggling between the desire for his work to be accepted, and his desire to remain true to his creative process, even if it led him to produce content that might not be as popular with video game players. In one of the games, the player walks through a simple hallway, and passes through a door locked only by a simple puzzle game. This is the entire game. Wreden explains that while this is the entirety of the experience for the player, this is not the point of this particular game. He then alters the game to show the player the true meaning behind it by removing the walls from the room. An endless labyrinth of interconnected hallways and rooms is revealed, a maze of infinite rooms and doors, as far as the eye can see (Figure 5). He explains his interpretation: "Either way I think the point is the same, is that most of the time you don't get to know what you're missing, or even that you're missing anything, that's not your role as a player."

The player/game designer relationship is at once collaborative and controlled. The act of playing the game brings it to life; making it a complete realization, rather than an empty world. However, the game designer is still ultimately in control of the player experience, and through the level design and level of interactivity allowed, determines how much freedom they can express in the game world. For example, can a player only walk around and look at things? Are they able to interact with the environment?

At a certain point, The Beginner’s Guide’s games start feeling outright self-hating, and the struggle of the creative process becomes something that was obviously making Coda feel self-destructive and depressed. A feeling of dread slowly mounts in one particularly self-

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destructive game, where the player is forced to take a gun to Coda’s work, shooting through each
game level and literally shattering his designs (Figure 6). There is also a mounting hostility
towards the player, as the games become less player friendly and more obtuse and impassable.

The Beginner's Guide raises questions about the responsibilities that game developers (and by
extension, all creators of interactive artwork that involves an active audience) have to the player,
and vice versa. Does a game designer have any responsibility to the player to make a game that
is satisfying to play? It is obvious that The Beginner's Guide is very much about the plight of the
game designer, and of the creative mind in general. In the face of the trend of objective-based
and narrative driven games, Coda was struggling with his own desires to create more abstract
and introspective games. There is a palpable anger in the work over this struggle; attempts to
actively make the experience unpleasant for the player. In one game, the player is meant to
become trapped in a prison room for one hour of real life time before being released to continue
through the game (Wreden steps in to activate a work-around that speeds up time and saves us
from this mechanic). Of this, Davey says: "The game goes beyond not being meant to be played,
it actually seems to despise the player for trying to play it at all."66 These incidents where
Wreden intercedes raise another question about the nature of player accountability. Is it okay to
change the nature of these games to make them less painful for the player? If the game designer
intended for the experience of playing their game to be difficult and unenjoyable, does the player
have the right to refuse, and instead enact their own set of rules that makes the process easier for
the sake of their own comfort? A reviewer of The Beginners Guide, Rebecca Vipond Brink
notes:

Wreden says about one of the games, "that the game doesn’t 'ask anything of me except a
lot of my time.” He says this disdainfully...but this is what the interactive empathy of

play requires: time, patience, a willingness to abide by someone else’s rules, even if
they’re different than your own. The Beginner’s Guide is a letter to the gaming public,
asking them to understand that.\textsuperscript{67}

Wreden constantly seems to struggle with the lack of clear objectives and the
decreasing ‘playability’ in Coda's games, and as the games go on, it becomes apparent that he
cannot accept the games for what they are, and instead tries to shape them into what he thinks
would make them more accessible. For example, adding convenient workarounds for the
players. This is a powerful statement on artistic creation, and the possibility of the erosion of
creative intent when a work falls into the hands of an audience. The Beginner’s Guide is not
only a good example of the ways the various components of hardware, software, interaction and
play create the aesthetic experience of playing a video game, but it also causes the player to think
about the responsibility they take on when they sit down to interact with a game designer’s
creation, giving them the duty of completing the work.

When playing The Beginner’s Guide, like any video game, the player experiences
varying states of flow and immersion while working through and becoming invested in the story,
and by concentrating to solve the puzzles put before them. Flow and immersion are the
functions put in place by the technological underpinnings of a game's design. The goal of a game
designer is to put the player of their game into an immersive state:

Just as perspective guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common
formulas guide and control the player in traditional video games by rewarding and
regulating behavior along certain paths and goals, in a video game, perspective is
mobilized in time as well as function, so that the game experiences flow.\textsuperscript{68}


\textsuperscript{68} Schrank, Brian. Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture. MA: The MIT, p. 32.
Flow is a state in which a player loses sense of time and space, and even sense of physical self; all attention becomes focused on using their skills to solve the problems in front of them. Saying one experiences immersion, or is immersed within something, it another way of expressing the state of flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, is best known for his coining of the term “flow,” which he defined as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" or "acting outside the parameters of worry and boredom."  

One can experience flow by doing things like playing sports or listening to or playing music. Game designers take "the traditional properties of potentially flow inducing activities: a goal, obstacles, increasing challenge, voluntary participation, and then use direct physical input, flexible difficulty adjustment, and instant visual feedback to tighten the feedback loop of games dramatically." Every monster successfully killed, every level gained and every problem solved, increases the emotional high of the flow experience. A game designer’s goal is to provide an experience in which players easily reach and stay in this state of flow. The state of immersion allows for games to provide extremely expressive and limited emotional experiences. Through the participatory nature, and procedurality of video games, game designers can craft an experience that feels very real, and brings out real emotional reactions in the players. Janet Murray describes the extreme immersion that is possible in video games as a kind of 'participatory theater:'

The computer is providing us with a new stage for the creation of participatory theater.


70 Ibid., p. 38.

We are gradually leaning...to enact emotionally authentic experiences that we know are not 'real.' The more persuasive the sensory representation of the digital space, the more we feel that we are present in the virtual world and the wider range of actions we will seek to perform there.\textsuperscript{72}

Many games encourage players to build emotional connections with the characters they are interacting with. The player/character connection further enhances immersion in the game world, and gives the player the feeling that they are truly emotionally invested in the outcome of the storylines, and the fates of the various characters they are introduced to. In story-driven games that emphasize the immersive qualities, we can become extremely attached to the characters we interact with; in the moment, our emotional connections to fictional characters can seem as real as our real-life relationships with human beings. Grant Tavinor explains this point further:

"Increasingly...games encourage our sympathy with their characters, and this is another emotional response that both connects us to their worlds and drives gameplay and narrative forward... our emotional responses to such characters become an essential part of gameplay.... Thus, the emotions that we have for real people are increasingly being introduced into our imaginative dealings with the worlds of video games, and impacting our actions in those worlds. This is to say that our social emotions are increasingly being engaged in our fictional interaction with video games."\textsuperscript{73}

Fictional interactions in video games can be funny, depressing, profound and frightening, and can teach real lessons about morality, relationships or politics. Because of these attachments, we might find ourselves brought to tears or shocked into inaction during the death of a certain character, or after a particularly difficult choice or revelation. We might become frantic to learn that one of our fictional team members are in danger, and rush through the game.


\textsuperscript{73} Tavinor, Grant. \textit{The Art of Video Games}.UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 54.
at a more frantic pace than we usually would, and perhaps end up being more violent or forceful than we would normally feel comfortable with to reach them in time. In video games, ”the fictional consequence-free context of the eliciting state may allow the player to enjoy the emotional states of startle and fear, but also to use these emotions to fashion the nature of their fictional response in the game world.”

*The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) is a game that fully makes use of the possibilities of player attachment to in-game characters to drive story and influence gameplay. The lead game director and writer is Neil Druckmann, who is also well known for his work writing and directing *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (Naughty Dog, 2016). He has won many awards for his work on both *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted 4*, including three Writer’s Guild of America awards for Outstanding Achievement in Video Game writing and two British Academy Games Awards (which are presented by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for Storytelling. In *The Last of Us*, the player plays as a character named Joel, as he navigates a post-apocalyptic world in which humans have been ravaged by an outbreak of a mutant form of the cordyceps fungus. Those infected by the fungus turn into mindless zombies that will attack any non-infected on sight. Joel’s goal in the game is to escort a young girl, named Ellie, who is immune to the fungus, to a medical facility to create a cure using her blood. Over the course of the game, Ellie becomes a kind of surrogate daughter to Joel (who lost his own daughter in the violence at the onset of the outbreak, shown in the opening of the game in a heartbreaking sequence). There is a scene late in the game, in which Ellie is being held in a makeshift hospital, with doctors

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about to perform an operation that would allow them to study her immunity (and possibly create a cure to the fungus). The procedure might very well be fatal to her. In my first play through of *The Last of Us*, I burst into the operating room in the nick of time. I immediately took out Joel's gun and shot all three of the doctors that were holding her, and then raced to her side. Upon speaking with other people about their experiences with the game, I found out that killing the doctors in the room was, in fact, optional. Neil Druckmann, the lead creative director of *The Last of Us*, had this to say in an interview when asked what most people do during this portion of the game:

I don't know the numbers, it's interesting. Sometimes people don't realize they can shoot all the doctors, and sometimes they don't realize that they don't have to shoot the doctors. And sometimes like, 'Hey, I don't care, I just went in there, guns blazing, how dare they do what they're doing!' And some people were disgusted that they have to shoot the first doctor. We have exit interviews after our playtests in-house, and we ask questions about difficulty and weapons and all sorts of different ramping things, and at some point, we walked through the game linearly. And once they get to the doctor's office, you'll always have, because we'll have like two or three people in the room at a time, and inevitably, there will be an outbreak of an argument between somebody and the other people in the room about like, 'Did you kill them all?' 'I murdered 'em all.' 'No, I let them all go, I wish I didn't have to kill that one,' 'I took out my flamethrower and burned them to a crisp!'  

After finding out that the slaughtering of the doctors was optional, some players end up feeling guilty about their actions as Joel. Those doctors might have just been following orders! They didn't know anything about Ellie or her condition! They were not intentionally being malicious! They might have thought that by sacrificing one life they could possibly save humanity! Players also start questioning Joel's intentions. What if sacrificing Ellie could have saved humanity? What if saving Ellie doomed the human race to extinction? Joel's actions start

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to seem increasingly selfish and almost irresponsible; saving Ellie because he thought he couldn't live without her, with no thought of the consequences. Of course, there is no way to know if Ellie possessed the cure for humanity or not, or if the procedure would even have worked to produce an antidote. In-game experiences like this one are a perfect example of flow in action.

Total immersion in a game's story and characters can greatly affect a player's actions, and therefore two people can end up with very different outcomes and very different emotional and moral responses to the game's events. The focus on how a game's design and programming creates a flow-inducing space in which the player is forced to react instinctively to in-game events and moral quandaries is the foundation to understanding the aesthetic nature of play and the feeling of interacting with a video game. Authors of the first general textbook on video game studies explain the complexities of the player relationship to the game world in a chapter titled “Player Culture:”

Gameplay does not exist in a vacuum, any more than games do as a whole. It is situated instead, within a matrix of potential meaning-creating frameworks. These can operate both at a local level, in the specific associations generated by a particular episode of gameplay and in the context of broader social, cultural and ideological resonances.78

_BioShock (2007)_ is another game in which the state of player immersion and ‘flow’ is an integral part of the actual storytelling. _BioShock_ is a first-person shooter game, designed by Irrational Games, and released in 2007, led by creative director Ken Levine. Levine was already well known for his work as lead game designer on the game _System Shock 2_ (1999, Electronic Arts), which was a first-person, science-fiction/horror game. _BioShock_ was not a direct sequel to _System Shock_, but is often described by Levine as a spiritual successor. _BioShock_ was also

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influenced by themes of Ayn Rand’s Objectivism and the books of George Orwell (Figure 7). It is set in the year 1960. The game opens with the player controlling Jack, the main character, as his plane crashes into the ocean and he emerges as the sole survivor. As he swims through the wreckage, he can see a lighthouse nearby, and enters it in search of help. Here he finds the entrance to an underwater city called Rapture. Rapture was built in 1946 by a businessman named Andrew Ryan. It was intended to be a utopia for the elite to live outside of government control. Science, industry and art are valued above all else, and values of religious faith and government regulation are frowned upon. The society was thriving until the discovery of a substance called ADAM, which could alter genetic code to provide abilities like telekinesis and super strength. ADAM addiction ravaged the population, and this, along with growing attitudes of dissent and class divide, caused the decline of the city, culminating in a final revolt on New Year’s Eve 1959. Games like BioShock are described by John Tynes in his essay Prismatic Play as follows:

An engagist work, [which] is one that uses the recent historical past as its setting and provides opportunities for participants to explore and experiment in that setting in ways that real life prohibits or discourages. It may still have genre conventions such as monsters, or mad science, but it uses them deliberately and symbolically within a familiar real-life context.”79

Upon his arrival in Rapture, Jack meets Atlas, a friendly resident, who is leading a rebellion against the corruption and depravity taking over the city, which is still under the control of Andrew Ryan. He aids Jack along his journey, filling the role of quest giver and guide, and gives helpful hints to nudge you along the way. Jack’s path takes you through the decaying

streets, and into conflict with the ADAM addicted residents of Rapture, now driven mad from the combination of addiction and mutation. Eventually, following the game’s path leads to a direct confrontation with Andrew Ryan. Atlas prompts the interaction by the request: "Now, would you kindly head to Ryan's office and kill the son of a bitch?" The build up to the event is significant; fighting through the destroyed city of Rapture, Jack comes across evidence of the degradation caused by Ryan's control, and, in the form of audio diaries found throughout your journey, you hear the tales of those who lived in the city as it was degenerating. As you enter Andrew Ryan's office (Figure 8) he seems resigned to his fate, but makes a final revelation to the player:

The assassin has overcome my final defense, and now he's come to murder me. In the end, what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A Man chooses. A slave obeys.... Was a man sent to kill or a slave? Did that airplane crash, or was it hijacked? Forced down by something less than a man, something bred to sleepwalk through life until activated by a simple phrase from their kindly master? Was a man sent to kill, or a slave? A man chooses; a slave obeys. Enter. [Ryan's office door opens; Jack approaches] Stop, would you kindly? [Jack obeys] Would you kindly? Powerful phrase. Familiar phrase?80

Upon first playing *BioShock* this moment is designed to catch the player completely off guard. Immediately you flash back to Atlas's many requests (Figure 9) "Would you kindly pick up that short-wave radio? Now, would you kindly find a crowbar or something? Come back to Fontaine Fisheries when you're ready, would you kindly?" The truth is revealed further by Andrew Ryan: Jack has had no choice in any of his actions. Every ‘request’ made by Atlas has been a subtle form of mind control. The genius of this plot twist, is that it serves as a kind of double narrative. In his book *BioShock and Philosophy*, Luke Cuddy explains the meaning behind the narrative:

[There is a parallel] between the lack of free will in this narrative and the player who is supposedly controlling the action. Whilst in narrative terms, Jack has no knowledge of such manipulation, blindly following the subconscious demands of hidden enemies, the player is immediately short-circuited into realizing that they too have had no control over the linear structure of BioShock's outcome.  

The narrative message achieved here could only have been done effectively in video game form. The twist in BioShock causes the player to be taken out of the immersion they were experiencing, and immediately reflect on the nature of video games, comparing Jack's manipulation by Atlas to their manipulation by the game mechanics. A quote from the lead game designer, Ken Levine, articulates his intent:

The player is at that moment encouraged to consider something that most other games would never dream of contemplating: ‘Why am I doing this?’ And the answer is because someone asked you to nicely. And there is nothing you can do about it. And in that moment, much of the illusion of control that a player has over the game experience is laid bare.  

As players of video games, we are used to following the commands of a quest giver to advance the story or level up. Following the direction of a quest giver like Atlas or the instructions of a quest log is common practice in any narrative-driven game like BioShock. This is how a player knows where the next objective is, which enemies are important to defeat, and which direction will lead to a desired location. Although there is some room to explore and wander off into tangential areas, games like BioShock are not quite open world; there is a linear progression that one must follow to complete the game. Even though the presence of a guiding hand telling us where to go and what to do might seem constricting, it is usually masked by good

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82 Ibid., p. 97.
level and game design, and is such a staple of the genre that it mostly fades into the background. Yet there still exists a sense of self-determination on the part of the player. This is because the player is seemingly freely controlling the character of Jack: walking around where they want, looting what they want, and arming themselves with their choice of weapon and ammunition. There is still a feeling of freedom of control, albeit a false one. The twist in Andrew Ryan’s office destroys the illusion of freedom the player has built up to that point. The betrayal the player experiences acts as a perfect mirror to Jack's feeling of betrayal upon finding out about his manipulation by Atlas. By betraying such an innocuous RPG staple as the quest giver, the BioShock player must question everything, and at that moment the underpinnings of genre and design are laid bare.

Looking at video games in a critical way shows us the expressive potential they can achieve in conjunction with human interaction. Game designers are able to design incredibly detailed and creative environments that facilitate a level of immersion in the players that gets more intense with each new technological and design breakthrough. Grant Tavinor highlights the importance of technological innovation to video game design:

Like the revolution that occurred in Classical Greek sculpture with the advent of lost-wax casting, the revolution of digital interactive fictions has led to the ability of artists to explore and develop unprecedented areas of artistic possibility, in this case artistically rich games.83

Whether looking at a story driven, narrative-focused game like The Last of Us, a smaller, independently developed game that uses more experimental gameplay, or a hybrid story and gameplay driven game like BioShock, the concepts of flow, interface, design and programming all contribute to the final aesthetic experience of interaction. Examining such complex,

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interactive experiences puts even more weight onto the consideration of how these works could be translated into a museum or gallery setting in a way that would allow the richness of expression to be experienced by an audience that might be otherwise ignorant to the artistic value of video games. I hope that by looking at the way games are developed by a 'fine artist,' with the intent to be exhibited in a formal setting, I can begin to show that there might be a solution.
CHAPTER IV

FENG MENGBO AND ART GAMES

Although the acquisition of video games by art museums is a recent development, which parallels the development of the first departments of ‘digital art’ (such as the one established at the Walker Art Center in the 1990s), the creation of ‘art games’ by artists working in digital media is a longer-standing practice. By an ‘art game,’ I am referring to any game created by an artist, with the intention of it being displayed within a gallery or other institutional setting. This is different from a regular video game, which is created by a team of game designers as a commercial, entertainment product. Ian Bogost describes the difference:

Despite its lack of specificity, the idea of 'games as art,' or art-games...does offer some insight on its own. It suggests that games can be constructed natively as art, within the communities of practice and even the industry of games…. Its practitioners are game developers first, working artists second.... By contrast game art describes a work prepared for exhibition in galleries or museum....Cory Arcangel's Super Mario Clouds, a hack of the Nintendo Entertainment System cart that removes everything but the moving clouds, offers a good example of game art. These are games that get exhibited, not games that get played.... We must look deeper, to the particularities of specific aesthetic trends in game development itself, in hopes of identifying their positions in relation to games and art alike.\(^84\)

This is an important, even fundamental, distinction to make. These 'art games' are designed to be displayed in a gallery setting in the ‘art world’ proper. Art games like Cory Arcangel’s Super Mario Clouds are non-playable and easy to exhibit; they are non-interactive, and work more like video projections than games. They function as a kind of truncation of the video game within the confines of the museum. A more interesting and complex practice occurs when an artist creates art games that have more features in common with traditional video

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games, particularly the interactive element, but still with the intent to display them in a gallery setting. Arcangel also designs works that are interactive; he, along with the Chinese game artist Feng Mengbo, often lay out specific instructions for exactly how they want these game artworks installed and displayed for maximum effect and interactive availability. Feng Mengbo’s model specifically holds the key to understanding a better way to exhibit video games. By looking at work that is hybrid art game and video game, we can gain some insight into a better way to show pure video games in an institutional space.

Feng Mengbo is a Beijing born artist (born in 1966) who works largely in new media; specifically, in video games and game-based themes. He graduated from the printmaking department of CAFA (Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts; the most traditional and highly respected MFA program in mainland China) in 1991, and has a strong hobby programming background in addition to of his art background. When asked about his choice of using video games as his primary mode of expression, Feng had this to say:

> In the age of the Internet, our poor children have only one way to play games. It is their poem, movie, and music. In the future, if somebody wants to research the culture of our generation, there will be nothing in the library. They will only be able to play millions of video games via the net, we were born there and died there, even our memory. There will be nothing like words on stone, just in bytes, forever.\(^85\)

For Feng Mengbo, interactive new media technologies allow a redefinition of the ways in which citizens view their own cultural identity and participation. His first fully interactive work was \textit{Q4U} (2002), followed by a later version titled \textit{Ah\_Q} (2004, using a dance pad\(^86\) as the controller but otherwise unchanged from the original) which was a modified version of the game


\(^{86}\) A type of controller with four quadrants that act as ‘buttons’ would work on a traditional controller. It lays flat on the ground, usually used for dance games. The player uses their feet to hit the ‘buttons.’
Quake 3 Arena (id Software, 1999),\textsuperscript{87} in which Feng altered the code so that all the player characters resembled his real-life self, wearing glasses, no shirt, green cargo pants and sneakers, and armed with a plasma rifle and a video camera. For display, Feng had the game displayed on three ten by thirteen foot screens (Figure 10), with controllers and headsets with voice chat capability available for two players at a time. And, emphasizing the audience’s participatory role, Feng himself played against the audience at the exhibit, and continued to play against them online from his home computer after he left the gallery.

Displaying the work in a way that highlights both the gameplay and the people playing the game is innovative on a few different levels. Although only two people can interact with the work at a time, displaying the gameplay on large screens on the gallery wall allows for the entire audience to view the work in action. The two players, members of the audience, being in the middle of the room, gives their interaction the air of a proper performance. Having the artist play against them live acts both as live performance art and as a live, educational display of the artistic creation. A multi-player, interactive work like Q4U, is not complete until someone is playing it; exactly in the same way as Flavin’s neon-light sculptures were considered dead by the artist as soon as the plug was taken out of the wall and the light was turned off. There is an additional level of interaction when Feng is playing against the audience from offsite, showing the audience a visual representation of online video game interaction. In an interview, Feng emphasized that "Q4U does not have a hero; instead, people wander aimlessly through a space in which violence becomes the only form of interaction."\textsuperscript{88} This harkens back to the Theater of

\textsuperscript{87} An online, multiplayer, first person shooter game. Unlike previous Quake games (this is the third in the series), it has no single player component, only multiplayer, in which players fight online against each other to the death using various weapons.

Cruelty of Artaud: the emphasis on the immersion of the audience member in a state of intense violent action. The type of interaction on display in *Q4U*, in which the player takes on the persona of the artist, with the goal to attack and kill other representations of the artist, who will then in turn come back and do the same to himself, creates a paradox in which the artist is within everyone and ultimately cannot be stopped from carrying out his artwork. There is no visible difference between friend and enemy character, since they all take on the same representation of the artist. On shooting ‘himself’ in *Q4U* Feng says: “This is strange for me...but after the first shot, I don’t care. I just play the game like normal.”89 The representation of Feng creates a moment of hesitation within the automatic violence of the multiplayer-shooter environment; usually in these types of games there is a clear distinction between ally and foe, but in *Ah_Q* and *Q4U* all players look the same. Giving everyone a uniform identity within a violent, online world, again, almost like a global sized version of the *Theater of Cruelty*, causes the players to recognize the impersonal nature of the anonymous, online game, and of online interaction in general, in a much more effective and immersive way than would be capable with a more traditional, static medium. Feng Mengbo’s *Quake* inspired games are a more personal commentary on modern, social interaction, and Feng has said: "...I'd rather be considered a game artist than a Political Pop artist.... This doesn't mean that I don't care about history, simply that I can't be responsible for it."90 Yet, his 2008 work *Long March Restart* became a much more sweeping political and cultural statement.

*Long March Restart* (which was acquired by MoMA in 2010), is a large scale, fully

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playable original game, programmed from start to finish by Feng Mengbo. The main protagonist of the game is a Red Army soldier armed with his weapon of choice: bombs that resemble Coca-Cola cans. He navigates through various levels, inspired by Chinese and Communist cultural history, and video game history: areas resembling Tiananmen Square, a level inspired by the space race and moon landing, and an area following a parade through Communist Russia. These levels are inhabited by recognizable pop-culture characters like Mario, Sailor Moon, and characters from modern media like Street Fighter and Alien. The level and art design is in the style of a 2-dimensional, side-scrolling game, closely resembling that of Super Mario Brothers (Nintendo, 1985), and the music (which Feng also wrote and programmed himself) is reminiscent of the jangly, synthesized theme of the Super Mario games as well. Long March Restart is something of a hybrid revisiting of the past, looking at the history of games in level design, music and character inspiration through a style inspired by the most well-known examples of classic game design, and then through that lens, looking at the cultural history of Revolutionary China. To exhibit Long March Restart, Feng had the work projected onto giant eighty by twenty inch screens (Figure 11), along both walls of a long hallway. One side shows the game as it is being played, while the other shows a zoomed-in image, focusing down on the character being controlled by the player. The player is forced to move up and down the hallway as they follow the character they are playing, adding an element of physicality to the interaction. Feng speaks of his intention:

"[This was my] original intention in designing the installation, which lies in the continued use of the audience’s, i.e. the gamers’, way of motion as the chief measuring mechanism…. I wanted to enable the character to move freely along the stretched scroll. Because of the vast space of the exhibition hall and the intentionally designed pace of the character, the gamer and the audience would have to dash to catch up with the
character.\textsuperscript{91} In works like \textit{Long March} and \textit{Q4U}, Feng appropriates tropes and imagery from classic video gaming, such as, the eight-bit art and music, the fast paced and violent nature of the first-person-shooter. He also appropriates popular culture, by replacing the characters in his games with copies of himself or cultural icons. John Sharp examines game worlds like the ones presented by Feng Mengbo:

[The game] remains playable, but that is no longer the [only] point. The substitution of the popular figures for the original characters [and backdrop of classical gaming imagery] transforms the game into conceptual art that can be experienced through seeing and even talking.\textsuperscript{92}

The formal structures that facilitate flow have been exposed and defamiliarized. In Feng Mengbo’s games, the familiar features of gameplay and interaction have been deconstructed and laid bare, creating a unique and challenging game experience:

Works like \textit{[Q4U and Ah_Q]} are...playable as video games, the...challenge of these games is to rediscover how to play them.... These games are difficult in ways like Manet and Pollock paintings, which challenged viewers to rediscover the medium of painting by figuring out how to view them.\textsuperscript{93}

The strategic planning of the exhibition of Feng Mengbo’s video games provides an interesting precedent for audience interaction with video game art within a museum space. Although he designs his games with the intent of having them displayed, they tend to behave


more like traditional video games in their gameplay and longer length. In the quest to design a way to successfully translate the video game into an exhibition space, it would be beneficial to adopt some of the solutions Feng Mengbo has come up with for displaying his work.
CHAPTER V

CURATING VIDEO GAMES

The little amount that I've played video games for research I found them to be such an interesting art form, and the idea of discovering through gameplay someone else's heart is pretty fascinating.94

The installation of paintings is usually straightforward: hang them on the wall, and allow any number of viewers to experience their aesthetic qualities, on their own time, and in their own way. Forms of new media art become much more complex for institutions to display; how does a curator display a sound or internet artist’s work in a way that makes sense to visitors, and is not intimidating to approach? As shown by the previous chapters, video games, like some other forms of new media art, are by nature incredibly diverse, essentially participatory and deeply immersive. The viewer takes on an active role in the artwork, and in a sense their participation with the work creates a final version of the piece. This mere distinction makes games a difficult case. Since games "rely primarily on computational rules to produce their artistic meaning...expression arises primarily from the player's interaction with game's mechanics and dynamics, and less so in their visual, aural and textual aspects."95 The artists and designers behind video games perhaps never intended for their creations to be displayed in an institutional context, which puts even more responsibility in the hands of the institution to translate games into this new space in a respectful and knowledgeable way. There must be a focus on highlighting the unique artistic possibilities which separate video games from other art forms, rather than trying to squeeze them into already existing categories.

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The outspoken Robert Smithson himself held reservations against museums and their curators, as he saw these institutions sterilizing and rebranding artworks in their collections. This attitude was expressed by Smithson shortly before the explosion of the video game, and long before anyone would have imagined them growing into the diverse art form they are today. Smithson’s remarks in 1972, remain just as alive today when one considers the plight of the video game exhibition space:

Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories...artists themselves are not confined but their output is…. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.96

Like other nontraditional and new media art forms before them, video games challenge the notions of departmental delineations within the museum structure. Because of the difficulties posed by placing video games into these already established institutions, and the unfamiliarity curators or other art professionals have with them, they could easily be forced into the categories of already existing departments (as is the case with MoMA). A curator might look at video games and see that they have certain traits in common with film or design for example – narrative structure, visual aesthetics, coding, programming – which could lead curators to decide that including them in one of those departments might make the most sense. In the same vein, because of video games’ apparent similarities with other art forms, applying the art theory and critiques pertinent to other disciplines (like film, sound, performance), to video games might seem appropriate. By focusing on the similarities, one may simply miss what precisely makes

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video games unique, and unwittingly cause an audience to be blind to the aspects of play and interaction that are essential to understanding video games’ aesthetic importance.

To rectify this, a wider understanding of the systems that inform and shape the aesthetic experience of playing video games is necessary. The ability to make informed curatorial decisions requires extended time playing video games, as well as learning about the history and current state of video game culture. In an interview, Penn Jillette talks about the episode of his show, Bulls***, that dealt with the stigma against violent video games. His comments are also relevant to the issues that arise around the way museums are currently dealing with the video games:

You can't listen to Stravinsky without listening to the other music of that time, and you can't understand a video game without knowing the antecedents and the peers of that game... You have to put in hours to start to understand the form.... You’re not going to just look at a first-person shooter where you are killing zombies and understand the nuances. There is this tremendous amount of arrogance and hubris, where somebody can look at something for five minutes and dismiss it.97

The art world, whose cultural fabric seems to be largely made out of this ‘arrogance and hubris,’ remains largely ignorant of video game art and video games in general, perhaps out of an unwillingness to reconsider their preconceived ideas about video games, and about what constitutes a museum worthy art piece. It might be necessary for art professionals to force themselves to re-evaluate their opinions on certain ‘fringe’ art forms like video games, and to reconsider things that they might have previously dismissed as unworthy or unimportant.

The role and expertise of the art curator must change as well for any kind of successful integration of video games into a museum or museum-like setting. One ought to expect a curator

of a video game collection to have a strong technological background and abiding familiarity with the full spectrum of video game systems, input devices, terminologies and history. They also ought to have a wider knowledge beyond the more traditional art and art history fields. This means that they should have more in common with professionals in the fields of game design or computer science, or hold some background experience in those fields. It might be more beneficial for someone in this position to come from outside of the art world, since the successful design of video game collections and exhibitions require something completely contradictory to how art exhibitions are currently laid out. In their examination of the curating practices of New Media art, Sarah Cook and Graham Beryl comment on cases where existing departmental curators strive to take on the exhibition of new media art:

> Certain expert areas may need to be outsourced, but curators will still need to know enough to determine when to outsource and what kind of expert might be needed. Curators with a delicate discrimination between gesso and impasto may lump carpenters, electricians, and audiovisual technicians roughly together in their minds.⁹⁸

> Since the display of video games requires new and innovative thinking, input from outsiders to the institutional art world might result in even more effective solutions, and allow for a better understanding of the games for gallery visitors. At the very least, the creation of a new art department (either video game specific or new media in general, with the subsection dedicated to video games) could help with putting people with the right expertise in the position to explore the implementation of the video game exhibition. With video games, a curator must become "increasingly less that of 'caretaker' of objects...and more that of a mediator and

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interpreter or even producer." They are tasked with successfully designing a space that allows for an immersive interactive experience, while keeping the exhibition accessible for those unfamiliar with video games as an artistic medium.

There is significantly more of an entrance barrier for an audience encountering an exhibition of video games as opposed to an exhibition of paintings or other more traditional art form. Most people who are familiar with more traditional museum fare like paintings and sculpture might not know how to appreciate video games aesthetically, let alone how to successfully interact with them in a meaningful way. A curator in this case must be able to set up an “exhibition space” in a way that makes the parameters for interaction clear while still emphasizing the games’ beauty and complexity. Christine Paul, who is an adjunct curator of New Media Art at the Whitney Museum, explains the delicate balance that must be maintained when exhibiting new media art in general:

> If a museum visitor is unfamiliar with a specific technology or interface, it automatically becomes the focus of attention - an effect unintended by the artists. For the expert audience, in contrast, the technology is transparent and thus moves to the background and becomes mostly a vehicle for content.\(^{100}\)

The most obvious example of the mismatch between curatorial experience and a necessary understanding of the video game form within the museum came from MoMA’s treatment of video games within their Architecture and Design collection, as discussed earlier. The sterilization of the games in that collection, in the *Applied Design* exhibition specifically, appear to be a consequence of a mere institutional decision to justify their existence in the

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\(^{100}\) Ibid., p. 67.
collection per se. The unfortunate side effect of this introduction of the video game in MoMA was to mislead those unfamiliar with video games in general or skeptical about their inclusion in a museum at all. In *Applied Design*, someone unfamiliar with video games might have walked away thinking that *Portal* is played only with a controller, or that the various types of hardware for the games are interchangeable or even completely non-important. An equivalent confusion would be to think that a paint brush, a palette knife, a chisel, are all equivalent and interchangeable utensils. Reviews of *Applied Design* in gaming and other publications at the time of the exhibition agreed with these sentiments. *Vice News’s* Motherboard Gaming contributor Colin Snyder reviewed the exhibition:

> Why is Canabalt, a one-button game, given a tabletop with a mouse? When I placed my hand down to the flat surface, and grabbed the mouse, my wrist turned upward at an uncomfortable right angle. Why is Tetris supposed to be played with giant, cumbersome, arrow buttons that feel more like Ralph Baer’s Simon than a computer keyboard, directional pad, or joystick? Why is Pac Man, a game designed for a high torque joystick, given such unresponsive hardware? Why is Katamari Damacy, a PlayStation 2 game, being played on a PlayStation 3 and still being displayed in a construed aspect ratio? But so many little issues like this make the games appear behind an opaque wall, as if one is not supposed to experience the games the way they were intended.\(^{101}\)

> Even *The New York Times* criticized the interfacing designs, remarking

> Playing the falling-block puzzle Tetris on a three-minute timer, as it is presented here, doesn’t exactly allow for a visitor to commune fully with that game either. Nor does picking up a story-driven game like Portal or Another World in midgame, with the ability to restart from the beginning disabled.\(^{102}\)

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These failings are partially due to the fact that video games, like other "new media art, fundamentally disrupt a curator's and an audience member's understanding of the stage of production, and consumption of a work of art."\textsuperscript{103} They are unlike traditional artworks, unable to be understood or appreciated by a singular form of observation. *Portal* alone requires somewhere around ten to twelve hours of playtime for a single completion, while *EVE* and other MMO players often put hundreds of days’ worth of hours into the game, with no sign of slowing down. This issue of duration of course is a complicated one, and forms a serious obstacle to look at a video game, or let alone, play with it, within the context of an exhibition. It is one thing to walk by and look at a painting, but interacting with a video game takes a considerable amount of time and dedicated attention. Since video games require a level of interaction unlike that in any other type of artwork, if they are to be included in museum collections, a new type of institution may have to be built around them rather than the other way around. How does one put something as expansive and nuanced as *BioShock* on display in a way that allows an audience to appreciate all the subtleties in its design?

Taking a cue from Feng Mengbo, the idea of setting games up in a way that turns them and the person playing them into more of a performance is an interesting way to present the video game experience to many people at once. The obvious problem with this is that only one or two people would be physically interacting with the game at a time. However, by setting the games up in a creative way on large projection screens or something similar, the rest of the audience can watch the gameplay and see someone else play and become immersed. This kind of "appreciation not involving participation is nevertheless to be understood in terms of it. Appreciating that the player of a digital game enters into their own fictional world gets to the

heart of the player experience.” Depending on the game being displayed, watching someone else play and become immersed can be a fulfilling way of experiencing a game second hand. To see the intense focus and reactions the game brings out of the person interacting with it can be an opportunity to view the mental and emotional connection that is possible between player and game when the player is in a state of flow. In this way, the act of playing becomes both an artistic expression in action and performance. However, not all games benefit from this equally. A game like *BioShock* is something that is not nearly as effective when experienced second hand: one must be in that first-person position to be fully effected by the intricately woven gameplay and story line.

Obviously, simply copying the method put forward by a game artist like Feng Mengbo is not going to be a perfect system. He had the benefit of designing his games from the beginning with exhibition in mind. Sarah Cook and Grahm Beryl describe the problem when a new media exhibition is poorly curated in their book *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*:

> Artists are usually the ones to have the detailed working knowledge of audience interaction: they know that if they build an artwork, the audience might come, but the audience might choose not to use the artwork if the interaction has not been carefully considered.  

Some imagination and adaptation of alternative exhibition styles is required when trying to come up with a successful way to translate the video game into an institutional context. I hope to do this by introducing a game called *The Stanley Parable*, and examining some of the ideas brought forward within the gameplay regarding museum exhibition.

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The Stanley Parable (2013, Galactic Cafe), originally began as a modification of the game Half Life 2 (Valve, 2004), created within the Source game engine, a 3D engine developed by Valve and used to create their games DoTA 2 (Defense of the Ancients, 2013) and Half Life 2. This means that it was originally a short segment that was developed from the altered code of an existing game. The original mod was designed by 22-year-old Davey Wreden in 2011. He later produced the remastered, full-length version with the help of William Pugh, another young game designer, who was well known among gamers for his amateur level designs for another of Valve’s games: Team Fortress 2 (2007). The game's website describes the game as follows: "The Stanley Parable is an exploration of story, games, and choice. Except the story doesn't matter, it might not even be a game, and if you ever actually do have a choice, well, let me know how you did it."

The Stanley Parable is a first-person, exploration game, with a very minimal interface, in which the player controls a character named Stanley. While The Stanley Parable is an incredibly humorous and entertaining game, it manages to provide a thoughtful and challenging commentary on the nature of choice and action in video games. The narration is the main form of storytelling in the game, and every move the player makes is narrated down to the smallest detail.

The basic premise is that Stanley works in an office building as a data entry drone, mindlessly pressing buttons, until one day his computer screen goes blank. Stanley gets up and finds his office building abandoned, and all his coworkers missing. From this point, the player is free to go in several different directions, which all lead to different outcomes or 'endings' (all of which are not entirely true endings to the game). Like most narrative games, The Stanley Parable has a traditional storyline, which you complete by following a certain pathway through
the game world; but unlike most games, there are also various other pathways to take, which lead to various kinds of outcomes. Upon reaching any one of these ‘endings,’ the game is restarted, and the player can adventure through in an alternate way, ending up at a different ‘ending’ each time. True to the name, *The Stanley Parable* allows the player to make their choices, and immediately reflect on the implications of their actions through the narrator’s judgment and in game consequences as they complete one ‘ending’ and immediately begin the game anew. The narrator of the game (voiced by British voice actor Kevan Brightning) guides the player through as they go, describing every action the player takes as they happen in real time. For example, if the player navigates Stanley through a door, the narrator will narrate: “Stanley walked through the door.” In a typical narrative video game, there are ‘rails’ to ensure the player stays on track. Often certain areas are blocked off and certain objects are not able to be interacted with, and to coax the player in the correct direction, the right path is often more populated, and audio cues and other interesting and/or exciting events are triggered in the direction the game wants the player to go.

In *The Stanley Parable*, there is almost always the option to defy the linear narrative and go off on explorative tangents. These all have their own payoffs. The first real choice the player has in the game occurs when they are faced with the option of going through two different doors. As they approach, the narrator says: "When Stanley came to a set of two doors, he entered the door on his left." Here you can make the choice to go through the opposite door instead, even though going through the left door is the action that will advance the main narrative. After this first wrong turn is taken, and Stanley begins to walk past the employee lounge, the narrator dictates: "Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it." If the wrong choices are continually made, the narrator begins berating the bad decisions: "Stanley was
so bad at following directions, it's incredible he wasn't fired years ago." The Stanley Parable is at once a linear game driven by a narrative story as well as an open game through which the player can choose their own path. Either way, the game and the narration is always a step ahead.

There are nineteen possible 'endings' to the game, depending on the choices the player makes throughout; however, after each one the game will either restart anew, or restart from a certain point, before a certain choice was made. Some of the 'endings' include the 'Coward Ending,' which triggers if you close the door to Stanley's office and refuse to leave in order to start the game. This causes Stanley to eventually die of starvation rather than venture out and face the unknown. There is also the 'Serious Ending,' which triggers if the player tries to enable cheats in the game, teleporting them to the 'serious room,' in which they are sentenced to a hundred trillion years stay – if they try to enable cheats a second time, they are teleported there again and sentenced to infinity years.

The 'Museum Ending' (Figure 12) is accessed towards the end of the game by trying to escape before the final challenge in the main storyline. Stanley takes a wrong turn, ending up in an in-game museum, complete with white marble walls and floors, and Romanesque columns and staircases. This ‘museum’ features an exhibit of The Stanley Parable, revealing artifacts both from within the game as it was just played as well as from the development process. There are displays of everything from scale models of the game's various office spaces, as well as the level design, to models of the computer and file cabinets used in the offices – all created by game artists. There are plaques for each display with some descriptive text, mirroring the wall labels used in typical museum displays. For example, next to the model of the room with two doors

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106 Cheats in a video game refer to codes the player can input into the game, allowing them to bypass certain game mechanics or make the game easier in some way. For example, a 'god mode' cheat might make the player invulnerable, so that they are unable to be killed. Or a cheat might give the player large amounts of in-game currency to spend without having to wait to earn it legitimately.
(Figure 13), from which Stanley has to make his first meaningful choice – which direction to go – there is a plaque that reads: "The set of two open doors was the very first concrete piece of The Stanley Parable's design. Once this room was created, the rest of the game emerged as an extension of it, an exploration of the contradiction this room posed." There are also marble plaques that resemble the spaces where museums often display their benefactors, yet here, they show the list of all the developers who worked on the game (Figure 14).

Most interesting are the sections of the museum that reveal cut material and other content from the development process. There is a display of the original advertisements the game designers created to market the game, as well as a room displaying content from a scrapped ending in which Stanley ended up on a battlefield, heroically fighting aliens. The wall text reveals that the game designers decided against this ending because they felt that sensitive fans of first-person shooter games would think they were making fun of them. There is even a dimly lit room, with a few chairs set up in it, in which the player can listen to scrapped dialogue that was recorded by the narrator's voice actor (Kevin Brightning), an ingenious way to acknowledge the extra work put in by Mr. Brightning that would generally just be lost on the development floor (Figure 15).

It is fascinating to access this space within the fiction of the game for it reveals so much about the real-life process of creating the game. Not only this, but the museum and exhibition concept that is laid out is quite ingenious. This is basically a museum exhibition of a single video game; the game designers have displayed and dissected the level and art design, written dialogue and voice acting, and even shown elements of the game's early conception and process of development, all in an extremely effective and engaging way. Whether something like this would work in real life is up for debate, but perhaps an interesting possibility for exhibiting
video games could include aspects of the game's design that are not usually focused on in this way. While the question still exists as to whether existing museum spaces will ever be suitable to exhibit complex, interactive, digital works of art like video games, it stands to reason that with enough investment and guidance art institutions will be able to provide an authentic and fulfilling experience that will highlight the full spectrum of the unique aesthetic qualities of the games in their exhibitions.
CHAPTER VI
TOWARDS THE CREATION OF A VIDEO GAME DEPARTMENT

Although MoMA has taken a major first step by acquiring and making an institutional
decision to display video game art within their permanent collection, the games are still rarely on
display, and when they are, they are unfortunately positioned within the Design department, and
appear in the same stunted manner as they were in the Applied Design exhibition. The
positioning of video games within the Design department is as absurd as if a powered-off Apple
computer or an empty film canister were placed within the Painting or Sculpture departments.
By focusing only on the surface or formal features of a video game console, visible at a mere
glance, one barely begins to scratch the surface of the rich aesthetic potential of these new media
platforms. Focusing specifically on video games, without the element of human interaction,
these objects become almost meaningless, void, dead. On the other hand, by focusing on the
tangible, interactive experience through an emphasis on the player intervention upon the works,
as well as highlighting information and artifacts from the games’ development processes, a
greater picture starts to emerge regarding the specificity of their aesthetic substance.

With already two immensely successful film theaters, MoMA, the first museum
institution ever to acquire films, ought to pause and reflect on how an analogous institutional
move and strategic investment could best enable the aims of ‘disseminating a culture,’ and encourage a taste for this new art: video games. MoMA of all places, should be the first
institution to understand the necessity of taking a risk on a new department to highlight cutting-
edge art forms that are underrepresented in the current art world. The establishment of the Film
Library (now the Department of Film) in 1935 was met with uncertainty from the general
population. Haidee Wasson reflects on the overwhelmingly skeptical sentiment from the public in her book *Museum Movies*, about the history of MoMA’s film department:

There was widespread skepticism about the pairing of such a popular and spectacular amusement with the comparatively elite and sacral space of the museum, striking many as novel, and at times, odd. Why see old films? What was a film museum? What did the ephemeral and entertaining value of film have to do with enduring and edifying proclamations of art?\(^ {107}\)

In keeping with the same logic, this is the same kind of reaction MoMA received from many people when the Architecture and Design department announced its intent to incorporate video games into the collection. Despite their Film Department’s trailblazing history, MoMA’s answer to the skeptical response their initial collection of videogames received was an attempt to justify their placement in the Design department by attributing typically ‘design object’ qualities to the games they were acquiring. By responding defensively, rather than confidently explaining the unique and highly specific aesthetic potential of video games as separate artifacts, it is difficult to feel reassured that their inclusion of video games is being taken as seriously as the early, groundbreaking collection of film, was in 1935. Video games, like cinema, require a separate department devoted to a more specific study of their artistic and cultural importance. It would not be a small undertaking - and I am fully aware of the extent (economic, social, cultural) of my claim. I hope I have demonstrated however, that video games are complex objects and their aesthetic qualities are complicated and nuanced and do not live happily in a display case on a shelf. Like the development of the early Film Library at MoMA, a new Department of Video Games would require new spaces designed specifically for effective interaction and display carefully thought out and arranged by curators and other professionals, who understand the

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environment and materials necessary to facilitate open play as well as exhibition. Keeping in mind the previous chapters of this paper, I intend to lay out a proposal detailing what such a Department would look like.

The ESA (Entertainment Software Association), an “association dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies that publish computer and video games for video game consoles, handheld devices, personal computers, and the Internet,”\(^{108}\) performs various functions in the service of promoting the video games industry, including hosting the E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) Games Conference in Los Angeles every summer, the largest video gaming convention in America. They produce yearly statistics on the population of video game players within the United States, tracking data like the number of players, the percentages of male and female players, and the most popular types of video games, among others. Per their 2015 study, 155 million Americans alone considered themselves players of video games, with the average age being thirty-five, and the gender breakdown being 56% male and 44% female; 42% of Americans played ‘regularly,’ or more than 3 hours a week.\(^{109}\) Newzoo, a “provider of market intelligence covering the global games, esports. and mobile markets,”\(^{110}\) estimated the worldwide number of video game players to be over 2 billion as of 2016,\(^{111}\) and reported that the worldwide video game industry made $99.6 billion in sales in 2016.\(^{112}\) In 2015, according to

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\(^{112}\) Tenebruso, Joe. 21 Videogame Stats That Will Blow You Away. The Motley Fool, Feb. 25, 2017
In fact, according to the same report, the total visitor figures for the top ten most visited museums in the world in 2015, which included the Louvre, the British Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Tate Modern, equaled only 55,081,037; far less than the number of video games players that year. Video games have become the most popular form of art and entertainment in modern society, and their audience has grown exponentially in recent years. Furthermore, the chance that someone might consider themselves both a ‘gamer’ and a museum goer might have been small in previous generations, but in recent years the two audiences have started to overlap greatly. Targeting this huge portion of the population that loves gaming by focusing on the art of video games would not only be professionally challenging and rewarding for art professionals, but would make great economic sense as well.

Here are my recommendations for the launching of a new Department. First and foremost, a Department of Video Games will need two different types of space: one space that will facilitate uninterrupted and preferably (as much as is possible) unlimited interaction for a museum audience with the video games, and one space that can act as an exhibition space. A new physical would need to be created for video game play, similar to the way MoMA’s Film Department created space for multiple theaters with separate entrances within the museum. This new type of space could look like a ‘cool’, sophisticated, inviting internet café or arcade; it could be the space where museum visitors can check-in to actually sit down and play a video game. By setting up an alternate space to the exhibition floor for facilitating longer and more focused interaction, the gameplay does not have to be truncated for the sake of the permanent collection galleries space or time constraints. MoMA’s Film Department uses its own theater spaces to

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screen films – often past the closing time of the permanent collection. Similarly, a Department of Video Games can make use of ‘arcade’ spaces to enable uninterrupted video game play time. The design and the security inherent in these spaces are not as simple as setting up computer and console stations in a room and letting people in to “view” these. There must be careful consideration given to the organization of a new category of museum visitors utilizing such space. Christine Paul, referring to general new media art practices, expressed some of the challenges faced by the varying technological skill of the audience:

The museum/gallery audience for new media art might be divided roughly into the following categories: the ‘experts’ who are familiar with the art form; a relatively young audience segment that is highly familiar with virtual worlds, interfaces, and navigation paradigms; and those who are open to an interested in the art but need assistance using and navigating it.114

This remark fittingly applies also to our video games’ public audience. Ideally, the ‘open play’ space will be divided into four separate rooms, each based on a different audience skill level. The number of spots available in each room will depend on the size of the space, and on economic factors; however, around thirty to forty stations per room would be ideal. The first room will be less of an open play space, and more of an educational space; along the lines of a ‘lab’ or other ‘hands-on’ type of area in a science or history museum. It is crucial to accommodate the museum visitors who have no experience at all with video games, and need the most basic kind of introduction to be able to interact with a video game at all. Educators will be able to lead group sessions through carefully selected video games from the collection, teaching the ‘class’ how to interact with them successfully (including basic tasks such as starting the hardware, loading the game, which buttons to press), and pointing out details that contribute to

the aesthetic experience of play as they encounter them within the games. The best choices for initial games, presented in this space, should be the simpler games like Tetris or Pong, or the games with repetitive control schemes like Myst. The audience will be able to follow along at their own stations, and with a game like Myst, once they have learned the controls and the basic premise of the game, they might be able to try exploring on their own. This would offer our beginners a taste of the game immersion that would not have been unveiled to them previously.

The second room will be the ‘beginner’s’ room, for those with very little experience interacting with video games, but who still understand the basics of interaction with the various gaming systems. There will be several educators available in this room to provide help and guidance to the members of the audience interested in participating. In the beginner’s space, the educators will actively patrol the room, and offer help if they see someone having difficulties. Each station should have detailed instructions on how to use the interfacing devices: directions on how to do things like turn on the hardware, which buttons do what on the controller, what the game’s mode of interaction is (i.e., whether you click on the ground to move, or use movement keys). For example, many PC games use the letters W, A, S and D as movement keys (W for forward, S for backward, A for left and D for right). This makes it easier to position one’s hands on a mouse and keyboard combination; the left hand rests at the WASD keys, leaving the right hand to control the mouse. To someone like myself, this comes as second nature; when I sit at any computer, my hands automatically default to that position. For the unfamiliar, however, this is completely unintuitive; they would probably assume that the arrow keys on the keyboard are used for movement. Basic instructions such as these would go a long way in reducing the frustrations of a new video game player, and having live assistance available will ease the
entrance barrier to something that otherwise might seem intimidatingly complex, or frustrating, for many people.

The third room will be an ‘intermediate’ space for people who might have a passing familiarity with video games, or casually play certain video games but still feel that they are not competent enough to play completely unassisted. There can be less detailed instructions at each station, but guidance should still be available. There will still be assistants in this space, however they will not need to be so proactive in offering their assistance; they can be stationed at a prominent location within the room, and respond to specific requests for help from the visitors, rather than actively patrolling.

Finally, the fourth space is the ‘advanced’ room for those who are proficient or highly proficient with video games and all video game systems. They should need no assistance, and will be able to go straight in to play any of the video games on their own. The assistant in this room will most likely end up playing more of a technical support role, assisting in solving any technical or connectivity issues. This space will most resemble an ‘internet café,’ with people checking in and out at will. It would be interesting to encourage programs with groups of people checking in together to play some of the multiplayer games, while sitting next to each other, rather than online from their own home game systems. Transplanting this casual interaction that most gamers carry out very day from a home environment to an environment within the ‘art world,’ might give players a new perspective on the game they are interacting with, and a new appreciation for a game’s aesthetic qualities, where before they might have focused only on the technical or competitive aspects.

The default set up for each station should follow such a model: one large monitor, twenty-seven to thirty inches, that is connected to a middle to high-end PC, XBOX and
PlayStation. The controls for each of these systems will also be connected. All the stations should have headphones available, with microphones and voice chat software\textsuperscript{115} available in case players are playing a multi-player game, where communication is necessary or desired. The PC will be running an emulation software to make some of the older games or games with limited hardware available at will for the visitors, and the appropriate controllers will be connected to the PC as well, whenever possible.

These systems, combined with the emulation software, will be able to account for all the games currently in the collection. Whenever emulation is used it should be made clear to the player upon loading the game (via a ‘pop up’ message or other introductory warning) that they are playing on a system of emulation rather than the original hardware, to account for any differences in responsiveness or general ‘game feel.’\textsuperscript{116} The games will be preloaded onto the various game systems for easy and instant access; most will end up living on the PC, since the emulation software will be running on it, and many of the games in MoMA’s collection run on obsolete or rare hardware. For those visitors that want a truly authentic experience — alternative to emulation — stations will also be set up with the rare gaming systems that the museum has obtained and that are still able to be used. These rare systems will have to be reserved by visitors, since there will inevitably be a limited amount. Should someone desire, for example, to play Tetris on a Nintendo Game Boy rather than on the emulation software, they should be able to reserve time with a Game Boy system. However, there must be an understanding that older

\textsuperscript{115} A type of software that allows people to communicate in real-time through their gaming systems. Console Systems like the XBOX generally have voice chat built into their online or multiplayer games. Some PC games also have voice chat built in, but more commonly players will download a third-party software, like Skype, Ventrilo, Mumble or TeamSpeak, to communicate with their friends.

\textsuperscript{116} When running an emulation of an older game on a more modern system, a game might feel more responsive or otherwise different than the original. For example, an emulation of the original Super Mario Brothers (Nintendo, 1985) might be run on a modern PC, with advanced hardware, causing it to run more smoothly than was originally possible.
hardware systems will not be as readily available, and at some points might have a wait time to use. As far as the setting and design of these new arcades are concerned, these rooms should be kept casual; gaming paraphernalia could be hung up on the walls, like posters or artwork. Collaboration projects or commissions with game artists could unique and interesting large scale artwork, such as murals or art based on different media. Getting support from the game industry would also lend credibility to the Department among more hardcore gamers.

Security will, of course, occupy a crucial position: how will museum visitors access these rooms in an orderly way? One of the best solutions is to have a check-in or reservation system in place. For the educational room, visitors will be able to sign up online for a spot in a particular game’s class, and attend at a certain date and time. The three ‘free-play’ rooms will have both an online reservation system and an on-site check-in system. Visitors to the museum will be able to reserve spots for certain date and times, as well as for a set amount of time that they estimate the duration of a game will take. Informed educators and assistance would play a crucial role at this stage as well. They will also be able to check into the rooms on-site. I think it makes sense to reserve a certain number of stations for on-site check-ins, but only up to a certain amount of time (maybe from one to three hours), ensuring that both modes of access are somewhat available at any given time. The visitors utilizing the on-site check-in will rotate more frequently, allowing visitors who might have been unfamiliar with the gameplay spaces, and have a limited time at the museum, to participate. The time factor is a vital question here; I believe visitors should attempt to estimate the amount of time they will want to spend, and confirm that upon checking in. Perhaps certain games will have recommended durations detailed out so people will have a general idea how much time they will need in total, or if they might need multiple visits to complete the game. This is often a difficult factor to quantify. A necessary consideration here is
to look at the number of hours a ‘gamer’ spends playing video games in a typical week.

Referring to my own experience, as a proficient video games practitioner, I spend around thirty hours playing video games on any given week. It can be more, of course, if I am playing a particularly engaging game, or less, if I don’t have anything new to play. Many of these hours spent from Monday through Friday, for both myself and other gamers I know, are in the evening and late night/early morning hours. Most of us work around having jobs, school, or other commitments. Thirty plus hours might seems like a lot for any person, let alone someone with a full-time job or other obligation. We all manage to find a balance between the two spheres of obligation; we can maintain successful professional lives while keeping engaged with our gaming commitments. Keeping this thirty-hour average in mind, and the time length of play to complete some video games, it might not be absurd to see a museum visitor checking into one of the ‘advanced’ stations for a full day, or for four or five hours on multiple days. The museum should encourage such situations; the issue of time being a defining reality in playing video games.

In addition to these gameplay spaces, a space will be created for the exhibition of the museum’s video games. The best solution with regards to content for a museum exhibition of video games would look like a combination of interaction and display; a melding of the solutions presented by artists like Feng Mengbo and the exhibit shown in the "Museum Ending" of The Stanley Parable, which examines some of the development process. Depending on the game or games being exhibited, this will be either an exhibition of a single game, or an exhibition designed by curators of the department, grouped around a specific quality of video games that will be highlighted. Themes could be genre (science fiction games, first person shooter games); platform (PC games, XBOX games), some specific aesthetic quality (games that use movement
in a unique way, like **Portal**; or games that use narrative to subvert player expectations, like *BioShock* and *The Beginner’s Guide*). These exhibitions will draw attention to the “full range of ‘process’ rather than object,” putting a spotlight on all the facets of video games that make them such a unique art form, rather than simply truncating them for the sake of the traditional institutional space.

Because separate spaces will be designed to enable game interaction, setting up interactive stations within the exhibition will no longer be needed. Long and complex games like *BioShock* or *Portal*, however, present challenges on how gameplay and interaction can be incorporated into the exhibition itself. I would recommend here the inclusion of shorter, carefully selected portions of the game. These gameplay sections must be chosen with great curatorial care, ensuring that they are representative of the larger story and feeling of the whole gameplay, without being unsatisfying or frustrating. For example, in an exhibition of *BioShock*, I would propose making the opening five minutes of the game available. The game opens with the main character, Jack, sitting in an airplane, when suddenly turbulence hits and the screen goes black. Jack regains consciousness underwater, and quickly swims to the surface, only to see that he is in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by the wreckage of a plane crash. As the player gains control, and uses the controller to look around, they see a lighthouse looming before them. The realization that this lighthouse is sitting out in the middle of the ocean is unsettling, however, it is clearly Jack’s only chance for survival. The player navigates over to the lighthouse, and comes upon a set of elaborate, art-deco designed doors, that slowly swing open to let them inside. The next few minutes take Jack into the entrance of the city of Rapture,

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complete with a ride down to the city’s depths in a bathysphere. The opening of *BioShock* is one of the most well-constructed opening sequences in any video game I have ever played; it effectively sets the tone for the rest of the game, sets up the narrative story, and gives a taste of the gameplay and controls. I like the idea of projection for this type of gameplay within an exhibition, as it serves the dual purpose of facilitating interaction, while also providing a ‘performance’ of the gameplay and visuals of the game for the exhibition visitors. Feng Mengbo’s design of *Q4U*’s display showed the potential of using projection within an exhibition space. The opening of *BioShock* would provide an eerie soundtrack for the rest of the exhibition (with music for the game written by film and video game music composer Gary Schyman), and the five-minute-long opening sequence would be an effective looping introduction to the aesthetics of the video game’s world. A game like *The Beginner’s Guide* would also make great use of projection for showing gameplay. Since the larger game consists of very short ‘mini-games,’ most of which reach a satisfying conclusion and each have their own clear, self-contained message, both watching and playing would be satisfying. Players would also see a quick turnover because of the short game times, avoiding awkward situations where people are standing around waiting for their turn. A game station would be set up with the gameplay projected onto a wall or screen; allowing audience players to get the chance to feel the gameplay, while perpetuating a continuous performance of the game for the exhibition. This, combined with the context that would be provided by supplemental materials, creates a full representation of the game’s intricacies.

The second idea I have regarding the incorporation of gameplay within an exhibition is slightly radical. If executed properly, however, it could provide a unique sense of immersion and

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118 A spherical submersible used mainly in the 1930’s.
Using video game play as performance is an effective way to present both gameplay and immersion in action: however, it is difficult for any player to enter into that immersive, ‘flow’ state while surrounded by other museumgoers, no matter how much they are drawn in by the game. I propose setting up isolation booths or pods (one or two within a single exhibition) with one way visibility, so the player inside cannot see out, but the rest of the exhibition visitors are able to see inside. The gameplay can be visible both through viewing the player’s screen, as well as on monitors set up around the booth. Some of the most intense gaming experiences I have had have been while cloistered in front of my own computer, in a dark room, with noise-isolating headphones. Blocking off any outside stimulus allows reality to disappear, while allowing the game-world to come to life. A station would be set up inside for one player to play through the game being exhibited. Visitors will be able to check in to play here just like in the free-play rooms detailed previously. These would be used for longer play periods to allow the player to reach that ‘flow’ state. The player inside will feel isolated enough to reach that state of immersion that might not have been possible while surrounded by other museumgoers. Outside observers will get a chance to see the intensity with which a video game player concentrates on and reacts to the ebb and flow of gameplay and game narrative. Players of video games laugh, cry and shout out in fear or anger in response to the events that unfold within video game worlds. It would be fascinating, for example, to experience in real time, the shock on the face of a player when they reach the pivotal moment of BioShock, or the fear they display when realizing what the world of Portal really has in store for them. Having real and intense emotional reactions in response to a video game is not something that most people have probably ever experienced or seen (and might not think is possible). Therefore, creating a live performance of an authentic gaming experience, which allows the player to reach a state of flow in action.
immersion that facilitates those reactions, is an effective way to highlight the expressive potential of video games. The larger audience probably think of simpler games like *Pac Man* or *Super Mario World* when referring to video games: seeing the impact a more complex and immersive game can have on those playing it could be surprising, and might open up the possibility for them of exploring the deeper aspects of different and more complex video games altogether.

Of course, these interactive units will not be the only content exhibited. Speaking of new media art in general, Christine Paul explains the value of layering interaction with context when presenting a technologically driven artwork:

A viewer who spends only a minute or two with a video in a gallery space does not have an optimal experience. Sending the same time with a new media project often reveals much less: the viewer might only see one configuration of an essentially nonlinear project. The context and logic of a particular sequence remain unclear. Every art project is embedded in a context, but viewers of new media works depend on contextual information: about the data being shown, where it is coming from, and the logic by which it is configured.¹¹⁹

This type of exhibition will mean having a larger scope of collection practice, that will include more than only the video games and their hardware. Cooperation with the game designers behind the museum’s games will be a key factor for their successful exhibition. Similar to the Museum Ending in *The Stanley Parable*, I would want to highlight the artifacts that detail the development process and behind the scenes work, and that look at the developer’s intention behind mechanics like gameplay, level, object, and character design. Obtaining access to such content will be vital; without these supplemental materials, the entire concept of this type of exhibition would remain incomplete. The average museum goer most likely has no idea what goes into creating video games. In her essay on documenting and archiving new media art,

Annet Dekker places emphasis on the importance of including certain aspects of the creative process:

It is important to be aware of decisions and their consequences that are made in the development of the work and accurately describe or record them. Theoretically, it is possible to recreate complex media artworks…but the level of success would increase when artists’ strategies are integrated into museum practices or by adapting existing models by giving more attention to the creative process….The behavior of the technology and the influence this [has] on the performativity of the work, might get lost when…applying emulation methods that transfer the game play to new platforms….Multimedia artworks are technically complex, not only in their final presentation but also in their production phase. For a recreation of the work it is therefore important to understand the technical choices that were made in the context of the time they were made.  

By displaying the finished product of game, console and interfacing device, alongside some of the level design, voice work, coding, concept art, soundtrack music and other relevant examples spanning from the conception to creation of the game, context will be created to generate a fuller experience for the audience, while interacting with the work. For example, character creation, which involves things like modelling and concept art, and later, voice acting and motion capture is often overlooked or taken for granted. The music in video games is often designed to elicit various emotional reactions in the player; therefore, a score might heighten in intensity leading up to a particularly difficult encounter. Composers of video game soundtracks must consider not only the scene and story they are writing for, but also what the actions of a player might be at any given time. Creating that emotional reaction can influence


121 A process in which either the voice actors or stunt actors don green screen compatible suits, and in which they act out various portions of game-action in real life. This allows the game artists to capture their movements and facial expressions to use for the in-game character models, so the voice and physical characteristics of the voice actors can both be represented within the game.
the player’s behavior at any given time, making the music another tool through which game
designers can influence the pace, intensity or mood of the player. Developer interviews should
be included as well, allowing the words of the artists of these works to be heard, directly
focusing on portions of the development process.

Using *BioShock* as an example again, the exhibition will have a space to display concept
art and early iterations of level and environment design, as well as examples of other games, art,
film or other media that might have inspired the design of the game. The art deco designs of
Rockefeller Center would feature prominently. It was those monolithic buildings that, after a trip
to New York, inspired Ken Levine’s design of Rapture’s look and feel. According to Jonathan
Chey, Irrational Games’ co-founder (along with Levine), before that moment of epiphany, “the
project struggled to develop a visual identity….There was a period of time where the levels
looked like typical grey industrial space corridors and the opponents were the usual mutated
monsters that you’d fought a hundred times before.”¹²² The plane crash opening sequence,
inspired by the TV show *Lost*, was a late addition to the game, in response to early game-testers
lack of connection to the story when being placed immediately within the city of Rapture, with
no lead-in. A display detailing the important comparisons between the antagonist Andrew Ryan
and John D. Rockefeller, and the use of the philosophies of Ayn Rand and her Objectivism in
shaping Ryan’s personality, would provide important insight into the developers’ inspirations
and philosophical motivations for writing the main story of the game. These game design
decisions and their inspirations are integral to understanding the development of the game’s
overall aesthetics, and give an audience a greater appreciation for the magnitude of work that
goes into creating a video game’s aesthetic qualities. By shining light on these underappreciated

or largely unknown processes, the work done by all parties involved, beyond the lead game
designer or development company, will thus be more fully appreciated. This might also create a
desire to seek out these or similar games for people who might otherwise be ignorant of the value
and meaning to be gained by interacting with them.

While these pages could not purport to offer a perfect plan for the foundation of the first
museum-based video game department, I believe that the ideas I have laid out here would go a
long way in cementing the base for such a Department of Video Games within an institution like
MoMA. Encouraging a museum audience to view video games in a serious way takes the right
combination of exhibition organization and design, and requires leadership with the experience
to back up their decision making. With careful consideration and respect for the medium put
into the video game spaces and their exhibition, the museum would gain credibility from both the
game and art worlds, and prove to any skeptical parties that the aesthetic qualities of video
games are worth exploring. It would also simply open a new (and I my opinion, highly exciting)
chapter in the History of Museums.
CONCLUSION

Making successful curatorial decisions regarding optimal display of art objects is nothing new. However, as museums begin to acquire and display interactive works like video games, the question has arisen as to how best to present new works to an audience in a way that both respects and maintains as much as possible of the original experience. The fate of forthcoming video game exhibitions is still unclear, and the acquisition of games by museums and other institutions is still a practice in its infancy. There is still very little focus on video games specifically in the art world; most of the focus on the technological is on more formal ‘new media art’ that is designed with exhibition in mind. While some of the innovations that have been made in exhibiting new media artworks can apply to the exhibition of video games, there are still many unique considerations that must be made for their successful inclusion in art collections. Major institutions like MoMA and The Smithsonian have put forth their best efforts to bring gaming into the modern art world. Yet, by staying too close to the formal disciplines that are most familiar to them, they unwittingly offered up anemic presentations of the video games in their exhibitions. The two museums chose to place video games in very different contexts and created very different atmospheres for their exhibitions. Both managed to create little more than an awkward distance between game and player, and game and hardware, that is impossible to ignore. By trying to force them to fit into pre-existing categories, and valuing in them the aesthetic qualities that are important in other mediums, the curators of these exhibitions missed the essential features about video games that make them so unique. The act of play, the modes of interaction, both physically through controller and console, and digitally, through the gameplay design and interface, as well as a full immersion in a game world and participation in the flow-inducing components of the gameplay; all these factors separate video games from
other art forms in a fundamental way. Focusing only on the visual aesthetic qualities can only lead to a partial, or total failure to understand the medium. Established art departments cannot simply appropriate video games as their own. Games like BioShock and The Stanley Parable can be effectively displayed alongside other forms of new media art, or art games like the works of Feng Mengbo and Cory Arcangel, but the curatorial decision-making regarding this group of games should not be uniform; considerations must be made for object individually. As video games have become more accepted, and have headed into the collections of galleries and museums, curators would be well advised to work directly with the game designers to come up with even more effective, creative, sense-making, ways of displaying their games. Similar to the way in which Feng Mengbo can devise the way he would like his games to be displayed in the gallery setting, it could prove beneficial to consider the opinions of the creators of the works.

Certainly, the artistic depth and importance of video games far surpasses the way in which they are currently trimmed down in institutions like MoMA and The Smithsonian. Both museums attempted to translate the video game medium into an environment they were not at all designed to be experienced in. This was not an easy task to take on, and both MoMA and The Smithsonian should be commended for the attempt. However, they both ended up falling short of creating a space in which the video games could both be seen and interacted with effectively. In the case of MoMA, by appropriating the values of different art forms onto the games, they missed an opportunity to explore the unique aesthetic features that separate video games from other art forms. There is a sensitive balance to be struck between the active and social nature of games and the sterile, controlled atmosphere of the museum. Allan Kaprow has said the following of the modern museum:
One may generalize that the environment context of the artwork today is of greater importance than its specific forms; and that it is this surrounding, furthermore, which will determine the nature and shape of these forms. It leads to the speculation that as a museum is obsolete, so are the kinds of art - pictures and statues - for which it was conceived.123

A new kind of space needs to be designed around interactive art like video games, that will not force them into preconceived categories that truncate their value, and will be able to celebrate the artistry of games in a more communal space.

Video games are important because they reflect so much of both the art and popular culture of modern times. From inception to completion, they combine aspects from traditional drawing and painting, film, literature, philosophy, programming, and engineering. Because of their proliferation throughout modern society, most people might not consider the complex design that goes into creating the interactive experience. How many people take the time to acknowledge the intuitive nature of the input duo of controller and user interface, or to appreciate the thought process behind the design of each level or environment with regards to the greater theme of the game? It makes sense to include video games in the collections of art museums and galleries, and to highlight these, and other, deeper aspects that might not be considered by most people in their causal gaming interactions (or lack of gaming interactions at all). Special consideration should be made to do them as much justice as possible within that new space. By disrupting the established hierarchies and departmental organizations of art institutions, incredible strides could be made in pioneering the study, curation and exhibition of video games as aesthetic objects.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. “The Past Was Behind Her.” The Beginner's Guide. Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015.

Figure 2. “Backwards.” The Beginner's Guide. Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015.
Figure 3. “Messages 1.” *The Beginner's Guide.* Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015.

Figure 4. “Messages 2.” *The Beginner's Guide.* Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015.
Figure 5. “Hidden Hallways.” *The Beginner’s Guide*. Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015.


