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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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For my parents: Perry and Betty Jurgensen

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I set out to examine the artistic and aesthetic features of videogames *as games*. Ultimately, I argue that a complete understanding of the aesthetics of videogames requires a more robust account of the role of the player and the aesthetic impact of the choices she makes than has been previously given. While the idea that videogames are a strongly interactive media is acknowledged in the literature, less attention is given to how the unique relationship between game and gamer affects both the overall aesthetic experience of playing videogames and the position these games hold in the artworld.

I first argue that the prevalent attempts at categorizing videogames as art fall prey to a similar pitfall, which ultimately contributes to a common mishandling of the aesthetic value videogames can offer. After highlighting the problems that the leading theories of art have in defining videogames as art, I turn attention to interrelated concepts of interactivity, gameplay, and player performance.

I develop an original account of interactivity as it relates to videogames. My account is meant to capture the uniqueness videogames offer as works of art and also the importance interactivity plays in understanding the aesthetic experience of playing videogames. Working from my proposed account of interactivity, I then look to concepts of gameplay and player performance and how they relate to the overall aesthetic experience of playing videogames. I argue that gameplay mechanics affect the overall aesthetic value of videogames by both delimiting and creating opportunities for how the player engages with the game. In this way,

gameplay mechanics need to be taken into account when evaluating the overall functionality of a videogame as a game, and subsequently, need to be considered when assessing the aesthetic quality of a videogame. Moreover, how a player chooses to utilize and navigate gameplay mechanics with respect to the choices she makes when interacting with the game ultimately affect the aesthetic experience she has while playing. Hence, I argue that player performance can have a significant impact the aesthetic quality of videogame play. In doing so, I highlight how the atypical relationship among artist, audience, and artwork in videogames plays a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic experience of gameplay. Finally, I offer a defense against the argument that even if videogames are art, they are artistically and aesthetically worthless. In doing so, I develop a novel account of kitsch gameplay to better understand and evaluate videogames as artworks.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

I've been to Vatican City twice. Once in 2006, as an undergraduate student in a study abroad program. And again, during the 15th century Italian Renaissance, when I was asked to assassinate Pope Alexander VI, also known as the notorious Templar leader, Rodrigo de Borja. I gleefully accepted my mission and completed it with overwhelming prejudice. Anyone who's played *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) can relate to my second visit and my cavalier attitude towards murdering a Pope (he totally deserved it). Videogames are highly immersive because they necessitate an interactive relationship with their users. In doing so, they invite entertaining, educational, introspective, emotional, and compelling aesthetic experiences. And in our increasingly technology-driven society, they are quickly establishing a firm foothold as objects worthy of rigorous intellectual study. As such, videogames are studied across multiple academic disciplines, exploring them as socio-cultural artifacts that can reflect free market behavior and social trends; as avenues for understanding artificial intelligence and our society's emerging relationship with advanced technology; as ethical case studies; as forms of mass entertainment; as educational and motivational tools; and as potential artworks.¹ My efforts here are a philosophical exploration on the artistic and aesthetic value of videogames and the experiences they offer, but I believe this project has cross-disciplinary value with its critical insight on videogames as complex cultural artifacts.

¹ For example, see Kosminksy (2009), Mateas (2003), Luck (2009), McGonigal (2011), and Gee (2003).

I was a gamer before I was a philosopher, spending countless hours of my adolescence in arcades and in front of TVs with a videogame controller in my hands. As such, my experiences as a gamer shape and inform many of my arguments here. I see this a strength of the project, in part because one of the overall goals is to help establish open lines of communication between the philosophical community interested in videogames and the gaming community interested in creating, designing, and engaging in worthwhile and rewarding gameplay experiences. For philosophers, a great deal of what I argue here connects directly with central questions in aesthetics including, but not limited to: What are the criteria for arthood? What is aesthetic experience? What aspects of a work account for the aesthetic experience it affords? What is aesthetic and artistic value? How are we to understand revolutionary artworks regarding their artistic and aesthetic value? Further, I hope that my efforts will help shift the discussion of videogames in philosophy of art to one that focuses on analyzing the aesthetic and artistic value of games on their own merit and distinct nature, instead of relying primarily on comparisons with other art mediums.

For the gaming community, a philosophical analysis of the artistic and aesthetic value can provide the tools needed to categorize videogames as a legitimate art form. Contextualizing videogames as art can prime society to take more seriously the potential artistic and aesthetic value of the medium. It's not necessarily an ontological impetus that motivates my desire to classify videogames as artworks, but a need for shifting the focus among scholars, game designers, and

gaming communities to the potentially unique normative value to be had while playing videogames. As a gamer, I'm attempting to bring the possible aesthetic value of videogame play into greater public consciousness. Hopefully, this helps in the production of better videogames overall, more meaningful gameplay experiences, and fewer pervasively kitsch games.

Overall, this dissertation is best understood as a series of interrelated papers that follow a general approach of highlighting the variety of ways in which videogames *qua games* are artistically and aesthetically valuable, and how their gamehood shapes that value. Chapter two focuses on a common way that scholars argue that videogames are artworks: they are compared with traditional works, similarities in their constitutive features are surveyed, and the conclusion is either that videogames have enough in common with other artworks to be art, or they don't. While this strategy can be helpful in determining the art status of videogames, it tends to gloss over the fact that videogames are games, and what makes studying them as works of art worthwhile is grounded partly in our understanding of them as games. After laying out a possible source of this problem, I examine ways in which the gamehood of videogames contributes to their artistic and aesthetic value.

Chapter three continues the exploration of the relationship between the aesthetic value of videogames and their gamehood by thoroughly examining the concept of interactivity. In doing so, I offer an original account of interactivity as it relates to videogames, arguing for a distinction between agent-to-agent and agent-

to-non-agent interaction to better understand the precise nature of videogame play. Afterward, I examine a few cases studies to show how aesthetic features of videogames and the gameplay experience are subject to changes in prominence for the player based on the type, source, and level of interaction during play.

Ultimately, the concept of interactivity I propose helps makes sense of the aesthetic importance the player's actions have during gameplay.

Chapter four provides a framework for understanding the ontology of videogames as artworks by examining the distinctive relationship among the artists, artwork, and audience (AAAR) created by the necessarily interactive nature of videogames. I provide a survey of both positive and negative accounts of the gamer's role in the AAAR, arguing that gamers are best understood as performative instantiators who help generate tokens or instances of an artwork type. In doing so, I aim to capture the pivotal role gamers have in creating an aesthetic experience during gameplay. Although I adopt a more traditional view regarding the artist-artwork relationship in videogames, situating gamers as performative instantiators highlights how their actions within the game form a relationship with the artwork that directly impacts the aesthetic features of that instancing.

Lastly, chapter five handles the objection that even if videogames are works of art, they are necessarily of the lowest aesthetic and artistic quality because of the way users must engage with them; since videogames are meant to be played, users cannot help but act willfully during gameplay. Thus, they are unable to meet the transcendental thesis (most commonly attributed to Kant and Schopenhauer)

required for aesthetic experiences of the highest value. Without rejecting the already well-contested transcendental thesis, I entertain the possibility that if videogames are artworks, they are best understood as kitsch art and are unable to provide the highest kind of aesthetic experiences. In defending against this claim, I develop an original account of kitsch gameplay as a vehicle to help understand the potential aesthetic value of individual videogames. Finally, I use a Schopenhauerian version of the transcendental thesis and argue that videogames with well-designed gameplay create opportunities for players to enter states of flow that are proprioceptively experienced as will-less action. In doing so, such games adhere to the transcendental thesis and can afford aesthetic experiences of the highest quality. At the end of this chapter, I offer my concluding remarks on the dissertation as a whole.

Chapter 2: Appreciating Videogames

Videogames are distinctive as a form of art precisely because they *are games*. A comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic of videogames requires an explanation of how videogames qua games affect the aesthetic experience of videogames qua works of art. The problem of ignoring how the gamehood of videogames affects our appreciative understanding has its roots in the way that scholars often argue that videogames are a legitimate form of art: videogames are compared with other widely accepted art forms, similarities are noted, and the conclusion is that videogames have enough in common with other art forms that they should be considered art. While this strategy can be convincing, it does a disservice to the videogame medium by inviting people to consider videogames works of art *despite* their gamehood; yet what makes studying videogames as works of art worthwhile is grounded partly in our understanding of them as games. In this chapter, I lay out what I take to be the root of this problem: the answers to distinct questions regarding what makes an object art and how that object is to be appreciated once identified as art are often conflated. I first offer a brief discussion of the way in which scholars often argue that videogames are legitimate works of art, noting the lack of reference to game mechanics. I then make the case that specificity of art form plays a central role in the appreciative understanding of works of art; in the case of videogames, part of their distinctness as works of art is that they are games. Thus, I offer an account of game mechanics that explains the impact that the gamehood of videogames has on our aesthetic attitudes towards the

medium. Lastly, I offer a few examples of how game mechanics affect the aesthetic experience of playing videogames.

Section I: The Comparative Approach

To begin, let's look at one common way videogames are often categorized as works of art. A strong case can be made for categorizing videogames as works of art by comparing them to other works and noting the features they share. This strategy has roots in contemporary theories of art. Here, we'll focus on prominent theories proposed by Jerrold Levinson and Berys Gaut, both of which lend themselves to the comparative approach.²

In a series of well-known papers, Levinson presents what is referred to as an intentional-historical definition of art.³ Levinson first formulates his theory of art in "Defining Art Historically," where he writes:

X is an artwork at *t*

=df *X* is an object of which it is true at *t* that some person or persons, having the appropriate propriety right over *X*, nonpassingly intends (or intended) *X* for regard-as-a-work-of-art – i.e. regard in any way (or ways) in which objects in the extension of 'artwork' prior to *t* are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded. (1979, p.240)

In unpacking Levinson's definition of art, there are two key points of which to take note. First, and most obvious, is Levinson's reliance on the artist's intention when determining whether or not something is an artwork. More specifically, a person who creates the work must have intended for it be regarded in a way in which

² My argument can be generalized to most theories and definitions of art. However, examining all the competing theories would be beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, I am restricting focus to two of the more recent influential approaches that employ a comparative method.

³ See Levinson (1979), (1989), (1993), (2002).

previous artworks have been correctly regarded. Levinson explicitly mentions that the artist need not be *aware* that her intention for *X* to be regarded in a certain way is one that falls in line with the way previous works have been correctly regarded. Even if the way the artist intends for her work to be regarded is, just by chance and unbeknownst to her, the same as other works have been correctly regarded, Levinson is willing to define such a work as art.

Second, it's clear that what makes artifacts art is contingent upon what modes of regard have been correctly applied to previous works of art. Here is where the importance of the history of the artworld comes in to play. To be art, *X* must be appropriately connected with the modes of regard that have been correctly applied to other artworks throughout history. Although Levinson is hesitant to give a full account of what modes of regard count as correct or standard, he does offer a list of examples. As a response to the potential objection that Levinson's theory is too broad and includes obvious non-art as art, he notes that the notion of modes of regard needs to be interpreted comprehensively, and something sharing just one aspect of a mode of regard with previous artworks may not necessarily be art:

Something closer to a comprehensive way of regard properly brought to bear on, say, almost any easel painting, would be this constellation: {with attention to color, with attention to painterly detail, with awareness of stylistic features, with awareness of art-historical background, with sensitivity to formal structure and expressive effect, with an eye to representational seeing, with willingness to view patiently and sustainedly, ...}. (1989, p.24)

At this point we can set aside the question of whether or not Levinson's reply is adequate to the objection he is responding to, and simply use his example of a comprehensive mode of regard of easel paintings as a way of understanding how

videogames are compared to traditional works of art. To determine whether an object shares a mode of regard with other commonly accepted works of art, you compare it with other works' intended mode of regard.

Just as Levinson's theory necessitates that a videogame's status as a work of art will rely on comparisons to other works of art, Gaut's does the same, albeit through different means. Dissatisfied with theories of art that propose a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be art, Gaut argues that art is best understood as a cluster concept.⁴ Starting from the view that definitions of art often fall prey to counterexamples, he follows a Wittgensteinian path, believing that "there are multiple criteria for the application of the concept, none of which is a necessary condition for something's being art" (Gaut 2005, p. 273). Here, Gaut understands criteria as properties that count towards an object's inclusion under a concept. He goes on to explain what it means to 'count towards' an object belonging to a concept:

First, if all of the properties that are criteria are instantiated, this suffices for an object to fall under the concept; and more strongly, if fewer than all of these properties are instantiated, this also suffices for the application of the concept. So there are jointly sufficient conditions for the application of the concept. Second, there are no properties that are individually necessary conditions for the object to fall under the concept (that is, there is no property that all objects falling under the concept must possess). Third, there are disjunctively necessary conditions for application of the concept: some of the properties must be instantiated if the object is to fall under the concept. (Gaut 2005, p.274)

In adopting this strategy, Gaut successfully avoids criticisms levied against definitions like Levinson's intentional-historical account. With no individually

⁴ See Gaut (2000), (2005).

necessary conditions, the cluster account has an easier time dealing with counterexamples that challenge the exclusiveness of traditional definitions of art.

Still, Gaut owes us a set of possible criteria we might include in our cluster; the formulation of which is inevitably based on the properties of other objects that are already widely considered works of art. Gaut offers the following as relevant criteria:

- (1) possessing positive aesthetic qualities, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure);
- (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings;
- (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (2000, p.28)

Proper understanding of Gaut's proposed criteria requires elucidation of two points. First, Gaut is quick to note that his set of criteria is amenable to change, should a plausible counterexample arise. He aims not to defend a particular version of the cluster account, but to offer it as a more palatable alternative to traditional definitions. Second, Gaut differentiates the cluster theory from a similar family resemblance theory that he calls resemblance-to-paradigm. "[The resemblance-to-paradigm] view holds that something is art by virtue of resembling paradigm artworks" (2005, p.275). In doing so, Gaut avoids problems of vacuity and incompleteness with respect to finding appropriate paradigm artworks. However, his view still calls for a comparative analysis of commonly accepted works of art in order to establish a set of criteria. It is unclear what other means would be available

in arguing for one set of criteria over another. The set must be established by taking inventory of the properties typically associated with commonly accepted works of art and noting the similarities, varied as they might be. In fact, Gaut understands this implication as a strength of the cluster theory, noting that we often appeal to a variety of criteria when arguing about whether something is art (2005, p.278). In doing so, we inevitably appeal to comparisons with other works of art.

Ultimately, Levinson and Gaut come to different conclusions on what makes an artifact a work of art, but both theories nicely represent the approach that some leading theories of art encourage: determining what makes an artifact a work of art often involves comparisons to other accepted works of art. This is particularly true with revolutionary artworks or works in new art forms: the art status of such works may be assessed by considering which features, intrinsic or relational, they share with established works. And the literature on videogames seems to reflect this.

In his article “Are Video Games Art?”, Aaron Smuts uses the comparative approach to argue that, according to most definitions of art, videogames can, in fact, be categorized as artworks. He relies heavily on comparisons to film. As Smuts notes, “game designers often try to make their games look more like film by including cut scenes and imitating other cinematic features. Most narrative-driven games are heavily interspersed with full-motion video sequences called cut-scenes” (2005, p.9). By deliberately including small cinematic scenes, game designers seem to have clear intentions of having games recognized as similar to works of cinema. Further, one could easily see this effort as being associated with criteria

from Berys Gaut's cluster account. After all, cinematic scenes in videogames can be formally complex, convey complex meanings, be expressive of emotion, be a product of a high degree of skill, etc., all in a manner similar to what might be seen in a film. Smuts goes on to discuss ways in which games often try to emulate the look of a film, e.g., through various lighting techniques. He notes that in the first-person shooter game *Halo*, when the player looks at the sun, it appears as if the player is looking through a cinematic camera (2005, p.9). It's no secret that videogames share many of the properties of other artworks in the medium of the moving image. As such, one would be hard-pressed to argue that game designers do not intend their products to be regarded in at least some of the ways other artworks have been historically and standardly regarded, which is what Levinson requires for arthood. Again, Smuts succinctly puts it, "Through repeated allusions and attempts at emulating the moving image, game designers intend that we appreciate their games as we do digital animation and video art" (2005, p.9). Hence, there are certain correct modes of regard with respect to the moving image that are also applicable to videogames. Likewise, if we consider videogames in relation to Gaut's cluster theory, many games seem to instantiate clusters of art-relevant criteria that, in other artworks, are sufficient for arthood.⁵

Similarities can be found between videogames and works in many other art forms. Many videogames are largely narrative driven, leading the player through an immersive story, much in the same way novels, plays, and epic poetry do. "Beyond

⁵ Gaut himself considers the art status of videogames as directly related to the connections they have with cinema. See Chapter of 5 of his *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (2010).

the goals of verisimilitude, games share narrative themes and expressive goals with the history of Western literature and theater” (Smuts 2005, p.11). Narrative-driven videogames address sociological, ideological, and political issues in a way also done in other forms of literature. For instance, the first-person shooter *BioShock* (2007) examines the notion of a dystopian society founded on objectivist morals featured in Ayn Rand’s famous *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). The entire story of *BioShock* is driven by themes widely considered in other artworks. Although it’s obvious *BioShock* was not intended to be regarded as a novel, the underlying narrative motifs are still present in both works. As such, a strong case could be made that the designers of *BioShock* intended for their game to be regarded in a manner similar to the way *Atlas Shrugged* was standardly regarded: as a reflection on the relationships among individual freedom, self-interest, and power. Here, we again find correct modes of regard with respect to a widely-accepted art form that are intended to be applied to videogames.

Though there are several similarities between videogames and other recognized art forms, for brevity’s sake I’ll only discuss one more. Specifically, videogames have the ability to evoke emotional responses much in the same way other art forms do. Grant Tavinor takes note of this similarity videogames share with other art forms when he discusses the case for videogames being art. In doing so, he explicitly takes the classification of videogames as an art from the cluster theory approach (Tavinor 2009, p.177). He also spends a chapter in *The Art of Videogames* arguing that we respond emotionally to videogames in a way

comparable to the way we respond to other fictional artworks (2009, p.131-149).⁶ Often, game designers use various strategies employed in other artworks to create fictions that we have genuine emotional responses to. They want to create an emotional experience similar to experiences one might get from engaging other art forms. As Dominic Lopes notes, “Video games present narratives and moving images. By doing so, they evoke the same kinds of emotional responses as we see in the classic fiction and film genres” (Lopes 2010, p.114). For example, the survival horror game *Resident Evil 4* (2005) uses various lighting and audio techniques to create a suspenseful, and at some points fearsome, fictional world, eliciting the corresponding emotional responses from the player. In creating dark, eerie environments that the player must traverse while fighting undead zombies, it seems clear the game designers wanted audiences to regard *Resident Evil 4* much in same way we might regard other frightening fictional works. Again, we see reason to believe that some videogames are specifically created to be regarded in a way other fictional artworks are sometimes standardly regarded, and that they instantiate many of the criteria from Gaut’s cluster account in doing so.

Given that videogames seem to engage the audience similarly to the way in which other art forms do, we have reason to believe that game designers intend for their product to be regarded, at least in some respect, in ways other works of art have also been regarded. Videogames incorporate elements from a variety of different artistic mediums to create experiences like those we might have with other

⁶ Tavinor ultimately concludes that part of what makes videogames distinct as potential works of art is their ability to elicit “self-directed” emotional responses.

artworks, thus instantiating many of the properties that count towards an object being a work of art. Overall, there is a myriad of similar modes of regard and cluster criteria that videogames share with other widely accepted forms of art.

Section II: The Problem with the Comparative Approach and a Possible Solution

Although the comparative approach is an effective strategy for convincing doubters that videogames are a legitimate art form, it often comes with an undesirable cost. Since games are not typically considered to be works of art, most of the comparisons made to other works of art either neglect or deliberately ignore essential elements of videogames that have a direct effect on our aesthetic and artistic appreciation of them. This can lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of the unique appreciative value videogames offer qua games. Exploring the root of the problem with the comparative approach will help set the stage for explaining the importance of gamehood of videogames and potential value it affords.

The problem with the comparative approach is that it leaves us susceptible to conflating two closely related, but distinct questions: (1) Which features make something an artwork? and (2) Which features of the thing are most central to appreciating it as art? At times, the answer to (1) is presented as the answer to (2) as well. The comparative approach may successfully establish a work's arthood by way of characteristics it shares with other works, but it would be a mistake to assume that these characteristics should be our primary focus when we appreciate or evaluate the works. Appreciation and evaluation rightly focus on features that

make a work distinctive, not those by virtue of which it resembles many other works of art.

It's important to recognize that using the comparative approach for a new classification of an artifact as art (or not) may be unavoidable; if the goal is to expand the extension of a category, then a comparison of the old members with the potential new members seems at least strongly intuitive, if not necessary.⁷ If this is true, then all revolutionary forms of art are potentially subject to the conflation problem. In fact, the conflation problem itself may contribute to the resistance some revolutionary artworks initially face by critics and audiences alike; they try to answer question 1 about a revolutionary work by appealing to accepted answers to question 2 about an already well-established work, where the well-established work seems to be the closest related object to the revolutionary work with respect to question 1. Film critic Roger Ebert's now infamous argument that videogames cannot be art rested in part on an assumption like this. "Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control ... I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art." (Ebert 2005, online). Ebert's statement seems to imply that because videogames relinquish authorial control, which is part of what we appreciate/evaluate in film, they necessarily cannot be appreciated as art. Both defenders and objectors of the art status of videogames are prone to conflation.

⁷ Thanks to Grant Tavinor for this helpful insight.

The framework for a possible solution to the conflation problem can be built on the works of Kendall Walton and Dominic McIver Lopes. In his well-known article “Categories of Art,” Walton argues for a contextualist understanding of aesthetic properties. Specifically, he says that a work’s aesthetic properties are contingent not only upon the work’s perceptible, non-aesthetic properties, but also on which of those non-aesthetic properties we see as standard, variable, and contra-standard relative to a category of art (Walton 1970, pp.338-9).

How, then, does Walton’s contextualist position help solve the conflation problem with the comparative approach to art categorization? By understanding features of a work as standard, variable, and contra-standard relative to a specific category of art, we have a way of distinguishing what features help answer question (2). What makes something a specific kind of work is the fact that it shares standard features associated with other works of that kind. But what we *appreciate* in any work is dependent primarily on what features are variable relative to its category. Thus, we can adequately answer (2) by appealing to the variable features of a work. A Waltonian framework offers a promising starting point for solving the problem: it highlights that the features that warrant our attention during appreciation can, and indeed should, be separated from those that motivate us to categorize it in a particular way.

At this point, we are left with two options for dealing with the conflation problem exhibited by some theories of art. We could simply ignore (1), noting that

answering (2) can still prove to be informative without requiring a theory of art.⁸ Or perhaps we could reframe (1) in a way that proves to be more fruitful, and lends itself to less confusion when answering both questions. In adopting the latter strategy, rather than ask, “what is it that makes something an artwork?,” we might ask, “what is it that makes something an artwork of *a specific kind*?” Call this question (1*), where a kind is a category established by a Waltonian framework. This strategy is one that Dominic McIver Lopes first discusses in “Nobody Needs a Theory of Art” (2008) and later refines in *Beyond Art* (2014).

In *Beyond Art*, Lopes begins defending (1*) over (1) by distinguishing what he calls his “buck passing theory of art” from “buck stopping theories of art,” like those of Levinson and Gaut (2014, pp.13-15). Traditional, “buck stopping” theories answer (1) by giving conditions or criteria intended to be applied to every work of art, regardless of kind. Lopes’ “buck passing” theory of art answers question (1), but in doing so raises two other important questions (hence, the metaphor of buck-passing). He holds that “ x is a work of art = x is a work of K , where K is an art” (2014, p.14). So, for Lopes, what makes something a work of art (i.e., the answer to question 1) is that it is a work of some art kind, K . From this, the two questions that lead to the ‘buck passing’ moniker reveal themselves: which kinds are art kinds and what distinguishes each art kind? These two questions are closely related to (1*) in so far as they all go beyond the more generalized task of developing an overall theory of art and focus on developing theories of the arts, or specific art forms

⁸ I suspect that most will see this as the more unpalatable of the two suggestions, especially if one favors a Waltonian framework: we need to place a work in a category first in order to know which features are variable (and thus expressive) relative to a category.

(2008, p.119). Lopes favors this approach because of what he sees as a common deficiency in most theories of art: theories like Levinson's and Gaut's fail to adequately address the problem of revolutionary artworks, or "hard cases" (2014, p.35). Spending a whole chapter in *Beyond Art*, Lopes argues that hard cases, or revolutionary works of art like Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or Duchamp's *Fountain*, create a dialectal impasse for theories of art. And this unavoidable impasse is enough to choose buck-passing theories over buck-stopping theories (2014, pp.53-8). He starts by dividing theories of art into two broad camps, traditional and genetic theories:

The 'traditional stance' is taken by theories that propose the possession of some exhibited feature (or a disjunction of exhibited features) to be necessary for an item to be a work of art. On any theory taking this stance, nothing can be a work of art unless some exhibited feature—sadness, beauty, profundity, for example—makes it so... The alternative is the 'genetic' stance. A theory taking this stance makes the possession of some genetic feature sufficient for being a work of art. As a result, all it takes for an item to be a work of art is for it to have the requisite provenance. What makes some items works of art may be their exhibited features, but this is not a necessary for art status. (Lopes, 2014, p.49)

Further, Lopes states that "genetic features of an art work are features of its provenance rather than its appearance or meaning (2014, p.48). Under Lopes' distinction, Levinson's theory of art is an example of the genetic kind, where having a correct intended mode of regard establishes the appropriate provenance of the work, and thus its status as an artwork. On the other hand, Gaut's account is

primarily an example of the traditional stance, where a work needs to exhibit properties from an established cluster of criteria in order to be categorized as art.⁹

After dividing buck-stopping theories into two different kinds, Lopes goes on to say that the motivation for favoring one over the other (either the traditional or genetic stance) relies on the intuition you have regarding hard cases. In short, genetic theories are favored by those who believe things like Cage's *4'33"* and Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* are artworks because such theories supply the tools needed to defend the art status of these hard cases. Those who favor traditional theories do so with the opposite intuition; hard cases are more easily denied artwork status based on their failure to exhibit the required features defined by a specific traditional stance.

By itself, the dilemma created by clashing intuitions is not enough to give up on buck-stopping theories. An argument can still be made in favor of either the genetic or traditional approach, based on which stance meets the criteria of theory choice, where the criteria include both normative and descriptive adequacy. So, Lopes' final step in setting up the dialectal impasse is to examine the criteria used to choose between theories (2014, p.53). However, the criteria of theory choice seem to be based on the same clashing intuitions that fuel the dilemma between the genetic and traditional stances: "The trouble is, there is a deep disagreement about the criteria for choosing a theory of art and this disagreement about criteria for theory choice stems from clashing intuitions about the hard cases" (Lopes 2014,

⁹ Admittedly, some of the properties Gaut includes in his cluster can be understood as genetic features. Thanks to Sherri Irvin for pointing this out.

p.53). Those with traditionalist intuitions about hard cases will argue that the most important criterion for theory choice is normative adequacy. That is, which of the competing theories best aligns with our intuitions over how *we ought* to categorize hard cases? On the other hand, geneticists will insist that descriptive adequacy is paramount: which of the competing theories best captures actual artworld practices when it comes to hard cases? The deeply rooted intuitions about hard cases lying at the heart of both traditional and genetic theories seem to be unwavering, and this is where Lopes sees the dilemma turning into an unavoidable dialectal impasse:

In brief, the choice between theories in each stance is impossible to make because the stances represent contrary intuitions on the hard cases, and furthermore, the same intuitions determine criteria of theory choice. The debates represent a clash of intuitions that they cannot resolve. (2014, p.55)

In light of the dialectal impasse, Lopes suggests that we should move past the task of answering question (1), and focus more intently on (1*), which would naturally help us answer question (2) with respect to revolutionary forms of art, including videogames.

Section III: Videogames as Games

Having established the need for both understanding and appreciating works of art in relation to an appropriate art kind, an examination of videogames as an art kind is in order. Such a task requires understanding how videogames operate as games. What makes videogames distinct from other art kinds is that as games, they are meant to be played. Since Wittgenstein famously challenged the ability to define “game” with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), scholars have wrestled with questions of both what it means

to be a game, and what it means to play a game. Without diving too deep into those waters, we can look to a general theory of games provided by Bernard Suits to see how aesthetic value of videogames is shaped by their essential gamehood. In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Suits takes direct aim at Wittgenstein's position, offering what he takes to be a definition of gameplay:

My conclusion is that to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (2014, p.48)

From this general definition of what it means to play a game, Suits goes on to identify four elements that together constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions of gameplay. He states, “the elements of game are 1/ the goal, 2/ the means of achieving the goal, 3/ the rules, and 4/ the lusory attitude [of the player(s)]” (Suits 2014, p.50). We can use elements that Suits mentions as a foundation for understanding how specific gameplay mechanics, as opposed to pure cinematic or narrative elements, shape the distinct value of videogames.¹⁰

Applying Suits' general theory of gameplay to videogames highlights a key difference between them and their traditional counterparts.¹¹ Videogames are a special kind of game in terms of how players engage with them. Part of what distinguishes videogames from other kinds of games is the way in which the

¹⁰ It's worth noting that although Suits is offering these elements as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute gameplay, I am not committed, nor need I be, to this conclusion. Rather, I see Suits as offering a strong framework with which we can understand the nature of videogames *as games*, regardless of whether or not the four elements constitute necessary and sufficient and conditions for gameplay.

¹¹ Brock Rough (2017) argues that not all videogames are games. If this is the case, then some videogames may require a form of appreciation that is distinct from what I advocate here. The details will depend on the specifics of these artworks and how they function.

constitutive rules of the game are set up and enforced. Because videogames are run on computers, the constitutive rules of the game are part of the computer program itself and cannot be broken by the player without direct manipulation of the program.¹² This restriction doesn't apply to more traditional games. For instance, if you're playing chess on a physical board with real pieces, you can easily break the constitutive rules: you could simply move your rook diagonally across the board. However, if you're playing chess on a computer, it's impossible to move your rook in any way other than horizontally or vertically on the board; the constitutive rules of chess are part of the computer program itself and restrict players' movements to legal moves without exception. Thus, in videogames the lusory means that are both afforded and restricted by the constitutive rules cannot be easily modified.¹³ However, the result of breaking or changing the constitutive rules of a videogame is the same as it is with traditional games. If a player directly changes the computer program in a way that affects the constitutive rules of chess, then the resulting game would no longer be chess.

At this point, we can use Suits' theory of gameplay to examine how the aesthetical value of videogames is shaped by their gamehood. The rules, the lusory means prescribed by the rules, and the lusory attitude of the player(s) all have the

¹² There are cases where socially constructed rules may be considered constitutive and exist outside of the game algorithm. In competitive gaming communities, for example, certain character abilities and/or playstyles may be banned for a particular event. Such cases present an ontological challenge but have less of an impact on the normative concern in this chapter.

¹³ Admittedly, some games allow for opportunities to modify constitutive rules: changing the difficulty settings among easy, medium, or hard in any videogame may be understood as changing the constitutive rules. Even in such cases, there are restrictions on how much players can modify the rules, so there is always a core set of constitutive rules that players must abide by. My thanks to Jon Robson for pointing this out.

potential to shape the aesthetics of videogame play. To illustrate this point, I turn attention to the concept of failure in videogames and how it relates to Suits' elements of gameplay.

Section IV: Failure as a Function of Game Mechanics

Suits' framework provides the tools needed to see how gameplay in videogames affects the aesthetically appreciable features of the game itself. More often than not, videogames are played with the intention of completing a prescribed prelusory goal. And like most games, attempts at completing the prelusory goal within the prescribed lusory means often fail. Analyzing the concept of failure and its relationship to videogame mechanics helps illustrate the importance of gameplay in our aesthetic appreciation of the game. In this section, I briefly explain the importance of failure and its connection to videogame mechanics. I then argue that the variety of ways in which a player may fail in a videogame are best understood in relation to important Suitsian game concepts. Failure made possible by players interacting with the formal features of a game (i.e., the lusory means prescribed by the constitutive rules used to accomplish prelusory goals) is desirable. However, failure induced by poorly conceived and executed mechanics that disrupt these formal features is the wrong *kind* of failure: it is failure that hinders or eliminates the possibility of experiencing aesthetically appreciable elements of the game. Ultimately, this argument strengthens my overall position that proper understanding and evaluation of videogames as an art kind demands

accounting for gameplay and player performance; and that the value of the videogame qua game directly affects the value of the game qua work of art.

Regardless of how objectives are presented to a player, simply setting up goals opens up the door to potential failure. Most often, players engaging in a game expect a certain level of failure when exploring in game environments for solutions to gameworld problems. In fact, to a certain extent failure is welcomed when playing a videogame. Part of adopting the lusory attitude that Suits sees as an essential part of gameplay is tacitly accepting the idea that the less than efficient means by which you choose to accomplish the prelusory goal can lead to failure. By adopting the lusory attitude, players knowingly accept that following the constitutive rules of the game may cause failure to achieve the prelusory goal. As Jesper Juul notes in *The Art of Failure*, “if you pick up a single-player video game, you expect the designer to have spent considerable effort preventing you from easily reaching your goal, all but guaranteeing that you will at least temporarily fail” (2013, p.11). The expectation of failure plays a key role in keeping the player in the proper epistemic relationship with the game that is needed to retain at least some level of interactivity for the player as she progresses through the game and becomes more proficient at navigating the in-game environment. If a player is guaranteed success without the threat of failure, then engagement with the game turns into manipulation as opposed to interaction.¹⁴ The limited unpredictability

¹⁴ For a more detailed account of the relationship between unpredictability and interactivity, see chapter 3.

required for interaction is no longer a feature of the game if success is a foregone conclusion.¹⁵

Furthermore, if the prelusory goals are too easy to achieve within the prescribed lusory means, then the game becomes less enjoyable.¹⁶ Juul discusses this phenomenon at length, drawing comparisons to the paradox of tragedy (2013, pp.33-45). He argues that gamers purposely seek out games in which they expect to fail even though failure is generally regarded as a negative experience, much in the same way audiences seek out tragic cinema and theatre even though such works are meant to elicit negative emotional reactions. Juul ran an online experiment to test if failure is correlated with enjoyment when playing a simple game he designed. After playing, he asked the players to rate how much they enjoyed their experience. “As it turned out, the most positive players were the ones who failed some, and then completed the game. Players who completed the game without failing gave it a *lower* rating than those who failed at least once” (Juul 2013, p.36). No matter how the paradox of failure is resolved, the mere fact that it exists illustrates how important the prospect of failure is in videogames. Therefore, establishing what constitutes an acceptable level of difficulty is a key in gameplay design, and requires meticulous construction of the constitutive rules.

¹⁵ There may be videogames where the unpredictability of possible outcomes remains without the possibility of failure if there are multiple ways a player can succeed. In cases with multiple win conditions, the idea of temporary failure at achieving one of those conditions is still importantly connected with unpredictability. Thanks to Jon Robson for pointing this out.

¹⁶ Conversely, if a videogame is *too difficult*, players’ enjoyment suffers as well. So it is important that the potential for failure is created through appropriate, balanced game rules.

With the relationship between failure and game mechanics in mind, I turn my attention to the impact it has on how videogames are appreciated. When successful, game mechanics relating to the constitutive rules and lusory means that help determine difficulty share two important features. First, they ensure a player will remain challenged and typically fail to accomplish a goal at some point during play. Second, successful employment of one or more of the mechanics ensures that player fails due to her *own actions*, erroneous or otherwise, and not because of poor gameplay design. Each of these features can have a significant impact on the aesthetically appreciable elements of a game. Regarding the first, Juul noted that the expectation of failure plays an important role in a player's overall enjoyment of a videogame. From this point it's no challenge to see how a game that is too easy suffers aesthetically as well. Often when a game is too easy players become disengaged, and the potential for a unique aesthetic experience found through interactivity and immersion is lost. Games that are too easy, or require little attention to rules of skill, fail to take full advantage of what sets videogames apart from other artistic mediums: the potential for a highly immersive, interactive experience. A player that is challenged is more likely to feel that her input actually matters in her gaming experience, thus deepening the level of immersion into the game world. This, in turn, opens the door for a more meaningful and appreciative experience. Games that don't challenge a player come across as dull and boring and lose the distinguishing features of their artistic medium. They fail to take full advantage of the unique way games can get a player personally invested in the

overall experience she is helping create. In doing so, easy games negate the value of working within the videogame medium.

Moreover, it's important to note that failure adds to the value of the game and a player's overall enjoyment only if her input plays a crucial role in bringing about failure. As Juul noted, this type of failure, caused by user action (where the action is best understood as failing to follow the prescribed rules of skill), is welcomed when playing a game. However, when failure is a product of poorly constructed constitutive rules and other faulty game mechanics as opposed to user choice, it detracts from the overall appreciative value of the game.¹⁷ Perhaps the most obvious way is when a player is unable to advance the narrative due to a game glitch or design error. Further, when failure is at least in part a product of badly designed game mechanics, the actual play of the game is a detriment to the entire experience. Games that contain numerous glitches, are unbalanced, or have poor or unnecessarily complex control schemes often lead to failure in the wrong sort of way.

For instance, when the fourth installment of the popular action role-playing *Fallout* series, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), was first released it was littered with numerous bugs and glitches that severely affected a player's ability to progress through the game. One of the more serious bugs involved losing saved game files

¹⁷ There are videogames where random failures may occur despite a player's choice. *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008) is one example. At random times, a player's character may trip and fall not because of any action she took, but because random falls are built into the algorithm of the game. Arguably, such events in videogames are best understood as failure produced by constitutive rules, and it could be contended that videogames which rely too heavily on randomly generated failure as their primary source for failure rapidly lose appreciative value by creating a disconnect between player choices and game outcomes. However, fully addressing this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter.

in their entirety if the player entered a certain area of the game world. Throughout the game, there are numerous underground areas, or vaults, to explore. Each vault is numbered, and several players reported having trouble with their saved game file when they entered Vault 3 (GameFAQs 2011, online). After completing the missions in Vault 3, upon trying to exit the vault and return to the main world players reported not being able to save their game anymore, and that all other saved files they had were corrupt and could not load. With the potential for over 100 hours of gameplay, *New Vegas* requires multiple sittings to complete; the ability to save your progress is a necessity. Thus, a problem of this magnitude makes the game virtually unplayable and failure inevitable, obviously negating most of the enjoyment that the game might have offered, aesthetic or otherwise. Less severe glitches and bugs were also reported that contributed to failure in the wrong sort of way; there are other instances where enemies glitch and ‘melt’ into the environment, rendering them invisible to the player, yet they can still inflict damage on the player’s character. Thus, the player is left facing unbeatable enemies and unavoidable failure. These bugs contribute to failure regardless of user input, and lead to frustrating gaming experiences, with no chance of player success. In turn, what was intended to be an aesthetically immersive experience where a player feels as if they are engaging first hand in an intense and mysterious world becomes a display of inept world-making.

New Vegas’s bugs and glitches, which lead to the wrong kind of failure, sever the connection between player and game, and work and audience, otherwise

found in a game without such problems. The sense of control needed for an interactive experience is lost, and the player is alienated from the game-world, no longer feeling as if her choices actually matter in producing what she is experiencing. In addition to rendering the game unresponsive to user input, glitches like those found in *New Vegas* serve as the wrong sort of reminder that the player is engaging in a work of fiction. Non-player characters suddenly disappearing without explanation is similar to a performer breaking character in a play or movie; it damages the cohesiveness of the fictional world and leaves the audience confused.

The relationship between failure and game mechanics represents just one of the ways in which the gamehood of videogames affects their aesthetic value. When it comes to narrative driven games, striking a balance between gameplay, player choice, and telling a worthwhile story is not an easy task. In the following section, I examine how constitutive rules work in conjunction with storytelling, further establishing the importance of including gamehood in our aesthetic understanding of videogames.

Section IV: Constitutive Rules and Narrative

I mentioned in the opening section that when establishing the art status of videogames, scholars often deliberately ignore gamehood and focus on other artistic elements of the medium. This strategy leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes videogames a unique artistic medium. Thus far I have addressed the problem only from a theoretical standpoint by highlighting the need to establish a videogame aesthetic (or theory of videogames as an art kind)

that includes features of gamehood for a more accurate understanding of the medium. However, the disjointed approach to understanding the aesthetics of videogames is, in part, a product of how game designers and producers sometimes approach their craft: when it comes to balancing gamehood with narrative, the divide between the two elements is rarely addressed. Yet even this divide helps galvanize the idea that gamehood is essential to developing an adequate understanding of videogame aesthetics. To illustrate, let's look at how the videogames *Braid* (2008) and *The Last of Us* (2013) incorporate the constitutive rules of their respective gameplay into their narratives.

Developed by independent game designer Jonathon Blow, *Braid* is a side-scrolling puzzle platformer, where the player controls the protagonist, Tim, who is trying to rescue a princess from an unknown enemy.¹⁸ Each level of *Braid* invites the player to solve various in-game puzzles in an effort to collect jigsaw puzzle pieces which must be put together to advance to the next level. For the most part, *Braid* plays like any other puzzle platformer: players must traverse in-game obstacles by jumping across pits and onto platforms, disposing of enemies by jumping on their heads, or simply running away from them. Anyone familiar with *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) will recognize most of the game mechanics. However, *Braid's* signature game mechanic, set up by its constitutive rules, allows the player to manipulate time in various ways to progress through the game. Rather than giving the player a set number of lives to complete levels like *Mario Bros.*, *Braid*

¹⁸ *Braid's* general story pays homage to the classic "hero saves the princess" trope seen in games like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and *Legend of Zelda* (1986).

allows the player to rewind time whenever an error is made and try a different approach. And each level adds a wrinkle to the basic time manipulation mechanic that is central to solving the central puzzle of that particular level. For instance, in world 4, in addition to the player being able to rewind at the press of a button, time is manipulated when Tim moves across the screen: as Tim moves towards the right, time goes forward, and when he moves left, time rewinds. As the player progresses, the twists to time manipulation from previous levels are often incorporated into the next level, building on puzzles already solved.

Although other games have utilized time manipulation as a game mechanic, *Braid* sets itself apart by synthesizing the mechanic with its narrative.¹⁹ When the player is first introduced to Tim, it's unclear what has happened to his Princess, or why she's in need of rescue; but what is clear is that Tim has made some sort of mistake and is stricken with guilt and regret. Before the first level starts, the player is presented with a brief paragraph explaining Tim's melancholia:

Tim is off on a search to rescue the Princess. She has been snatched by a horrible and evil monster. This happened because Tim made a mistake. Not just one. He made many mistakes during the time they spent together, all those years ago. . . Our world, with its rules of causality, has trained us to be miserly with forgiveness. . . But if we've learned from a mistake and become better for it, shouldn't we be rewarded for the learning, rather than punished for the mistake? (*Braid*, 2008)

Almost immediately, *Braid's* storyline invites the player to consider what it would be like to go back in time and make up for past mistakes. Tim is clearly regretful of past wrongdoing and will go to great lengths to make up for it. The narrative

¹⁹For example, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003) both use time manipulation as a game mechanic.

focuses on a character yearning to erase the past, and the central game mechanic maps seamlessly on to this idea. By allowing the player to rewind time, *Braid* successfully connects its gamehood with the narrative, taking full advantage of the interactivity videogames offer. Doing so creates a cohesive object of aesthetic appreciation, where the artistic value of the narrative and gamehood are intimately intertwined.

In the last level, *Braid* solidifies the connection between its central game mechanic and the story. Curiously labeled “1,” the final level tasks the player with rescuing the Princess from her captor. The player can still manipulate time, only in this level, time already flows in reverse; so when she presses the corresponding button, time then flows forward. As the level opens up, Tim is underground, separated from the Princess who is on the surface, being held by a large figure wearing a knight’s armor. Tim watches as the Princess escapes the knight’s grasp, crying out for help, with the knight calling for her to come back. She then runs across the stage while Tim, still underground, races to catch up with her, avoiding various obstacles and traps along the way. At the end of the stage, Tim finally reaches the Princess. However, when he gets close to her, time suddenly reverses flow, and the player watches as the actions she took to rescue the Princess are reversed.²⁰ Now, the Princess is running *away* from Tim as he gives pursuit. Again, she cries out for help, and this time the knight is calling for her to join him, as she jumps into his arms, avoiding the reach of Tim. As the level ends, the player

²⁰ Recall that in the final level time is already reversed, so once Tim reaches the Princess, time starts moving forward again.

realizes Tim is the monster that the Princess is hiding from, and the knight comes to her rescue. Again, *Braid* invites the player to see the central game mechanic as a crucial part of the narrative itself. Tim desperately wants to right the wrongs he committed in the past, and the game mechanic reflects his desire before helping reveal the twist ending: no matter what Tim does, his past mistakes are irreversible. Integrating the game mechanic with the narrative as *Braid* does makes the narrative more impactful to the player, and helps *tell* the story, rather than diminish it.

Where *Braid* succeeds in taking full advantage of the opportunity videogames provide for telling an immersive story, *The Last of Us* represents a case where the gamehood detracts from the potential aesthetic impact narrative videogames can offer. Set in a modern day dystopian society, *The Last of Us* is a survival horror action adventure played from the third person perspective. Most of the game takes place twenty years after an airborne fungal outbreak turns humans into zombie-like monsters. The player controls Joel, weathered survivor of the original outbreak, who reluctantly takes on the task of escorting Ellie, a teenage girl, from Pittsburgh to one of the last medical centers standing in Salt Lake City. Ellie represents humanity's last chance of curing the outbreak, as she is somehow immune to the effects of the fungus. The hope is that the doctors in Salt Lake will be able to create a vaccine based off of Ellie's immunity.

Throughout the journey to Salt Lake, the player must navigate her way through infected zombies, hostile groups of survivors, and environmental obstacles impeding progress. As far as the central game mechanics go, *The Last of Us* keeps

with the tradition of most survival horror games. The player can choose to directly confront enemies, using a variety of weapons to dispatch them, use a stealthier approach by sneaking around enemies and avoiding conflict altogether, or use a mixture of both strategies. Resources like weapons, ammunition, and first aid are scarce, so the player must plan her strategy accordingly.

Although the gameplay of *The Last of Us* is standard when it comes to games of its genre, the story and character development have been praised almost universally by critics and gamers alike. The game received an overall rating of 95 on metacritic.com, with several commenting on the unusual success of a compelling story being told through a game (Metacritic 2018, online). The story primarily revolves around Joel and Ellie's relationship. Throughout the game, the player learns about Joel and Ellie's pasts, and how their pasts affect their relationship. Mostly through cut-scenes and scripted dialogue, it's revealed that Joel had a daughter close to Ellie's age when the outbreak first occurred and was unable to save her. This sets up his future relationship with Ellie, as he slowly accepts his role as Ellie's protector and surrogate father figure. Moreover, Ellie, who was born after the initial outbreak, only knows a world post-apocalypse. Joel often serves as a historian for Ellie, explaining how life was before the outbreak. As the story progresses, Joel and Ellie's father/daughter-like relationship is cemented as the player navigates the gameworld. Solving various puzzles in order to progress often requires help from Ellie, further strengthening the relationship between the Joel (the player) and Ellie. Joel and Ellie work together throughout the

game, establishing a dynamic bond where they become mutually dependent on one another; as many times as the player is asked to save Ellie by controlling Joel, Ellie saves Joel an equal amount.

By the time the game and story reach the climax, Joel and Ellie have formed a fiercely loyal connection with one another: a connection that the player can't help but feel obligated to protect. So when they finally reach the hospital, there is an unnerving sense that the player will be faced with a difficult choice. Again, through a series of cut-scenes and contextual dialogue, it's revealed that extracting the tissue necessary to create the vaccine and save humanity will kill Ellie. At this point, Ellie has been knocked unconscious in a previous fight, so it's up to Joel to make the decision: leave Ellie with the doctors, essentially killing her but saving humanity, or violently break her out, dooming humanity but saving her life.

The entire game and storyline set up the player to confront this unavoidable, anxiety-ridden choice. As I was playing the game, anticipating the moment when I would have to decide whether to save Ellie or save humanity came with a sense of agony. Although I knew it was building to this point, I still didn't know what choice I would make. And then, as the moment approached, the game did something that, within a highly interactive medium, came as an unwanted surprise: the choice was made for me. In a cut-scene lasting roughly 10 minutes, Joel breaks Ellie out and kills any doctors stopping him from escaping with a still unconscious Ellie in his arms. As they drive away in the following shot, Joel lies to Ellie, knowing full well that she would have wanted to stay and sacrifice her life for the

good of humanity. He tells her that there were others like her and that the doctors were unsuccessful in creating a vaccine, ultimately giving up on the project. In the final scene, as Joel and Ellie are walking through the wilderness back to a community they discovered earlier, Ellie again confronts Joel, asking him to swear that he told her the truth about the hospital. For the second time, Joel's response is left out of the hands of the player, as he lies once more to Ellie, knowing she would never forgive him if she knew the truth.

Although telling the final chapter of the story through non-interactive cut-scenes and scripted dialogue creates a cohesive and lasting impression, it makes for a less interesting overall work of art *qua* videogame. In this case, the rules of the game prohibited the player from making any choice about how *she* would respond, given the choice that the entire story was building towards. Because the pivotal moment of choice is taken out of the player's hands, the final product is disjointed. Nothing about *The Last of Us* *qua* game relates to or reinforces *The Last of Us* *qua* narrative. The relationship built up between the player (playing as Joel) and Ellie is cast aside, as the player is forced to passively watch the ending unfold, rather than being a part of it. By restricting the player's actions in this way, *The Last of Us* fails to take advantage of the special opportunity videogames can provide to their audience as an interactive medium. What's left is a distinct story *and* a distinct game rather than a story told *through* a game.²¹

²¹An alternative (and perhaps more charitable) interpretation suggests that the lack of player-controlled narrative in *The Last of Us* is deliberate. That is, the game intentionally restricts choices to foreground a characterological dissonance between the player and their character Joel. The player's lack of narrative freedom may be a self-reflective *feature* meant to highlight the complex

At this point it's clear that there are important non-aesthetic features of videogames *as games* that affect our aesthetic experience of them. If we are to have a complete understanding and proper evaluation of the aesthetically appreciable nature of videogames, then we must include these features in the discussion. Understood as a product of the constitutive rules, game mechanics are a perfect example of one such feature, affecting the appreciable nature through failure and storytelling. We cannot merely focus on the obvious similarities videogames may share with other artistic mediums. A framework that both recognizes and helps explain what sets videogames apart as an artistic medium needs to include an evaluation of gameplay, including game mechanics.

nature of the relationship between the perceived sense of authorial control gamers might feel and the reality that they are forced to follow certain narrative paths to finish the game. Whether the lack of freedom and disconnect between the narrative/gameplay is understood as a defect or a deliberate appreciative feature, *The Last of Us* still serves as an example why it is important to include features of gameplay in an appropriate mode of appreciation. My thanks to Grant Tavinor for pointing this out.

Chapter 3: Interactivity, Unpredictability, and Aesthetic Change in Videogames

Within the aesthetics literature, the topic of interactivity is being met with increasing interest. Surprisingly, though, there has been little written on how interactivity affects aesthetic experience. As a highly interactive medium, the videogame provides an excellent starting point for exploring the relationship between interactivity and aesthetic experience. In this chapter, I argue that the degree and source of interactivity has a significant aesthetic effect on the play of videogames. First, I draw an original distinction between agent-to-agent interaction and agent-to-non-agent interaction with a survey of the literature on interactivity. I then spell out the connection between meaningful interaction and unpredictability in videogames. Afterward I show that, in varying degrees, videogames rely on at least two sources of unpredictability: game-produced (built into the algorithm of the game) or player-produced (generated by players' choices). Finally, I illustrate that the aesthetic experience of playing videogames varies depending on the degree and source of unpredictability present in the game. Specifically, I show that if game-produced unpredictability is dominant, the narrative will play a larger role in the aesthetic experience. As game-produced unpredictability diminishes, game content (what is being presented) may recede in the player's experience while the mode of presentation becomes more prominent. In addition, as game-produced unpredictability decreases, player performance plays a more prominent role in

aesthetic experiences. The player may become more aware of *her own* involvement in creating her aesthetic experience.

Section I: Understanding Interactivity

Consider first the notion of interactivity and its relationship with unpredictability. Several definitions of interactivity have been proposed in various academic circles. As Lori Landry notes in her entry on interactivity in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, “the definition of interactivity has historically been contested, with scholars from different fields emphasizing either technology, the communication setting, or the perceiver, yielding different insights and interests” (2014, p.173). The number of attempts made to define interactivity speaks to both the importance of the concept itself and the difficulty one faces when explaining the term. It may be that the concept of interactivity cannot be properly understood with a singular definition in mind. Dominic McIver Lopes echoes this sentiment while discussing interactivity and computer art:

The trouble with “interactivity” isn’t that it’s meaningless. The real trouble is that it means too much—it means so many different things in so many different situations that it’s hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all definition... Luckily, a theory of interactivity isn’t obliged to cover interactivity in every domain, though it should fit all works of computer art. (2010, p.36)

Following Lopes’ lead, I will restrict my attention to the concept of interactivity as it relates to videogames specifically.

Videogames afford interactive experiences in two ways: interaction with the game system itself, and interaction with other players *through* the game.

Essentially, this is what separates single player games from multiplayer games. The

former is a case of agent-to-non-agent interaction, whereas the latter is a case of agent-to-agent interaction. Thus, understanding the fundamental difference between cases of agent-to-agent interaction and agent-to-non-agent interaction is paramount. Dating back to the well-known Turing Test, the question of whether machines (in our case, computers) could be appropriately considered genuine thinking agents in any robust sense depends on their ability to interact with other agents (Turing 1950, pp.433-60). The basic idea behind the Turing Test is to take both a person and a computer program, and have a judge discern which one is the person and which one is the computer by asking each a series of questions. If the judge cannot reliably distinguish between answers given by the computer and answers provided by a person, the computer is said to pass the test. In essence, the Turing Test uses a conversation between two people as a model by which to judge intelligence. A conversation is often taken as a classic example of interaction between two agents. In a conversation, both parties exert partial control over the direction of the exchange and where it ultimately ends. Each agent has limited command of how the conversation will develop, and responses are shaped by what the other agent is saying. Ideally, neither party can to completely dictate the flow of the exchange, yet each is able to adjust on the fly and respond accordingly to what the other person has said. There is an element of organic adaptivity in a conversation between two agents. Although each agent might be able to predict how the other is going to respond given the context and subject matter of the conversation, there is an open-endedness that characterizes the exchange. A person can interrupt the other to

expand on a topic or ask a related question, which would alter the course of the discussion.

It's precisely the lack of organic adaptivity that helps identify the computer in Turing Tests and that distinguishes agent-to-agent interactions from agent-to-non-agent interactions. Using a conversation as a model of a classically interactive exchange, videogame designers are tasked with creating a game that does its best to imitate the responses a genuine agent might give to user-generated input. By attempting to imitate genuine agent responses to user input, interactivity with non-agents materializes with a crucial epistemic component, dependent on the perception of the agent involved. The player, being the only agent, must be in the proper epistemic state with the game for the experience to be interactive: in cases of single player games, it needs to appear *as if* the player is interacting with another agent, instead of simply inputting data into a computer program. Videogames attempt to mimic or emulate the organic adaptivity found in genuine agent-to-agent interaction with what I call "limited unpredictability."

Aaron Smuts, Dominic McIver Lopes, and Andrew Lippman all offer accounts of interactivity earmarked by unpredictability. Explaining these views will clarify the notion of limited unpredictability. In his article "What is Interactivity?", Smuts argues for a generalized definition of interactivity. However, I will consider the adequacy of his account as it relates specifically to video games. He writes, "Something is interactive if and only if it (1) is responsive, and (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a

completely random fashion” (Smuts 2009, p.65). From conditions two and three, I take Smuts to be saying that interacting with something requires that that thing be at most partially controlled by your actions while at the same time producing results that at most partially control your subsequent actions. That is, the actions of all parties involved in an interaction are at least somewhat influenced by the other party, and no single party completely determines or dictates another party’s actions.

Though there must be some control involved when interacting with something, to have too much control over it would no longer be compatible with interaction. As Smuts puts it,

It is crucial to note that we must not be able to infallibly predict the response of that with which we are interacting. If we can reliably predict the response and there are no other ways in which we can act on the thing, then there is no longer interaction; there is merely control or manipulation. For the thing to remain interactive for us there must be forms of input that result in responses that we cannot accurately predict. (2009, p.65)

So, even though for something to be interactive it must not respond in a completely random way, it must also not be completely predictable. A good place to start making sense of a distinction between mere control and interaction would be at the level of predictable outcomes. The more predictable something’s responses to input become, the less interactive it becomes. On this view, the same thing can be interactive for one person (a novice), and not at all interactive for another person (an experienced player). Distinguishing between manipulation and interaction reinforces the notion that interactivity is a relational property dependent upon the epistemic position of the agent(s) involved. If an agent becomes too familiar with

the responses that a non-agent will give to specific input, then the exchange shifts from interaction to manipulation.

Here, we begin to see the importance of understanding Smuts' account of interactivity as specialized to interacting with non-agents.²² The limited unpredictability of game responses to user input attempts to capture some of the organic adaptivity found in agent-to-agent interaction. When successful, it offers control to the player, yet the responses to user input are varied enough to make them difficult to predict, simulating the presence of genuine agency behind the responses to the player's input. Keeping Smuts' notion of interactivity in mind, let's look at what Lopes says about unpredictability and interactivity.

Like Smuts, Lopes recognizes the important role unpredictability plays in making sense of interactivity. Ultimately, Smuts and Lopes come to different conclusions about what it means for something to be interactive; Lopes does not explicitly include a condition of unpredictability in his definition of interactivity. However, he does mention that unpredictability is an important feature in paradigm examples of interactive objects. In "An Ontology of Interactive Art," Lopes draws upon the ontology of games to help develop an ontology of interactive art. He takes games to be an example of strong interactivity because "their users' input helps determine the subsequent state of play"; moreover, Lopes points out that the players help determine the structural properties of the game itself (2001, p.68). At any point during a game, a player has at least partial control over how that

²² This is not to say that Smut's account of interactivity isn't tenable in understanding agent-to-agent interaction. Organic adaptivity that earmarks agent-to-agent interaction ensures that there is at least some unpredictability in the responses to input from both agents.

particular instance of the game is laid out. The rules of the game, combined with player choices, determine the properties of the states of play. For example, at any given point in a chess game, the location of the bishop is determined by the rules dictating how it can move on the board, the current layout of other pieces, and the choice of the player to move the piece. Once the game has started, an explanation of the structure of the game at any given point would inevitably involve a description of a player's input. Lopes goes on to say,

Playings of most games, like baseball or chess, can progress through an indefinite number of sequences of states. This is a key feature of games worth playing. Our enjoyment of games depends on their future states being unpredictable. (2001, p.75)

Admittedly, Lopes is not offering unpredictability as a necessary or sufficient condition for interactivity.²³ However, he does seem to acknowledge that interactivity and unpredictability are close bedfellows. For Lopes, what makes a game strongly interactive may be the fact that the player plays a direct role in bringing about different sequences of states, but what makes this interactivity interesting and worthwhile is the unpredictability of the sequences of states themselves. Both Lopes and Smuts thus see unpredictability as an important element that shapes interactive relationships.

Unsurprisingly, Smuts and Lopes are not the only ones who see the connection between unpredictability and interactivity. In an interview with Stewart Brand discussing interactivity, MIT Professor Andrew Lippman notes the

²³ For the most part, I favor Smuts' definition of interactivity over Lopes'. However, the fact that Lopes does not require unpredictability for interactivity is not detrimental to my position. That he sees a crucial relationship between the enjoyment of strongly interactive media and unpredictability is sufficient for my purposes.

importance of a program not being too predictable in its responses to user input (Brand 1987, pp.45-50). Lippman frames unpredictability as “limited look-ahead.”

He states:

Another one was limited look-ahead...You can't have precomputed everything you're going to say. In a conversation, how far ahead of where you're talking are you really thinking? You have a goal, but since it's interactive, and each one of us is going to interrupt the other, we can't anticipate ever reaching that goal or where we're going or how far we're going to digress, so you don't look that far ahead in composing interaction. From the point of view of programming it would mean that you wouldn't necessarily string together the entire database...[Y]ou'd start to draw upon the whole database on the fly, to compose what your responses would be. See? It has to be on the fly. (Brand 1987, p.48)

Lippman is approaching the concept from the view of what it takes for a non-agent to keep the agent in the proper epistemic state in order for interaction to take place. He goes on to say, “you want to avoid building a system that sort of has this default path that you're going to go down unless you change it. You really do want it to happen on the fly, because defaults are...boring” (Brand 1987, pp.48-9). If a system's responses to user input become too predictable, and the agent can look ahead and see how each sequence in the exchange plays out, then the level of interaction rapidly decreases. Lippman seems to agree with Lopes that what makes interaction enjoyable is the limited unpredictability of the exchange itself, a sentiment showcased in many videogames.

For example, in the basketball videogame *NBA 2K13* (2012), the player is invited to create a basketball player and guide him through an NBA career in a game mode called “MyCareer.” The developers go to great lengths to make the experience immersive and interactive: in addition to simply playing in simulated

NBA games, the player can personalize the look and position her character plays; play in multiple seasons; sign endorsement deals; track her popularity through social media; meet with general managers to discuss trades, contracts, and other players on the team; design her own shoe; and answer questions during post-game interviews. Essentially, *NBA 2K13* draws upon classic elements from character customization found in traditional role-playing games and packages them in a sports game. At this point, I want to focus one specific feature of MyCareer mode to illustrate why limited unpredictability plays such an integral role in creating interactive experiences: the post-game interview. After each basketball game, there is a press conference where the player's character (PC) is asked a question about his performance in the game. The player is then given a choice between four different responses, with each response affecting the PC's popularity among fans and teammates in a different way. The question asked during the interview is determined in part by the player's performance in the basketball game. For instance, after a game that I played in which I scored a considerable number of points, I was asked, "It seemed pretty clear that you tried to step it up offensively. Is there anything particular you can point to that led to this performance?" I had four response options: A) I was just having a good game, B) Mostly Coach and my teammates, C) Not wanting to lose the game, D) I was hitting my shots. The first time I encountered this question, the exchange felt like I was genuinely interacting with the game. Limited unpredictability worked in at least two ways to help create the feeling of interaction. First, the question itself seemed naturally linked to my

performance, capturing some of the organic adaptivity one might experience in a real conversation about the game. Clearly, my input mattered in the direction that the interview took, yet I could not have predicted exactly what question was going to be asked of me. Further, the responses I could offer all seemed to represent natural responses a real NBA player might consider, but I couldn't predict with high accuracy how each response would affect my PC's popularity among fans and teammates. In this instance of the post-game interview, limited unpredictability helped create the proper epistemic state for me to be in as if I was interacting with the game itself; the responses to my input weren't entirely random, yet they weren't easy to predict either. As Lippman put it, the computer-generated responses to my input felt as if they were "on the fly," and thus the post-game interview felt highly interactive.

However, the level of interactivity dramatically decreased as my PC progressed through the NBA season. The more games I played, the more repetitive the post-game interviews became. There were several occasions throughout the 82-game season where my PC scored a considerable number of points, and I was asked the same, or a rather similar, question about my offensive performance in nearly every post-game interview that followed. In addition, my response choices were exactly the same as well. Responses to my input that initially seemed limitedly unpredictable were becoming annoyingly redundant the more I played. I knew that if my PC performed well offensively, I would be asked a question about it; eventually I knew exactly how each response I could choose would affect my

popularity as well. As the exchange became more predictable, the level of interactivity decreased. With limited unpredictability decreasing, the feeling of organic adaptivity disappeared, and the exchange became one of manipulation rather than interaction. The post-game interview began to follow a “default path” that Lippman suggests programmers avoid when designing interactive systems. It no longer felt like a conversation, and it became a rather boring part of the game.

At this point, we can start to make sense of limited unpredictability and its role in creating enjoyable interactive experiences. If we restrict our focus to how the concept functions in videogames, it is helpful to distinguish between agent-to-agent and agent-to-non-agent interaction. Videogames afford both types of interaction, and limited unpredictability plays an important role in each type. As we have seen, in single player games, where interactivity is exclusively agent-to-non-agent, limited unpredictability helps establish the proper epistemic state by mimicking organic adaptivity to make the experience feel genuinely interactive. Essentially, the extent to which a single player videogame can be interactive depends on its responses to user input being limitedly unpredictable. The responses cannot be completely unpredictable because complete unpredictability amounts to almost no control at all. Limiting the unpredictability is meant to bound interaction at the level of complete randomness and ensures that the user’s input plays a meaningful role in helping to determine subsequent states of play.²⁴ Requiring at

²⁴ I take this to be a way of understanding Smuts’ requirement that the object must be responsive to count as interactive.

least some unpredictability for interaction is meant to help distinguish between manipulating or controlling something and interacting with it.²⁵

In multiplayer games, a player may experience both agent-to-agent and agent-to-non-agent interaction, sometimes independently and sometimes simultaneously.²⁶ In these cases, limited unpredictability again ensures the experience remains interactive and does not turn into mere manipulation. And, as Lopes and Lippman point out, unpredictability helps make interaction interesting and enjoyable. Without limited unpredictability, the agent-to-agent interaction experienced through multiplayer videogames lacks what makes the exchange engaging and worthwhile. In most multiplayer videogames, as long as one is playing with someone else, the exchange will include organic adaptivity because no agent will completely dictate or control the actions of any other agent. However, there are cases where the game itself, understood as a platform through which agents interact, may severely limit the organic adaptivity by restricting the range of possible actions each player can take. Tic-tac-toe is an example of a game where agent-to-agent interaction quickly devolves into a mechanical exchange where no one ever wins because the range of moves and outcomes are easily predictable once the player understands the game.²⁷ Overall, there seems to be a general agreement that limited unpredictability is vital to the type of interactivity afforded by videogames.

²⁵ In this respect, I'm closer to holding Smuts' view that unpredictability is a constitutive part of agent to non-agent interactivity.

²⁶ This is a point I return to in a later section of the chapter.

²⁷ Thanks to Sherri Irvin for pointing this out.

Section II: Sources of Limited Unpredictability in Videogames

Thus far I have shown the important relationship between interactivity and limited unpredictability. Now I wish to focus on the sources of unpredictability with respect to videogames and discuss how changes in the degree of source-specific unpredictability affect interactivity. In terms of identifying sources of unpredictability within games, Lopes offers a good starting point. Lopes contends that “unpredictability is sometimes a result of rules incorporating randomness, but in most games it is also the result of players’ choosing what moves to make, and this requires skill” (2001, p.75). I agree with Lopes that unpredictability can be game-produced and/or player-produced. However, two points need elaboration for my purposes, given that Lopes’ focus is on games in general, whereas mine is on videogames specifically.

First, unpredictability can be generated by rules of a videogame in at least two ways. For instance, a videogame may be programmed to randomize the number, type, and/or location of enemies or obstacles you face as you progress through it. An example would be the puzzle videogame *Tetris* (1984), where an algorithm randomly generates the pieces used to advance in the game. In addition, videogames may deliberately withhold information from a player at certain points. For example, in narrative-driven videogames, a player’s in-game character is often in situations where it is unknown how the story will progress, and what choices are available to her. Minimal instructions may be given to the player stating what needs to be accomplished to advance in any given stage or level, but what in-game

obstacles she may encounter as she attempts to complete the given tasks is not easily predictable.²⁸ In both instances, I refer to this unpredictability as game-produced unpredictability.

Additionally, it is easy to understand how player-produced unpredictability affects multi-player videogames. If you are playing with other people, they will undoubtedly make decisions that are not entirely predictable (while hopefully not entirely random either) that affect the subsequent states of the games. However, the notion of player-produced unpredictability can affect single-player videogames as well. This follows from the fact that a significant level of skill can be required by single-player games. Given that execution of player-produced choices is fallible, the sequence of states a videogame goes through can be difficult to predict even for the individual who is playing, regardless of whether the expected consequences of the intended action are known. Even if a player knows exactly what is required to succeed at a certain point in the game and how to go about it, it may take a player several tries to accomplish an in-game goal. For instance, consider the first-person shooter series *Halo* (2001).²⁹ When playing in single-player mode, at various times the game requires that the player defeat a certain number of enemies to advance in the level. A player may reach a part in the level where she knows the number and location of enemies as well as what is required to defeat them (e.g., shooting them

²⁸ In section III, I discuss the videogame *BioShock*, which is an excellent example of narrative driven unpredictability.

²⁹ In a first-person shooter, the player navigates her in-game character from a first-person perspective. She sees the game through the eyes of the in-game player character; thus typically only the character's arms and hands are visible to her. In a third-person shooter, by contrast, the entire body of the character is visible. As the reader might have guessed, the games are called "shooters" because the primary gameplay focuses on eliminating enemies using various projectile weapons.

with a weapon or blowing them up with a grenade), but often it is easier said than done. A player may make a mistake, such as an errant gunshot or a misplaced grenade, and subsequently lose the battle and have to start over, perhaps adopting a different strategy the second or third time around. This sort of trial and error makes it difficult to predict states of play. Even when the ultimate outcome of the engagement is predictable (i.e., the player succeeds and progresses to the next part of the game or fails and must start over), the properties of the particular sequences of states experienced can vary greatly with each attempt. Here, the unpredictability is associated with how the player acts within the context of the game, not necessarily the outcomes of the particular actions she takes. Although the line between player-produced unpredictability and game-produced unpredictability is thinner in single-player than in multi-player games, it exists nonetheless.

Given that unpredictability is a relational property contingent on the player's epistemic position, there can be varying degrees of interactivity that coincide with the source or type of unpredictability. It might be best to think of the sources of limited unpredictability in videogames as lying on two interrelated scales. A videogame can be more or less interactive in terms of both game-produced unpredictability and player-produced unpredictability. As is evidenced in the above paragraph, single-player games typically rely more on game-produced unpredictability than player-produced unpredictability, though both elements may be included. Conversely, multi-player videogames may rely more on player-

produced unpredictability as the cornerstone of interactivity.³⁰ In part, the distinction between sources of limited unpredictability mirrors the distinction between agent-to-agent interactivity and agent-to-non-agent interactivity. If we have a single-player game where only one agent is part of the interaction, then game-produced unpredictability is more prominent. If the game features multiplayer modes of play, and there is a chance for agent-to-agent interaction, then both game-produced and player-produced unpredictability can be experienced. In what follows, I will first focus on single-player videogames and make the case that changes in the degree of game-produced unpredictability affect the aesthetic experience of gameplay. I then turn attention to multiplayer games, arguing that changes in both degree and type of unpredictability can affect aesthetic experience as well.

Section III: Degrees of Unpredictability and Aesthetic Change

In this section I discuss the relationship between degrees of unpredictability and aesthetic change in play. Different aesthetic features of a play-through of a videogame will be dominant in the player's experience, depending on the degree and source of unpredictability involved in the interaction. When game-produced unpredictability is prevalent in interactivity, aesthetic elements of the narrative are more prominent. As game-produced unpredictability diminishes, aesthetic elements

³⁰ The trend for single-player and multi-player games to rely more heavily on one type of unpredictability over the other is fast changing. Massively multiplayer online games, such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), attempt to incorporate both sources, allowing for multiple player collaboration to accomplish different and new goals the game itself offers. Furthermore, games like *Demon's Souls* (2009), which is a primarily single-player game that is played over an online network, allow players to indirectly affect the single-player story mode of others playing the game. For example, a player may leave a message for others, indicating an enemy ambush ahead.

of the performative aspect of videogame play are more prominent. Discussing a few examples will help make sense of what I have in mind. First, take *BioShock* (2007), a single-player, first-person shooter, survival-horror game.³¹ In *BioShock*, the player is immersed in a narrative set in a dystopian underwater society, called Rapture, during the 1950s. The citizens of Rapture have gone mad, and the player's objective is to survive their onslaughts and confront and defeat the man who is responsible for Rapture's current state.

On first play-through, what is captivating about *BioShock* is the narrative itself. It initially relies on game-produced unpredictability to keep the player on edge and actively engaged throughout the play. As a player, you are immersed in the world of Rapture knowing almost nothing about how or why you came to be there, except that you survived a plane crash. As the game progresses, more information is slowly revealed that helps piece together the overall narrative. Adding to the unpredictability of the narrative is the role the player has in shaping the story. The player's choices play a crucial role in determining the final ending of the narrative. At various times throughout the game, the player must choose to either rescue or "harvest" little girls who possess valuable resources needed to proceed. If the player chooses to rescue a girl, the player receives fewer resources but the little girl lives. If the player chooses to harvest, the little girl dies but the player receives a great deal more resources. Depending on which choice is made, the player will reach a different ending of the story. Although the choice itself is

³¹ In a survival-horror game, the player's objective is to keep the in-game character alive in scary situations. For a nice description of the artistry of *BioShock*, read Grant Tavinor's "*BioShock* and the Art of Rapture." *Philosophy and Literature*. 33.1 (2009): pp. 91-106.

binary, it helps maintain the feeling that the player's choices genuinely matter in determining subsequent states of the game, creating a more interactive experience than might otherwise be had.

BioShock repeatedly puts the player in unpredictable situations. In each level of the game, you are given a main goal, and, at times, various sub-goals that you must accomplish to advance. However, a player must do a great deal of exploration to figure out exactly how and where each goal needs to be accomplished. *BioShock* also allows for a large amount of creativity from the player as she attempts to complete goals or defeat enemies: The player may freeze, electrify, incinerate, use mind control, set immobilizing traps, or even dispatch a swarm of bees to attack an enemy. Or she simply may choose to shoot an enemy with a revolver. Various combinations of attacks can also be utilized, depending how imaginative the player may be. Furthermore, the computer generated and controlled enemies in each level are programmed to act and react to the player's actions in a variety of different ways in an effort to mimic organic adaptivity through limited unpredictability. For instance, if a player chooses to incinerate an enemy, the enemy might suddenly flee and look for a water source to put out the flame before resuming any attack. *BioShock* attempts to keep the player guessing and creatively involved as she progresses through the story and does an excellent job of using game-produced unpredictability in doing so.³²

³² *BioShock* incorporates elements of player-produced unpredictability as well. Like many other videogames, *BioShock* requires a considerable amount of skill to complete. As in *Halo 2*, the player of *BioShock* may have to try and beat a level several times before actually succeeding, due in part to the difficulty of the level and how well the intended actions are executed.

Keeping this in mind, let's look more closely at how changes in degree of game-produced unpredictability in *BioShock* affect aesthetic features of the gameplay. As the player advances through *BioShock*, or perhaps plays through the entire game additional times, the level of game-produced unpredictability inevitably diminishes. The player becomes more familiar with the narrative, the way the enemies act and what needs to be done to defeat them, her in-game surroundings, and the overall computer-generated responses to various inputs. As game-produced unpredictability decreases, the player is less likely to focus on certain aesthetic features that, at first when game-produced unpredictability was greater, were extremely striking. In *BioShock*, enemies that once came across as frighteningly aggressive, disfigured mutant abominations start appearing on a routine basis and are easily overcome and no longer as frightening. The dark, gloomy setting of a crumbling underwater city is less violent and eerie, and the unnerving feeling of not knowing what is around the next corner becomes less prevalent in the gameplay. In cases of playing through the game more than once, the player may find the narrative less intriguing and mysterious, given they know how the story progresses and ultimately concludes.

Though the shock value of a playthrough may be lost as game-produced unpredictability decreases, the player may focus on other aesthetic features of the game. The sharpness of the texture, the vividness of the color scheme, and the meshing of the audio with the visuals are more easily noticeable if game-produced unpredictability decreases: you're less worried about being attacked by mutated

humans and thus able to enjoy the scenery a bit more. When game-produced unpredictability diminishes, *what* is being presented becomes less important than *how* it is presented. That is, the intricacies of the style and overall aesthetic gestalt of the game are subject to a deeper appreciation, much in the same way one might be more attuned to the fine detail and physical texture of expressive brush strokes after multiple viewings of a painting; the style of the presentation of the representational content becomes the prominent appreciative focal point.

Furthermore, in single-player games like *BioShock*, as game-produced unpredictability decreases, player choices become more important in both exploiting the interactivity of the game and shaping dominant aesthetic features of the play-through. I mentioned earlier that *BioShock* allows players to creatively defeat enemies by using a combination of powers and weapons. These variations, contingent upon choices the player makes, are a feature of play that gains more attention as game-produced unpredictability diminishes. Knowing how the computer-generated enemies respond allows for more experimentation in defeating them. In a first encounter with an enemy, the player may want to just defeat them in the most effective way possible. But as enemies become more predictable, the player can choose to be more creative and original in how she engages them, enhancing the aesthetic quality of the experience. So, as various elements of game-produced unpredictability diminish, and a player becomes more knowledgeable about the choices available to her, those choices may become more creative and original.

Thus, as game-produced unpredictability decreases a player will more than likely shift her focus to how well she is performing in the game. What once was a matter of just “surviving by any means necessary” may turn into “accomplishing this goal in the most skillful and ingenious way possible.” Aesthetic features of the player’s performance within the game are brought to the forefront as the degree of game-produced unpredictability diminishes. Style of play may be scrutinized more heavily: Was the player too aggressive here? Should she have been more defensive? Was the optimal path taken to accomplish the goal? Did she miss out on opportunities to accomplish a side-mission or secondary goal in the game? Did she take full advantage of every resource available to her at the time? In essence, when a game becomes less interactive due to the decrease in game-produced unpredictability, a player is more likely to be concerned with playing the game *well*, as opposed to merely advancing to the next level. Here, playing the game well isn’t reducible to concrete outcomes of advancing or failing to advance in the game; it’s more about producing the desired outcome with a stylistic flourish. This shift in attention to the skill of the player as a performer is analogous to the shift in attention one might expect from seeing a play or movie for the second time or watching a sporting event. Knowing what the story is and how it ends, one might focus more on how well the story is being told, including the way in which the actors perform. Similarly, a veteran basketball player might decide to attempt a reverse windmill dunk to score instead of a simple layup. Although each act is only worth two points, finishing with a dunk instead of a layup is a demonstration of

superior skill. In the same way, a videogame player can critique the aesthetic appeal of her actual play of the game, as opposed to simply the game itself, or the ultimate outcome of her choices.

Shifts in aesthetic focus caused by changes in the degree of interactivity can be found in non-narrative driven videogames as well. For instance, the popular videogame series *Guitar Hero* (2005) is a case where the notion of player performance takes on an obvious prominence as game produced unpredictability decreases. Every game in the *Guitar Hero* series has roughly the same gameplay mechanics and objectives. *Guitar Hero* functions much like a rhythm-based *Simon Says* game, where the player is required to press various buttons on a guitar shaped controller at the right moment as the required button combinations scroll across the screen. The control scheme is intended to mimic playing a real guitar. The player can choose from a variety of well-known songs to try and play, each with its own pattern of button combinations. The overall objective of the game is to accumulate the most points by correctly hitting the button combinations at the right time. By hitting a sufficient percentage of buttons correctly, the player advances through the entire song. If the player misses too many ‘notes,’ she fails the song and must start over from the beginning.

Guitar Hero incorporates game-produced unpredictability in two different ways. First, each song has its own unique set of button combinations that must be hit to succeed in the game. Depending on how quickly a player memorizes the song-specific button patterns, there can be a relatively high degree of game-

produced unpredictability based simply on the song selection. Second, within each song there are 4 difficulty settings a player may choose from when playing, ranging from easy to expert. On the easy setting, each song incorporates only three of five buttons available on the controller, and the rate at which the required button combinations appear on the screen is relatively slow. As the player advances through the difficulty settings, more buttons are incorporated in the patterns, and the combinations start appearing in rapid succession. On the expert setting, the player must use all 5 of the buttons, making the patterns all the more difficult to memorize, and the speed at which the notes appear is considerably faster. So, what may have been a relatively simple song to master on the easy setting could turn out to be quite difficult even to complete on the expert setting.

By allowing the player to choose from numerous songs, each with four different difficulty settings, *Guitar Hero* keeps the degree of game-produced unpredictability (as well as the level of interactivity) at a high level for most players well after they first play it. There are, however, instances where a player may become extremely proficient at playing one, if not many, of the songs on all four difficulty settings. In the course of mastering a song, the level of interactivity diminishes, and the aesthetic features associated with the player's own role in playing the game become more prominent. At this point, gameplay arguably starts to look and sound more like a performance of a musical piece than simply following a set of button combinations on a screen. Indeed, in their article "Performance Hero," Craig Derkson and Darren Hudson Hick argue that instances

of playing *Guitar Hero* should be treated as performances of songs (2009, online). Ultimately, they conclude that when “the *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band* player performs at expert level with minimal error, it seems, the player can indeed be said to be legitimately performing the song in question (Derkson 2009, online). If we are willing to accept some playings of *Guitar Hero* as legitimate performances of a musical work, then it is plausible that certain aesthetic features more closely associated with the player’s actual performance will become prominent, and those features associated with the game itself will recede. The player will become less concerned with the overall function of the game and the features that initially made it challenging and enjoyable and focus more on her own input as an integral part of the performance. For instance, one might focus less on how the song compares with the original recordings or live performances, or how closely the button combinations represent actual chords in the song and turn her attention to how the mistakes *she* makes affect the overall quality of that particular playthrough. A successful performance of a notoriously difficult song like DragonForce’s “Through the Fire and Flames” in *Guitar Hero 3* (2007) on expert level may be more aesthetically pleasing and rewarding to the player and/or audience than a failed attempt, or an attempt that hits a lower percentage of notes. Admittedly, this might also be the case when game produced unpredictability is still relatively high. However, my point is that once a player reaches the level of manipulation as opposed to interaction, her focus will typically be more on the performative aspects than it was when levels of game produced unpredictability were high. In sum, the

more familiar a player becomes with the game's responses to their input, more attention will be drawn to the effect the player's choices have in contributing to the aesthetic experience of the playthrough.

Section IV: Types of Unpredictability and Aesthetic Change

Thus far I have focused on showing how changes in the degree of source specific unpredictability cause certain aesthetic features to be more prominent in a playthrough. A similar argument can be made for changes in the type or source of unpredictability. As game-produced unpredictability gives way to player-produced unpredictability, we once again see certain aesthetic features associated with player performance come to the forefront of the gaming experience. To illustrate, I will turn attention to multi-player games and discuss how shifts in the source of unpredictability facilitate change in the overall aesthetic experience of gameplay. In these cases, the game acts as more of a conduit through which agent-to-agent interaction takes place. While game produced-unpredictability is still noticeable, player-produced unpredictability plays the dominant role in the interaction. First, take the popular fighting game *Super Smash Brothers Brawl* (2008), in which up to four players are pitted against one another.³³ Players can select from a list of 36 characters, each with his or her own unique set of moves and attacks. The objective of the game is to inflict a high percentage of damage on your opponent with various attacks, with the ultimate goal of knocking them off the stage. The higher the

³³ Players have the option to play on teams, with two players per team, or take part in a free for all battle.

damage percentage a player's character suffers, the more likely he or she is to be knocked off the stage.

Initially, *Brawl* incorporates game-produced unpredictability in ways similar to those found in *Guitar Hero*. Where *Guitar Hero* uses a variety of songs and various difficulty levels to keep unpredictability at a high level, *Brawl* does the same with the variety of characters, stages and difficulty settings a player may choose from. Although the control scheme is set up the same way for each character, the specific moves mapped on to each button are unique to every character. That is, even though every character has both basic and special attacks, each attack is different depending on which character is chosen. For example, if the player chooses to fight as Mario from the *Super Mario Bros* series (1985), then her standard special attack is to shoot a fireball at opponents. If the player chooses to fight as Link from the *Legend of Zelda* series (1986), then her standard special attack is to shoot an arrow at opponents: yet both attacks require the same button combination. The control scheme makes it easy for a player to learn the basics of *Brawl*. However, given the large list of characters and their unique corresponding move set, mastering the game proves challenging. Even if a player decides to use only one or two of the available characters, the intricacies involved with each character's move set require a significant amount of time to figure out how to fully utilize a character. There is a great deal of character exploration available in *Brawl*, and this process alone incorporates game-produced unpredictability and interactivity.

In addition to the character list, *Brawl* gives the player an option to choose from several different stages on which to battle. Each stage is also unique and has the potential to affect the gameplay in several different ways. Some stages are relatively simple, consisting of a platform on which to battle and not much else. Others are more complex and may even include elements that have a direct impact on the fight. For instance, some stages are designed to inflict damage on characters at random times. Others may randomize the control scheme, making it so that pressing forward on the controller moves the character backward, pressing down moves the character up, and so forth. Coupled with the variety of characters, the stages themselves add an element of game produced unpredictability to *Brawl*.

Lastly, when playing in single player mode, a player is allowed to choose computer-controlled opponents at various difficulty settings to fight against. This adds to game-produced unpredictability in at least two ways. First, with difficulty settings ranging from one (easiest) to nine (hardest), a player is faced with different computer-generated responses to her inputs. A computer-controlled character at level one is going to behave and respond differently than a computer-controlled character at level nine. This adds a good deal of unpredictability to the initial single-player experience. Secondly, each computer-controlled character has behavioral peculiarities that are independent of the level of difficulty that is chosen. For instance, a slower, stronger character will have a different fighting style than a faster, weaker character when controlled by the computer. Because there are so

many combinations of players, opponents, stages and difficulty levels, game-produced unpredictability is virtually impossible to eliminate.

Admittedly, *Brawl* successfully incorporates several features to keep game-produced unpredictability at a high level throughout the single player experience. However, as with the other examples discussed thus far, if one spends enough time playing *Brawl*, the level of game-produced unpredictability inevitably diminishes. In addition, unlike single-player games like *BioShock*, the availability of a rich multiplayer experience provides the opportunity for interactivity to remain at a relatively high level. In multiplayer modes, when game-produced unpredictability has reached a low level for a player, there remains a high-degree of player-produced unpredictability. Even if a player is familiar with every character's move list, the style of play the computer uses for each character, and the patterns of the stage interference, when playing with human opponents, players are unlikely ever to know with any certainty what the other is going to do in a given game situation. Players who have mastered *Brawl* will undoubtedly use a variety of attacks and strategies to best their opponents. Part of being a successful *Brawl* player is keeping your opponent guessing how you will go about attacking and defending. In multiplayer modes, well-rounded players will typically supply a significant degree of player-produced unpredictability.

As the type of unpredictability shifts from game-produced to player produced, the object of interaction for a player also changes; the experience goes from being one of agent-to-non-agent interaction to one of agent-to-agent

interaction. In single-player modes of *Brawl*, where game-produced unpredictability provides the majority of opportunity for interactivity, it is the AI of the game itself with which a player is primarily interacting. In multiplayer modes, where player-produced unpredictability provides the bulk of interactivity, it's the players interacting with one another, with the game acting more as a conduit for player-produced unpredictability and less as an object of interaction.

As one may have guessed, when game-produced unpredictability diminishes, giving rise to player-produced unpredictability and a different object of interaction, we again see certain aesthetic features associated with player performance become more prominent in the gaming experience. In games like *Brawl*, where players are pitted against one another, there is opportunity to both appreciate and evaluate not only your own input, but that of other players as well. Once a player has reached a point where game-produced unpredictability and agent-to-non-agent interactivity are minimal, there is less interest in what the game brings to the overall experience and more interest in what the player(s) themselves are bringing to the experience. Aesthetically, diversity among moves and combos a player performs takes a more prominent role.³⁴ Initially, players unfamiliar with the game mechanics and character moves may rely on the repetitive use of one or two moves to win a match.³⁵ Although this strategy, unaffectionately known in the

³⁴ In videogame jargon, "Combo" refers to any particular set of button combinations that, when successfully executed, link together several basic attacks in a specific order, to deal additional damage to an opponent.

³⁵ In these cases, a player can be said to be interacting with *both* the game and the player she is fighting. If she is inexperienced with *Brawl*, then game-produced unpredictability will still be at a high level. Thus, she may be simultaneously experiencing both types of unpredictability, whereas

gaming community as “spamming,” can be effective in achieving victory, it detracts from the potentially rich aesthetic experience of fighting games. When a player spams, she reduces the scope of aesthetically appreciable features that she herself could have brought to the gaming experience. *Brawl* invites the player to utilize a great deal of creativity in linking together combos and finding ways to defeat her opponent(s). When player-produced unpredictability is more prominent, from an aesthetic standpoint, *Brawl* increasingly becomes a showcase of the skill and performance of the players rather than the game designers. If a player chooses to spam moves, she limits her own performance, and thus the appreciable aesthetic qualities of the experience. This self-imposed limitation is analogous to a painter reducing the rich, vibrant color scheme of a sunset to shades of gray when the entire color palette is readily available. Spamming moves can diminish the aesthetic quality of a gaming experience because it changes the nature of interactivity. The more important a player’s choices become in terms of interactivity, the more important those choices become regarding aesthetic experience.

Whereas *Brawl* primarily pits players against one another, there are cooperative multiplayer games that showcase a similar change in aesthetic focus when game-produced unpredictability is secondary to player-produced unpredictability. Take, for instance, the first-person puzzle-platform game *Portal 2* (2011), in which the player must solve a series of puzzles in order to advance. Most

her opponent, who may be more familiar with the game mechanics, may be primarily experiencing one type of unpredictability.

of the puzzles are maze-like, requiring the player to navigate from start to finish with various obstacles and enemies placed throughout the levels: there are automated turrets; bottomless pits; insurmountable walls; and pits full of lava, spikes, or acid that the player must be careful to avoid. The player controls a character equipped with a “portal gun” that shoots two portal openings that can connect distant surfaces to one another. The player can travel through the openings herself, move items required to solve puzzles from one place to another, and connect bridges together to complete levels. When playing co-operatively, two players, each with their own portal gun, are tasked with working together to solve the puzzles required to advance in the game.

Upon initial playthrough, the experience simultaneously offers both agent-to-agent interaction and agent-to-non-agent interaction: There is a high degree of both game-produced and player-produced unpredictability. Game-produced unpredictability is showcased primarily through level and puzzle design. As the players advance through the game, the puzzles become increasingly more difficult to solve due to the addition of new elements that must be manipulated in order to progress. For instance, once the players reach level 16, they are introduced to “light surface bridges” that can be extended and connected through portal openings. However, upon first exposure to the bridges, it’s unclear how the player is supposed to use them. The majority of game-produced unpredictability is showcased through a trial and error use of the portal gun with new elements as they are introduced. Upon first exposure to levels with newly incorporated game

elements, the level can seem disorganized, disarrayed, cluttered and puzzling. Over time the player familiarizes herself with the level and how to best use the tools available to her to solve the puzzle. During this familiarization, unpredictability recedes, and the solution to the puzzle slowly starts to manifest. The more proficient the player becomes at using the tools, the more predictable both responses to user input and the sequences of states in the game become. Thus, agent-to-non-agent interaction changes into manipulation. However, the cooperative element of the game makes execution of the solution to the puzzle more complex than it would be if the game were single-player. No matter how familiar each player becomes with a specific level, they must work in synchronization with one another to actually accomplish the goal. At times, this proves to be quite difficult. In the *Halo* example discussed earlier, I argued that player fallibility can lead to unpredictable sequences of game states even if the ultimate outcome is binary (i.e., the player either fails or succeeds). In cooperative games like *Portal 2*, this problem is compounded; both players are fallible, and it takes coordination from each to achieve the desired outcome. So, player produced unpredictability still plays a large role in sustaining the agent-to-agent interactivity of the playthrough, even while the agent-to-non-agent interactivity diminishes.

Here, the shift in type of unpredictability and interactivity experienced in *Portal 2* cooperative play accompanies a shift in aesthetic focus as well. The early feeling of a disorganized, scattershot level intended to confuse and perplex recedes; familiarity gives rise to a new way of looking at the level. The players can see

through the initial complexity of the puzzle and recognize the beauty of what often becomes a simple solution, much in the same way an experienced mathematician might come to see the beauty in a solution to a complicated formula proof. The initial impression that the design of the level is chaotic and haphazard gives way to a new understanding and appreciation once the solution is recognized; the level comes across as calculated and meticulously constructed. Further, the aesthetic features associated with player performance are of greater importance. Successfully executing a solution affords an opportunity for synchronic stylistic flourish. If both players are familiar with the level, then they can attempt to accomplish the goal more creatively, much as two basketball players might attempt an alley-oop dunk rather than a simple bounce pass. Cooperative play offers a chance for two players to join together in creating a mutually satisfying aesthetic experience.

In closing, I have shown that interactivity needs to be understood and defined contextually. In the case of videogames, which afford both agent-to-agent and agent-to-non-agent interaction, limited unpredictability plays an important role. There seem to be at least two kinds of limited unpredictability in videogames: game-produced and player-produced. Depending upon the degree and source of unpredictability in a play-through, different aesthetic features will be more prominent in the player's experience. When game-produced unpredictability is dominant, aesthetic elements of the narrative and representational content are more prominent. As game-produced unpredictability recedes, aesthetic elements of the performative aspect of videogame play overtake those of the narrative. My aim

here was to explore in a more detailed way the relationship between interactivity and aesthetic experience within video games than has been previously done. In my efforts, I have attempted to capture how the experience of playing a game evolves over time, and why certain games can remain engaging and aesthetically worthwhile, even when the player has a strong grasp of the game. Hopefully in doing so, I have opened new avenues for discussion about interactivity and aesthetic experience in general.

Chapter 4: Gamers as Performative Instantiators

Appropriately understanding videogames in the context of their status as artworks and how users consume them is no easy task.³⁶ One of the special features videogames offer as objects of artistic and aesthetic consideration that sets them aside from works in traditional mediums is the kind of relationship fostered between the player and the game: one that is necessarily interactive. Although there is a general agreement among videogame scholars that videogames are inherently interactive, the role gamers play concerning the artistic and aesthetic value videogames afford is more controversial. Traditional art forms (painting, sculpture, music, film, etc.) typically establish a clear-cut ontological boundary of the roles involved in the artist, artwork, and audience relationship (henceforth referred to as the AAAR): the artist's role is one of intentionally creating and presenting an object (the work) that is then attended to by the audience in an effort to understand, evaluate, appreciate, interpret, etc.³⁷ As inherently interactive objects, videogames blur the lines of the AAAR. In this chapter, I explore both positive and negative accounts that attempt to define the AAAR in videogames, ultimately agreeing that players are not artists, performers, narrators (when applicable), or audiences of a work in any traditional sense, nor are videogames traditional works-for-performances. While several scholars have noted that the interactive nature of works like videogames creates a new kind of AAAR, less attention has been paid to

³⁶ I use the term “users” and “players” interchangeably.

³⁷ This statement is best understood in a general sense, especially regarding what counts as “creating and presenting an object,” where “creating” and “object” are broad enough categories to include things like conceptual art and found art.

the emerging aesthetic experience explicitly fostered through that relationship, especially in terms of gameplay;³⁸ to that end, I offer an account of the AAAR with videogames that coincides with understanding unpredictability as integral to interactivity. Drawing predominately on the works of Dominic McIver Lopes, Berys Gaut, Andrew Kania, and Shelby Moser, I contend that players are best understood as *performative instantiators*, generating instances of works by interacting with a game through artist sanctioned constitutive rules that both afford and restrict the actions players can take. Moreover, actions taken by the player as they instantiate the game are aesthetically relevant with respect to the relationship they form with the game. That is, the gamer's actions are aesthetically relevant in a similar way a that musician's actions are aesthetically relevant to a performance of a musical work, but this does not mean that gamers *perform* the videogame work like a musician performs a musical work. Understood this way, we are left with two mutually dependent, but ontologically distinct objects of aesthetic appreciation: the game itself (best understood as a complete game algorithm or CGA) and the *experience of play* that occurs as a result of the relationship fostered between the CGA and the player as they engage with it.³⁹ Further, when playing, the aesthetic features of both the game and the experience are subject to changes in prominence for the player (and/or audience) based on the level and type of interactivity

³⁸ For more on this see Fernandez-Vara 2009; Lopes 2001& 2010; Tavinor 2009 & 2017; Meskin and Robson 2016; and Nguyen 2017.

³⁹ Moser's CGA is slightly different than the standard definition of a computer algorithm; in computer science, an algorithm is understood as a precisely-defined procedure consisting of a sequence of unambiguous instructions that allows a computer to solve a problem. Thanks to Dean Hougen for pointing this out.

involved. My position hopefully clears up some of the ontological confusion surrounding videogames as potential artworks and further opens the door for developing a more robust account of the aesthetics of games.

Section I: What the AAAR in Videogames is Not

A good place to start carving out the AAAR with videogames is to eliminate some of the more traditional conceptions of the relationship. To that end, Andrew Kania provides some helpful insight. In “Why Gamers are Not Performers” (forthcoming 2018), Kania argues against the view that videogames are works for performance in the traditional sense, like music is for musicians, dance is for dancers, or theater is for actors.⁴⁰ Kania rightly points out the need to “develop new theories in order to understand what goes on when we interact with [videogames]” (2018, p.196). I agree that a proper understanding of the ontology of videogames and our engagement with them necessitates a different framework than we find in more traditional performance works. Furthermore, the position he takes nicely sets the stage for developing a positive account of the AAAR with videogames by looking more closely at the concept of interactivity and how it relates to the player’s role. Spring-boarding from Kania’s position will help identify what the object(s) of both artistic and aesthetic appreciation are when it comes to playing videogames.

Kania sets out to refute the claim “that merely in virtue of their interactivity, videogames are works for performance and gamers performers” (2018, p.187). He

⁴⁰ In another work, “Gamers are Not Narrators” (forthcoming 2018 Routledge) Kania adopts a similar position to argue that users of videogames are not narrators or co-narrators of a story (if there is one) in any robust sense.

begins by first examining two related concepts of interactivity espoused by Dominic McIver Lopes (2001 and 2010) and Berys Gaut (2010). He ultimately concludes that Gaut “captures the essence of interactivity better than Lopes” (2018, p.189). Kania comes to this conclusion as a result of agreeing with Gaut’s criticism that Lopes’ account is overly inclusive. Lopes defines a work of art as interactive “to the degree that the actions of its users help generate its display (in prescribed ways)” (2018, p.188). Gaut contends that on this formulation, works in traditional arts such as theatre and musical performances are inappropriately categorized as interactive, since the users (the performers of the work) help generate the works’ displays by following the prescriptions of scripts and scores, respectively (2018, p.188). Kania then points out that Gaut’s strategy for solving this problem is superior to Lopes’.

Although both Lopes and Gaut clarify the role of the user, Gaut stipulates that in interactive works there is an essential combination of roles between the user and the audience; audiences of interactive works simultaneously play the role of users by instantiating the work itself (Kania 2018, p.188). Traditional theatrical and musical performances involve distinct roles for audience and users, whereas interactive works do not. Although Lopes acknowledges this, he does not see it as a necessary component of interactive works, which is why Kania ultimately favors Gaut’s refinement of the user’s role to avoid construing works in the performing arts as interactive. But Gaut argues that by accepting this refinement, we are also accepting an implication that audience members take on the role of performers

when playing videogames, in so far as they instantiate the work much as actors and musicians instantiate scripts and scores. Thus, videogame users are also performers of the work. Kania denies this implication because accepting it necessitates that other traditional works of art are wrongly categorized as performance-works; for instance, sculptors casting from molds are instantiating their works, but this act should not be considered a performance of a work (Kania 2018, p.189). His strategy for rejecting this implication relies on explaining why sculptures are not the right kind of works to be thought of as works-for-performance. Kania accomplishes this by endorsing an account of the role of a work-performer offered by Lopes that distinguishes gameplay from work-performance (2018, p.189). Essentially, Lopes argues that a work-performance requires that the performer know what features a display of the work-for-performance must have in order for it be a display of that work. Not only do gamers typically lack the knowledge of the features of a game must have in order to be a proper display of that work, Kania justifiably points out the complexity of contemporary videogames makes it the case that no one (including game designers) knows all the necessary features of a proper playing/display of a game (2018, p.190).

Kania also gives two highly intuitive reasons to think that the usual playthroughs of videogames are not work-performances. He first claims that paradigm performances are communicative, in so far as performers and audiences are typically distinct in their respective roles (Kania 2018, p.193). To say that a user is self-communicating when playing a videogame is unusual at best, and as

Kania states “it casts doubt on the possibility of a performance art that is essentially self-directed, as an interactive performance art would have to be” (2018, p.193).

Second, Kania contends that, unlike traditional performances, gameplay is not a candidate for any kind of robust performative interpretation of a work:

Though one might talk of a gamer’s mastery of a particular video game or the brilliance of her choices and strategy in navigating the game, it is not common to talk of the interpretation of a game communicated through, or implicit in, a given playthrough.... [N]either gamers nor those who follow other gamers commonly conceive of their gameplay as an act of communicating a particular conception of the game they are playing, that is, as embodying an interpretation....none of this makes it impossible for the gamer to provide an interpretation of the game to herself (or to others) by playing it, but it does suggest that the idea that typical video games are designed for the gamer to play such an interpretive role is implausible. (2018, p.193)

In traditional performance mediums like theater, cinema and music, the performers are typically granted some degree of interpretative freedom when they help instantiate respective works. Take, for example, The Joker, a recurring villain in the DC Comics *Batman* universe. Batman narratives are told in multiple mediums, including comics, graphic novels, cinema, television and videogames.

Unsurprisingly, several different film actors have played the Joker, each with their own interpretation of the character. Jack Nicholson’s Joker in the 1989 film *Batman* is more comical and outlandish than Heath Ledger’s Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008), who was portrayed as a sinister sociopath, establishing an overall darker tone to the work itself. In most narrative driven videogames, character traits that may affect the narrative are firmly established, offering little to no room for the player to embody their own interpretation of the work as a whole.

Additionally, Kania argues that even an expert well-versed in the features of a playthrough of a game is not executing a performance of a work, but rather performing in producing an instance of an artwork (2018, p.193). So the actions taken by the expert gamer are not necessarily part of the performance of the work (the videogame itself), but are auxiliary “performances.” He likens this to what is occurring with the videos of Picasso painting on glass: what is captured in the video is a performance that may be entertaining and aesthetically appreciable, but it is not a performance of the artwork understood as a painting. In emphasizing this point as it relates to performing gamers, Kania claims that “similarly, there is no role for a performer to play prescribed by most videogames” (2018, p.193-4). That is, the role that *is* prescribed by most videogames for their users may give rise to performative aspects based on player skill and execution, but this does not mean that their actions constitute a performance of the artwork.

The last case Kania considers is expert or exemplary playings of videogames. Relying on David Davies’ terminology, the contention here is that exemplary playings of games are works in their own right, or performance-works as opposed to works-for-performance. Kania is willing to entertain the idea that such playings might be performance-works, perhaps in the same way pure improvisational music pieces are:

But could not a playthrough qualify as a performance-work on its own merits, as it were, independent of the ontological status of the game itself? Many have argued, for instance, that “pure” improvisations, such as Keith Jarrett’s Köln Concert, are works of art in their own right, despite being performances that are not of any preexisting (or indeed reinstantiable work. Could an expert playthrough be just such a work of art? (2018, p.194)

Even if accept this possibility, he contends that such an understanding is uninformative when it comes to the ontology of videogames. Furthermore, he argues that “the gamer’s performance relies on interacting in prescribed ways with a highly structured pre-existing artifact—the videogame” (2018, p.194-5). Thus, expert playings of games fundamentally differ from pure improvisations in a way that may disqualify them from being performance-works. Before moving on, it’s worth repeating that in denying that the performing gamer is engaged in a performance of the work of the videogame, Kania claims “that there is no role for performer prescribed by (the designers of) typical video games” (2018, p.192). However, he clearly seems to think there is *some prescribed* role for a gamer to fill when they play a videogame. Clearly defining that prescribed role is at least part of my objective in this chapter.

Overall, I agree with Kania that attempting to understand the artistic status/value of videogames using existing frameworks and theories developed for more well-established mediums often leads us astray. Specifically, he’s convinced me that

video games are not works for performance because they are not created with a prescribed role for a work-performer to play, and typical gameplay differs significantly from paradigmatic work-performance. Thus, even if she may perform in playing the game, the player cannot give a performance of the game any more than one can give a performance of a painting, novel, or other nonperformance artwork. There may be exceptional video-game playthroughs that are performance-works in their own right, but this does not show that the games being played in such cases are works for performance. (2018, p.196)

To think of videogames as works for performance or their instances as performances of a work is misguided. But Kania’s efforts offer the beginnings of a

potential positive account of what is going on when we interact with videogames by calling for a closer look at interactivity and how it functions in gameplay; a call that will be answered in section two.

While Kania concludes that gamers are not performers, nor are videogames works for performance, others have suggested that gamers might be understood as co-authors or co-creators of a work. Since videogames necessitate that the audience play a direct role in creating instances of a work, it may be helpful to think of them as collaborative authors who help define the work's meaning when they instantiate particular instances. In "Ontology and Aesthetics of Digital Art" (2008), Paul Crowther defends a collective authorship view. With respect to traditional visual arts, Crowther duly notes that the audience may reposition themselves with respect to the work, allowing for alternative viewpoints, "[b]ut the audience is not called upon to engage with the work in a way that alters its existing physical and virtual structure by virtue of such repositioning" (2008, p.165). With digital imagery, Crowther argues that "significant modifications to the original program can be performed, in principle, wherever and whenever it is realized using the apparatus through which it is realized" (2008, p.165). Thus, Crowther concludes that the audience of a digital work function as "an active participant in the generation of the work, rather than passive observer" (2008, p.165-6). He grounds this conclusion on the inherently interactive nature of digital art. Crowther gives five main vectors, or domains of interactivity as they relate to digital art, but when it comes to videogames the last two he mentions are most important:

4) By voluntary interface where the user *navigates* a program or exercises choices that are reciprocated through the computer's opening up new creative possibilities of interface in response to them.

5) User-transcendent interface—where the user instigates and guides a program that is able to then develop at various levels of autonomy in formulating and projecting visual configurations. (2008, p.165)

Most videogames can be understood as operating in at least one of the vectors mentioned above. Designers create digital game spaces that are navigated and explored by players, and the space itself can change based on the choices made by the players. Crowther seems to recognize this while speaking about the potential for user-based development of digital works. “Earlier on I stressed the importance of the interactive dimension of digital art. In its navigational forms, this means the viewer or user of a program can explore and extend its scope on the base of choice and (*in the case of games*) *an element of skill* (2008, p.167).⁴¹ He goes on to suggest that as digital technology advances, navigable digital works may call for new understandings of authorship: “visual idioms may emerge where the virtuoso interpreter takes on something of the same significance as the creator of the work” (2008, p.168). In this sense, Crowther seems to be considering digital works like videogames as performance-works, where player actions are just as artistically and aesthetically relevant as the features of the game itself. Addressing virtual reality as a navigational form of digital art, Crowther suggests:

it is easy to conceive of programs where it is not the elicited VR environment that is important, so much as the use to which the immersant puts it. (In this respect, for example, consider how a program attuned to nuances of movement might be realized by an immersant trained to professional ballet standards.) (2008, p.168)

⁴¹ Emphasis mine

At the very least, Crowther's position implies that users of digital works are integral to producing instances, or tokens, of a work type. But he takes one step further, attributing a sense of authorial control to users, citing the inherently open-ended, interactive nature digital art embodies: "It may be that the work grows far beyond [the basic parameters established by the original creative individual or team], taking on a new identity on the basis of how it is realized by new generations of users" (2008, p.168). Crowther offers little in terms of how much authorial control users have over digital works, but it seems plausible that it would depend on the degree of navigable freedom afforded to users within the work/game space. So an open-ended sandbox game like *MineCraft* (2009) seems to relinquish a significant amount of authorial control to its users, whereas games like *Tetris* (1984) are more limiting in this regard. That is, *MineCraft* gives players more navigational freedom regarding their choices within the digital gamespace than *Tetris* does. Crowther concludes by taking note of the distinct ontology his account accompanies:

Not being tied to existence in one place and time, and in many cases, being navigable or having evolutionary potential is something with intrinsic fascination. On the one hand, the work is disembodied in terms of parallels with traditional art "objects," but at the same time the fact that it can be realized in times and places determined by the user means that it has an intimacy and special status through being realizable very much in one's own personal space. It is embodied as the user wills...." (2008, p.169)

Crowther's position leaves us understanding the AAAR with videogames as a hybrid relationship, where the artist(s) and audience work collectively together to establish the identity of the artwork.

The collective authorship view is also taken by Annika Waern in her 2012 article “Framing Games,” albeit for subtly different reasons. Waern’s primary goal is to establish a working definition of games to bridge the gap between digital and non-digital game studies (2012, p.1). For my purposes, the details of Waern’s argument are less important than her conclusion: “A game is a (designed or emerging) system of rules, goals and opposition, which has as its primary purpose to allow people to engage with it for paratelic reasons, while agreeing that the actions performed are re-signified” (2012, p.11). Unpacking Waern’s definition reveals why her account endorses a collective authorship ontology. First, Waern seems to outline what it is to play a game in addition to defining what a game is. The first half of her definition lays out what a game is as an object: a constructed system designed for people to engage with it purely for the sake of the engagement itself and not for some extrinsic goal (this is implied by the mention of ‘paratelic reasons’). The second half of the definition speaks to the kind of activity players must take part in when they interact with the system. In this regard, Waern’s definition aligns with the Suitsian conception of gameplay, requiring players to adopt a lusory attitude, whereby they tacitly agree to act in accordance with the rules of the system solely because it makes possible the activity itself (Suits 2014, p.55). The last part of Waern’s definition may be the most crucial in understanding why her view endorses collective authorship; actions performed during play are re-signified. Waern adopts Gregory Bateson’s understanding of resignification:

The second requirement that I would put on play is thus *that actions are re-signified*. As Bateson describes it, this creates a double-layered meaning of

actions. Firstly, the meaning of an action is different from outside of the play situation...But at the same time, this meaning is 'not real'; it stands for a real action, but it does not mean what the action it stands for means. (2012, p.6)

Understanding actions as being re-signified in play is intuitively satisfying, as few would contend that combat in a game like *Sea of Thieves* (2018) is "real combat."

Waern uses the videogame *Counter Strike* (2000) to illustrate resignification:

Counter Strike lets a key press represent firing a gun. Firstly, the action itself is not "contrary to real" - it is a real key press. Through the game simulation, it is given a representational meaning as a kill, and this representation is fictional (as nobody actually dies). But the fictional meaning is rendered moot, as the key press has another and more important meaning as a way of scoring. This meaning is not simulated by the game but created by it: when you manage to press the key in the right way, you increase the score for your team. (2012, p.7)

At this point, it's clear why Waern's account is best understood as endorsing collective authorship:

If we accept that games exist to be played, this influences how we understand their meaning. The meaning of games is not created by the game designer, and nor is it created by the human player in playing the game. It lives in between, emerges through play and is structured by design. (2012, p.12)

Since games are meant to be played (or engaged in for paratelic reasons) and the meaning of a user's actions is re-signified within the context of the game, then the overall meaning of the work is determined by the system itself *and* the actions taken by the user. Meaning is created through the relationship formed between the user(s) and the system; with this claim it's important to remember that Waern is referring to the meaning of a game as a whole, and not just it's narrative or representational content. Presumably, the degree to which the meaning of a videogame is established by the actions taken by the player corresponds with the

level that those actions are re-signified within the context of the game space. Understood from Waern's position, it may be case that the meaning of most videogames qua games is established largely by the pre-existing system since the system itself often contains robust representational content, but that meaning emerges through play, or the actions taken by the user. So while Crowther contends that users are co-authors of a work because their choices help determine features that establish an overall identity of the work, Waern's position holds that users are co-authors because the meaning of the work can't be established without taking into account the actions of the user. Before moving on, it's important to recognize that I offer both Crowther's and Waern's view as examples of positive accounts of how we might understand the AAAR in videogames. My efforts are not exhaustive but intended to highlight attempts at understanding how the interactive nature of videogames challenges the traditional AAAR.

While the collective authorship view seems tenable, in *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (2010), Lopes argues that it rests on a mistaken ontological supposition: a failure to distinguish displays of a work from the work itself. This error occurs because in traditional visual mediums, the work and the display of the work are often the identical; Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* qua artwork is ontologically the same as Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* qua display. Although mostly visual, computer art, Lopes argues, is ontologically closer to musical works, where the work is repeatable across time and space (2010, p.56-9). So when we attend to computer art there are two closely related, but ontologically distinct

objects of appreciation: the work itself (perhaps best understood as a computer algorithm) and an instance, or display of the work. But since audiences (users) of computer art help instantiate displays of a work by interacting with it, “the question is whether users also play the role of computer artist by generating its varying displays” (2010, p.75). For Lopes, the answer is obviously no:

I may intend to generate *a display* of the work through my actions; but the work isn't the same as its display and an intention to generate a display isn't an intention to make the work. Moreover, the work would have exactly the same features no matter what I do to generate its display. While that display wouldn't have the same features were it not for how I act, the work, once again, isn't the same as the display I generate. Nothing I do creates the computational process or physical apparatus, so nothing I do creates the work. (2010, p.75)

If we apply Lopes' proposed ontological framework to Crowther and Waern's position, the work itself isn't under any sort of user generated authorial control. Computer art necessitates that tokens, instances, or displays of a particular work are only realizable by interacting with the work itself, but that doesn't mean that audiences take on the role of author or co-author of the work when they interact with it. For Crowther, this would mean that audiences play a central role in establishing the features of a specific display of a work, but not the features of the work itself. And for Waern, it means that audiences help give meaning to a specific display of a work, but not the work as a whole. Either way, Lopes' contention preserves a more traditional understanding of the AAAR with respect to computer art and videogames, one similar to that of the performing arts. Through the combined efforts of Kania and Lopes, it's made clear that videogames test the boundaries of traditional conceptions of the AAAR, and that the role of the player

cannot be reduced to more conventional ones, like that of a performer, narrator, or author. However, there are a few ideas from the positions discussed above that are useful for constructing a positive account of the AAAR with videogames.

Section II: What the AAAR is in Videogames

There is some common ground shared among Crowther, Kania, Lopes and Waern. At a minimum, they all agree that videogames are ontological multiples. That is, they are types whose tokens are instantiated by users who interact with a computer algorithm in a way prescribed, both implicitly and explicitly, by the creators of the algorithm. An appropriate understanding of the AAAR with videogames can be built on this minimalistic groundwork. A good place to start is with a proper understanding of what videogames, understood as objects of artistic and aesthetic interest, are. To that end, Shelby Moser offers an intuitively convincing position in her work, “Videogame Ontology, Constitutive Rules, and Algorithms” (2018).

Moser argues for an algorithmic ontology of videogames, similar to views held by Lopes (2001) and Tavinor (2011) (2018, p.45). However, her account of a videogame algorithm is the most explanatorily robust and detailed. She begins by adopting a Suitsian framework, using his understanding of constitutive rules as individuation conditions for games in general (2018, p.42-5).⁴² Afterward, she endorses Lopes’ definition of an algorithm to argue that a videogame’s algorithm is ontologically essential:

⁴² For a more detailed explanation of Suits’ account see the “Appreciating Videogames” chapter.

For his account of interactive art (of which videogames might be a subset), Lopes defines an algorithm as the work's set of rules. Further on, he clarifies that "the algorithm just is the function that maps any one state of an interaction-instance onto the next state, given an interactor's gesture and the sequence of previous states" (2001: 76). Lopes suggests that the algorithm relates to an ontology in a direct way because, like the constitutive rules, it helps us to individuate one work from another. (2018, 45)⁴³

Moser then tidies up the definition by carefully distinguishing between a videogame's algorithm and code, explaining why the code does not contribute to a videogame's identity:

the programming code of a videogame is necessary for gameplay because it translates the algorithm into a format that is readable and executable by the hardware, but the programming code's changeability from one device to another means that the specific code does not contribute towards the ontology of videogames. (2018, p.47)

In other words, because videogame algorithms can be implemented using a variety of coding languages on different hardware and using different software, the programming code is not ontologically essential to the work. Moser is quick to point out that "although the code is not relevant for an algorithmic account of videogame ontology, this should by no means suggest that the code is altogether unimportant or uninteresting from an aesthetic point of view" (2018, p.47).

Aesthetic features of a display of a videogame work may be contingent on things like the programming language and hardware used, but individuation conditions for the work itself should refer to the stable algorithm.

Moser makes one last addendum to her algorithmic ontology, responding to a potential criticism that claims game algorithms are too simple (a mere set of

⁴³ Moser also accepts Lopes' argument that provenance of a work matters too, so that if it happens that two algorithms are the same, they can be individuated by their origin (p.46).

rules) or too vague (lacking a prescription for appreciation). She cautions that we ought to think of videogame algorithms as “complete game algorithms” or CGAs (2018, p.43). A CGA, Moser contends, “contains information that extends beyond the rules and states of play...to include prescriptions for things such as features of the sprites and characters, expressions, colors, background textures, music, text, animations, mood lighting, narrative, and other assets” (2018, p.50). Understood this way, we can trace potential aesthetically relevant features of the work back to the CGA, thereby eliminating the worry that the algorithm is too ontologically simple or vague to individuate works.

Before closing, Moser addresses two hard cases that may give pause to endorsing a CGA ontology. The first is videogame mods, whereby a player can change features of a game by directly changing the game’s code. Mods can be as simple as enhancing textures of the in-game environment, or may involve more drastic changes, like rendering the zombies in *Left 4 Dead* (2008) to look like Teletubbies or increasing the damage per second inflicted by a specific weapon.⁴⁴ Moser contends that, in certain cases, modding games may change the constitutive rules of the game (2018, p.53). The second hard case is more common; videogames often allow the player to control the level of difficulty, sometimes in the middle of play. If we follow a Suitsian approach, changes in difficulty result in changing the constitutive rules of a game, so it becomes a different game.

⁴⁴ If you’re interested in Teletubby mods: <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=352606721>. Further, if the mods are purely cosmetic and don’t affect what are to be considered the constitutive rules of the game, then they don’t change the identity of the game.

In dealing with both cases, Moser stays committed to her Suitsian position. Concerning mods that change the constitutive rules, she admits that users might be playing different games, but they are still engaging with the same work qua CGA.⁴⁵ A CGA will both afford and restrict the kinds of mods that are compatible with any given videogame, but the mods themselves do not alter the CGA, even if they may change the constitutive rules of gameplay (2018, pp.53-4). The same holds true when difficulty settings are changed. The ways in which a player might change the difficulties of the game are built into the CGA: “The algorithm consists of the potential constitutive rules that a work can have, but when we change the game settings, the constitutive rules of that particular display will differ from the other display(s)” (2018, p.56). For these reasons, Moser believes “both the mod examples and the difficulty modes presented above are of the same work *and* different games” (2018, p.55).

At first glance it may seem that Moser’s final move in offering different identity conditions for the work and the game leaves us with a rather messy ontology. At the very least, it seems counter-intuitive to claim that a player who changes the difficulty settings while playing a videogame thereby starts playing a different game. However, there are a few ways of deflating this problem. First, in cases where players play a game on the same difficulty settings multiple times (or generate displays of the CGA multiple times), even those instances will likely

⁴⁵ Although somewhat obvious, it should be noted that if players make any changes to the CGA itself, then the work is no longer the same.

contain different, aesthetically relevant features. Minimally, we're okay with individuating those instances of the work as distinct tokens of the same work type.

Further, it may turn out that a certain constitutive rule or set of rules written into the CGA are never actualized, or acted on, during one instance, but are in another. This is especially true of videogames that rely on random number generator algorithms to create a sense of unpredictability while playing. For example, let's say I play two matches of *MarioKart 8* (2014) with a random course selection. If one match is on the Hyrule Circuit racetrack and the other is on Rainbow Road, they will have different constitutive rules based on the portion of the CGA that each track is programmed in accordance with. And it's already common practice to refer to *different modes* of a game, so it doesn't seem like a reach to realign the conversation into one about CGAs and instances, or displays of CGAs. Take the *MarioKart* example again; a player may choose between playing in battle mode, or in time trial mode. In battle mode, players are tasked with popping balloons floating above other drivers' vehicles using a variety of items as weapons. The player who collects the most points by popping the most balloons and avoids having their balloons popped by other players in the allotted time wins the match. In time trial mode, players compete against themselves by trying to complete the course as fast as they can, in an effort to break personal records. There are no other drivers on the course, so most of the items picked up have no causal efficacy even if they are used, which means that certain sets of constitutive rules aren't applicable in time trial mode that are in battle mode. For a Suitsian, these

modes would be considered entirely different games. But they would still be instances, or tokens, of *the same videogame*, understood as a CGA.

Finally, it's worth recalling the depth and detail of Moser's CGA concept: "The CGA specifies this degree of variance of the rules, the perceptual properties, and potentially the artistic properties of a videogame" (2018, p.43). Given Moser's conception of the CGA, the Suitsian individuation conditions for games in general no longer do any heavy metaphysical lifting for understanding the individuation conditions for videogames, and they don't need to. What's the payoff of using Suitsian conditions to individuate and refer to different "games" if we can just as easily talk about videogames specifically in terms of multiple instances of a CGA? If we accept videogames as artworks, realizing that they are CGAs and can be multiply instanced, we have all the tools needed to understand the ontology of videogames and have meaningful conversations about how that ontology affects their artistic and aesthetic potential. Overall, Moser's algorithmic ontology serves well to help identify what a videogame is, if it is a work of art.

Having now established what the artwork is in the AAAR with videogames, let's take a closer look at the artist-audience relationship that is fostered through the work itself. First and most obvious, the artist(s) are the individual(s) who (co)design, (co)create, and (co)author all of the properties and features of the CGA. In creating the CGA, artists communicate explicitly and implicitly to the audience what the prescribed way(s) of engaging with the work are.⁴⁶ Since CGAs are

⁴⁶ For more on the ways in which artists might sanction appropriate ways of engaging with a work, see Irvin (2005).

instantiated as games, users are explicitly prescribed to *play* the game; they must adopt a lusory attitude by complying with the constitutive rules of the game(s) (that is, use lusory means) to accomplish prelusory goals. Moreover, players are implicitly asked to follow rules of skill, understood in a Suitsian framework (more on this in section III). But it's important to note that following rules of skill is not necessary for appropriately instancing the work itself; only following the constitutive rules relevant to that particular instance of the CGA is required.

At this point, all the building blocks needed to articulate the AAAR in videogames are in place: Artist(s) (co)design, (co)create, and (co)author a CGA, and in doing so prescribe/sanction a method of interactive engagement for players, both explicitly—through constitutive rules, or game mechanics—and implicitly—through rules of skill. When players appropriately engage with the CGA, they take on the role of performative instantiators, whose actions are aesthetically relevant to a particular instance of the CGA based on their skill. More specifically, when users take on the role of performative instantiators by interacting with the CGA,⁴⁷ they form an aesthetically appreciable relationship with the CGA, which leaves two ontologically distinct, but mutually dependent objects for aesthetic and artistic consideration: the CGA itself and *the experience of play* fostered through relationship between the CGA and the player, where the aesthetically appreciable features of the experience are intimately related to and affected by the skill of the player, and consequently, the level of interactivity during play.

⁴⁷ Interaction with the CGA is mitigated by both the hardware and software that the CGA is running on.

By situating players as performative instantiators, I hope to call attention to the central importance of their own actions in shaping the aesthetic experience of play without committing myself to the problems noted in section I by calling gamers performers or authors. For the reasons explicated by Kania above, gamers do not meet the conditions of traditional performers (2018, pp.192-4). Although gamers are not performers, the relationship between the player and the game shares some of the same aesthetically appreciable features seen in the more traditional performer/work-for-performance relationship. Moreover, in my understanding of the AAAR with videogames, the artist's role in the creation of the work and the ontological status of the work itself are similar to what's found in certain forms of cinema, theater, performance poetry, and music. What is distinct is the how experience of the work is shaped by the emerging relationship fostered between the audience as performative instantiators and the instances of the CGA that they directly bring about. While it remains true that we can aesthetically appreciate the CGA itself, what's most intriguing about videogames is that the audience-artwork relationship *itself* becomes aesthetically important in terms of shaping the experience of play. The remainder of this chapter lays out this idea in more detail and offers a case study illustrating the potential emergence of both positive and negative aesthetic qualities of the experience of play fostered through audience-artwork relationship.

Section III: The Aesthetics of Performative Instantiation

Recall from an earlier chapter that I take interactivity with videogames to be mostly an epistemic relationship, since the unpredictability of the CGA's response to user input eventually diminishes as the player becomes more knowledgeable of how the game responds to her input. That is, as a player becomes more proficient in navigating within the game space and accomplishing in-game goals, the level of interactivity decreases, and the engagement becomes closer to a kind of manipulation than interaction.⁴⁸ It's common among the gaming community to speak of "mastering" a game; one way of cashing out this concept is to think of it as understanding exactly how a CGA will respond to your input and using that knowledge to your benefit as you attempt to accomplish in-game goals.

A helpful Suitsian parallel can be drawn regarding rules of skill. For Suits, a rule of skill "operates, so to speak, *within* the area circumscribed by the constitutive rules" (2014, p.51). Suits' example of a rule of skill would be "to keep your eye on the ball" when you are playing baseball. If you break a rule of skill, or don't follow its prescriptions, you don't stop playing the game entirely (as you would if you were to break a constitutive rule), but you probably fail "to play the game well" (2014, p.52). So as a player familiarizes herself with the game, the rules of skill associated with that game become more apparent, and by repeatedly attempting to follow those rules during play, she masters the game. In most games, rules of skill aren't immediately available or apparent. It usually takes some trial and error as you play the game to figure out what rules of skill should be followed in order to

⁴⁸ This may not be the case with multiplayer games. For a more detailed account, see the chapter on interactivity, unpredictability, and aesthetic change.

play well.⁴⁹ Even if a player is aware of the rules of skill, this doesn't guarantee that they will actually be able to follow those rules. For example, a rule of skill in basketball might be, "dunk the ball when you are close to the basket, so it cannot be blocked by an opponent." If I can't jump high enough to dunk a basketball, then I can't follow that particular rule of skill. This might help explain why we enjoy watching expert playings of games like basketball; the rules of skill associated with the game are such that only a select few people can follow them, so mastery of the game seldom occurs. When it comes to videogames, simply by creating the CGA, artists implicitly create rules of skill for users by asking them to complete in-game tasks.

Keeping the notion of rules in skill in mind, let's refocus on performative instantiations. Instances of a CGA are the playings of a game that are defined by one of the possible subsets of constitutive rules detailed by the CGA itself. But before a CGA is instanced as a game, it exists as a conceptually incomplete system, requiring input from a player for the system to be actualized or instanced. When users start the input process (or initiate play), they thereby complete the system defined by the constitutive rules of that particular instance. In doing so, they inevitably start acting in accordance with, or against rules of skill as they set out to accomplish in-game goals prescribed by the constitutive rules of that instance. It's important to remember that players cannot help but follow the constitutive rules of

⁴⁹ You might also come to understand rules of skill through the testimony of others who have already mastered the game. The ways in which you discover rules of skill are by no means exhausted here. Further, rules of skill may be as simple as "avoid scoring points against your own team."

any particular instance, since they are written directly into the CGA itself. When it comes to playing the game, an argument could be made that an important variable, and thus appreciable feature (adopting a Waltonian view) of any instance is how closely the player follows the relevant rules of skill suitable for that particular instance while they interact with the CGA.

Furthermore, the relationship formed with that particular instance of the CGA can take on a variety of different aesthetic qualities. For instance, when a player successfully executes prescribed in-game goals while following rules of skill, there is an emerging aesthetic gestalt of the experience itself, with the CGA and player functioning in harmony, as both the challenges afforded by the game and the solutions enacted by the player emphasize the elegance and grace of the completed system. Of course, such harmonious relationships can only be achievable if the CGA includes well-designed game mechanics, with appropriately responsive controls and meticulously constructed challenges that offer achievable solutions.⁵⁰ Conversely, if the player fails to follow the appropriate rules of skill in that instance, or the CGA is poorly constructed with glitchy game mechanics, unresponsive controls, and overly simple or overly difficult challenges, then the emerging aesthetic gestalt of the experience fostered by the relationship may take on negative qualities: a dissonant relationship is formed between the player and the game, accompanied by feelings of imbalance, frustration, haphazardness, banality, and clumsiness. Again, it's important to remember that emerging aesthetic features of the experience cultivated through the relationship are dependent both on the

⁵⁰ See the chapter on appreciating videogames for more detail.

CGA system itself *and* the actions taken by the player.⁵¹ Understood this way, the actions taken by the player can be proprioceptively evaluated from a performative perspective, much in the same way a dancer might evaluate her own instancing of a ballet performance.⁵² It's also important to note that in any given instance of the CGA, the player will likely experience a range of both positive and negative aesthetic qualities, because those qualities are dependent on the skillful execution of intended actions.⁵³

An example will help illustrate the kind of aesthetic fluidity a gamer can experience as a performative instantiator. *Ori and Blind Forest* (2015), is a side-scrolling, 2D puzzle platformer that tasks the player with guiding Ori, a tree spirit, through various areas of Nibel, an enchanted forest, in order to restore the elemental balance that was upset after a natural disaster. Unanimously praised for its graphics, world-building, and gameplay design (Metacritic 2018, online), *Ori* challenges the player in a myriad of ways that gamers well versed in puzzle-platforming games will recognize. About halfway through the narrative, the player must guide Ori through the insides of a giant tree to free the element of water and revitalize Nibel. Once the player restores the element, the final task is to navigate Ori up to the top of the tree, avoiding the rising water that rapidly fills the trunk. Doing so is one of the more challenging sequences in the game, requiring adept,

⁵¹ The same can be said for multiplayer videogames as well. Although it may be the case that a more complex relationship is formed, one among all the players involved and the game.

⁵² For more on proprioceptive aesthetic experiences, see Barbara Montero's "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense" (2006).

⁵³ Another way of understanding why following rules of skill are important is because the player is more likely to enter a state of flow when successful. As discussed in the chapter on kitsch gameplay, the possibility of entering states of flow may be crucial to creating aesthetic experiences of play of the highest quality or kind.

well-timed jumps from limb to limb, and precise execution of combat moves to simultaneously dispatch enemies and avoid life-threatening obstacles like spiked platforms and walls. I'll sheepishly admit that it took me dozens of attempts before I succeeded in guiding Ori to the top, even after I was well acquainted with when and where each challenge occurs. But even as I failed in one frustrating attempt after another, I was able to recognize the elegance of the challenges created by the designers of the CGA because I came to understand what was required of me to enact the intended solutions to those challenges. That knowledge of both the problems created in the game-space and the possible solutions available to me played a crucial role in the phenomenology of my play. With every failed attempt, I *felt* the dissonance between my actions and the game-space; as I slowly started to realize what was required of me in order to succeed, each failed attempt materialized into an experience of the relationship with the CGA that proprioceptively felt clumsy, tragic, frustratingly ugly, and unbalanced *because* of my actions. However, even though my actions were accompanied by negative aesthetic features, they were framed that way in part because I was able to recognize the potential for a positive experience created by a well-crafted CGA. So with each action that was successful in overcoming in-game obstacles by following implicit rules of skill, I worked in concert with the CGA to create a synchronized, unified relationship, earmarked by positive aesthetic qualities of gracefulness, elegance, and harmony. Furthermore, just as the relationship between the player and the CGA remains unbalanced and desynchronized in failed attempts, so too

remains the elemental imbalance in the fictional forest as Ori fails. The poetic juxtaposition of gameplay and narrative only adds to the aesthetic gestalt of the play experience.

Before concluding, there is one caveat worth mentioning: my proposed account of the AAAR with videogames and the nature of the potential aesthetic experience that is afforded by that relationship does not require that the player actually succeed in accomplishing in-game goals. But it does require that the player adopt a lusory attitude *while playing the game*. It's not necessarily the success or payoff of achieving in-game goals that affords the potential for an aesthetic experience, but the player's willingness to engage in play, thereby creating a relationship with the CGA through their own actions that's most important. Further, a player might still appreciate the elegance and beauty of the CGA as a system and the opportunities it affords the player to engage with it, without actually doing so. This leaves open the possibility of appreciating the relationship between the CGA and player from an outside audience perspective as well, much as we might appreciate expert performances of more traditional works. Admittedly, though, the most positive and intrinsically rewarding experiences are probably those where the player does succeed in accomplishing in-game goals.

To conclude, as potential artworks, videogames are distinct in part because of the kind of AAAR they provide. The view I propose is less radical than the collective authorship accounts of Waern and Crowther, as it preserves a more traditional distinction between artist, audience, artwork. It also avoids the problems

associated with calling videogames works for performance and gamers performers of a work, while simultaneously highlighting how the relationship cultivated between the audience and the work plays a crucial role in shaping the aesthetic experience of gameplay. With videogames, the audience's relationship with the work itself becomes aesthetically relevant. Understood as performative instantiators, a gamer's actions are integral to the aesthetic gestalt of experience the work in a way not seen in traditional mediums. As such, we should look to develop positive accounts of the ontology of videogames as artworks by looking more closely at the experiences of playing videogames, and in turn use that ontology to help explain what it is that makes videogames a revolutionary art form in the first place.

Chapter 5: An Apology for Videogames

Thus far I've avoided offering a formal argument claiming that videogames can be works of art. My reasoning for this is two-fold: there already are several persuasive arguments made in the literature in favor of this view, as noted in chapter two, and I also believe serious work can be done to understand both the aesthetic nature of videogames and their value regardless of their categorization as art. However, this approach still leaves open whether videogames are worth playing in terms of their artistic and aesthetic potential. As I see it, the strongest hesitancy to understanding videogames as a legitimate artistic medium is that their very nature as games disallows the kind of engagement needed for the most worthwhile aesthetic experience. It may be the case that videogames are indeed art, but because they necessarily involve play, they are closer to kitsch art than to high arts. In this chapter, I build a defense against the view that videogames can never afford the rich, in-depth aesthetic experiences that the traditional arts offer. In doing so, I first lay out the objection that even if videogames are art, they are necessarily one of the lowest forms because they are games; as such, they require audiences engaging with them to adopt a lusus attitude, which necessarily limits the kind of appreciative attitude needed for meaningful aesthetic experiences. My efforts here are based on views about the artistic status of videogames inspired by Roger Ebert and Brian Moriarty. As a supplement to this objection, I then lay out an account of kitsch art, relying primarily on Tomas Kulka's theory, and apply it to videogames; doing so highlights the idea that both representational content *and* gameplay can be

kitsch. I then offer a novel account of kitsch gameplay to better understand the potential artistic and aesthetic value of videogames. Lastly, I respond to the objections using a Schopenhauerian framework and contending that the role the player has in creating her own aesthetic experience is precisely the right kind of engagement to lead to a worthwhile, introspective, and enlightening aesthetic experience.

Section I: Pushpin is Not Poetry

In popular culture, the debate over the artistic status of videogames gained attention when well-known movie critic Roger Ebert drew the ire of gamers by defending the claim that videogames can never be art (2010, online). In 2005, Ebert reviewed *Doom* (2005), a film adaptation of the popular first-person shooter videogame of the same title. After panning the film, he responded to a handful of reader comments where he first denied that videogames could ever be art. But it wasn't until 2010 that Ebert formally condemned the idea. In "Videogames Can Never Be Art," Ebert responds to a TEDx talk on the artistic value of videogames given by Kellee Santiago (2010, online). He takes up each of the examples Santiago uses to argue that videogames are art and quickly proceeds to dismiss them. Yet the crux of Ebert's argument relies on the conflation of the categorical and honorific uses of "art." For example, look at his comment about *Braid*, a game Santiago refers to as art: "She [Santiago] also admires a story told between the levels, which exhibits prose on the level of a wordy fortune cookie" (2010, online). He goes on in an equally trivializing tone regarding *Flower* (2009), another

example referred to by Santiago: “Nothing she [Santiago] shows from this game seemed of more than decorative interest on the level of a greeting card” (2010, online). Afterwards, Ebert reiterates his claim about videogames in general: “No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers” (2010, online). Ebert’s remarks suggest that videogames, as a category, cannot be art because no videogame can be considered an artistic masterpiece, and he is skeptical that one ever will. Ebert’s argument assumes that if no masterpiece can be created in a specific medium, then that medium cannot be an art form.

A few months after “Videogames Can Never Be Art,” Ebert returned to the debate and softened his position. In “Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn,” Ebert wrote, “What I was saying is that video games could not in principle be Art. That was a foolish position to take, particularly as it seemed to apply to the entire unseen future of games ... It is quite possible a game could someday be great Art” (2010, online). Ebert rescinded his original conclusion on the grounds that sometime in the future a videogame might be considered an artistic masterpiece. Nonetheless, a serious problem concerning the aesthetic value of videogames can be pulled from a charitable interpretation of Ebert’s position.

While it’s wrong to think that videogames can never be art in a categorical sense, perhaps it is the case that videogames can never offer the aesthetically rich experiences the ‘high arts’ do. This is the line of reasoning that Brian Moriarty defends in “An Apology for Roger Ebert.” A professor of game design at

Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Moriarty has been involved with the gaming industry for over 30 years, developing and producing games for LucasArts since the 1980's. Thus Moriarty's videogame experience and expertise are significantly more substantial than Ebert's, yet he stands by the claim that videogames cannot be great art:

But as much as I admire games like *M.U.L.E.*, *Balance of Power*, *Sim City* and *Civilization*, it would never even occur to me to compare them to the treasures of world literature, painting or music. And I'm pretty sure the authors of these particular games wouldn't presume to, either. (Moriarty 2011, online)

Moriarty goes on to give three related arguments to support his claim that videogames can't be great art. First, he gives a pragmatic argument grounded in the idea that the videogame industry is not the appropriate environment to create great art.⁵⁴ He supports this claim by first noting that creating great art requires mastery of a medium that necessitates years of practice with the tools used in that particular medium. When it comes to videogames, he goes on to say that "the tools and technology we work with are, and always have been, slippery" (Moriarty 2011, online). Videogames and the technology used to produce and consume them are in a constant state of flux. The relatively brief history of videogames has witnessed dramatic advancements in the sophistication of the computing hardware and software games utilize. Compare some of the first widely produced games like Atari's *Pong* (1972) to current titles like Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017); in a little over 45 years, the tools used in the design, production, and

⁵⁴ Although Moriarty presents his arguments in a different order, I address them in order of perceived strength and relevance to my own project.

exhibition of videogames have evolved to the point that they are hardly recognizable. And with the recent advancements in Virtual Reality hardware, the videogame landscape is likely facing another revolutionary technological change. As an artistic medium, videogames don't afford the consistency needed for designers and producers to master their craft; thus we can't hope to see great art come out of it. Similarly, Moriarty argues that from a business standpoint, videogame companies are subject to far too many changes in management and personnel to maintain the consistency needed to master their art form:

Now let's talk about the business of video games. During the five years I worked at Lucasfilm, the management of the games division changed six times. Acquisitions, layoffs, delays, cancellations, closing studio doors, lawsuits ... you've all been there. How can a potential artist hope to accumulate any deep practice in this maelstrom? (2011, online)

Although anecdotal, Moriarty's point represents a more general concern for the artistic worthiness of videogames: working in a hyper competitive entertainment industry, videogame designers and producers focus on turning a profit rather than making great art, and this leads to an unstable working environment that is ill-suited for mastery of an art form. Take, for instance, the massively popular *Call of Duty* (2003) series. In just 13 years, a dozen titles have been handled by three different developing companies and released on over 15 different platforms ranging from personal computers to smartphones, utilizing a variety of different game engines. While this atmosphere may be good for business, it's bad for creating great art.

The remaining two arguments Moriarty gives are conceptually closely related. He attacks the artistic value of videogames by noting their similarity to kitsch art and then challenges the aesthetic value of videogames by claiming that their fundamental nature as games rules out the highest aesthetic experience great works of art aspire to: the sublime. Both arguments rely on the general idea that, from a standpoint of evaluating great art, videogames do not, and, by their very nature as games, cannot produce the kind of experience that great artworks give us.

The argument that videogames lack serious artistic value requires an understanding of kitsch art. To this end, I turn to Tomas Kulka's *Kitsch and Art* (1996), in which he gives a careful analysis of both the concept of kitsch and its value in the artworld.⁵⁵ Kulka begins by offering a set of three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an artwork to be kitsch:

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes. (1996, pp.37-8)

It's worth noting that despite being presented as necessary and sufficient conditions, Kulka sees his definition as allowing for differing degrees with respect to a work being kitsch: "We should remember, however, that kitsch doesn't form a pure, monolithic category with sharp, clear-cut boundaries. There are paintings that are more kitschy than others and there are bound to be many borderline cases"

⁵⁵ Moriarty offers a brief summary Kulka's position as well. However, referring to Kulka's own writing provides a better understanding of the issues at hand.

(1996, p.77). Presumably, the degree to which a work is considered kitsch corresponds to the degree to which the content of the work is charged with stock emotions and easily identifiable objects and themes.

A brief explanation of each of the conditions illustrates the reason most videogames might be categorized as kitsch art. Kulka's focus is on visual arts, and he notes that works considered kitsch are "charged with stock emotions that spontaneously trigger an unreflective emotional response" (1996, p.26). To bring out this instantaneous, cursory emotional response, kitsch art deals with content that has mass appeal: "[kitsch art] exploits universal subjects such as birth, family, love, nostalgia, and so forth, which could, perhaps, be further analyzed in terms of Jungian archetypes" (1996, p.27). Condition one requires that kitsch speaks to its audience in a supportive manner, reinforcing fundamental beliefs and common emotional platitudes. Condition two establishes the way in which condition one is met. As Kulka notes, "the positive response to the depicted object obviously depends not only on what is represented but also on how it is represented" (1996, p.28). Successful kitsch art doesn't call for any interpretation of the subject matter; trees should be immediately recognizable as trees, a happy person should be smiling, and a sad person should be crying and look remorseful. The stock emotional responses required from condition one ought to come at zero intellectual or interpretative cost to the audience. Lastly with condition three, Kulka establishes what kind of experience audiences have with kitsch art. He argues that a mark of great art is that it can "transform the familiar ideas and associations related

to the depicted object in various ways. Standard associations can be sharpened, amplified, intensified, or altogether transformed” (1996, p.35). When it comes to kitsch art, the familiar ideas and associations with the depicted content are taken at face value. Kulka goes on to say that “kitsch art does not exploit the artistic possibilities of structural elaboration, extension of expressive potentialities, elaboration of unique individual features, interpretation and innovation” (1996, p.37). Not only should the objects and themes of kitsch art be easily identified, but they shouldn’t be left open for interpretation: what you immediately see is what you get, and it’s unnecessary to look for underlying implications or draw any inferences. Regarding kitsch paintings, Kulka argues that “the picture should be totally explicit and one-dimensional; no ambiguities, no hidden meanings” (1996, p.37). The content of kitsch art exploits standard and stereotypical themes with little room for further analysis; happy is happy, sad is sad, evil is never good, and good is never evil.⁵⁶ Kitsch art reinforces the most common ideas and concepts associated with its content. On the other hand, high arts challenge and enhance, inviting audiences to go beyond the surface representations and contemplate a deeper understanding of what they are experiencing.

If we follow Kulka’s definition and apply it to videogames, then it’s no surprise that Moriarty argues that videogames lack the artistic value required for great art. Part of what makes the videogame industry financially successful is its

⁵⁶ Kulka readily admits that what is considered kitsch art is partly dependent on social and cultural context. Kitsch artwork functions in methods that are standard and conventional relative to the context in which it’s created and observed. As such, what might constitute kitsch art in the present-day U.S. may have been artistically innovative and challenging in the early 1900’s.

mass appeal to a wide variety of audiences. In garnering this appeal, production companies and designers seem to purposely make the artistic style of videogames kitsch. A game that depicts easily identifiable, stock emotions or themes and reinforces the contextual stereotypes associated with those themes is undoubtedly going to appeal to a wider audience than its counterpart. Most of the best-selling videogames easily seem to fall under the definition of kitsch art. For example, take the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise (1985-2015). It's one of the most financially successful videogame series to date, with over 18 individual titles; the first game in the series, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), has sold over 40 million copies (Lama 2013, online). Released 2006, *New Super Mario Bros.* has sold over 30 million copies (Lama 2013, online). Suffice it to say, *Super Mario* games have massive appeal. And from an artistic standpoint, the games follow a fundamentally basic narrative format that aligns with Kulka's definition of kitsch. In the first game, players control Mario, an average man whose day job is as a plumber (as reflected by his attire, complete with a red pool boy cap and blue overalls), but who moonlights as a hero tasked with saving his beloved girlfriend from the evil King Bowser within plumbing pipes that lead to a fantasy land known as Mushroom Kingdom. *Mario* makes full use of stock emotional appeals and themes. The stereotypical plot of the unassuming hero needing to save his lady love from the clutches of evil is the basis for nearly every *Mario* game produced. Mario represents the average, everyday man with a blue-collar job who is forced to find his inner strength to save the woman he loves. Princess Peach is his one true love and always the damsel in

distress; she is often depicted as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, hourglass figure wearing a pink evening gown. Bowser is Mario's archenemy and fits the part of the typical villainous ne'er do-well: hailing from the magical Mushroom Kingdom, he looks like a cross between a dragon and a turtle, complete with a giant spiked shell, sharp claws, and the ability to breathe fire.

In nearly every iteration of *Mario*, Bowser kidnaps Princess Peach and holds her prisoner in his ominous fortress, complete with fiery death traps and evil henchmen. From a narrative standpoint, *Mario* relies heavily on stock emotions associated with the easily identifiable and stereotypical "good vs. evil" motif, reinforced by the visual representations of the characters. It's also steeped in some of the worst stock gender stereotypes and hierarchies; through her position in the story and her visual representation, Princess Peach is cast as the physically and emotionally weak woman, incapable of looking out for herself and entirely dependent on the strong, brave man to save her.⁵⁷ Moreover, it doesn't ask of its audience to think too deeply about the characters or themes in the story: You're there to rescue the Princess from the clutches of evil and live happily ever after.⁵⁸ Nothing about the series (or the individual titles) suggests that it's anything but kitsch art (if, in fact, it is art at all). *The Super Mario* series represents many financially successful games that are proudly kitsch: if the primary goal of most videogames is financial success, then making them kitsch is a proven plan. As

⁵⁷ A strong case could be made that part of the problem with kitsch is that it not only deals in stock emotions, but often deals in the worst kind of stock emotions that reinforce discriminatory stereotypes based on race, gender, and ethnicity.

⁵⁸ That is until Bowser inevitably kidnaps the Princess again: Eighteen times and counting.

Moriarty notes, “kitsch is a risk-reduction strategy, time-tested and good for business” (2011, online). Yet employing this strategy seems to come at the cost of restricting the potential artistic value of the medium; as kitsch, videogames seem fundamentally incapable of being great art.

Lastly, Moriarty argues that the essential nature of videogames as games prohibits the kind of aesthetic experience needed for a work to count as sublime art. To this end, he endorses an understanding of aesthetic experience and the sublime modeled after Arthur Schopenhauer’s thoughts on the subjects. For Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience played a central role in relieving us from our own nature (Levinson 1998, p.247). Schopenhauer famously held a particularly cynical view with respect to human nature, believing that we spend the majority of our time in a constant of state of desire, or willing: “Schopenhauer proclaims, my entire inner nature is willing—desiring, striving, urging—and all varieties of affect and emotion, pleasure and pain, that conduce to or inhibit action” (Levinson 1998, p.246). For Schopenhauer, a constant state of desire inevitably leads to a life full of suffering; having desire means being dissatisfied with your current state, which is in itself suffering. Although there may be moments of relief, they are brief and cyclical, often only leading back to desire. We can, however, escape perpetual suffering momentarily through aesthetic experiences of the beautiful and sublime (Levinson 1998, p.46). Echoing a Kantian sentiment, Schopenhauer understands sublime experiences as transcending the purposeful will, thus breaking the cycle of

suffering. Philosopher Sandra Shapshay nicely summarizes Schopenhauer's concept of aesthetic experience:

In order for the subject to attain such perception, her intellect must cease viewing things in the ordinary way—relationally and ultimately in relation to one's will—she must “stop considering the Where, When, Why and Wherefore of things but simply and exclusively consider the What.” (2012, online)

With this understanding of what is required for a sublime experience, it's easy to see why Moriarty doesn't think videogames qualify as high art. Playing a videogame explicitly requires players to apply their will, not transcend it: “How can an activity motivated by decisions, striving, goals and competition, a deliberate concentration of the force of Will, be used to transcend Will itself?” (Moriarty 2011, online). Necessarily interactive, not only do videogames require players to make purposeful choices when playing, but they must do so by first adopting a lusory attitude.⁵⁹ A strong case can be made that by adopting a lusory attitude, players are no longer able to transcend their own will. As such, they are incapable of being in the appropriate appreciative mindset necessary to experience the sublime.⁶⁰ Videogames seem explicitly designed to keep the player focused on achieving goals by exercising their own will. Whether it be advancing to the next level, finding all the secret items and power-ups, beating your opponent, getting the highest possible score, etc., players are constantly aware of their own involvement and impact on their gaming experience. Since videogames by their very nature

⁵⁹ Recall that adopting a lusory attitude is a necessary condition for gameplay according to Bernard Suits. As part of adopting this attitude, players tacitly agree to try and accomplish a specific goal within the game by less than efficient means, purely for the sake of doing so.

⁶⁰ Brock Rough uses a similar strategy to argue that games cannot be art because they require their participants to adopt incompatible attitudes: A lusory attitude and an appreciative attitude. “The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks” (2017).

disallow the kind of experience needed to access the sublime, Moriarty concludes that we ought not seek them out for their artistic or aesthetic value.

If a person is after a deeply enriching aesthetic experience aimed at connecting with the sublime, then she shouldn't bother playing videogames. Regardless of the strength of Moriarty's individual arguments, it's this general sentiment that videogames aren't worth our time from an artistic and aesthetic standpoint that is the most troubling. After all, with finite time and resources, why bother actively engaging in a medium that, through its essential nature, makes it impossible to achieve most valuable aesthetic experience? Even if videogames are art, they have as little artistic and aesthetic value as pushpin does when compared to poetry.

Section II: Addressing the Pragmatic Concerns

At first glance, Moriarty's position represents a formidable problem for understanding videogames as offering serious artistic and aesthetic value. Moriarty and his ilk may be correct in contending that most videogames on the market do not offer the kind of experience necessary to be considered great works of art. But to claim that videogames categorically cannot be high art is misguided. In this section, I build a defense against the specific arguments given by Moriarty; in doing so, I offer direct responses to each of the three arguments explicated in the previous section, highlighting examples of videogames that may offer artistic and aesthetic experiences of the highest kind. Additionally, I show that similar pragmatic concerns have been raised for other mediums, including cinema and painting. Thus,

if we accept Moriarty's arguments and others of a similar kind, there is an unsavory implication regarding the artistic and aesthetic value of other, highly regarded art mediums. At the very least, a few case studies offered below serve as counterexamples.

To begin, recall the pragmatic concern voiced by Moriarty. Briefly, he makes a two-pronged attack that the tools with which videogames are made and the industry where they're created limit their ability to be considered great works. The first prong claims that to produce great works of art requires mastery of the tools used in that particular medium, and since the tools and technology used to make videogames are continually changing, game designers cannot become masters of their medium. The general implication that advancement in technology or the basic tools used to create other works of art necessarily limits their aesthetic potential is weak at best. Technological advancements have a rich history in several art mediums, and not much concern is expressed about such advancements limiting potential aesthetic value simply because artists must adjust to new tools.

He compares this to the film industry, claiming that, aside from a few minor changes when sound was introduced in film, "the basic format, the fundamental engineering parameters controlling the design, production, distribution and exhibition of movies, remained virtually unchanged for over 115 years" (Moriarty, 2011, online). Although not entirely ungrounded, Moriarty's comparison gravely undersells technological advancements in filmmaking: from early cinema where color was literally painted on black and white film stock, to the more recent

shift away from the standard 35mm film and cameras to digital recording requiring no physical film with editing done entirely on computers, film is no stranger to technological change. And despite the shake-up in technology and tools used in cinema, there is little worry that such advancements will neuter filmmakers' ability to produce great art. Noted film critics Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott discuss the changing cinematic landscape in their article from the New York Times, "Film is Dead? Long Live Movies: How Digital is Changing the Nature of Movies." Scott notes that the rapid advancement in cinematic technology has at times been a boon to the overall artistic quality of recent films, referencing the aesthetic achievements of digital films like *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Life of Pi* (2012): "Image quality improved rapidly, and the last decade has seen some striking examples of filmmakers exploring and exploiting digital to aesthetic advantage" (Dargis 2012, online). Dargis goes on to explain that cinema has always been fundamentally linked with changes in the tools used to produce it. "The history of cinema is also a history of technological innovations and stylistic variations. New equipment and narrative techniques are introduced that can transform the ways movies look and sound and can inspire further changes" (Dargis 2012, online). Admittedly, the changes in technology and tools are not always optimally utilized to improve the artistic or aesthetic quality of film, as Scott is quick to point out:

I agree that digital has introduced new visual clichés and new ways for movies to look crummy. But there have always been a lot of dumb, bad-looking movies, and it's a given that most filmmakers (like most musicians, artists, writers and humans in whatever line of work) will use emerging technologies to perpetuate mediocrity. (Dargis 2012, online)

Still, the idea that some might use developing technologies to an artistic fault does not support the claim that changes in the tools used to create works limit the potential to make great art in a given medium. In fact, the successful employment of new technology in creating works of art could be considered a testament to the skill of the artist. After all, what is it they say about a craftsman who blames his tools?

When it comes to the second prong of Moriarty's pragmatic attack, there may be more cause for concern. Instability in an industry that's primarily concerned with making a profit leads to some notoriously poor products. For example, consider the much-maligned *Superman 64* (1999). Developed for the Nintendo 64 and produced by Eric Caen of Titus Software, *Superman 64* is regarded as one of the worst videogames ever made (GameRankings.com 2016, online).⁶¹ Critics often cite the clunky, unresponsive controls, tediously repetitive objectives, multiple glitches, and poor graphics:

The game was buggy in every area. It was easy for Superman to get stuck on a building, and in later levels, he could go through a wall or even get stuck in the floor. Boss fights were little more than button mashing affairs where you wailed away with awkward punches, often hitting nothing but thin air. (Wong 2015, online)

The universal pan of *Superman 64* traces back to problems during its development: problems that illustrate Moriarty's general concern about lack of stability within the gaming industry. In an interview discussing the game, Caen went into detail about

⁶¹ Multiple media outlets have compiled lists of the worst games made, and *Superman 64* is consistently among them.

the difficulties he faced with licensing issues and management turnover that contributed to the poor quality of the final product:

“The Warner licensing team was let go only a few days after our deal was inked,” Caen said. “The next people in charge hated us the first minute they saw us and our project. They believed a major company such as EA Games would pay more and create a better product. In every way, they tried to stop its development,” he continued. “First, they asked us to change it from an action game to a Sim City-like game, where Superman would be like the mayor of Metropolis. That was honestly pathetic.” (Wong 2015, online)

The unstable upper management diverted the Caen’s attention so much that he was unable to spend the time needed to create a better game:

“We lost too much time answering Warner Brothers and DC’s concerns and weird ideas,” he said. “With more time to focus on the game’s development and its playability, instead of the surrounding circus, we could have improved the controls and the collisions, and have made a better game at the end.” (Wong 2015, online)

The case of *Superman 64* highlights the general motivation behind criticisms like Moriarty’s.⁶² Despite the negative critical reception, the game was financially successful; at one point, it was the third best-selling Nintendo 64 title almost three months after the initial release (IGN staff 1999, online). Not only is it a case where instability within the industry negatively impacted the potential artistic quality of the product, it shows that even universally panned games can still make money. If an abhorrent game like *Superman 64* was profitable, there doesn’t seem to be much incentive for game designers to create artistically praiseworthy works, even if they had the means and support from a stabilized industry to do so.

⁶² A more recent example of a game facing similar production problems that negatively affected its critical reception is *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011). The fourth installment in the franchise was stuck in development hell for over 14 years, dealing with multiple production companies, lack of funding, and changing technology. With no stability during production, the final product was universally panned.

Within the artworld, Moriarty's worry about creating works under the backdrop of a volatile industry preoccupied with turning a profit isn't uncommon. When it comes to cinema, those involved with the industry refer to films that get bogged down in pre-production as being in "development hell." Projects can slip into development hell for a multitude of reasons, including inadequate funding, licensing issues, multiple script rewrites, or casting problems. Regardless of the reason, films that end up in development hell often stay there for years at a time, sometimes never finding the stability needed to move on. Moriarty sees this as fundamentally problematic when it comes to making great art, but being in development hell doesn't always end with disastrous works. Take, for example, *Dallas Buyers Club*. Released in 2013, the film was nominated for multiple Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Actor (Matthew McConaughey), and Best Supporting Actor (Jared Leto). Despite being both a critical and financial success, *Dallas Buyers Club* suffered in development hell for over a decade (Ulaby 2014, online). The original script was written by Craig Borten in 1996 and quickly picked up for production, with Dennis Hopper slated to direct and Woody Harrelson cast in the lead role. Not long after, the company that purchased the script went bankrupt. Things only got worse from there:

Borten teamed up with Melisa Wallack, and the next year, they sold a new script to Universal, with Brad Pitt to star and Marc Forster to direct, the latter then hot off the indie hit *Monsters Ball*. But Forster and Pitt ended up making *World War Z* instead. (Later, Ryan Gosling and director Craig Gillespie would sign on but the financing fell apart.) Universal decided the script was not ready. (Ulaby 2014, online)

It wasn't until 2009, nearly 13 years after Borten wrote the first script, that the film emerged from development hell. After buying back the rights to the script, the co-writers were able to secure investments for production with help from McConaughey, who did some self-promoting for the film (Ulaby 2014, online). But the instability and uncertainty that clouded the project remained: 10 weeks before filming was scheduled to start, some of the most recent investors backed out. Determined to complete the project, producer Rachel Winter used her own personal credit cards to help with production costs (Ulaby 2014, online). *Dallas Buyers Club* went through years of industry-induced problems before finally being made, much in the same way *Superman 64* did. In this case, though, the quality of the work wasn't detrimentally affected by all of the development problems.

Although the pragmatic concerns voiced by Moriarty are troubling in their own right, they are not insurmountable, nor are they unique to videogames. Other artistic mediums, including painting and cinema, have been affected by changes in the tools and materials used to create works. Art historian James Elkins spends an entire chapter in *What Painting Is* (1999) discussing how changes in the types of paints and how they are made directly impacted the development of particular styles and techniques throughout the history of painting (1999, pp. 8-44). And when comparisons are drawn with cinema, it's important to remember that videogames are still in their infancy, with the first games coming on the market roughly 40 years ago; if it were film, that would put the industry in the 1920's, before sound was introduced. Understood in this light, it's unsurprising that the

tools used in videogame production are evolving rapidly. Overall, it's no secret that as advancements in technology are made, the art created with said technology is going to adapt and change as well. In many instances, new technologies emerge and are available alongside more traditional technologies. To a certain extent, videogames are already experiencing a similar phenomenon, both in terms of software and hardware. Take for example, titles like *NeuroVoider* (2016) and *Golf Story* (2017). Although developed and released using contemporary software and hardware, both of the games' graphics are textured in a pixelated, rough style, strikingly similar to the graphics most common in games during the late 1980's. And as first-generation gamers reach adulthood, they've created an increased market demand for retro gaming consoles. In 2016 Nintendo released a replicated version of their original 1985 console, the Nintendo Entertainment System. Complete with 30 games designed for the original console, the unit was in high demand, with 2.3 million sold between November 2016 and April 2017 (Gilbert, 2017, online). So even though the technology used to create and display videogames has rapidly advanced, this doesn't entail that the quality of works created always suffers. Great works are still produced in the mediums of painting and cinema despite the changes within both industries and tools. Consequently, the possibility of creating a great work of art in the videogame medium should not be dismissed because of pragmatic worries like those issued by Moriarty.

Section III: Addressing the Conceptual Concerns

Pragmatic objections aside, the most difficult problems gleaned from Moriarty's take are conceptual. By taking Kulka's definition of kitsch art and applying it to videogames, we're left with a framework for understanding them that seems to necessarily limit their artistic potential. This move is somewhat justifiable; there are more than enough examples of games that satisfy Kulka's definition. Moreover, coupling the kitsch objection with the argument that videogames by their very nature as games eliminate the possibility for the most meaningful type of aesthetic experience leaves us little motivation to argue for their art status. If designers only create games that, at their best, are merely kitsch and necessarily unable to provide even the potential of meaningful artistic and aesthetic value, we ought not bother thinking about them as anything but a form of mass entertainment. But there is hope. Further consideration of Kulka's theory of kitsch provides greater insight into the argument against videogames' artistic value and a possible response to the objection. Additionally, a response to the argument against aesthetic value is available through an application of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. This strategy is optimal, as it meets the transcendental criteria of aesthetic experience Moriarty seems to accept.⁶³

Recall that Moriarty argues that most videogames are kitsch because kitsch sells: making videogames charged with easily identifiable, stock emotions broadens their appeal to a larger audience. But looking closely at the concern that

⁶³ The transcendental thesis is, at best, contentious. But for charity's sake, I'll address it on the assumption that it is viable.

videogames lack significant artistic value because they are kitsch calls for another pass at Kulka's work.

In his evaluation of the worthlessness of kitsch, Kulka makes two distinct arguments, one regarding artistic worthlessness and the other regarding aesthetic worthlessness. Kulka distinguishes between the artistic value and aesthetic value of a work in an intuitive manner; in particular he notes that most of the artistic value of a work is less a matter of the formal properties of the work itself, and more a function of its position within the history of the artworld. "The artistic value of a work of art can be conceived of as reflecting the public, or more specifically the artworld significance of the innovation exemplified by the work, and the inherent potential of this innovation for subsequent artistic/aesthetic exploitation" (1996, p.55). Understanding a work's artistic value requires attention to its place in an art-historical context. To illustrate his point, Kulka points to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. Now considered one of Picasso's most famous works that sparked the cubism movement, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was critically panned and widely considered a failure upon its creation in 1907 because of its perceived aesthetic shortcomings when compared to its contemporaries (Kulka 1996, p.52-3). The disparity between early criticisms and present-day praises is explained through its retrospective position in an art-historical context; today, *Les Femmes d'Alger* is considered an innovative and inspiring masterpiece because of its lasting impact in the world of painting. By accepting this idea, Kulka readily admits that the artistic value of most

innovative works is best determined well after their creation (1996, p.56-7).

However, he's quick to add that

this does not mean that we cannot say anything meaningful about the artistic value of a work at the time of its creation. Sensitive art critics can often "see" the new artistic possibilities opened for aesthetic exploitation in the work that has just been created. They may grasp the significance of the innovation even before its influence has actually made itself felt. (1996, p.56)

Thus, for a work to have significant artistic, i.e., art-historical value, it must be innovative, or possess a certain novelty that spawns a significant new movement or direction within an art-historical context.⁶⁴ Following Kulka's lead, it's safe to assume that artistic value comes in degrees, based on the work's art historical impact. And while we may prognosticate about the work's potential artistic value, only in retrospect can it be accurately assessed. It's also worth mentioning that Kulka leaves open the possibility that certain works that, during their time of creation, were not innovative or novel may have some art-historical value: "One could plausibly argue that even the works that were not radical innovations in their time had artistic value because they helped to establish and define the emerging artistic style" (1996, p.63). For instance, even though Jean Metzinger's *Nu à la cheminée* came nearly four years after Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and therefore was not particularly innovative, it still helped to define cubism as an artistic style. If we follow this example, then at least some of the artistic value of a work can be determined by the degree of excellence with which a particular work exhibits or utilizes constitutive elements of an already well-defined artistic style.

⁶⁴ Works like this may still possess significant aesthetic value by virtue of excellence according to the aesthetic standards of their time period or artistic style.

Looking back on Kulka's definition of kitsch, the conjunction of the second and third conditions seems to necessitate that kitsch is artistically worthless (1996, 58-9). The second condition maintains that if an artwork is kitsch, then the depicted objects and themes are instantly and effortlessly identifiable. This means that kitsch works are stylistically conservative, relying on well-established artistic conventions in the presentation of their content; there is nothing innovative or groundbreaking in the artistic style in kitsch art when understood from an art-historical perspective. The third condition holds that kitsch provides no sort of enrichment or enlightened understanding of its objects or themes; there is nothing inspiring or worth contemplating beyond the immediate, automatic response one might have to the work. The implied lack of innovation and novelty (from an art-historical perspective) taken from the last two conditions virtually ensures that if a work is kitsch, then it's artistically worthless.

So what can be said about videogames and their apparent lack of artistic value? Two strategies seem available. One is to deny that kitsch art necessarily lacks artistic value; this would amount to rejecting Kulka's definition of kitsch and its implications. The other is to take an empirical approach and examine games (on an individual basis or perhaps as genres) to determine if they meet the definition of kitsch art. The safe assumption is that most of the mainstream videogames do in fact meet the definition to a high degree. But we can look to a multitude of outlying cases, particularly independently developed games, that don't fit the kitsch mold; they don't fit precisely because they are innovative, novel, and directly flout

commonly accepted tropes, objects and themes seen both in videogames and in other artistic mediums. The latter strategy is attractive, as it preserves the work done by Kulka on kitsch and simultaneously raises the awareness of both academics and those in the gaming industry about possible ways to create more artistically valuable videogames. Employing this strategy requires looking at examples of games that are innovative and novel with respect to their art-historical position, thus possessing a high degree of artistic value. Doing so also helps lay the groundwork for a more prescriptive account of the artistic and aesthetic evaluation of videogames without relying so heavily on comparative approaches with other mediums of art, which often leads to a misunderstanding of what it is about the videogame that shapes its artistic value.

It's unsurprising that most products of an industry dominated by giant businesses focused on making money employ kitsch principles; Moriarty highlights this point in his argument, and even casts smaller, independent game developers as attempting to do the same. But he is too cavalier in his dismissal of the entire medium in this regard, for two reasons. First, recall that the videogame as a medium is in its pubescent stages, comparatively speaking. As such, to accurately assess the art-historical value of the medium right now is incredibly difficult, let alone attempting to do so with the individual works. Second, judging the artistic value of videogames requires going beyond what the representational content is and considering how that content is incorporated into the gameplay. Moriarty's argument is another example of how comparing videogames with other forms of art

leaves out precisely what makes them rare as an art form: while most videogames may contain kitsch-like representational content (that is, they meet the first two conditions of the definition), the way in which consumers engage with that content may bring with it an opportunity for an enriching, amplifying or even transformational experience. In such cases, the third definitional condition is violated, opening the possibility that even games with unabashedly kitsch narratives, themes, and styles still invite consumers to experience that content in non-kitsch ways.

We can look to examples that violate the third condition and are likely to possess artistic value. *Braid*, discussed in chapter two, is a clear-cut example of a game that takes a kitsch narrative and, through both gameplay and storytelling, violates the third condition. As a reminder, *Braid* tells the story of a physically unassuming protagonist named Tim on his quest to save a princess. A side-scrolling puzzle platformer, *Braid* asks the player to guide Tim through a series of puzzles and navigate multiple levels populated by enemies and obstacles, ultimately trying to rescue his love from her captor. Understood on this level, *Braid*'s basic storyline and gameplay are like those of *Super Mario Bros*. However, what prevents *Braid*'s narrative from being kitsch is that it was designed against the backdrop of kitsch narratives; *Braid* was a deliberate effort by creator Jonathan Blow to call attention to the pervasive kitsch narratives and game design so often found in the videogame industry. This is evidenced both in the narrative's final act, and in how the

gameplay corresponds with the story itself.⁶⁵ The story is left open for interpretation and exploration of deeper levels of meaning. It calls into question the nature of the “hero saves the day by rescuing the girl” trope by literally reversing the theme, in both the story and the gameplay. At the start of the game Tim is represented and meant to be thought of as the hero. In the moments of the last level, it’s strongly suggested that Tim is actually the evildoer from whom the Princess was rescued. This shift in perspective is foreshadowed in subtle explorations of Tim’s motivation throughout the game; it’s clear that he has regrets and wishes to make up for past mistakes, a theme reinforced by the central game mechanic of time manipulation, whereby the player can press a button to reverse the flow of time if mistakes are made. *Braid* takes a kitsch narrative scheme commonly seen in videogames and manipulates it, inviting further contemplation from the player. I should add that it’s not this particular method of storytelling that sets *Braid* apart from kitsch art; a wide variety of stories told in different artistic mediums make use of a twist ending or revelatory moment. However, the method itself, regardless of the context that is used in, necessarily opens the door for further contemplation and possible enrichment of the associations made with a narrative, thereby violating Kulka’s third condition. In multiple interviews, Blow has made clear his intention to leave open *Braid*’s narrative for analysis:

The story of rescuing the Princess has a literal interpretation, as well as a metaphorical one; and then there are other small-scale levels of change to the interpretation, too. I don't intend for any of them to be the sole truth; the story I am trying to tell is something like the quantum superposition of all these things. (Totilo 2007, online)

⁶⁵ For elaboration on this, see section IV of chapter two.

Elsewhere, he reiterates, “The narrative in *Braid* is not being obscure just for obscurity's sake. It's that way because it was the only way I knew how to get at the central idea, which is something big and subtle and resists being looked at directly” (McElroy 2008, online). From Blow's comments and the game itself, it's evident that *Braid's* narrative is not kitsch.

Even in cases where the representational content of games is, to some degree, kitsch, it doesn't follow the entire work should be considered kitsch. Gameplay and design need to be accounted for in our evaluation of the artistic worth of the specific works in the medium. To say that a videogame is kitsch only because its representational content is kitsch is a misstep, much in the way that the comparative approach to categorizing videogames as art is a problem; it ignores a large portion of the constitutive properties of the work. A complete evaluation of the artistic value of a videogame requires looking at the game design as well as the representational content. In doing so, we might find that games with clear kitsch narratives like *Super Mario* garner their art-historical value from the gameplay; when game design is considered, Mario has a clear and distinct art-historical value, similar to Lichtenstein's *Look Mickey* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Each of these works represents the first of its kind in a genre. *Braid's* success as a work is only made possible because of the lasting impact *Mario* had on the gaming industry, much as the Pop Art revolution in the late 1950s is only properly understood in the context of the more traditional art movements before it. What salvages *Mario* from being highly kitsch is its lasting impact on gameplay design; it helped usher in an

entire genre of side scrolling puzzle platforming games and is a model that many games created today still follow. As such, its overall art historical value within the videogame medium is quite high, despite its decidedly kitsch narrative.

It should be evident that regarding videogames en masse as artistically worthless is untenable; the evaluation of their artistic value should be done on a case-by-case basis, with attention to all the constitutive elements of the work, including gameplay design. Doing so allows for a better understanding of videogame aesthetics, but it also gives insight on how we might further construct a normative account of videogames' artistic value, looking at gameplay design specifically. A kitsch-like framework adopted from Kulka's work helps us establish a more nuanced way of evaluating the overall worth (both artistically and aesthetically) of gameplay mechanics.

What follows, then, is the need for an account of kitsch gameplay. The first obstacle towards that effort is clear: all of Kulka's conditions require that the object of evaluation be representational. The focus on representational content is not uncommon when it comes to kitsch. Ian Bogost and Brian Schrank specifically discuss videogame kitsch, with both focusing mostly on the representational content in their accounts; In *How To Do Things With Videogames* (2011), Bogost devotes a chapter to explaining the relationship between kitsch and videogames (pp.83-9). In his work *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture* (2014), Schrank recognizes that most mainstream games work mostly in kitsch content, easily letting consumers know exactly how they should respond to and

interact with the work (pp.34-8). But gameplay is not constitutively dependent on its representational content.

We can borrow from some of the qualities identified in kitsch to help establish what kitsch-like gameplay might look and feel like.⁶⁶ In the last chapter of his book, Kulka considers nonrepresentational mediums like abstract painting, architecture, and music as they relate to kitsch. He writes, “When an abstract painting or a piece of music has no artistic and aesthetic merits of its own, but derives its appeal from being parasitic on some previously well received gestalts, it functions as kitsch” (Kulka 1996, p.102). Kulka rightly points out that not all music which borrows from previously successful musical gestalts results in kitsch. He looks to Clement Greenberg’s work on kitsch to help distinguish between parasitic borrowing and non-parasitic borrowing:

The precondition for kitsch...is the availability close at hand of a fully mature cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. (Greenberg p.10-1)

By endorsing Greenberg’s sentiments, Kulka provides a clearer understanding of parasitic borrowing that falls in line with his third definitional condition, where kitsch work does nothing to substantially enhance our understanding or experience; it instead uses strategies made successful through other well-received works to capture its audience without demanding any further contemplation (aesthetic,

⁶⁶ I include “feel” because a strong case can be made that gameplay design is best understood as at least partially kinesthetic and proprioceptive; for example, videogame critics often talk about how game mechanics and responses to user input *feel* “clunky,” “un-responsive,” or “unnatural.” There is a distinct *gestalt*-based reaction to well-crafted gameplay design intimately tied in with a physical response to how user input is received.

artistic, or otherwise). Non-representational art can still qualify as kitsch on the basis that it draws directly from the gestalt of well-received artworks of its kind and sentimentalizes it for mass consumption. From this understanding, an account of kitsch gameplay takes shape with an emphasis on the concept of parasitic videogame gestalt.

I propose that kitsch gameplay is best understood as gameplay that parasitically utilizes previously well-received and creatively innovative game mechanics (best understood as constitutive rules) and subverts or undermines the potential aesthetic value of those game mechanics by creating a highly incentivized option to completely avoid or altogether circumnavigate them. It is gameplay that lacks complexity and is broken down to create a Pavlovian relationship between player and game, cheapening the experience of play. In claiming that kitsch gameplay lacks complexity, I do not see games with relatively easy-to-learn gameplay, like *Tetris* or *Geometry Wars* (2013), as kitsch. While the gameplay is based on simple concepts, it's the utilization of those concepts within the game that disqualifies it from being kitsch. The simplified gameplay in these cases operates for the sake of playing the game and not for some other non-gameplay related ends. It may be the case that such games are on the low end of the spectrum when it comes to artistic and aesthetic value, but even that claim may be contentious. Some of the most pervasive examples of kitsch gameplay come from mobile platforming devices, including games like *Clash of Clans* (2012), but it occurs in PC and

console games as well.⁶⁷ A closer look at *Clash of Clans* elucidates the problems with kitsch gameplay.

Developed and released by SuperCell, *Clash of Clans* is a freemium, massively multiplayer online game where players compete against one another for in-game resources used to build, repair, and upgrade their town, troops and defenses. Within the gaming community, engaging with this game mechanic is known as grinding or farming: players repetitively complete the same in-game task, typically to gain experience or resources needed to advance the game or narrative (if there is one). For *Clash*, grinding constitutes regularly logging in and finger-tapping resource collectors, barracks, and troops to accumulate resources.⁶⁸

The basic premise of the game harkens back to real-time strategy and resource management games like *Warcraft* (1994) and *Age of Empires* (1997), but with a key difference in gameplay. Players aren't required to pay for access to the game itself; instead, they are presented with multiple opportunities to make in-game purchases that help complete prescribed lusory goals. For instance, the in-game economy relies on three basic resources: gold, elixir (of two types), and gems. Each type of resource is needed at various times to construct and upgrade buildings, troops, and magic spells used for defending the player's town and attacking enemy bases. Players accumulate resources through a few generalized

⁶⁷ *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (2017) produced by EA games is the most recent example of a console game receiving significant backlash from the gaming community about its overt attempt to encourage players to bypass actual gameplay by way of in-game purchases to unlock basic game content.

⁶⁸ Even the player versus player battles are passive experiences: players simply click the desired number and kind of troops and then unleash them all at once. They have no control over how or where their army will attack or defend.

lusory means: they can construct “collector” buildings in their base that periodically produce gold or one of two types of elixir; they can steal resources from other players by successfully attacking their settlements; or they can make in-game purchases using gems to instantly fill their coffers. As play progresses, gamers can use their resources to upgrade their buildings and troops so that they might be more successful in defending their settlement and attacking others. With each successive upgrade on any building, troop, or spell, there is a correlated rise in resource expenditure. Additionally, both the initial construction and tier upgrade of any game piece have a real-time build cost. Although the time costs are small initially, they dramatically increase at higher tiers. For example, it only takes 10 seconds to build a tier 1 elixir collector, but it takes five days to update a tier 11 collector to the maximum tier 12. Thus, it would take nearly 16 full days to completely upgrade just one elixir collector. Fully upgrading every available building and troop type would take an estimated time of nearly 3,000 days. I can imagine that simply *reading* about the significant time required to fully upgrade is starting to feel tedious. Suffice it to say, *Clash of Clans* players may end up spending a considerable amount of time attempting to accomplish the prescribed goals of building and maintaining their settlement.

However, players can bypass the significant gold, elixir, and time expenditures by using gems to instantly upgrade units. Going back to the collector building example, for approximately 750 gems, a player can avoid the 5-day waiting period and instantly upgrade from tier 11 to 12. Players can also use gems

to directly purchase the other in-game resources instead of waiting for their respective collectors to produce them; the cost is determined by the type of resource and size of the storage building a player wishes to fill. Although players are periodically rewarded in gems for completing in-game goals, those rewards are heavily restricted by the amount of time and other resources needed to accomplish those goals.

Understood as a game mechanic, the concept of resource management and grinding is not uncommon. It could be argued that resource management games constitute an entire sub-genre within the videogame medium: a sub-genre defined by a constitutive rule restricting the efficiency with which players can accumulate desired resources.⁶⁹ Such games can reward patience and persistence and invite players to contemplate their own actions as they attempt to collect, steal, win, and protect resources in a complex socioeconomic game space shared with others.

As a style of play, grinding is a divisive topic. At its best, it can be praised for rewarding patience, teaching persistence, and highlighting the beauty and grace of laboring and striving experiences.⁷⁰ Others have criticized it, abhorring the unending repetitiveness and psychological exploitation of triggering a false sense of achievement with an imaginary payoff of little value. Edmund McMillen, independent game designer and co-creator of *Super Meat Boy* (2010), falls in this camp. McMillen went as far as creating a satirizing web-based game, *A.V.G.M.*

⁶⁹ This understanding fits well with a Suitsian understanding of games.

⁷⁰ My thanks to Ivan Davidov for pointing out this way of understanding it.

(Abusive Video Game Manipulation), in response to the pervasiveness of grinding.

In an interview discussing the issue, McMillen states:

The game was basically commentary on the formula that's used in most MMORPG's and a lot of online games on Facebook, like Pet Society and Farmville...where you're basically rewarded with digital items for time spent and clicks. Quite literally. People don't see that because they're lost in the repetition of something. There are really irresponsible games that feed off of our minds and the holes we have in our brains (Swirsky 2012, 1:45-1:47)

Negotiating the value or lack thereof in grinding as a style of play is beyond the scope of this project, but the debate itself helps elucidate a key feature that separates grinding in games like *Clash of Clans* from grinding in games like *Age of Empires*: the option to spend money to completely circumnavigate grinding gameplay. *Clash Of Clans* players can make in-game purchases to acquire gems immediately. Prices are discounted based on the number of gems purchased, ranging from 80 gems for 99 cents to 14,000 gems for \$99.99.⁷¹ By allowing players to purchase gems instead of requiring that they complete in-game goals, *Clash* and games like it void their primary style of play of any real value or meaning. Even defenders claiming that the playstyle of grinding is valuable because it teaches patience and explores the intrinsic worth of play have little ground to stand on when players can avoid the entire process. Combined with the lengthy upgrade times and steep in-game currency costs, *Clash* incentivizes gem purchasing to the point that it seriously undercuts any sort of value grinding might afford. Even though players can technically grind to completion without spending

⁷¹ Top ranked players in *Clash of Clans* have reportedly spent near \$16,000 in a year to max out their bases and maintain their world ranking.

any money, *Clash* is designed in a way that actively and passively *discourages* players from doing so. Instead, players are subversively encouraged to purchase their way towards in-game goals as opposed to playing their way towards them. This is where we begin to see the notion of kitsch gameplay appear. *Clash* uses a method of gameplay that has the potential for an enriching experience and deliberately strips it of that potential by encouraging players to completely avoid engaging in that style of play altogether.⁷²

The question left is whether employing kitsch gameplay constitutes an artistic defect. If we can imagine the same game without the possibility of in-game purchases and determine that would be an improvement, then a game mechanic allowing for the circumnavigation of grinding constitutes a defect; the game mechanics would be there for the sake of play first and foremost, and not some other, non-gameplay reason that subverts the value of the mechanic. With *Clash of Clans*, removing the option to pay to avoid grinding would only highlight how the game subversively utilizes the grinding mechanic by making the process exorbitantly long and tedious. Even proponents of the value of grinding would probably agree that *extraordinary* amount of time required to grind through *Clash* doesn't add to the potential value the process may provide; the value of grinding could still be found if the time restrictions on upgrades were even a little less demanding. The safe inference is that the extraordinary restrictions aren't in place

⁷² It's easy to understand this issue under a Suitsian framework as well; it could be argued that when the less than efficient means to accomplish lusory goals are intentionally circumvented by allowing players to buy their way into those goals, gamers are not actually playing the game *at all*.

to incentivize the value of grinding, but instead exist to encourage players to pay their way through the game.

Finally, it's important to understand there is no necessary connection between in-game purchases and kitsch gameplay. Kitsch gameplay occurs to the degree that a subversion of the potential aesthetic value of central game mechanics is created by the existence of a highly incentivized option to completely avoid or circumnavigate the very same mechanics. I've made the argument here that *Clash of Clans* engages in kitsch gameplay for profit, but my account leaves open the possibility of kitsch gameplay occurring for a number of other reasons. On a related note, videogames might include opportunities for in-game purchases but not be examples of kitsch gameplay. *Overwatch* (2016) and *Rocket League* (2015) are two examples where players have the option of making cosmetic in-game purchases that can change the look, costume, color scheme, hair color, etc. of their player-character or avatar. The availability of these in-game purchases does not subvert or incentivize avoidance and circumnavigation of either of the games' respective constitutive rules, so there is no kitsch gameplay involved.

So far I've argued that to assess whether a videogame is kitsch art requires that we look at both the representational content of the game (if there is such content) and the gameplay mechanics (best understood as constitutive rules). The combination of the two aspects will determine to what degree the work is artistically valueless because of its kitsch nature. Mainstream videogames often employ kitsch representational content, but that alone does not suffice for calling

them wholly kitsch; there are some works that resist the kitsch moniker because their central gameplay mechanics are decidedly not kitsch. It is in cases where both the representational content of the game and the gameplay are highly kitsch that the work significantly lacks artistic value. Further, gameplay is best understood as being highly kitsch and lacking artistic value if it takes previously well-received game mechanics such as resource management and highly incentivizes the option to circumnavigate or avoid the mechanics, thereby significantly reducing the chances for valuable and rewarding aesthetic experiences.

Having explored the artistic potential of videogames in relationship to kitsch gameplay, the last step is to address the aesthetic concern voiced by Moriarty. Recall that Moriarty invests in a general argument claiming that the way videogames engage their audiences necessarily prohibits them from potentially offering aesthetic experiences of the highest value: the sublime. He endorses Schopenhauer's understanding of sublime art, claiming that experiences of the highest aesthetic quality are earmarked by transcendence of the will. That is, when a person experiences the sublime, she must be in a state of mind where her desires and needs are no longer important as they relate to the object of experience: "In other words, will-less perception is perception of objects simply for the understanding of what they are essentially, in and for themselves, and without regard to the actual or possible relationships those phenomenal objects have to the striving self" (Shapshay 2012, online).

A caveat is needed before addressing the concern about videogames and the sublime. Schopenhauer's understanding of aesthetic experience and the sublime is controversial. One worry is that under Schopenhauer's model, aesthetic experiences may not be possible at all:

The problem is that aesthetic experience seems to require the breaking free of the intellect from its service to the will to life. But according to Schopenhauer, the intellect comes into being originally as a tool for and, as a rule, serves the needs of the will to life. He holds further that nature does nothing in vain. So it would seem that the intellect cannot actually break from the will, but if this is so, then aesthetic experience would not be possible (Shapsay 2012, online).

For Schopenhauer, aesthetic experiences of any sort (including the sublime) are intellectually and cognitively engaging, but this engagement must be distinct from the ordinary everyday way that intellect is applied: it must transcend our instinctual will to life. But if the intellect necessarily originates from the purposeful will, then it would be impossible to have an experience that is both intellectually engaging and transcendental. Although others have called attention to this problem, there is little agreement on how it ought to be solved.⁷³ So while there may be a bigger reason to reject Schopenhauer's understanding of aesthetic experiences (and with it, the general concern about aesthetic value that Moriarty expresses), for charity's sake let's assume the possibility of transcending the will in an effort to directly address the worry about videogames.

Ironically enough, an argument can be made that well-designed videogames offer the potential for precisely *what is necessary* for the transcendental thesis: a cognitively engaging yet will-less experience. In terms of gameplay, a well-

⁷³ See D.W. Hamlyn (1980) and Alex Neill (2008)

designed videogame invites the player to experience “cognitive flow.” The concept of flow was introduced by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in an effort to explain the type of mental state that artists may enter when creating their work.⁷⁴ Csikszentmihalyi was initially intrigued by the fact that “when work on a painting was going well, the artist persisted single-mindedly, disregarding hunger, fatigue and discomfort—yet rapidly lost interest in the artistic creation once it was done” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi 2002, p.89). His research into the phenomenology of such experiences lead to the concept of flow and the conditions under which it is achieved:

The conditions of flow include:

- Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, that stretch (neither overmatching or underutilizing) existing skills
- A sense that one is engaging challenges at a level appropriate to one’s capacities
- Clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress that is being made. (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi 2002, p.90)

These conditions help facilitate experiences of flow, highlighted by the following features:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)

⁷⁴ A similar concept can be found in the works of ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, where the foundations of Taoism and living in accordance with “wu-wei” are explicated (Zhuangzi, 1968).

- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura & Csikszentmihályi, 2002, p.89-90)

The conditions under which flow is achieved and the features that define the mental state of the participant once she enters it represent the type of experiences well-designed videogames can offer.⁷⁵ In fact, the majority of videogames are explicitly designed to create flow experiences; independent videogame designer Jenova Chen wrote his MFA thesis on different methods of game design intended to induce states of flow (Chen 2006, online). The concept of flow also helps explain why games that are too easy or too difficult are not as enjoyable for the player; both types of games violate the first condition of flow by creating challenges that underutilize player skill (games that are too easy), or overmatch player skill (games that are too difficult), resulting in experiences that lack any feeling of intrinsic reward.

More importantly, the concept of flow not only provides a scaffolding for understanding the potential for the rich aesthetic experiences videogames offer, but also represents a solution to the incompatibility problem of Schopenhauer's transcendental thesis.⁷⁶ When gamers enter a state of flow, they can experience a sense of transcending their own will. Although what may have opened the door for flow to occur could be a willful action (e.g. the desire to accomplish a pre-lusory

⁷⁵ The similarities between Csikszentmihályi's concept of flow and Suits' definition of games are hard to ignore, particularly concerning the idea that one engages in gameplay for its own sake, and not for extrinsic goals.

⁷⁶ Granted, the solution I propose is only effective if we allow a phenomenological understanding of the transcendental thesis: that a person must feel as if the will has been transcended. If actual transcendence of the will is read as a metaphysical requirement for aesthetic experience, then the incapability problem mentioned above is still in play.

goal), when actually engaging in the play, the player can feel as if their actions have transcended the initial desire that motivated them. Acting in the game world may be deliberate and intentional, but during certain periods of play, the player experiences them in a transcendental, effortless state; in these moments of play, the player no longer consciously experiences the struggle to impose her will on the game. Similar experiences of flow are often reported in competitive sporting events and performance-based entertainment; after elite performances, athletes and entertainers often speak of “being in the zone,” where their actions are performed with keen focus on the task at hand and sustained effort but feel as if they are accomplished effortlessly. Even in cases where the actions taken are a product of years of purposeful, goal-oriented practice, the phenomenological nature of being in flow is one of effortless mindfulness.

If the aforementioned response to the requirements set by Schopenhauer’s transcendental thesis is tenable, then not only are the highest forms of aesthetic experience possible with a well-designed videogame, they are more likely to occur. Moreover, it helps carve out a better understanding of the possible aesthetic value videogames offer. Since gamers go in and out of immersive states of flow during play, it’s likely that the aesthetically appreciable features of both the game and the playthrough fluctuate in their prominence. The fluctuation caused by entering and exiting states of flow is closely related to changes in interactivity as the player becomes more familiar with how the game (or other players) responds to user input. The initial experiences with the game, during which a player is learning how

to navigate the gameworld in order to accomplish prelusory goals, may involve direct attention to the features of the gameworld: the visual motifs, color, lighting, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, the narrative structure (if there is a narrative), etc. When responses to user input become more predictable (and the level of interactivity diminishes), states of flow are more likely to occur because the player has a better sense of control over the outcomes of their actions, thus making it easier for the 4th feature of flow (the sense that one can successfully handle whatever happens next) to occur. When states of flow are reached, what's aesthetically prominent is the relationship formed between the player and the game, as opposed to just the features of the game itself. What's left is an aesthetically appreciable mastery of the possible relationship (prescribed by the constitutive rules of the game) between the game and the player.⁷⁷

By now, it should be clear that Moriarty's position and others like it fail to properly understand the aesthetic and artistic potential videogames offer. There is nothing in the nature of videogames or the type of engagement they afford that necessitates labeling them as artistically and aesthetically worthless. In defending this claim, I've offered a more detailed account of how we might seriously evaluate the aesthetic and artistic potential of both videogames and the kinds of experiences they afford. Doing so helps build momentum for moving away from the kinds of comparisons between videogames and other traditional art forms that often lead to fundamental misunderstandings. If scholars, gamers, and game designers are to take seriously the potential for rich, rewarding, and insightful aesthetic and artistic

⁷⁷ This relationship is the primary focus of chapter 4.

features games can offer, then we must develop a methodology that recognizes how those concepts relate to videogames qua games.

Section IV: Concluding Remarks

A common theme throughout this dissertation has been that videogames are a revolutionary form of art, and as such we need to develop new theories and concepts to appropriately understand their artistic and aesthetic potential. Since videogames are still in their relative infancy compared with other art forms, it's not surprising that scholars are still fleshing out fundamental issues concerning their metaphysical status and normative value as artworks. In the very least, I hope my efforts here provide helpful guidance on ways in which we might continue to develop an overall theoretical framework to better understand videogames artistically and aesthetically. To that end, chapter two explicated a pitfall with a common way that videogames are categorized as art. The intention here was not to completely dismiss the arguments given, but to raise awareness about what makes videogames unique as potential artworks. As a corollary, the arguments in chapter two speak to a broader concern about traditional theories of art and how they influence our understanding of the artistic and aesthetic value of revolutionary artworks. For classificatory purposes, the comparative approach is intuitively satisfying and helpful, but we would do well to remember that the normative value of new kinds of artworks may require new methodologies for proper evaluation. With respect to videogames, this means taking into account their nature as games and exploring how that nature shapes the potential aesthetic value of gameplay.

Chapter three provided the groundwork for understanding the aesthetic experience of gameplay by detailing an original account interactivity as it relates to videogames. By distinguishing agent-to-agent interactivity from agent-to-non-agent interactivity, we're left with a better way of unpacking the aesthetic features of videogames and a more precise method of tracking how a player's actions during gameplay help create and influence her own aesthetic experience. By highlighting the connection between unpredictability and interactivity, we're better able to distinguish between cases of mere manipulation and genuine interaction, which helps identify when videogames are an object of interaction or a conduit through which agents interact with one another.

From there, chapter four took a closer look at the ontological implications of videogames as interactive artworks. Specifically, I examined how best to understand the AAAR relationship with videogames, adopting the view that as artworks, videogames are CGAs. Doing so clarified the unique role gamers take on in helping instantiate instances of a CGA, whereby the aesthetic experience of gameplay is intimately shaped by the relationship the gamer forms with that particular instance. Since engaging in gameplay requires skill, the player's actions are aesthetically relevant and evaluable much in the same way musical and theatrical performers actions are. Thus, there are two mutually dependent but ontologically distinct objects of appreciation: the CGA itself and the experience of the gameplay fostered by relationship created between the player and the particular instance of the CGA that she brings about.

The last chapter examined the possibility that even if videogames are artworks, their nature as games prohibits any chance of affording aesthetic experiences of the highest kind. In defending against this objection, I offered a way of evaluating videogames based on both their representational content and gameplay mechanics by proposing an original concept of kitsch gameplay. My view provides a good resource for assessing the artistic and aesthetic worth of videogames as potential artworks. Finally, I explained how well-crafted videogames are able to put players in states of flow, thereby opening up the possibility for immersive, deeply satisfying aesthetics experiences in accordance with Schopenhauer's transcendental thesis.

Videogames have the ability to transform living rooms into theaters for powerful, rewarding and thought-provoking aesthetic experiences. This is not to say that every videogame offers that potential; this is true of artworks in every medium. But taking seriously the idea that videogames can be as artistically and aesthetically valuable as traditional artworks found in museums will benefit scholars and gamers alike. My hope is that this dissertation helps foster continued, mutually beneficial lines of communication between the academic and gaming communities. So, who's ready to play?

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