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A DISSECTION OF VIDEO GAMES AS A MEDIUM OF ART: THE UTILIZATION OF AESTHETICS AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VIDEO GAMES AS A TOOL IN CURRICULUM

Over the years, video games have seen increasing acceptance as a classification of art by individuals other than those traditionally defined as gamers, such as politicians and educators. Art as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary has many definitions, but the definition discussed in this paper is “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form” (“Art”). Once considered just a form of entertainment, video games have garnered much more cultural significance in society. The United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the classification of video games as art in 2011, and even the French Minister of Culture, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, supported the recognition of video games as an art form in 2006. Despite being initially introduced as a form of entertainment, video games play an important role in popular culture as well as education. With the incorporation of aesthetics along with the capabilities of video games in the classroom, video games are a form of art that can be applied in several artistic disciplines.

Video games, just like books, movies, or poetry, can be designed with various meanings, interpretations, or intent. For instance, what if video games are designed to integrate players into their gameplay, creating different experiences based off the interpretation of the player? In education, could students in a visual arts curriculum learn basic programming and how to create 2D art through a video game? Society in general can learn to appreciate and utilize video games beyond their current reach as they can

become instrumental tools in reflection and learning. Involved in the concept of art is “aesthetic,” which means “perception” in Greek and is defined by our experience of art and/or the nature of the art such as how it’s designed. Video games can allow people, not just gamers, to create and share their creative ideas and beliefs through story as well as aesthetics, one of the core concepts of game design. Aesthetics help us understand what qualities determine a work’s categorization as art as well as the work’s overall quality. In video games, the aesthetic may encompass several aspects such as graphics, art design, music, and mechanics. In the *Journal of Media Practice*, Ernest Adams, a game design consultant, mentions that video games have aspects of aesthetics in which “there are distinct aesthetic qualities of games, such as ‘replayability,’ that may not apply to more conventional art forms” (Adams 71). Adams explains that video games present aesthetic qualities not seen in other forms. Replayability, for example, is the desire to play through a game again with the intent of seeking a different experience. This type of aesthetic quality is very common in games that allow players to make decisions that could affect a game’s narrative or its characters. Of course, aesthetic qualities such as replayability may not be present in every video game.

Over the past few decades, many video games have been designed or created with various differences in aesthetics with the intent of invoking different experiences and emotions. Take 1993’s, *Doom*, for example. *Doom* is a science fiction first-person shooter game with 2.5-D graphics that pits a player against the demons of Hell. The game was highly acclaimed for its art and style at the time as well as for its music, gameplay, and pace. The game has very little story and mainly involves the mass slaughter of demons using multiple weapons with heavy rock music playing in the background. The player is constantly moving as a result of the game’s pace, thus creating fast and action-filled gameplay. One of the game’s creators, John Carmack, stated that the reason for the game’s design was for the players to feel quick and powerful while destroying grotesque demons at an alarming rate (Mendoza 249-250). The main protagonist is a nameless space marine with no given history

or background, which allows players to picture themselves as the space marine. This allows players to become more immersed in the game's experience and become more engaged in the gameplay. After the game's release, it received critical acclaim and attention for its innovation and style in the video game industry with several sequels and mods created afterwards. Many players praised the game's unique atmosphere and experience, raising the standard for later games.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is a more recent example of a video game with unique aesthetic. Released in 2012, *The Walking Dead* is a point and click game set in the same universe as the comic books it's based off of, but with a whole new cast of characters. The game was developed in cell-shaded graphic designed to have visuals similar to that of a comic book. Storytelling is a large and integral aspect of the game design with the development of characters and their stories being critical. Unlike *Doom*, *The Walking Dead* puts less emphasis on gameplay and more on the story. The game allows players to make decisions over the course of the narrative that can have a positive or negative impact on the player's relationships with other characters. Additionally, these decisions can affect the flow of the narrative, influencing the cause-and-effect relationship of events and how characters react.

Music is also an important element of the video game, setting the tone and mood for events and creating a suspenseful or emotional atmosphere. *The Walking Dead* has been critically acclaimed by reviewers and players alike, praising the game for the harsh emotional tone and the emphasis on character development rather than making exciting gameplay. A large emphasis on having exciting gameplay would have been detrimental to the game's intended experience because the intent was to create a meaningful and impactful story, not create a game with such a large focus on gameplay to the point where the gameplay serves as a distraction from the story. Games like Telltale's *The Walking Dead* evoke themes and experiences in which writers pass down their thoughts for the player to interpret through gameplay and his or her own experiences. The use of aesthetics can engage players in

ways unique to the realm of video games. The players can become emotionally invested in characters because much time and effort is put into their development. Should one of these characters die, the game is designed to place a toll on players who feel more invested in the characters, creating emotional responses and thoughts upon their deaths. In many cases, it is up to the player to decide what is meaningful and what is not depending on their interpretations of the game. That being said, not everyone enjoyed *The Walking Dead* as it lacks gameplay and emphasizes the story. However, like all evaluations of art, these opinions ultimately depend on personal taste.

One game that intentionally leaves players with the ability to interpret the meaning of its story is *Limbo*, released in 2010. Unlike most other games, *Limbo* has a unique style and aesthetic as it is a 2D puzzle/platformer with visuals identical to that of a film noir. The game presents itself in shades of black and white with film grain effects and minimal ambient sounds to create a mysterious, eerie atmosphere. According to the main composer, Martin Stig Andersen, the game's music and sound design is mainly acousmatic or ambient with the intention of creating interpretation on the player's part (Thomsen 2). The story involves a nameless boy who wakes up in a forest on the "edge of hell" and leaves to search for his missing sister. *Limbo's* narrative is minimal because the creators of the game wanted players to interpret the story for themselves (Thompson 2). Critics praised the game for its presentation and was even compared to works of German Expressionism, a creative movement in Germany that occurred before World War I (Martin 24).

These are just a few of examples of how video games can provide different experiences in aesthetics. Depending on the view of the player, aesthetic qualities can differ on what can make a game an artistic experience. In *Limbo*, for example, does one find oneself in deep contemplation of the game's ambience and how it affects the meaning of the game's narrative? Or does the sound make the game a dull experience and detract from its overall quality? In *Doom*, does the absence of story make the game less meaningful,

or does it strengthen the game's structure in favor of making the game more applicable to players? These aspects of video gaming can create meaning depending on who interprets them. There are those who play games purely focused on the action or gameplay. On the other hand, there are those who play a game to invest in the story, treating characters and their experiences as if they actually exist. As art exists for taste and interpretation, so can video games in which anyone can experience them, appreciating any of their aesthetic qualities.

Despite their differences from traditional forms of art, video games do not stray from other forms of art in terms of intent or origin. Jef Folkerts, a lecturer of communication and media at Hanze University, states that video games are not unlike other forms of art such as books or films because “without exception they all are products of the imagination and as cultural artefacts an expression of, and a reflection on the culture they emerge from. On the other side they all, one way or another, arouse imagination among their users” (Folkerts 99). *Doom*, *The Walking Dead*, *Limbo*, and many other games provide different aesthetics and experiences. These games help satisfy players with various tastes, leading people to appreciate some games over others. Some games may be interpretive and require some investment, while other games can be taken at face value without any detriment or benefit to the overall experience. Through aesthetics, creativity in video games takes both a broad and specific approach with its applicability not just towards society in general, but also as an instrumental tool in art education.

Some video games allow players to create and design their own content or worlds. Limits vary on these games' restrictions, but players can use complex thinking or creativity to work around these limits, creating products of their mind. Games like these can help students in the field of visual arts, encouraging them to use their creative minds and produce works within a video game at low cost with potentially limitless resources. For example, the Xbox 360 exclusive *Halo 3* gives players a chance to create unique maps for players to play together by using objects such as crates, fences,

and boxes to create various structures (CMNeir). The popular video game series, *The Sims*, revolves around the freedom in the creation of many things such as homes, carnivals, and even medieval castles. World building games or games with a large emphasis on creativity are now starting to create a presence in art curriculum with the addition of *Minecraft*.

Minecraft is a highly popular, critically acclaimed video game created by developer Markus Perrson where creation makes up the core of the gameplay. Players use textured cubes to build constructions of any kind. The game does not provide a tutorial or instructions for new players and so they must learn the game's mechanics themselves or refer to the hundreds of how-to videos on *YouTube* made by more experienced players. There are three modes in the game: creative mode, survival mode, and adventure mode. Creative mode, the mode that would best fit the curriculum, gives players access to all building material and resources at the beginning of the game to build what they like within the world with no restrictions. In survival mode, the player must avoid hostile inhabitants of the world whenever possible, strategically gather resources, and build shelters to protect themselves from monsters such as giant spiders and zombies. Adventure mode gives the main objective of navigating through a player-created map in order to find and destroy the fictional Ender Dragon. Although all three modes give the player the ability to make choices and use whatever materials they see fit, creative mode immediately gives players total creative freedom, giving them all the materials at the start with the ability to create what they want. Because of this, the game is very appealing for educators because it gives students limitless possibilities in structural creations and gives educators an opportunity to engage with their students.

Two art educators, Alexandra Overby and Brian Jones, advocate the use of video games in an art curriculum. They studied the use of the game *Minecraft* and its role in the classroom as well as how it affects students from grades K-12. Observing the students, they noticed that while they initially struggled to grasp the concepts and mechanics of the game, they quickly started to become

accustomed to how the game worked (Overby and Jones 22). The authors noted that the players quickly began to debate which building material would be most appropriate for their structure, how to create building materials as well how to change their color, and to look into factors such as the theme, size, and detail of their structures (Overby and Jones 22). Projects such as villages inspired by medieval architecture, monumental homes, and even a children's museum were among some of what the students created and expanded on with constructions becoming more and more complex and elaborate.

After the study, Overby and Jones concluded that *Minecraft* can apply several key concepts to classroom learning. It was found that *Minecraft* can teach basic programming skills that would allow the ability to create interactive digital art (Overby and Jones 24). According to Overby and Jones, programming in the game can lead to more advanced or complicated coding and create interest in learning image and 3-D programs such as Photoshop or Maya (Overby and Jones 24). Collaboration was another significant aspect of the game that helped players work together during the construction of buildings. Some players can gather materials, while others can start building. Lastly, *Minecraft* gives the ability to create pixel art, a 2-D art that is then recreated in 3-D in the game (Overby and Jones 24). In this process, students must critically think and analyze what and how many resources they need to convert the art from 2-D to 3-D. Examples of pixel art can be anything from video game characters to recreating famous works of art. The possibilities are practically limitless.

Minecraft thrusts players into the role of both an architect and a developer in which they can critically think and analyze what they need or must do to express their imaginative ideas. Users even have the opportunity to share their works online and allow them to be critiqued and interpreted by anyone who views them. This criticism allows players to gain feedback on the meaning and characteristics of their work. Despite this, there are educators who believe that learning based on computers could prove to be detrimental in the classroom (Overby and Jones 26). There are also educators who may be unaccustomed to technology and thus may be uncomfortable

with using video games in the classroom (Overby and Jones 26). In her own article about technology in art education, Professor Penelope Orr believes that the lack of knowledge or confidence regarding technology in art curriculum hinders the possibility of new media practices in art education. Unlike technology such as interactive whiteboards or an iPad with drawing apps, works can easily be produced within a video game with little cost or risk. Students can create reflections of their imagination with easy accessibility for others to see and provide feedback on their work. Ryan Patton of the Virginia Commonwealth University agrees, saying:

“...art educators should learn how to critique and make video games as a way to develop an understanding of the associations between objects and ideas and how game interactions can be traced to reveal and critique complex relationships and systems within artistic and other life processes” (Patton 47).

Aesthetic qualities such as mechanics in world building and visual style can appeal to educators in helping provide students the tools to think critically about their creations.

Video games are a worthy form of art. Unlike other art forms, they contain unique aesthetic features that can enhance the player's experiences and feelings. Graphics, art design, music, mechanics, and interactivity can create an experience quite different from other forms of art. However, video games are very similar to other forms as they can be the subject of interpretation and taste. Keeping people who experience their video games in mind, video game developers focus on applicability in an attempt to connect players and immerse them in the gaming experience. Of course, the weight of this varies depending on the individual, but many video games push to convey a message to their players. For example, as mentioned before, *Doom* wants players to feel powerful and unique, constructing the main protagonist in a way that allows the players to be the main protagonist themselves rather than have a predetermined character as the protagonist. In order for users to decide a game's meaning, they must ask what a video game means to them and what they seek from it.

From applicability in aesthetics, video games extend themselves not just into popular culture, but also the art curriculum. Many of them allow the in-game manifestation of the player's imagination as well as become an integral part of a classroom's curriculum. With minimal cost and risk, games that demand the creation of worlds or certain environments can allow students to apply critical thinking skills when building and constructing. As both social media and the Internet grow, so does the ability for students as well as players in general to share their creations online. Unique creations and designs can allow students to develop their own works as well as the works of others online to find inspiration and learn new concepts in visual arts. Although this is still a debated topic, video games have provided unique experiences and ways of engagement that are unlike other forms of art. In order to strongly benefit from video games, they must be seen as not just a tool for entertainment, but as a tool that can allow personal growth and experience through their applicability as an art form.

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