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Classifying Videogames as Art  
and Why It Matters Now

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyses the idea that videogames can be considered art in order to argue that wide ranging benefits could be seen if the institution recognised them as such. I have explored the idea that the institution is the key to progress the notion of videogames as art and both art museums and universities alike must be behind the progression of what is considered the artistic canon in order to create new opportunities in the field of making art.

I have reviewed popular arguments for and against the inclusion of videogames in the institutional artistic canon and then considered videogames in the light of several theorist's ideas of what art is. Primarily I have looked at the ideas behind cluster theory and the theory of mass art as a way of justifying videogames as art. I have followed this with case studies of *This War of Mine* (2014) and the developer Sam Barlow who has produced many videogames including *Aisle* (1999), *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (2009), and *Her Story* (2015).

Lastly I have considered what might be the long-term benefits of classifying videogames as art within the institution, primarily the enfranchisement of young women artists. I do this by reviewing the new National Curriculum in computer programming and considering how, in the light of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, this new education area will empower young women to be able to create art despite pressures that still persist with regards to the "proper" role of a woman in our society. It is my suggestion that all you need to create a work of videogame art is a basic computer, a standard UK education, and a room of your own - but only if the art institution recognises videogames as a legitimate form of art.

## Acknowledgements

There are a handful of individuals who have had genuinely life-changing roles in my thirty-two-year journey, I am inordinately pleased that Dr Harry Mount ranks amongst them. It took five long years of applying to university before I was offered a place on a History of Art undergraduate degree at Oxford Brookes but my interview five years ago changed everything. I had been made redundant only weeks before and all my hopes were pinned on going back to university. An interview, several undergraduate modules, and three thesis supervisions later I do believe that I can count Harry as both a mentor and a friend. I would simply not have reached this point in my education without his support, and most importantly his belief.

The same is true of the entire History of Art department at Brookes, of course. Each member of staff within the department has shaped my research in some way over the past five years and provided endless encouragement and cheerleading. It has truly been an environment where my curiosity has been allowed to flourish, and where my research and writing skills have been uncovered and nurtured. I was not sure when I started my academic career at the age of twenty-eight if I would manage to even write a first-year essay, so it is with some pride that I have submitted a thirty-thousand-word thesis on a single subject.

Lastly I must thank Linda Nochlin, who passed away last year while I researched and wrote. Throughout these pages I stand upon the shoulders of giants like Nochlin; without her groundwork I could not even have considered writing this thesis.

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## Introduction

This thesis analyses the idea that videogames can and should be considered art form in order to argue that doing so will have wide reaching benefits beyond the inclusion of popular culture in an art museum. I have walked in the experimental footsteps of art historian Erwin Panofsky and his essay “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” throughout this thesis. Had Panofsky lived past 1968 he may well have written a similar piece on the subject of videogames.<sup>1</sup> His assertions of the ways that “film art” differs from preceding forms of art are directly transferrable to videogames; both kinds of art (film and videogame) had their academic discourse initially written by people who witnessed the transformation of the medium from inception to maturity, and it was “technical invention” rather than artistic urge that formed the foundations of these mediums.<sup>2</sup>

The art institution has been relatively slow to realise the benefits of recognising various digital mediums as legitimate art mediums and instead has traditionally only included these mediums within major collections when they resembled more traditional works of art such as painting or sculpture. Major institutions such as The

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1. Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" in *Three Essays On Style*, 91-126, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*, 93.

Museum of Modern Art have led the way in recognising videogames as art by acquiring a number for their permanent collection, however the acquisition of these works by the design department of the institution rather than the art department make this move not quite as bold as it might initially seem.

The issue of whether or not videogames are art has been considered at length within the academic discipline of game studies. It is interesting that in the 2004 book *Rules of Play* by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman they suggest that if we consider videogames as a form of “creative cultural production” it could threaten “conventional distinctions between high art and popular culture.”<sup>3</sup> While I am sure that there are some out there within the art institution who believe that videogames should not be considered art, there has been a blurred line between “high art” and “popular culture” for a very long time now. Institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum have been mixing high art and popular culture within their collection as a matter of routine almost since their inception, as I discuss in chapter two.

The result of the art institution recognising videogames as art would be wide-ranging, however I will focus primarily on the benefit that this classification would bring to potential women artists who are currently in the UK's education system. There is still societal pressure for women to conform to particular gender roles that include homemaking and caring. Virginia Woolf recognised in her essay *A Room of One's Own* the benefits of writing as a career to women - it can be undertaken with minimal materials, expense, and education and only needs a small personal space in which to be produced. I argue that videogames could be the modern

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3. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, 518, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).



equivalent to Woolf's writing for the art world; young people are now taught computer programming as part of the standard National Curriculum, and almost everybody has access to the technology required to produce a videogame.

In this thesis I will be using the term "art institution" in order to refer to the nebulous collection of institutions that through their actions together define the way we think of art. Art museums, major mainstream galleries, and universities are definitely included within this definition for they have a direct impact on the way that society perceives art and on how discourse is produced about art. Related but perhaps not so central to this thesis are groups such as private galleries, art dealers, and private art collectors.

Within this thesis I have also frequently used the terms "canon," "canonical," and the phrase "great works of art." I defer to Eric Fernie on the definition of "canon" and "canonical." In a book serving as an introduction to common methodologies used in the history of art he says:

A canon can be defined as a body of work agreed to represent the great examples of a genre, and which hence provides a standard against which new work can be judged. Shakespeare and Michelangelo are the most prominent canonical figures in twentieth-century assessments of English literature and Italian art respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The term "Great" is more complicated, and I choose to use it in the same way that Linda Nochlin chooses to in her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists."<sup>5</sup> The word "Great" to describe artists and works of art is one that has

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4. Eric Fernie, *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, 329, (London, UK: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995).

5. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, 145-78, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1989).

been in the common vernacular of the history of art for as long as it has been in existence. Arguably it could be traced back at least as far back as Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* published in 1550 – quite easily could “most excellent” be switched for “great.” “Great” is the word used for artworks and artists who comfortably fit into the mainstream art historical canon that Fernie describes.

Fernie warns us of “the need to be aware of the artificiality of the canon and the criteria used to construct it” and this is what Nochlin also considers in her essay on *Great Women Artists*.<sup>6</sup> In this thesis my intent is to examine why videogames can or cannot become part of the art historical canon because these choices are, to some extent, arbitrary and political. However the choice of what constitutes the art institution considers to be “great” and part of the canon matters desperately because this is the art that is overwhelmingly shown in institutions and taught in universities. This thesis rallies to Linda Nochlin's call to action to break down the idea of a single canon of “Great” artists and artworks that is the be-all and end-all of the history of art.

### ***Videogames in the Art Institution***

Although some might automatically assume that any research on videogames should neatly fit into the academic discipline of game studies, this thesis relates much more closely to historiography and aesthetics. I offer only discussion on if and why the art institution should consider videogames to be works of art and do not involve this thesis with the study of games themselves as game objects or the act of playing them as games. I believe that the disciplines of art history and game

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6. Fernie, *Methods*, 329.

studies are substantially different and can offer very different perspectives on the same objects.

The key to this distinction is in the separation of art from the visuals of videogames. Just because something has a visual quality to it that has been created by someone it is not automatically the kind of thing that would be accepted in an art institution. Confusion often arises from the fact that the word 'art' can be applied in many different ways; there is certainly artwork that has been designed by an artist within almost every videogame, but that does not mean that there would be an institutional consensus that the game as a whole is a work of art.

The definition of art that is used in game studies courses is different to the specific sense of the word used in aesthetics, art history, and the art institution. There is a difference between the teaching of art, craft, and design skills (as is found on many game studies courses) and defining something as a work of art according to aesthetics or art history. Deferring back to Fernie once again, he offers three categories of art objects: "fine," "practical," and "comprehensive."<sup>7</sup> It is the narrow sense of "fine" that I largely concentrate on in this thesis which Fernie suggests is "what is taught in art schools as part of a fine art degree."<sup>8</sup> He attempts to give an idea of what could be considered in this group by suggesting that it is primarily painting, drawing, and sculpture, but also includes tapestry, ceramics, and architecture. Discussing "practical" as a classification for the word art Fernie says that this relates to the actual skill of making.<sup>9</sup>

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7. Ibid., 326.

8. Ibid., 326.

9. Ibid.

There are many undergraduate degree courses in the UK that teach aspects of visual videogame design to students. 3D modelling skills, animation, interface design and so forth are all artistic skills that contribute to the creation of a visually spectacular form of entertainment. This falls squarely into Fernie's classification of a "practical" sort of art.<sup>10</sup> However after reviewing the prospectus and UCAS information available for each videogames related course in the UK I found none advertising that they teach history of art alongside how to use the tools to create artistic works. In comparison traditional fine art undergraduate degrees in the UK generally contain significant portions of history of art teaching throughout the course of study which is what potentially sets these courses apart from each other.

There are some BA (Hons) courses being taught that are bridging the gap between art and games, for instance the Game Design and Art course taught at the University of Southampton.<sup>11</sup> However while the prospectus website for this undergraduate degree explains that the course will take place in the art school rather than a computer department (which immediately sets it apart from most other game design courses) it still does not suggest that analysis and history of art will be taught in the same way as they would be on a fine art or history of art degree. In Appendix A I have provided a list of all undergraduate courses in the UK related specifically to games that may either be teaching ideas surrounding videogames as art already, or would be well positioned to do so in the future.

This is not to criticise game theory or game design degrees at all, but simply to consider that teaching history of art is outside of the scope of most courses since

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10. Ibid.

11. "BA (Hons) Games Design and Art (3 years)," University of Southampton, accessed July 9, 2018, [https://www.southampton.ac.uk/wsa/undergraduate/courses/ba\\_games\\_design.page](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/wsa/undergraduate/courses/ba_games_design.page).

there is only so much that can be fitted in to three years of full time study. A game design course, for example, requires the teaching of large amounts of technical material that is not taught in a standard secondary school education - however this may change as schools teach more and more computer science in the future as I discuss in chapter four.

Fundamentally as long as game studies exists as an academic field and students are being encouraged to see and understand that the videogames can be used as a way to create art, challenge cultural expectations, and potentially even change the way we view society then the creation of videogames as art will continue to move forwards. It is most important that people are inspired to make art using the medium of videogames – where the support ultimately comes from matters less. Texts such as *Rules of Play* set out compelling reasons for videogame designers to consider the cultural context of the videogames that they produce, thus signposting some game designers to the potential of videogames being considered art by the art institution.<sup>12</sup>

If videogames are to be accepted as art by the art institution then it is important that a justification for this move is found within the discipline of art history and aesthetics rather than game studies alone. With that in mind I consider this thesis to be interdisciplinary in nature, sitting in the void between art history and aesthetics, rather than art history and game studies. The fields of art history and aesthetics currently dominate the thinking in the art institution and so any argument for the inclusion of videogames as art must be made convincingly from within.

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12. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 507.

Aestheticians have always sought to define what is considered art (and logically by extension, who was considered an artist) and it is in this tradition that I continue. I am interested, in this thesis, in the way that people have written and talked about videogames as art and how arguments are formulated and dismantled. Much of this discussion is carried out on the internet and in video recordings of presentations, mediums which will increasingly become a challenge for historiographers to record, decipher, and interpret.

In the future I hope that videogames are also taught and discussed on history of art undergraduate degrees rather than being confined to specialist game studies or game design courses. It is my belief that not only could history of art bring interesting discourse to videogames as a medium, but videogames and the videogames industry could be used to teach history of art students about current design, politics, and serve as a juxtaposition to new media art that has emerged from the fine art tradition.

The question that this thesis attempts to answer is quite simple; can videogames be considered works of art in the context of the art institution? I believe that videogames can and should be considered works of art and in this thesis I will lay out my arguments for my rationale. As this is a relatively short thesis I focus on just two major theoretical arguments for videogames being classified as art; Berys Gaut's cluster theory and Noël Carroll's philosophy of mass art. However there is plenty of scope, as I address in the conclusion, for further research and justification of videogames as art using other theories and methodologies from aesthetics and the history of art.

In addition, I will also answer the question of why it matters if videogames are classified as art. While many, including those within the institution, may simply shrug their shoulders and ask "who cares if videogames are art?" I will lay out arguments that classifying videogames as art will support potential young women artists.

Although the academic disciplines of game studies and philosophy have seen many papers and books on videogames published, there have been very few that deal with the specific subject of videogames as art. Grant Tavinor touches on videogames as art in his book *The Art Of Videogames* and again in a journal article *Video Games as Mass Art*, however these works come at the subject from a much more philosophical point of view rather than art historical.<sup>13</sup> There have been several attempts at producing art historical discourse on the subject of videogames as art, but these attempts by and large are not picked up by the academic art history community. Ernest W. Adams, an games designer, wrote a brief article asking if games will ever be a legitimate art form for the *Journal of Media Practice*.<sup>14</sup> However despite claims that he will explore working definitions of art, he does not draw on canonical theories used by art historians and seems to largely gravitate towards speculation from the point of view of a videogames industry professional rather than an art historian.

There are discussions of how designers could make art using videogames in the

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13. Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Grant Tavinor, "Video Games as Mass Art," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (May 5, 2011), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=616>.

14. Ernest W. Adams, "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?" *Journal of Media Practice* 7, no. 1 (July 2006): 67–77.

Salen and Zimmerman book, however anyone wishing to find these discussions may struggle because “art” is listed in the index only once and takes you to a discussion of how to define games rather than how to make art using the medium of games.<sup>15</sup> The book does include interesting but brief discussions throughout the later sections of various subjects such as the difficulties of the inclusion of games in museums,<sup>16</sup> and a considerable amounts on challenging culture through games.<sup>17</sup> However, again what I believe book is lacking is a grounding in the discourse of the art institution. If artists cannot talk about their art in the language primarily used by the art institution then they will struggle to gain widespread acceptance.

Mary Flanagan’s *Critical Play* is a book that uses the language of the art institution to discuss the possibilities of videogames as art while remaining firmly in the game studies field.<sup>18</sup> Institutional context is provided within Flanagan’s book for the creation of new critical videogames which gives potential artists the start of a discourse and vocabulary that can be used to gain acceptance in the art institution. Flanagan repeatedly draws on examples of artists and works of art that are recognised by the art institution throughout the book which promotes the idea that any artist who wishes to be in the art institution with their art (videogame or other medium) must understand something about who the gatekeepers of the institution are and the language that has traditionally been used.

I believe that there is a need for those trained in art history rather than aesthetics or game studies to contribute to the debate on videogames as art, using

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15. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 78, 638.

16. Ibid., 518.

17. Ibid., 515-534

18. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).



methodological approaches that have been proven to work for discussing works of art. The dominant discourse in the art institution at present is one of history of art. This means that in order to have the institution regard videogames as legitimate works of art, and to include them in the mainstream museum and teaching spaces, there will have to be discourse created that surrounds videogames in a style that is acceptable to the institution.

It is beyond the scope of these thesis to decide if this kind of cultural gatekeeping is a positive or negative aspect of the art institution but it is at present one of the primary narratives of the sector. It is itself a compelling reason for encouraging art historians to write about videogames as art as without them doing so the argument carries little weight. There can be no doubt that there are growing numbers of art games and art videogames being produced however that they are not making it into museums and galleries at any notable rate requires addressing.

Artists such as Celia Pearce and Jacquelyn Morie are working at the forefront of the art games movement but they are likely to need the support of the art institution if their works are to appear on art history syllabuses and in traditional art museums. Events such as SIGGRAPH conferences and the Lyst Summit, and the Digital Games Research Association have also been instrumental in laying the foundations that will allow art videogames to flourish inside the art institution. However now is it down to collaboration between these individuals and organisations and the art institution to begin the process that will see these works elevated and venerated as art in our museums, galleries, and universities.

If we are to regard videogames as art, as those using an aesthetics or game studies approach would like us to do so, then we also need to prove that videogames can be written about in a way that is the same as any other work of art from the canon. It is from this point of view that my thesis takes its lead, exploring several approaches to considering videogames as art and then demonstrating that videogames can be written about in an art historical style.

### ***Outline of Chapters***

First I will consider some of the main arguments against videogames as art that have been made by critics of film and art. Roger Ebert, the American film critic and historian, attracted much debate online with his claim that "the nature of [videogames] prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art."<sup>19</sup> Several times Ebert wrote more articles on the subject clarifying his views and explaining why he felt about videogames the way that he did.

I will also review Jonathan Jones' arguments as to why we should not consider videogames as art, as well as the very public rebuttal made by Paola Antonelli during a TED talk about the future of video games in art institutions.<sup>20</sup> With Jones being the art critic for *The Guardian* and Antonelli being the senior curator for the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, as well as the Director of R&D, this very public battle was fought over several newspaper articles, blog posts, and

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19. Roger Ebert, "Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?" November 27, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>.

20. Jonathan Jones, "Sorry MoMA, Video Games Are Not Art," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art>; Paola Antonelli, "Why I Brought Pac-Man to MoMA," filmed May 2013 at TEDSalon, New York, NY, video, [https://www.ted.com/talks/paola\\_antonelli\\_why\\_i\\_brought\\_pacman\\_to\\_moma](https://www.ted.com/talks/paola_antonelli_why_i_brought_pacman_to_moma).

TED talks. There were also some very interesting contributions made by senior figures in other fields that I will look at in the context of the debate between Jones and Antonelli.

The theory of mass art proposed by Noël Carroll seems a particularly suitable way to view videogames as art and so I have discussed Carroll's ideas in my second chapter. There are some who believe that interactive works cannot be classified as art and I will briefly discuss that idea here, although I will also consider what it means to be an artist and if interactivity and the use of labour other than that of the artist can truly prevent a work from becoming art. In addition, I will consider Berys Gaut's ideas of using a cluster theory approach to identifying if an artefact is a work of art or not.

My third chapter will consist of two case studies designed to demonstrate that art historical writing can be produced that deals with the subject of videogames as art. As I discussed in my undergraduate thesis, it is my belief that one of the ways in which something becomes art is when there is a body of critical discourse about it.<sup>21</sup> I will use two different approaches to the writing about videogames here. The first is a social analysis of a game that views war through the eyes of civilians. Here I will examine the similarities between this videogame and an artwork currently on display in the Tate Modern. Secondly I will take a biographical approach to an artist who has a number of videogames released commercially which show a fascinating development of style throughout his career. There are a number of further interesting case studies regarding games as art in the book *Critical Play* by Mary

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21. Charlotte Moss, "'These Stories Are Not For You' Towards an Intersectional Art History of Videogames" (Undergraduate dissertation, Oxford Brookes University, 2016), 9.

Flanagan.<sup>22</sup> Many of Flanagan's case studies of individual games consider the reasons why they should be considered legitimate works of art due to previous art historical discourse on related objects and styles.

Lastly I will examine what difference classifying art could have for the prospects of potential young women artists. I will begin by discussing how women have previously had restricted access to the art institution by examining Nochlin's seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which is still as relevant today as it was in 1971 when it was first published.<sup>23</sup> The systematic barriers that Nochlin describes in her essay are still quite evidently still in place even today, although they are progressively becoming easier to bypass. In addition I will explore Virginia Woolf's assertion that all you need to be a writer is a room of one's own and its relevance to videogame artists today.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Flanagan, *Critical Play*.

23. Nochlin, "Great Women Artists?"

24. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (Los Angeles, CA: Green Light E-Books, 2012. Kindle.

## Chapter I: Arguments Against Videogames as Art

The world of the art institution and videogames have so far managed to mostly avoid colliding dramatically and publicly. Some exhibitions in art museums have contained videogames (or focused on them entirely), but videogames are still more likely to be considered a work of design rather than a work of art.<sup>25</sup> However the art institution still generally does not appear to rally in favour of videogames being considered a legitimate form of art.

Sometimes the view is voiced that critics of all kinds of artistic mediums are looking for something that is just not there. Perhaps sometimes a movie about cowboys is just a movie about cowboys,<sup>26</sup> a painting of a black square on a white background is just a painting of a black square on a white background,<sup>27</sup> and a videogame about stealing cars is just a videogame about stealing cars.<sup>28</sup> Of course it is entirely possible to enjoy artistic works in this way; most individuals never think too deeply

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25. "Applied Design," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1328>; Victoria and Albert Museum, "Disobedient Objects;" "Videogames," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed September 16, 2017, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/videogames>.

26. Quentin Tarantino, *The Hateful Eight*, Film, The Weinstein Company, 2015.

27. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

28. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, Videogame, Rockstar Games, 2004.

about novels they read, films they watch, or the videogames that they play and this is an entirely acceptable way to enjoy cultural objects. Many of the population will never set foot inside an art gallery or read critical discussion of artworks and this is perfectly fine, as long as they are enjoying the media that they are consuming.

However, some individuals have spoken out about their belief that the very nature of the medium of videogames, the particular combination of electronic media and interactivity, prevent them from being considered art. These individuals do not leave space in the discourse for videogames to be both entertainment and art, instead they are convinced that videogames are not art now and potentially never will be. In this chapter I will consider some of the arguments that have been made against recognising videogames as a legitimate medium for the creation of art by film critic Roger Ebert, art critic Jonathan Jones, and videogames academic Liel Leibovitz. I will also discuss the defence of videogames as art by MoMA's Senior Curator of Architecture and Design and their Director of Research and Design Paola Antonelli, the Global Head of Computational Design and Inclusion at Automattic John Maeda, and Co-founder and former President of thatgamecompany Kellee Santiago.

I have placed the arguments chronologically beginning with Ebert's personal blog posts that were made in 2005. Although the discussions never ceased about videogames being classified as art I have opted to jump over a decade to then consider Jones' article in *The Guardian* in 2013, and Leibowitz's interview comments in 2014. I believe that this gives a broad overview of the arguments made by various critics against videogames being classified as art and displayed in art museums. At the end of the chapter I have also added some thoughts on the

narrative of videogames as "harmless fun" and how that may harm their chances of being taken seriously by the art institution.

### ***1.1 Roger Ebert***

One of the most famous early critics of videogames as art was Roger Ebert, the American film critic who wrote for the *Chicago Sun-Times* from 1967 until he passed away in 2013. Ebert was an extremely well known reviewer - he was the first film critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1975 and in the same year began to co-host a review programme titled *Sneak Preview* that helped popularise film review shows on television.

I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, 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. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.<sup>29</sup>

It was a bold statement from Ebert in 2005 to say that it is inherent in the medium of videogames that they can never move beyond craftsmanship to the point where they could be considered art. Up until his death he would be challenged on his ideas of videogames as art and more than once Ebert penned response articles explaining his views further.<sup>30</sup>

In 2007 Ebert wrote an article for his blog that summarised his feelings on why videogames can never be considered works of art, pushing back against Clive

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29. Ebert, "Chicken."

30. Ibid.

Barker (a writer, director, game designer, and artist) speaking at the Hollywood and Games Summit who himself was responding to Ebert's initial statements on videogames as art quoted above. There are two main rebuttals that Ebert makes in his argument that videogames can never be art:

Art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist.

Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices.<sup>31</sup>

It seems to me that Ebert's argument largely centres around the idea that videogames cannot be art because the videogame can be affected by the player. While this is true in some cases (such as the games I discuss later in the Sam Barlow case study section of this thesis), it is certainly not true of all games. Indeed I would argue that the vast majority of narrative based games (as opposed to sandbox games, sports games, et al.) have a very definite story with a plot where you are led through a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>32</sup> Even MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games) such as *World of Warcraft* have a scripted story that will be fed to the player over time, even if the player can choose what to spend their time on outside of the main story events. It would appear that Ebert feels that the interactivity of a video game somehow prevents it from being regarded as a work of art, as well as the tendency to deal with relatively lightweight subject matter rather than emotionally difficult narratives. Regarding the idea that if you change a work then you become the artist, I discuss this more thoroughly later in this chapter while reviewing Jonathan Jones' opinions on videogames as art.

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31. Roger Ebert, "Games vs. Art: Ebert vs. Barker," July 21, 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/games-vs-art-ebert-vs-barker>.

32. A sandbox game is one where players can pick their own path through virtual worlds and choose objectives freely. This style of game is the opposite to videogames with a more structured, linear style of gameplay. The term is taken from the idea of a child's sandbox where play is without rules and based on open-ended choice.



Several years later in 2010 Ebert was urged by a reader to watch the video of a TEDx talk given by Kellee Santiago. I will break down Santiago's response and some of its unfortunate flaws later in this chapter, however it did at least inspire Ebert to write some more on the subject of videogames as art. One of Ebert's main criticisms of videogames is quoted above - "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." What Ebert is essentially saying here is that since nobody has created a videogame that can be compared in greatness to the greatest works of all time, you cannot consider videogames art. This is a fallacy - videogames are still in their infancy, they have been around little more than half a century in a format that most people would recognise. It takes time to understand and fully utilise a medium for the purpose of making great works of art that are comparable to the greatest in Western art history. Santiago dedicates a large amount of her TEDx talk to persuading her audience that videogames are not thereas great works of art yet, but they will be one day. However on the other hand this is a difficult argument to make, since we simply cannot predict the future of the art institution or which works of art will be considered good in years to come.

Ebert himself does concede that perhaps it is foolish to say "never" (referencing the title of the blog "Video Games Can Never Be Art"), however he also goes on to state that "no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form" suggesting that he believes it will take a very long time indeed for there to be the possibility of videogames being considered art.<sup>33</sup> But he does point out a more subtle nuance missing in Santiago's argument about how

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33. Roger Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," April 16, 2010, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art>.

cave paintings are not the Sistine Chapel - these were both great works at the time of their creation. Of course cave paintings have been superseded by "greater" works, but that is the very nature of artistry. Techniques improve, visual literacy changes, and ideals for the creation of artwork vary from century to century (and even decade to decade). Ebert's argument seems to be that if videogames are being made today (which they are) then they need to stand up to scrutiny against the great artworks of this time period. Until we can compare a videogame directly to a piece of canonical art created in the same period and say that they are as "good" as each other, then Ebert believes that videogames do not count as art.

Of course what Ebert seems to be missing is that art can be bad. Videogames may not yet be "good" art, but that does not automatically mean that they are not art at all. There is plenty of bad art in the world, people create bad art all the time as they attempt to become better artists. But in Ebert's world there seems to be no room for bad art, only excellent art or stuff that is not art at all. This seems quite strange considering he was a film critic who awarded star ratings to films on a scale from zero to five stars. Apparently it is ok for there to be bad films, but not bad art.

The second argument that Ebert briefly articulates in his article is that he thinks of works of art as being the creation of just one artist. Immediately Ebert answers himself by reminding us that "a cathedral is the work of many" and therefore his definition of art has a flaw because he considers a cathedral to be a work of art.<sup>34</sup> However Ebert then says that "one could think of [a cathedral] as countless individual works of art unified by a common purpose."<sup>35</sup> This assertion about works

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34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

of art being the creation of just one artist seems rather odd coming from Ebert considering his belief that films (which are also made by a team) can be art.

Lastly Ebert states that an obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game - the implication being that you cannot "win" a work of art. But of course there are games that you cannot "win" - the Surrealists would famously play a game called "exquisite corpse" (derived from the parlour game "consequences") designed to entertain and pass the time.<sup>36</sup> There was no winner in the game, it was merely a collaborative exercise. Ebert then states that "Santiago might cite an immersive game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film."<sup>37</sup> Again this assertion seems absurd to me. It is like saying that a film is not a film it is merely a representation of a story. However videogames are not, unless intended to be, a representation of a novel, a play, a play, a dance, or a film. It is a videogame even if you cannot "win" the game, even if it is "just" a guided story. Indeed, novels, plays, dances, and films are all "just" guided stories. This argument makes absolutely no sense when considered thoroughly.

Towards the end of the article Ebert asks what is perhaps a far more interesting question than any he has asked previously; "Why aren't gamers content to play their games and simply enjoy themselves?"<sup>38</sup> Without undertaking a major survey of those who play videogames this question is almost impossible to answer, however I do believe that Ebert is missing the point slightly with with this question. There are a whole myriad of answers as to why individuals would wish for videogames to be

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36. "Cadavre Exquis (Exquisite Corpse) – Art Term," Tate, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/cadavre-exquis-exquisite-corpse>.

37. Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art."

38. Ibid.

considered art - ranging from those that I lay out in chapter four of these these regarding the promotion of women's voices in the arts, to simply feeling like their hobby is considered a valid way to spend time by wider society.

## **1.2 Kellee Santiago**

Much of the problem with debates and arguments about videogames being art is that they are not being contributed to by people who are particularly knowledgeable about art or aesthetics. A good example of this is Kellee Santiago's TEDx talk entitled 'An Argument for Game Artistry' as referenced previously while discussing Ebert's opinions.<sup>39</sup> Santiago is the co-founder and former president of thatgamecompany - the production company behind several games that have received awards for their artistry. However during her TEDx rebuttal of Roger Ebert's statement "video games can never be art" Santiago decided to use a quote from Wikipedia to define what art is, referring to the definition as "the most articulate I've found" which I have reproduced below.<sup>40</sup>

Art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions.

This quote from Wikipedia has no academic attribution and first exists in this exact wording from 22nd February 2009, edited by Wikipedia editor VincentXP38.<sup>41</sup> It exists in that form until it is changed just over a year later. Wikipedia does not require a user to identify themselves or submit qualifications before revising pages. In theory changes can be reversed by other users, and there is often discussion of

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39. Kellee Santiago, "An Argument for Game Artistry," filmed March 29, 2009 at TEDxUSC, Los Angeles, California, video,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9y6MYDSAww>.

40. Ebert, "Chicken;" Santiago, "Game Artistry."

41. "Art," Wikipedia, revised February 22, 2009,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Art&oldid=272407636>.

major changes between various wiki editors. However, we have no idea what will have led the editor to believe that the quote above is a suitable way to describe what art is in an introduction to an encyclopaedia entry on art.

I would suggest that if this definition of art was "the most articulate" Santiago had found, then she had not looked very far. From this point on in the talk (two minutes and fifty six seconds to be precise), no matter how good the arguments are they are all undermined by this lack of basic research. There is no attempt by Santiago to invoke or enact any form of critical art historical or aesthetics discourse. What counts as art will always be subjective, however this definition in particular that Santiago uses in her talk has very little grounding in any theory of art. We could challenge the definition in a myriad of ways to prove that there are many, many exceptions to the rules. Equally it is possible to say that the vast majority of videogames do not fit into this definition at all. Are videogames really designed to appeal to the senses and emotions? Some are, but equally some are just designed to be button-pushing exercises that trigger pleasure or addiction sensors in the brain. It is also possible to have deliberately arranged elements that appeal to the senses or emotions that are not art. Very few people would suggest that my neighbours window box is art, however the plants have definitely been deliberately arranged to appeal to the senses of sight and smell.

Of course a large portion of the problem is the inaccessibility of many art historical methodologies and theories about art. As Robert Stecker points out in the essay "Is It Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?" many authors, such as George Dickie (who wrote about institutional theories of art), rely heavily on our "unarticulated background knowledge" which is a barrier to understanding if you are coming at

the subject from a games development or business background rather than an art history or aesthetics background.<sup>42</sup> To discuss art and aesthetics on this advanced level there is a certain level of education required (be it self-directed education or from a more conventional university format) in order to understand the complicated nuances of the subject. Almost every art history student at university should be able to articulate why the definition used by Santiago is not really good enough to stand up to criticism.

The frustration here is that by attempting to convince the world that videogames should be considered art Santiago has perhaps done more damage than good. Such a flimsy definition from a non-academic source such as Wikipedia does not stand up to scrutiny by anybody with any education in the field. If Santiago had perhaps used a more conventional definition of art it would have been a much more compelling argument, and critics such as Ebert would have had to work much harder to find the holes in the notion of videogames being considered art.

### **1.3 Jonathan Jones**

In November 2012 Jonathan Jones, the British art critic who has written for *The Guardian* for nearly two decades since 1999, penned an article entitled "Sorry MoMA, video games are not art."<sup>43</sup> Jones wrote the article in response to Paola Antonelli releasing a blog entitled "Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters" which announced the acquisition of fourteen video games being acquired for MoMA as the first part of a wider collection of forty different titles.<sup>44</sup> In the blog

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42. Robert Steckler, "Is It Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?" in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 45–64, 50.

43. Jones, "Video Games Are Not Art."

44. Paola Antonelli, "Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters,"

post Antonelli asks the question "Are videogames art?" and follows it up with a confident "they sure are, but they are also design, and a design approach is what we chose for this new foray into this universe." This is as far as Antonelli discusses videogames as art in this blog post, instead discussing videogames as examples of interactive design rather than as art. The rest of Antonelli's blog post is an eloquent breakdown of the selection criteria that MoMA have applied when selecting which videogames to acquire, as well as a brief discussion of the difficulty of collecting and displaying digital objects.

Jones suggests that masterpieces in MoMA are "a series of personal visions," one person's "reaction to life."<sup>45</sup> He then states that "any definition of art that robs it of this inner response by a human creator is a worthless definition."<sup>46</sup> For Jones, art must be "an act of personal imagination," no matter the material that the work is made from.<sup>47</sup> So far, so good - it would seem that videogames tick Jones' boxes of being "personal visions" and a "reaction to life." It is difficult to think of many videogames that do not somehow fulfil these criteria. I would suggest too that videogames are certainly works of "personal imagination" that have been dreamt up from the minds of the various artists and technicians that work to create videogames. However, then Jones provides a reason why he believes videogames cannot be considered art:

The worlds created by electronic games are more like playgrounds where experience is created by the interaction between a player and a programme. The player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game, while

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November 29, 2012, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/).

45. Jones, "Video Games Are Not Art."

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one "owns" the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art.<sup>48</sup>

Jones seems to believe that because a player of a game does not impose a "personal vision" on a video game as a viewer might use their life experiences and ideologies to interpret a work of art, that videogames are not works of art. I think that if someone is playing a videogame that contains thoughtful themes and narratives then of course they will bring their own life experiences to the game, just as someone would to a work of art. How we interpret a videogame is based in our cultural understanding. While one person might interpret *Resident Evil 5* (2009) as harmless fun, another might bring their years of living in oppression to the table and understand *Resident Evil* as being racist in its portrayal of black Africans.<sup>49</sup> As Hilary Goldstein points out it really depends on our lived experiences how we interpret the game.

Jones' statement about videogames being more like playgrounds also does not allow for the fact that there are already "analogue" works of art in major collections that are about the experience created by the viewer and their interaction with the work of art. Just because the names have changed from "player" to "viewer" and "programme" to "work of art" should not make any difference, for they are just alternative words for the same thing in this context. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's *Séance de Shadow II (bleu)* (1998) is an example of interactive art that uses technology within the Tate's collection.<sup>50</sup> It is a work that requires the viewer to interact with it in order to experience it by using their

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48. Jones, "Video Games Are Not Art."

49. *Resident Evil 5*, Videogame, Capcom, 2009.

50. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *Séance de Shadow II (bleu)*, 1998, lamps, infrared sensors, carpet and painted wall, overall display dimensions variable, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gonzalez-foerster-seance-de-shadow-ii-bleu-t12752>.



bodies to turn on and off lights as they walk in front of them. The viewer has no direct interaction with the artist, the same as a videogame, but they are changing the art work by interacting with it. This does not mean that the "viewer" or "player" of the work is the artist, it just means that the artist intended interaction as part of the format of the work of art.

Taking it one step further, Meschac Gaba's *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002), an artwork currently in the Tate's collection, is a series of installations that include many interactive features.<sup>51</sup> In the Architecture Room visitors are invited to interact with wooden blocks on a blue carpet in order to propose their own architectural vision for *Museum of Contemporary African Art*. The models created by visitors are constantly in a state of change as other visitors add their own parts, remove blocks, or knock them down entirely. The various interactive parts of *Museum of Contemporary African Art* are fundamental to the work. They provoke social interaction and discussion, just the as many videogames do. The visitor is no more imposing a "personal vision of life" on the work of art than a player is imposing a "personal vision of life" on a videogame - this is ensured by the limitations of the art work; there are only so many blocks so the vision never lasts for more than a few moments. Both videogames and parts of *Museum of Contemporary African Art* are fleeting experiences that exist only ephemerally. The experiences are not documented by the artist, and the artist does not experience them.

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51. Meschac Gaba, *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, 1997-2002, mixed media, displayed dimensions variable, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gaba-museum-of-contemporary-african-art-129412>.

We could also examine Nam June Paik's work *Participation TV* (1963-1966).<sup>52</sup>

*Participation TV* is an interactive-participatory artwork where the participant controls what is seen on a TV screen by speaking into a microphone; by making noise into one of the two microphones lines are made on the screen. It is James Wilson's belief that Paik's works integrate "engineering practice and aesthetic image-making. *Participation TV* fulfils the criterion of *intermedia*, mixing real-time sound, real-time vision, [...] and the 'found object' of the television set itself."<sup>53</sup>

While not enough on its own to guarantee a label of "art," this precedence does at least prove that it is not the technology itself that prevents an object from being considered as art.

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52. Nam June Paik, *Participation TV*, 1963-1966 (remade 1998), manipulated TV and microphone, variable installation, Nam June Paik Art Centre, South Korea, <https://njpac-en.ggcf.kr/archives/artwork/participation-tv>.

53. Jason Wilson, "'Participation TV': Videogame Archaeology and New Media Art," in *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*, ed. Melanie Swalwell (Jefferson, N.C.: McFrand & Co, 2008), 94-117, 102.

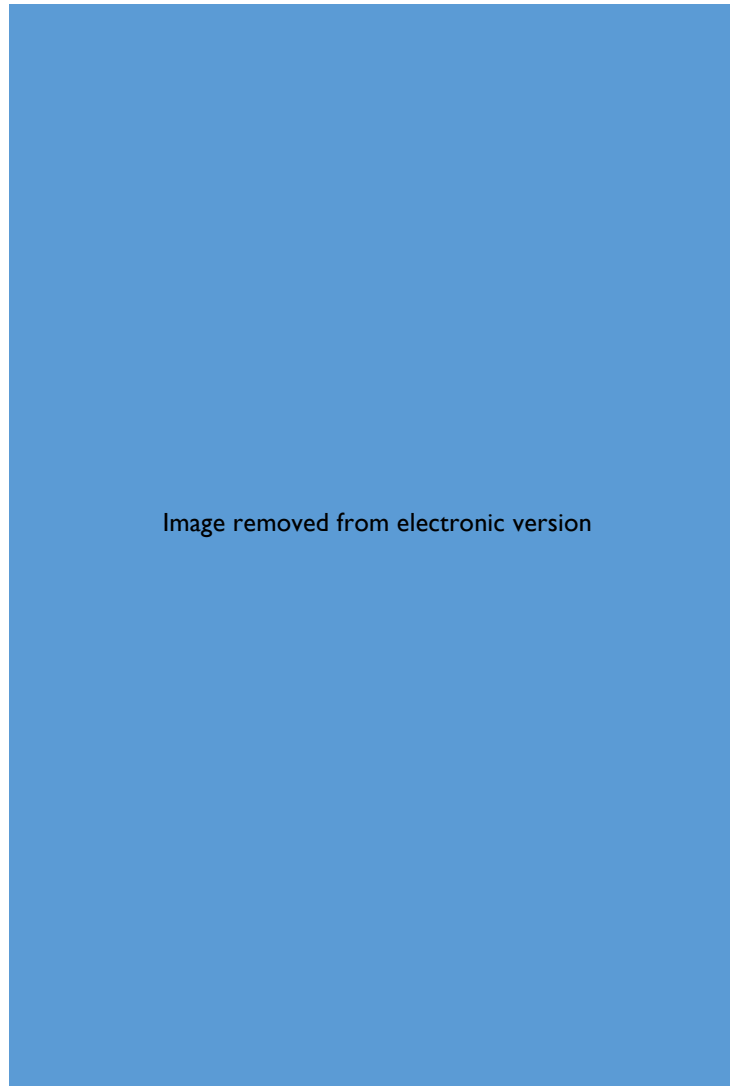


Figure 1: Nam June Paik, *Participation TV*. (Image shows one possible configuration).

In addition, *Participation TV* gives a precedent for considering playfulness to be a legitimate part of a work of art. Wilson discusses how both the person informing the work (the individual using the microphone to affect the TV) and the viewers are part of the playful nature of the piece. Wilson describes *Participation TV* as being "explicitly social and inclusive, comprehensible [...] though experiential play." So while it may seem that Jones has a point with his assertion that games are more like playgrounds, it falls down in the same way that many other historical theories of art have fallen down. There are exceptions that will make the definition invalid; however, this does not mean that the theories are not good or useful. But rather,

it points out the flaw in every definition of art - that they only work for a limited number of artworks and we must consider the limitations of any definition or classification as much as we consider the strengths.

In addition, John Maeda also took up the baton to defend Antonelli and MoMA, penning an article for *Wired* that discussed the legitimacy of digital art appearing in the collection of MoMA. Maeda uses his own works of art that are in the permanent MoMA collection as the basis for his argument:

Just as software and art are now inextricably linked - this is part of what MoMA has established by acquiring my work and the recent videogames - I believe that design and technology help leaders navigate this information age. So yes, I'm pleased to see MoMA show intellectual leadership in acquiring videogames, the most modern expression of humankind's ability to fuse rich design and technology into an immersive, interactive experience.<sup>54</sup>

Although Maeda does also point out that MoMA has acquired videogames as great examples of design and not art, he also deals with the question of them being art (in response to the article by Jones) in a previous blog he has written on the subject. "Designers create *solutions*" says Maeda in this second article, "But artists create **questions**."<sup>55</sup> Certainly this is a very different idea of what art is than Jones' assertion that art is a series of personal visions. Is one more valid as a definition of art than the other? I do not believe so. Of course everyone who offers a classification of art is likely to believe that their idea is the best, but instead of stalling on what exactly counts as art perhaps the better idea would be to discuss

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54. John Maeda, "Videogames Do Belong in the Museum of Modern Art," *WIRED*, December 4, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/12/why-videogames-do-belong-in-the-museum-of-modern-art/>.

55. John Maeda, "If Design's No Longer The Killer Differentiator, What Is?" *WIRED*, September 21, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/09/so-if-designs-no-longer-the-killer-differentiator-what-is/>.

how classification could enable better works of art to be made and open up the process of making works of art to a wider range of potential artists.

#### ***1.4 Liel Leibovitz***

In March 2013 Liel Leibovitz wrote an article for *New Republic* in response to the opening of the *Applied Design* exhibition, the blockbuster show that was to showcase MoMA's recent videogame acquisitions.<sup>56</sup> The article handily summarises some of the key points of those who oppose videogames being considered art: they lack a single creator, they are primarily playthings, and they fall short of art's "Olympian standards" (whatever that means).<sup>57</sup>

Leibovitz then goes on to summarise the argument in a single sentence:

"Videogames aren't art because they are, quite thoroughly, something else: code."<sup>58</sup>

It is an interesting statement for sure, but one that I find quite frankly rather baffling. Leibovitz is a videogame scholar, and was for at least a time lecturing on various videogames undergraduate and postgraduate courses at New York University where he was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Media, Culture and

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56. The Museum of Modern Art, "Applied Design."

57. Liel Leibovitz, "MoMA Has Mistaken Video Games for Art," *The New Republic*, March 13, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/112646/moma-applied-design-exhibit-mistakes-video-games-art>.

58. *Ibid*,

Communication.<sup>59</sup> Any scholars working with media and culture should be able to understand that an artefact can be more than one thing at a time - Antonelli quite succinctly dismisses his argument by saying "so Picasso is not art because it's oil paint. Right?"<sup>60</sup> Antonelli does have a habit of jumping between defining videogames as art or design depending on what she is trying to achieve, however I do not believe this to be deliberately misleading, but rather the nature of the mediums that are being used to communicate (live speaking at TED and blog posts) and the fact that videogames are not yet considered one or the other (or both, even).

It is true that the various interpretations of the component pieces of the medium make videogames a tricky art form to pin down. Some believe that the code itself is the artwork, that code can be particularly beautiful and certainly artistic when written by someone who is talented in this field. In a way this approach is a little like admiring the way that Vincent van Gogh applied the paint onto canvas - those swirling impasto lines building up texture on the canvas are certainly a key feature of his paintings that art historians analyse regularly. However, perhaps the code is more fundamental than that and should actually be compared to those in an artist's workshop who make the dyes and brushes by hand; master craftspeople, but not really artists in their own right.

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59. "Liel Leibovitz - Faculty Bio," New York University, November 19, 2014, accessed October 31, 2017, [https://web.archive.org/web/20141119162334/http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/mcc/faculty\\_bios/view/Liel\\_Leibovitz](https://web.archive.org/web/20141119162334/http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/mcc/faculty_bios/view/Liel_Leibovitz).

N.B. This link is to an archived version of the webpage which is now not available on the New York University website. A page referencing his employment as a lecturer can be found here:

"MCC's Liel Leibovitz Talks Seriously About Video Games," *NYU Steinhardt at a Glance*, April 13, 2012, <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/site/ataglance/2012/04/inside-nyu-steinhardt-mccs-liel-leibovitz-talks-seriously-about-video-games.html>.

60. Antonelli, "Pac-Man," 04:51.

But the truth is that a videogame is so much more than its code. The code is just what brings the videogame into being alive, no different to the chisel used by a sculptor to bring forth a statue from a block of marble. There still has to be an idea for a game before a single line of code is written. Themes must be decided, characters generated, and narratives written. Just as "writing" is not *Twelfth Night*, "code" is not *Grand Theft Auto*. Code is something quite remarkable and it should certainly be studied in the same way that languages are studied, but the code alone is clearly not the art.

Perhaps instead we should look to the graphics of the videogame being art? It is, after all, the part that people would call "artistic," and the graphics within a videogame are created by people called game artists. But do game artists have much in common with the more traditional type of artist that art history usually considers? I think it is possible to answer that question with both a yes and a no. It is true that the works of art within a videogame created by game artists could be studied as standalone artefacts. One could look at the intricacy of the costume or the architectural designs of a city. I am sure that it would be possible to write a paper on the evolution of costume design in the *Assasin's Creed* series, or the architecture of *Calvino Noir* (2015).<sup>61</sup> *Calvino Noir* is particularly interesting because it was created by an architect, Dan Walters, who says that he was inspired by the eighteenth-century French architect Charles de Wailly and his Parisian Théâtre de l'Odéon (1779–82).<sup>62</sup>

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61. *Calvino Noir*, Videogame, Calvino Noir Ltd., 2015.

62. Megan Logan, "This Stunning Adventure Game Plays Like Art in Motion," *WIRED*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.wired.com/2015/08/film-noir-french-architecture-inspired-stunning-adventure-game/>; Charles De Wailly, *Théâtre de l'Odéon*, 1782, Paris.

Image removed from electronic version

Figure 2: Promotional image from *Calvino Noir*.

Image removed from electronic version

Figure 3: Comédie-Française (Odéon) long section in perspective, drawing by Charles de Wailly, 1776. From: Allan Braham, *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 100.

Again though, a videogame is more than just a single part of its construction. It is perfectly possible to analyse the individual aspects of a videogame, such as the artwork or the code, in the same way that we give awards to parts of film production such as best screenplay or best cinematography. However without



situating these pieces within their wider context they make little sense when considered in isolation. A videogame is more than the sum of its parts and should be treated as such in discourse. It is more than the soundtrack, the graphics, or the narrative, and it is certainly more than just "code."

### ***1.5 Videogames as Harmless Escapism***

I do think it is worth considering whether the quest of some to get videogames considered art by the mainstream has been hampered somewhat by the way that society perceives videogames. In Constance Steinkuehler's talk at GDC (Game Developers Conference) in March 2015 during the "#IReasonTo Be: A Celebration of Us" panel Steinkuehler shares images from meetings with Vice President Biden after the Sandy Hook school shooting where debates were had about the accusations that videogames encourage gun violence.<sup>63</sup> Steinkuehler then goes on to say "the games industry has a real PR problem [...] so every time something goes wrong and games get blamed for it, it's me that goes and tells the American public and policy makers how it is actually not true. That games are nothing but a trojan horse for misogyny, violence, and everything else [...]. How it is that violence is on the decline while games are only booming."<sup>64</sup> There have been numerous journal articles both suggesting and denying that videogames cause or encourage violent behaviour and the studies are often reported in a sensationalist manner in the mainstream press in order to sell more copies of the newspapers on a slow news day. More recently academics have been working to combat the previous reports to the public, and in 2013 two hundred scholars signed an open letter to the American Psychological Association warning of the dangers of applying laboratory-

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63. Constance Steinkuehler, "#IReasonToBe," filmed March 2, 2016 at the Game Developers Conference, San Francisco, CA, video, 1:20:30, <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1021747/>.

64. Ibid.

based findings to the wider public who play videogames.<sup>65</sup> But the negative stereotypes live on, and there is still a certain image of a lazy, "basement-dwelling," middle-aged man with no social skills as the typical gamer. This trope is played out in TV series, books, and films where the characterisation is rarely positive.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately the reaction to accusations that roleplaying games encourage players to not understand if they are in the real world or the fantasy world was to frame the games as "harmless escapism" which may be part of the difficulty of framing videogames as art today.<sup>67</sup> If something is "harmless escapism" how can it be possibly be art? Most institutions would hope that their collected works represent more than harmless escapism or just pure fun, so it would make sense that the institution would largely reject this kind of object as a work of art.

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65. "Scholar's Open Letter to the APA Task Force On Violent Media Opposing APA Policy Statements on Violent Media," September 26, 2013, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/223284732/Scholar-s-Open-Letter-to-the-APA-Task-Force-On-Violent-Media-Opposing-APA-Policy-Statements-on-Violent-Media>.

66. "Basement-Dweller," TV Tropes, accessed November 9, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BasementDweller>.

67. Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 13.

## ***1.6 Summary***

The major arguments against videogames as art I have discussed in this chapter can be briefly summarised as follows:

- Videogames are design, not art.
- Art should be the creation of a single artist, and interacting with the work makes it a collaborative artefact rather than the work of just one person.
- Videogames are not art because they are something else - namely they are code.
- Videogames are not art because they are not as good as the greatest works of art in existence.
- Art should seek to lead you to an inevitable conclusion.
- You cannot "win" art, but you can win videogames.

While each critic had their own reasons for thinking that videogames are not art, when held up to traditional art historical or aesthetics discourse none of the reasons really appear convincing. Art is constantly evolving and new theories and classifications of art are constantly being rewritten in order to include (or exclude) styles or mediums. In the next chapter I will discuss several approaches to the classification of art and how they might be relevant to the inclusion of videogames in the artistic canon. It is my intention that this discussion will rebuff all of the above reasons as to why videogames cannot be considered art.

## Chapter 2: Classification of Art

This chapter introduces two key aesthetics theories that I consider particularly relevant for the case for videogames as art. The first is Berys Gaut's cluster theory which puts forward the notion that for something to be considered art it just has to fulfil enough of a set of properties that are relevant to the style or medium being discussed. It is different to previous theories that involved comparing new works to exiting paradigm works to determine their status because the set of properties is flexible depending on what is being considered at the time.

I will then consider videogames with regards to Noël Carroll's idea of mass art, particularly in comparison to cinema and other multiple instance mediums. There are a number of points in Carroll's writings that are very relevant to videogames, such as his ideas about producing and distributing works by mass technology. Videogames could be considered the very epitome of an artistic medium that is produced and distributed by mass technology and so Carroll's theory of mass art is extremely relevant to the case for videogames being accepted as legitimate works of art.

After looking at Gaut and Carroll's theories of art I will consider the argument for videogames as design rather than art. MoMA is a useful comparison tool here as they have certain rules about whether objects are acquired as works of design or works of art. Looking at the major London institutions too it is clear to see that there is a difference in collecting strategy between the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum which I will explore through the Tate's policy documents and recent job adverts for a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

## **2.1 Cluster Theory**

Berys Gaut proposed a new theory of determining whether objects are art in his essay on art as a cluster concept.<sup>68</sup> This "cluster" theory attempts to build on ideas that emerged in the mid-twentieth century relating to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concepts of familial relationships in determining if an object is a work of art or not. The problem with Wittgenstein's theories, according to Gaut, is that they require one to first designate a "paradigm work" with which all other artefacts can be compared to in order to determine if they are art.<sup>69</sup> Obviously there are difficulties with trying to define paradigm works of art to which all other works of art should bear a familial resemblance. Trying to produce a set of objects that encompass Western art in the twentieth century would be enough of a struggle, let alone trying to introduce historical works of art and works from non-Western societies.

In response to these problems Gaut proposes that instead of a set of paradigm works of art to which we should compare all new potential works of art, we should instead have a set of properties that define what a work of art is. A single

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68. Berys Gaut, "'Art' as a Cluster Concept,' In *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 25–44.

69. *Ibid.*, 25.

work would not have to have every single one of the properties but it must possess some of them.<sup>70</sup> Gaut does remind the reader that he is proposing and defending the cluster concept rather than any particular set of properties (and that an individual or institution should be able to add or remove properties as they see fit for their particular circumstances), but the essay does propose ten ideas as a starting point:

1. Possessing positive aesthetic properties (such as being beautiful or graceful),
2. Being expressive of emotion,
3. Being intellectually challenging,
4. Being formally complex and coherent,
5. Having the capacity to convey complex meanings,
6. Exhibiting an individual point of view,
7. Being an exercise of creative imagination,
8. Being an artefact which is the product of a high degree of skill,
9. Belonging to an established artistic form,
10. Being the product of an intention to make a work of art.<sup>71</sup>

Gaut later considers that a work of art can actively reject some of these criteria and still be considered art. For instance Gaut notes that religious art is often not intellectually challenging because it is designed to represent religious views rather than looking to test them.<sup>72</sup> It is point number nine that particularly interests me for this thesis - Gaut makes the statement that "not all artworks are in established art genres: indeed, they could not be, for if they were, no new art genres could have emerged."<sup>73</sup> Videogames, as I have already discussed, are not an established artistic form in the view of the institutional art world, but Gaut's cluster concept for art allows for this systemic barrier to be ignored as long as (some) other criteria are met.

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70. Ibid., 27.

71. Ibid., 28.

72. Ibid., 32.

73. Ibid.

An additional point made by Gaut is that nowhere do the criteria say that an artwork must be "good."<sup>74</sup> A bad work of art is still a work of art - a crucial point for a fledgling new medium that is being introduced. For some time there will be challenges associated with videogames as a medium while artists discover its plasticity and they understand how it can be best used to convey their desired messages. These early attempts at working with the medium of videogames to create art should not be dismissed but rather critiqued and encouraged in order that proficiency with working in this new medium is attained. Indeed according to Gaut's theory we should be looking back at the videogames that have already been produced and seeing them as experimentation leading up to videogames being classified as art: "consider early pioneers of a new medium, who may not intend to produce art, but merely think of their work as technical experiment or entertainment, but who produce work of sufficient merit that we judge it art."<sup>75</sup>

Surely the easiest comparison to make with videogames is the medium's likeness to cinema when using Gaut's list of properties. Certainly the mainstream, AAA game studio's offerings have a distinct similarity to the medium of film.<sup>76</sup> The most obvious is that they are viewed, generally, on a television or a television-like computer monitor and they both feature narratives with protagonists, antagonists, and so forth. The art institution has no difficulty regarding cinema as a valid medium to create works of art and so it seems like this could be a good place to start to begin using cluster theory analysis on videogames.

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74. Ibid., 33.

75. Ibid.

76. A "triple-A" or "AAA" is a term for videogames with high development budgets and levels of promotional activity. They are likely to be very high quality and should score highly in the bestseller charts.

Videogames differ from cinema primarily in the interaction and the branching narrative state. Players have agency in almost all modern AAA games to decide how the story moves forward and there are often multiple endings available to the player. This allows the player to repeat the process of playing the game from start to finish, experiencing a different narrative each time. There is often the possibility to play other characters too, each with their own particular variation of play style and story. Modern AAA games are also often packed full of "side quests" - branches from the primary narrative that give depth to the world and your character. Rarely do these side quests need to be completed to play the main game but in some games, such as *Fallout 4* (2015), the volume of side quests is so massive that you might never see them all even on repeated play-throughs of the game.<sup>77</sup> This is a distinctly different experience to the watching of a film but it is still possible, despite these differences, to see how similar these mediums are when using Gaunt's cluster theory as a guide for classifying objects as art.

Some argue that a game can never have the depth of movie or book. However compare the one hundred and twenty-three minute running time of the movie *Warcraft* (2016), or the three hundred and sixty-eight pages in the novel *World of Warcraft: Rise of the Horde* (2006) with the fact that my played time on *World of Warcraft* (2004-) over the past eight years shows that I have been playing is one hundred and seventy-eight days, twenty-one hours and seven minutes!<sup>78</sup> Reviewing my "achievements" in game it seems I have barely even scratched the surface of the narrative exploration that is available to me.<sup>79</sup>

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77. *Fallout 4*, Videogame, Bethesda Game Studios, 2015.

78. It is possible to type the command "/played" into the *World of Warcraft* interface and obtain the amount of time that you have been logged in to the game. This time was recorded on the 1st June 2017.

79. In *World of Warcraft* "achievements" are awards for completing certain tasks in game. There are over 2500 achievements in game.



Moving more into the technical aspects, an often missed comparison between videogames and cinema is the use of the camera and viewpoint. AAA videogames largely use two different types of camera position - the "third-person shooter" (TPS)<sup>80</sup> or "first-person shooter" (FPS).<sup>81</sup> Neither of these viewpoints are often seen in mainstream cinema editing. As Will Brooker points out, they are techniques used sparingly for particular situations - FPS for example can be seen in Terminator's digital scanning, or the infra-red vision of Predator. It is used sparingly in the world of filmmaking, unlike a videogame where an entire game can be FPS. This kind of continuous point-of-view sequence is a technique so unusual and rare that Brooker has listed all of its uses within his paper on videogames and the cinematic.<sup>82</sup>

As Brooker then goes on to explain, the "fluid, soaring, unbroken TPS camera" is seen only occasionally in cinema - and usually those occasions where it is seen are lauded as ground-breaking filmmaking.<sup>83</sup> The long car chase scene in the movie *Children of Men* (2006) particularly stands out to me as an example where videogames and cinema overlap. This dominant camera mode of AAA videogames is far closer to art cinema than Hollywood. So while we might make the immediate assumption that AAA videogames are closer to Hollywood cinema than any other form of media, it is perhaps more truthful to compare them directly to art cinema.

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80. A videogame genre where the player character is shown on screen and the camera is positioned behind the figure. It has an 'over the shoulder' perspective, a technique used in cinema.

81. A videogame genre where the player experiences the action as if they were looking through the eyes of the protagonist. Often the display will show the hands and weapon of the protagonist but not the rest of their body.

82. Will Brooker, "Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the 'Cinematic,'" *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (2009): 122-128.

83. *Ibid*, 128.

Brooker closes his paper with the following words: "As cinema, the videogame would be not youthful rebellion, but the mature challenge of the avant-garde".<sup>84</sup> This does perhaps elevate the AAA videogame to a status that many would perhaps feel is underserved, however the similarities are undeniable when considered objectively.

Considering these ideas about complex camera work in the light of Gaut's cluster concept, we can see that videogames follow cinema in "being formally complex and coherent" which is number four on Gaut's list of starting points for the classification of objects as works of art. Arguably videogames also often possess aesthetic properties, express emotion, can be intellectually challenging, are the result of creative imagination, and are the product of a high degree of skill. The idea of works being formally complex and intellectually challenging I will pick up on in the case study in Sam Barlow later in this thesis. I also discuss if works exhibit an individual point of view earlier when I looked at Jones' objections to videogames being considered works of art. It is quite clear to me that videogames can be classified as works of art according to Gaut's cluster theory, indeed they fit into the properties suggested by Gaut quite easily especially if the list of properties was adapted slightly to provide a more direct comparison with cinema. However works of cinema are not usually collected by traditional art institutions, instead they are usually left to specialist film and television museums because they are not considered part of the family of fine and applied arts and therefore are kept in specialist collections that are not usually referred to as art collections. I will come back to the idea of videogames being considered design rather than art later in this chapter.

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84. Ibid.

## 2.2 Mass Art

It is quite easy to dismiss videogames (along with popular cinema) as being unintentional in their approach to creating a work of art, therefore quickly eliminating them from any classification of art. There seems to be a distinct difference in the treatment of so-called "high art" and "low art" in this respect. When a work is considered high art the artist's message is almost always considered intentional by the art institution, however "low" (or "mass") art is rarely afforded the same assumption of autonomy.<sup>85</sup> Writing in 1998 Noël Carroll suggests that this lack of attention could be, at least in part, attributed to philosophers of art being loyal to modernism and Kantian aesthetic theories, discounting mass art on the basis of reasons such as the artworks not being unique, because the viewer's response is passive, or because it is "generally designed to induce certain predetermined effects."<sup>86</sup>

Carroll's definition of mass art is particularly interesting when considering if videogames can legitimately be considered art because it takes into account these challenges. Many of the objections to this classification appear to be to do with the formatting of videogames and the way they are presented. However, Carroll's ideas specifically allow for new digital medias and mass distribution technologies. His definition is as follows:

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85. Mass Art, as defined by Noël Carroll, includes "popular commercial films, TV, commercial photography, pop music, broadcast radio, computer video games, comic strips, world wide web sites, and pulp literature."

Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 173.

86. Carroll, *Mass Art*, 174.

X is a mass artwork if and only if 1. x is a multiple instance or type artwork, 2. produced and distributed by a mass technology, 3. which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended effect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences.<sup>87</sup>

Engaging with the first point of Carroll's definition, it seems to me quite clear that videogames are a multiple instance artwork and therefore meet these criteria.

Videogames are a most certainly a multiple instance work that can be displayed simultaneously in many places at the same time. This could be a problem because scarcity is a valuable commodity in the language of the art institution and a work of art will sometimes not attain high status in the plastic arts if there are many copies of it available.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York has been recently implementing bold collection strategies that seem to deliberately disrupt the traditional collecting of unique or editions works. Before MoMA even added videogames into the design collection in 2012, they did something that was even more bold. Paola Antonelli announced in 2010 on the MoMA blog that the Department of Architecture and Design had acquired the @ symbol as part of its collection. Antonelli described it as "a momentous, elating acquisition that makes us all proud."<sup>88</sup> Certainly it had some people puzzled as to how the @ symbol could even be acquired, let alone displayed, by a museum or gallery however Antonelli described it eloquently in her TED talk on bringing Pac-Man to MoMA:

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87. Ibid, 196.

88. '@ at MoMA,' The Museum of Modern Art, accessed September 16, 2017, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/03/22/at-moma/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/22/at-moma/).

[. . .] it's almost as if a butterfly were flying by and we captured the shadow on the wall, and just we're [sic] showing the shadow. So in a way, we're showing a manifestation of something that is truly important and that is part of our identity but that nobody can have.<sup>89</sup>

In that sense it matters really very little that the object does not have scarcity, what matters is that the object is culturally important in a way that fits with the collecting ambitions of an art museum or similar institution. If we take the Tate as an example, Nicholas Serota put his name to a document entitled "Tate's Vision: Championing art and its value to society."<sup>90</sup> In this document it states that the Tate wishes to "make us all aware of the significance of the visual in contemporary life" and that it will "keep abreast of new developments in the visual arts, continually reassess the past and explore new ways of presenting ideas and experience."<sup>91</sup> Have Tate considered collecting videogames? They could easily fit into the display at the Tate Modern as I demonstrate in the first case study in chapter three. Videogames also certainly present ideas and experience in new ways that are unfamiliar to the art institution so it would seem that they could potentially find a place in the collections. It was five years ago now that Antonelli acquired fourteen video games into the collection of MoMA, but why has no leading British institution followed MoMA's lead?<sup>92</sup>

All but the earliest videogames have been produced and distributed by mass technology of some form, and this meets the requirement for the second point of Carroll's definition of mass art.<sup>93</sup> I did briefly consider the idea that perhaps cabinet style arcade games did not count as being distributed by mass technology, however

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89. Antonelli, "Why I Brought Pac-Man to MoMA," 17:14.

90. Nicholas Serota, "Tate's Vision: Championing Art and Its Value to Society," accessed September 16, 2017. <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/101667>.

91. Ibid.

92. Antonelli, "Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters."

93. Carroll, *Mass Art*, 196.

then I reminded myself that cinema is widely considered to be a form of mass art and so being in fixed commercial locations (i.e. cinema buildings) rather than people's homes should not be a barrier to being considered a work of mass art. The other forms of distribution of videogames - cartridge, disk, disc, the internet, and so forth - can (and should) be counted as "mass technology" since the aim of the technology is to package the game object in such a way that it is obtained by as many people as possible. Digital distribution of products makes this even more true, of course.

All modern videogames are produced on systems that count as mass technology. Everything is designed on computers when it comes to videogames, from the code that starts the game to the marketing materials that are distributed to all corners of the world before its launch. It is unthinkable that a person could even question the notion of videogames not being produced by mass technology and so I believe that videogames have fulfilled both clauses of the second part of Carroll's definition of mass art.

3. which artwork is intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended effect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences.<sup>94</sup>

This third clause in Carroll's definition of mass art is considerably more challenging than the first two. Grant Tavinor suggests that "a lack of gaming skills [...] can be a real barrier to new players experiencing these games."<sup>95</sup> He is correct, of course. Someone who has never held a console controller before, or who has never used a

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94. Ibid.

95. Tavinor, "Video Games as Mass Art."

computer keyboard for gaming, will almost certainly struggle. Playing videogames is a skill that needs to be learned, muscle movements that need to be memorised, and in many games a whole vocabulary of unspoken nuances that need to be mastered. In this way it is not entirely unlike the playing and understanding of a musical score. Some might be able to conceptualise what the score will sound like based on the musical notation alone, others might need it played. And even those listen to music with intent will often have prior knowledge that allows them to interpret the music in some way - a dictionary of tropes that appear time and time again in musical score and performance. Tavinor also makes the point that Carroll's theory of mass art was not created with the nuances of videogames in mind, and therefore just because he leaves out commenting on the specifics of skill-based gameplay it should not be assumed that his theory is not a good fit for videogames.<sup>96</sup>

However there does seem to be some allowance for repetition and previous experience within Carroll's theory; "the tutoring at issue involves training in *specialized* background knowledge, including training in deciphering erudite codes, cues, implications, and allusions."<sup>97</sup> Carroll here is specifically discussing languages, but I believe that "language" is a concept that should be interpreted in a way that means more than just the words we use to communicate. Being a gamer is, in many ways, like being an art historian. Both gamers and art historians require a specialist vocabulary and knowledge that has been built up over time in order to interact with their chosen mediums in a meaningful way. Videogame culture might seem quite impenetrable from the outside, however I believe no more so than the current art institution appears impenetrable to the uninitiated. Tavinor briefly

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96. Ibid.

97. Carroll, *Mass Art*, 227.

points out the same; "Many so-called 'hard-core' video games are at least as inaccessible to the uninitiated as are avant-garde works of art."<sup>98</sup> If you stood a person unfamiliar with twentieth-century avant-garde art in the middle of Martin Creed's *Work No 227: The Lights Going On and Off* (2000) you would not be surprised if they were extremely confused at what they had been presented with.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps they might not even believe that this was a genuine art work in a genuine art institution. They might, with some coaxing, understand that this is widely regarded as a work of minimalism, but that would possibly be as much as they could take away from the work while observing it. It is only with prior knowledge, experience, and an understanding of the language of the avant-garde art scene that you might make the connection that Creed appears to be rebelling against his traditionalist Slade School of Fine Art education. Or that his work seems to riff off of the mid-century avant-garde movements such as the Fluxus movement or the Dadaists. That his works often seem to be a pastiche of things that have gone before, rather than true minimalism (or whatever else the press decide to label him as).

The same is true of gamers and videogames. While anybody can watch a demo of a videogame, watch a launch trailer, or even watch another person playing the videogame, it is unlikely that without experience they will fully understand the videogame that is being played. Videogames are not just what is happening on the screen in front of them, they are also the particular backstory, the universe that the videogame is set in, other videogames in the genre, and the background

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98. Tavinor, "Video Games as Mass Art."

99. Martin Creed, *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off*, 2000, gallery lighting, overall display dimensions variable, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/creed-work-no-227-the-lights-going-on-and-off-tl3868>.



material for the videogame (such as books, cinema, even historical events). They could even be referencing recent pop-culture such as particular internet memes or tropes. People who play videogames regularly will most likely have built up this language from experience. They will recognise certain markers as pointers for action, they'll understand subtle in-jokes being made, and they will know the tropes in the same way that a fan of Hollywood action movies understands the tropes used in that particular medium and genre.

### **2.3 Design or Art**

There is still the debate to be had as to whether videogames would fit better into a design collection than an art collection. Perhaps the Tate would argue that it is within the Victoria and Albert Museum's remit to collect videogames since it already holds a large design collection - if we are to consider videogames as works of design rather than art. Indeed the Victoria and Albert Museum is specifically mentioned in the Tate's Acquisition and Disposal Policy as being one of the organisations that the Tate will specifically consult with to avoid "conflict of interest" and "unnecessary duplication and waste of resources."<sup>100</sup> The Victoria and Albert Museum does seem to have picked up on the potential for videogames to be in their collection, albeit with a low-commitment approach of hosting a major exhibition opening September 2018 that will reveal "the complexity of videogames as one of the most important design fields of our time" rather than actually acquiring works as MoMA has done.<sup>101</sup> The choice of language on the exhibition page is interesting - it refers to videogames as a "movement" with no apparent irony. This places videogames firmly into a canonical role within the art institution

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100. "Tate Acquisition and Disposal Policy," Tate, November 19, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/50197>, 79.

101. "Research Curator - Videogames," Call For Curators, August 10, 2015, <https://www.callforcurators.com/2015/08/10/research-curator-videogames/>.

and affords videogames the same academic respect as any of the hundreds of art movements that have gone before. Arguably videogames are not a movement but a medium that can be used to create works of art in many different movements, but the very fact that another leading international art institution is taking videogames seriously at all makes the argument not worth having at this time.

This exhibition has been in the planning stages for some time now - I originally saw the job advertisement for a "Research Curator - Videogames" in August 2015.<sup>102</sup>

The job advertisement gives an advance preview of what is planned to be in the exhibition:

The show will provide an in-depth look at the complex design processes behind the creation of contemporary videogames ranging from multi-million dollar AAA titles, large contemporary releases through to smaller independent games. Areas of focus within the exhibition include the new generation of highly-authored games, the work of critics provoking new ethical debate within the field, the new wave of developers tackling subjects including gender, inequality, violence and race not seen before in videogames design, the rise of eSports and the fast-changing contemporary modding scene.<sup>103</sup>

The text from the job advertisement suggests to me that the exhibition will focus on the artist as creator (highly-authored games) as well as critical discourse on videogames as art (the work of critics). The fact that it also suggests it will be dealing with subjects such as gender, inequality, violence, and race (alongside the aforementioned use of the word "movement") adds to the idea that the exhibition will be presenting videogames as works of art rather than objects of design.

However the press release from the Victoria and Albert Museum detailing the 2018 programme highlights conveys the impression that this exhibition will take a design-led based approach to its curatorship. It says that the exhibition will "fully

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102. Ibid..

103. Ibid..

consider the complexity of videogames as one of the most important design fields of our time" and "explore the design and culture of the medium" as well as looking at how increased access to the internet and technological advances changed the way that we design, discuss, and play videogames.<sup>104</sup>

Undoubtedly the final blockbuster exhibition will be very different to the way it was advertised on the initial job application; not least because the curators hired will shape the way the exhibition forms and the final format it takes. However this information is still very much worth examining in the context of this thesis because it contains some initial thoughts on the way that the exhibition may develop. This is not a job advert that has been put out speculatively; it has already been subject to a planning process and is part of a long term project which suggests that the steering committee already have some ideas about what the exhibition is likely to entail.

There is no problem in curating exhibitions based on their worth as objects of design rather than objects of art, however design and art collections do have different remits and we, as visitors, students, and academics, interpret the objects and their curation differently depending on which part of the museum they are placed in. Antonelli draws attention to this issue when talking about her desire to acquire a Beretta for the design collection:

At MoMA, interestingly, there's a lot of violence depicted in the art part of the collection, but when I came to MoMA 19 years ago, and as an Italian, I said, 'You know what, we need a Beretta.' And I was told, 'No. No guns in the design collection.' And I was like, 'Why?' Interestingly, I learned that it's considered that in design and in the design collection, what you see is what you get. So when you see a gun, it's an instrument for killing in the design collection. If it's in the art collection, it might be a critique of the killing

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104. "V&A Highlights 2018," Victoria and Albert Museum, September 11, 2017, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/press/>.

instrument. So it's very interesting. But we are acquiring our critical dimension also in design, so maybe we'll be able to acquire also the guns.<sup>105</sup>

There is no doubt that many videogames do critique society. Even the Grand Theft Auto series was intended to be satirical of American society according to its producer Dan Houser (although he specifies that the series is a satire of "American media culture" rather than "American culture").<sup>106</sup> For the reason that most videogames comment on and critique society it does not make sense, in some respects, to favour so heavily placing them into design collections. It makes that decision look like one that is primarily designed to pacify those who are perceived to frequent and fund our art museums. If videogames are placed into the design collection then they can be viewed as the technological masterpieces that they are. However if you put them into the art collection suddenly you have to consider them alongside deeply political works such as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).<sup>107</sup> I think that displaying videogames in the art collection of museums would make some people uneasy to see the world through the lens that some videogames encourage us to use.

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105. Antonelli, "Why I Brought Pac-Man to MoMA," 11:04.

106. Chris Suellentrop, "Q. and A.: Rockstar's Dan Houser on Grand Theft Auto V," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/arts/video-games/q-and-a-rockstars-dan-houser-on-grand-theft-auto-v.html>.

107. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil painting on canvas, 349.3 x 776.7 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/guernica>.

## **2.4 Summary**

It makes sense with videogames to use theories that were designed for novel digital mediums in order to support a case for classifying videogames as art. Gaut's cluster theory and Carroll's theory of mass art were both conceived with our changing digital world in mind which makes them an easy choice to use here in this thesis. They both provide compelling arguments for the art institution to include videogames as legitimate artistic mediums in the future.

There are other aesthetic theories that would potentially also be worthwhile to explore in the context of videogames as art. Arthur Danto's ideas surrounding the institutional theory of art would be one and Clive Bell's theory of aesthetic emotion could be another with respect to many of the sensory videogames that are emerging. It would certainly be more challenging to make a case for videogames as art using some older aesthetic theories but I do not think impossible in most cases.

Additionally, it might be worth considering if a “soft” introduction of videogames to museums is a good way to approach changing people's minds about classifying videogames as art. This appears to have been MoMA's strategy as they have introduced videogames as works of design to their collection rather than works of art. Perhaps they will, eventually, be shown alongside the art collection in the gallery space, but for now they remain conveniently separated by a floor or two despite being exhibited under the same roof.

## Chapter 3: Case Studies

The following two case studies demonstrate how videogames can be written about using art historical approaches. If videogames are indeed a legitimate form of art then it follows logically that they can be written about as any other artwork can. In my undergraduate degree I wrote multiple essays that focussed on treating videogames as works of art on topics ranging from the representation of women in videogames to the way that videogames can be considered monuments to real-world people and events.

In the first case study I will compare *This War of Mine* (2016) to a sculpture currently on display in the Tate Modern.<sup>108</sup> *This War of Mine* is a recent videogame that takes an alternative look at war through the eyes of the civilian population. I will ask the question if it could be inserted into the museum display without changing the meaning of the exhibition, thus potentially adding weight to the argument that videogames can and should be classified as art by the institution.

The second case study will look at a series of works created by Sam Barlow using feminist and biographical approaches. Biographical approaches to artists have been

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108. *This War of Mine*, Videogame, 11 bit studios, 2014.

common throughout the history of art dating back to Giorgio Vasari in the sixteenth century. There are many videogame artists who now have a substantial catalogue of works, enabling videogames to be analysed in the context of other works by the same artist and building a picture of the subtle nuances involved in that individual's works. It is my hope to demonstrate that a traditional art historical methodology can be applied to this new digital medium just as easily as it can be used with traditional artistic mediums.

### **3.1 *This War of Mine***

Videogames featuring war usually portray the player as brave and heroic. Usually you get to fight on the winning side, and characters have endless health and weapon upgrades. Nothing about these games could be considered an accurate portrayal of war. *Battlefield 1* (2016) did something a little different; the video game tells the story of a pointless war of attrition from the point of view of a lowly soldier and attempts to convey the horrors of being in the armed forces during the First World War.<sup>109</sup> Miguel Concepcion from Gamespot described the game as "graceful" with "emotional stories" that show "a world in technological transition while humanizing the war's participants through well crafted, albeit fictional, narrative vignettes."<sup>110</sup> The reminder that real people died in this conflict each time you are killed in the game makes for sombre playing at times. This approach to war games was new and had not been doing before in a AAA game, but the groundwork had arguably been laid for a good reception from critics for *Battlefield 1* by the release of *This War of Mine* two years prior.

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109. *Battlefield 1*, Video game, Electronic Arts, 2016.

110. Miguel Concepcion, "Battlefield 1 Review," *GameSpot*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/battlefield-1-review/1900-6416555/>.



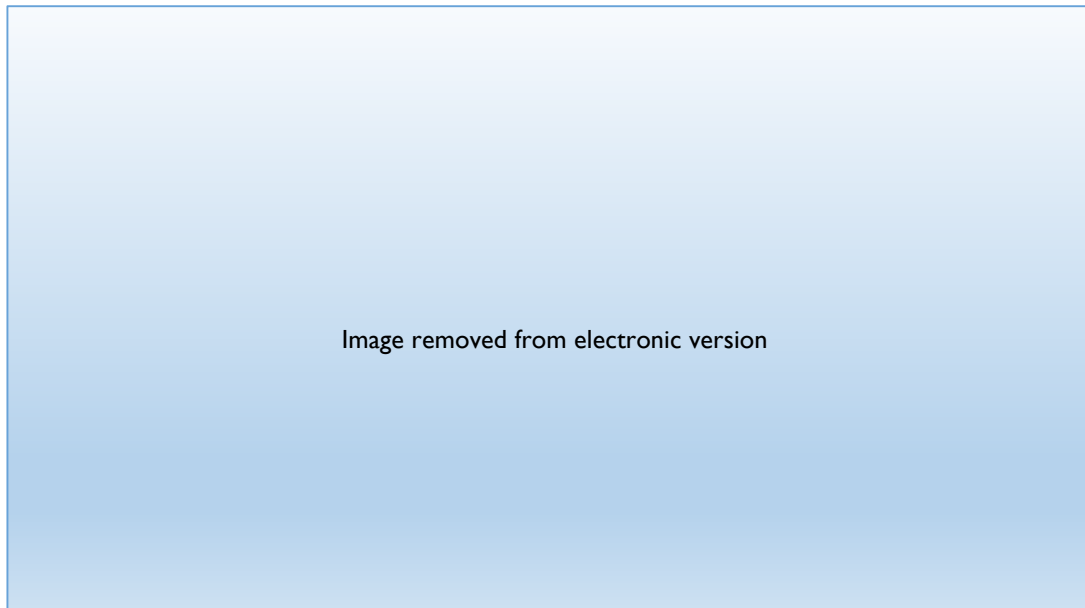


Figure 4: Promotional image from *This War of Mine*.

*This War of Mine* is relatively novel in being a war game where you do not play as a soldier or other military character. Instead you control a frightened group of civilians living in the city who are simply trying to survive from day to day until a ceasefire is called.

It seems relatively simple at first - during the day you tend to the needs of your small family of characters. You must provide them with food, water, and preferably some entertainment. A place to rest is required and hopefully you will secure the house that they are squatting in. At night under the cover of darkness, when the snipers fall silent, you send one of your characters out to scavenge nearby buildings to find food, materials, parts, and weapons. It is fine for the first few days - you are likely to find a relative abundance of food, parts, and materials in safe locations. But after the first week or so passes things start to get more difficult. Food becomes scarce. Injuries and sickness occur. No matter how hard you try, your characters never seem to get enough rest. People start trying to steal from you at night. And then the winter comes and the cold sets in.

Depression hits your characters hard in *This War of Mine*, they become despondent and take longer to do the tasks that you tell them do. At some point, they might just stop altogether. If you cannot use another character to talk them round then it becomes inevitable that your character will just simply walk out one day, or they will die. The game makes it very clear to you - this is failure. You, as the player, have failed these characters. You let this happen to them. You did not take care of them well enough when they needed you.

When I talk to people about this game they often express how bad they felt that they could not help the characters out of their depression. That they regret going for the low risk but low reward scavenging location rather than risking their characters' lives at somewhere higher risk. Or perhaps it was a high risk location that was the problem - their scavenging character became wounded and never recovered - their death causing a domino effect of depression throughout the vulnerable household.

While this game can never truly convey the trauma of what it must be like to be stuck in a real city siege while fighting continues all around you, it certainly does provide a different perspective to most videogames that tackle the themes of war and survival. Killing people makes your characters miserable - especially if they were other "innocents." Your characters are, after all, just normal people trying to get through this period of violent upheaval in their lives.

Image removed from electronic version

Figure 5: Gallery photograph of *Monument for the Living*.

In that respect *This War of Mine* feels quite similar to *Monument for the Living* (2001-8) by Marwan Rechmaoui, an artwork currently on display in Tate Modern.<sup>111</sup>

Rechmaoui's sculpture is a scaled-down concrete replica of the thirty-four storey Burj al Murr building in Beirut, a prominent landmark in the city that was never finished due to the onset of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90). The building was used as a sniper post due to the sightline it had across the city of Beirut, allowing snipers from various factions to dominate the fighting as long as they controlled the

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111. Marwan Rechmaoui, *Monument for the Living*, 2001-8, concrete and wood, 2360 x 600 x 400 mm, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rechmaoui-monument-for-the-living-t13193>.

tower. The Burj al Murr building now cannot physically be demolished because of the proximity of new redevelopment work surrounding the base of the tower so it still stands scarred from battle as its own monument to the fighting that the city saw.

In *This War of Mine* your characters cannot leave the squat during the day because of the fearsome sniper fire that we are advised is outside. Of course this is just a game mechanic to explain why scavenging must always be carried out at night between certain times, but the story it tells is similar to the story told by *Monument for the Living*. It calls attention to the innocent civilians who become caught up in war, who must struggle just to meet their basic needs and live a painful existence. It reinforces that civilians usually have nothing to do with the war that is currently being fought where they are living or have fled to.

If a concrete tower replica that tells this story is considered a work of art worthy of a prominent place within the current display of the Tate Modern, then why should a videogame telling the same story not deserve the same treatment? *Monument for the Living* is currently displayed in the opening room to the themed gallery "Artist and Society" within Tate Modern. Opposite the sculpture hangs the Rachel Whiteread photographic series showing the destruction of concrete towers in east London housing estates. The Tate website says that this room "brings together two works that use high-rise buildings as symbols for a wider social situation," but I see no reason why *This War of Mine* could not easily replace the

Whiteread display to create a themed room considering the horrors of modern warfare for civilians.<sup>112</sup>

The Tate website goes on to say that "Art can hold up a mirror to contemporary life, raise awareness about urgent issues or argue for change" and I believe that *This War of Mine* fulfils this function as wholly as *Monument for the Living* does.<sup>113</sup> The difference is, perhaps, that those who are used to going to art institutions may not wish to find meaning in videogames, and those who are more used to playing videogames may not so easily find meaning in a replica concrete building housed in a white-walled art gallery.

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112. "Rachel Whiteread And Marwan Rechmaoui," Tate, accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/display/artist-and-society/rachel-whiteread-and-marwan-rechmaoui>.

113. Ibid..

### **3.2 Sam Barlow**

It is rare than an artwork is looked at in isolation when writing academically (or even when in the context of a gallery). Works always sit in the tradition of both the artist's own catalogue and other works that relate to them from different artists or traditions. So when considering a videogame as a work of art it makes sense to also consider the other videogames produced by the design studio or artist rather than study a single work in isolation. It is possible then to see patterns within the artist's work that will allow further and deeper interpretation and interrogation of the videogame than if it were treated as a standalone piece with no surrounding cultural context.

In this case study I will focus on three videogames created by Sam Barlow at different points during his career. I will analyse similarities between the three videogames and investigate how Barlow has developed various themes in his work as well as suggest comparisons with artworks from other established traditions. This section will feature primarily biographical approaches to the work, one of the most common approaches used when writing about artists historically. However it is rare that art historical methodologies are used in isolation and this case study also uses a feminist approach, as well as drawing on a discussion of complex narratives from film theory.

Just as we have come to understand over time that in order to be great work of art a painting does not have to be from a highly thought of Renaissance movement, so this true is of videogames. There is no reason why a videogame must be from a top end studio with dozens of leading artists and programmers on its payroll in order to be considered a great work of art. It is often the less popular works of art that are the most poignant and rewarding to engage with in our art museums, so the same should be true of videogame art too.

In the same way that postmodern art is often perceived to have moved away from "quality" as defined by a traditional connoisseurship approach in order to focus on a sceptical and critical approach to society, so too have some videogames. One such videogame is *Her Story* (2015), where the "player" must search through an archive of police interview footage to solve a crime.<sup>114</sup> Essentially that is the entirety of the game - an interface with a search engine and a set of video clips that are presented in no particular order. There is no confirmation if you have "won," you must merely satisfy yourself that you have solved the crime and know the reasons why it was committed.

At its heart *Her Story* appears to be a game about Dissociative Identity Disorder. A common reading of the game is that the story is about identical twins, of which one of the two has committed a crime. However this reading is superficial in nature - the first clue is in the title where the first word is "Her." The game is not titled "Their" Story, it is "Her" Story. This is a game about a single person, not two different people.

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114. *Her Story*, Videogame, Sam Barlow, 2015.

Secondly we must consider the history of the director and writer of *Her Story*, Sam Barlow. This is Barlow's first indie game after working for Climax Group for twelve years as Game Director.<sup>115</sup> His portfolio from Climax Group features seven games (including two that were never released) but perhaps the most relevant game that Barlow previously worked on is *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (2009).<sup>116</sup> *Shattered Memories* is essentially a game that can be broken down into two distinct stories. The first is a story set inside the office of a psychologist. The view is first person and we are given no clue as to our identity. The second is the recounting of a traumatic story. Beginning with a car accident, we learn that we are a man called Harry. He must search for his daughter, Cheryl, who has become lost after the accident. We wander through the semi-abandoned town of Silent Hill, but all is not as it seems. Occasionally we find echoes of traumatic experiences. A phone call will tell us about a crime happening or a photograph will reveal some terrible event from the town's past. Then the creatures come for us - we are unarmed and all we can do is try to run and lose them rather than defeat them as in a traditional Shoot 'Em Up style videogame.<sup>117</sup> The Silent Hill franchise of videogames and a movie is one of psychological horror and this instalment of the series makes no exception.

Revealed during the ending of the game is the twist that Harry died in the car accident that night and that Cheryl is the one in the psychologist's office exploring her own constructed ideas about who her father was. In this respect it could be compared to art-house films given that it has the kind of complex narrative

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115. "Sam Barlow," LinkedIn, accessed August 17, 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sam-barlow-65023b1/>.

116. *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, Videogame, Climax Studios, 2009.

117. Shoot 'Em Up style video games are those in which the objective is to kill as many enemies as possible.



structure that is often a feature of this genre. A particularly relevant comparison might be the film *Memento* (2000) which even features, like *Shattered Memories*, "thematic meditations on memory, knowledge and grief; and [...] a number of red herrings and misleading clues that seem designed either to distract the audience or to hint at a deeper, second layer of puzzle at work."<sup>118</sup> Both *Shattered Memories* and *Memento* feature a disjointed style of storytelling where two narratives are essentially spliced between each other to make one jarring sequence of events that prevents the viewer/player from understanding the story in the way that they might with a traditional linear narrative.

Image removed from electronic version

Figure 6: Screenshot from *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*.

What is unusual about this videogame compared to others, even those in the psychological horror genre, is the warning that appears at the start when you turn the console on. We are warned that, as players, we are being psychologically

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<sup>118</sup> Andy Klein, "Everything You Wanted to Know about 'Memento,'" *Salon*, June 28, 2001, [https://www.salon.com/2001/06/28/memento\\_analysis/](https://www.salon.com/2001/06/28/memento_analysis/).

profiled in a way that will change the game. And this is true to an extent - there are in fact five different endings to the game and the one that you receive will depend on your behaviour while playing. Both questions asked in the psychologist's office and the way you behave in the "town" section of the game influence the endings. Be a "good" person who never looks at sexual or drug related imagery within the game for too long and you will get the most positive ending. But if you stare at sexual images within the game and answer the questions related to sex in the psych questionnaires positively then it will turn out that Cheryl's idea of who her father was is not a very pleasant one at all.

*Shattered Memories* teaches us that our behaviours and actions influence who we are, and that who we are influences how our children see us. The shocking revelation if you receive the "bad" ending that your fictional child thought the worst of you because of how you behaved before your life was dramatically cut short in the car accident makes a certain point about our behaviour as adults within wider society. It is doubtful that Barlow's primary reason for creating *Shattered Memories* was to make those who play the game think hard about how they act in society but it does demonstrate how a videogame could be used to challenge behaviour that is considered problematic. This is what many modern and contemporary works of art do - they challenge behaviour that the artist considers somehow difficult or problematic. *Shattered Memories* might be dissimilar in format to works in art museums, but it is not so dissimilar in its message.

Prior to working at Climax Group, Barlow released a game titled *Aisle* (1999) which is a "Groundhog Day" style interactive fiction videogame.<sup>119</sup> The game introduced

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119. *Aisle*, Videogame, Sam Barlow, 1999.

and made popular the "one move" style of command prompt gaming, spawning several copycat variations on the theme by other developers. The key aspect of the game is that you have a single turn to make your move, so to speak. You have the ability to tell the game to do just one single action and in response it will tell you a part of the story. On starting the game you are given a brief introduction that reads:

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You are about to read a story. Or rather, part of a story. You will be asked to define the story by controlling one instant in the life of the man whose story it is. Your intervention will begin and end the story. But be warned; there are many stories and not all of the stories are about the same man.

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On entering the next screen you are told the story. It is brief, so I will reproduce it here (italic and bold formatting as in the original):

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Late Thursday night. You've had a *hard* day and the last thing you need is this: shopping. Luckily, the place is pretty empty and you're progressing rapidly.

On to the next aisle.

**Interesting... fresh Gnocchi--you haven't had any of that since...  
Rome**

The aisle stretches to the north, and back to the south. The shelves on either side of you block your view of the rest of the supermarket, with only the brightly coloured aisle markers visible.

You have stopped your trolley next to the pasta section, bright plastic bags full of pale skin-tone shapes.

There is a brunette woman a few meters ahead, filling her trolley with sauces.

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The angular bracket at the end of the text denotes a space for the player to type a command and it invites the player to interact and experiment. A command as mundane as "pick up pasta" gives a response that closes the story ("Nope; Gnocchi

is not on the list. You grab some penne and move on. The brunette glances up at you as you wheel by") and the user is then told by the game "*The end of the story*. The end of *a* story. But not the only story..." (formatting as in the original, the exact wording changes but there is always the suggestion of more stories). The player hits the enter key and tries again, using their knowledge gained to ask more intelligent questions. Groundhog Day time and time again - and it is surprisingly addictive. Eventually we discover mental health problems, a murder, regret - more and more of the backstory is revealed each time the game is played and we find ourselves culturally analysing each response to get more and more information about the man's life.

In Jeremy Douglass' thesis on Interactive Fiction it is pointed out that *Aisle* is more than the usual escapism that is found in other similar games of the time period: "*Aisle* [...] repeatedly suggests that there may be something disturbingly wrong with *objectification* as the fundamental verb-object mode of relating to the world inherent in IF's (interactive fiction) command line interface. The desire to heal Clare's absence with some name-object-possession (rather than person) is likewise rebuffed in most ham-fisted attempts at romancing the unfamiliar brunette [...] in which the shopper seems both unconcerned about whether he knows the woman he is addressing and incapable of differentiating her from other women."<sup>120</sup>

Douglass suggests that the game is fundamentally about a shopper with multiple personalities, a "transvestite" who sexually harasses women he does not know while trying to buy food for himself and his female underwear wearing alter-ego.<sup>121</sup>

In addition Douglass also suggests that "physical actions are easy, but social

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120. Jeremy Douglass, "Command Lines: Aesthetics and Technique in Interactive Fiction and New Media" (PhD dissertation, University of California, 2007), 306, <http://jeremydouglass.com/cv/dissertation.pdf>.

121. *Ibid.*, 307.

outcomes are hard," a deep reflection on the game as a social artefact that can reflect the world that we live in with uncanny likeness.<sup>122</sup>

Arguably *Aisle* is much closer to a work of art than a traditional "game" with its critical exploration of society. As in *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* the emphasis is on critically considering our world and society through the medium of gaming which is a theme that continues into Barlow's latest work *Her Story*.

What makes *Her Story* a feminist work of art, is the way that it analyses and critiques the way that society treats women who are accused of a crime. "Players" are given access to a representation of a police terminal from 1994 which has loaded on it a number of video clips from a series of interviews with a young woman, Hannah Smith is being interviewed by police as part of an investigation into the disappearance of her husband and all of the videos are of her. Players can search for interview clips using keywords but cannot view the clips sequentially from start to finish. The player must piece together the crime from the interview clips available to them and in the same style as *Aisle* each clip gives players new ideas for what to consider next in order to piece the story together. It is, essentially, a more advanced version of *Aisle* that uses video rather than just text.

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122. Ibid., 309.

Image removed from electronic version

Figure 7: Promotional image and screenshot from *Her Story*.

*Her Story* is probably one of the closest videogames to established and recognised video art from a contemporary collection such as the Tate and therefore one of the easiest videogames to suggest as a champion for the videogame as work of art.

The works of videogame created by Barlow demonstrate that it is possible to create the kinds of complicated and multi-layered narratives found in art-house cinema and some art movements through works of fiction that are specifically interactive in nature and produced as commercial videogames. However, as art historians we should be wary about pigeonholing videogames as a kind of advanced form of interactive cinema so early in the development of the medium. As Henry Jenkins says videogames "could just as easily become about expressive movements, like dance, or spaces, like architecture."<sup>123</sup> While currently videogames are often admired for their narrative qualities and ability to tell stories interactively,

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123. Henry Jenkins, "More On Games As Art," *HenryJenkins.org*, July 13, 2006, [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/07/more\\_on\\_games\\_as\\_art.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/07/more_on_games_as_art.html).

it might become the case as the medium is utilised by more artists that it grows into something very different and perhaps more recognisable by the art institution. Perhaps then it will become easier for the art institution to collect, display, and engage in discourse about videogames as just another medium used for the creation of works of art.

Peg Zeglin Brand suggests that "there is art about women and there is feminist art."<sup>124</sup> Of course, it seems entirely logical that one work of art can be both about women and feminist in nature or it could be about women but not feminist in nature (as is the case with most nude paintings in most art museums globally). *Her Story* (2015) is an artwork that I propose can be both of those things. It is both about women and fulfils feminist ambitions.

Brand also goes on to suggest that at the time of writing (the edited collection of essays was released in the year 2000) it would be hard to imagine a piece of feminist art that was created by a man.<sup>125</sup> Linda Nochlin in 2015 says in interview that "one hopes for a future in which male artists can be feminists--so far, however, I have not seen too much evidence of 'male feminism,' despite the fact that feminist art practice has had, and continues to have, a profound influence on the shape of art since the 1970s."<sup>126</sup> I do think that perhaps we are starting to see feminist works of art by men, especially in relatively novel mediums such as videogames. However it will be a long and slow process in order to get the art institution to recognise them as such.

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124. Peg Zeglin Brand, "Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art," In *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 176.

125. *Ibid.*, 176.

126. Linda Nochlin, *The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 35.

In one interview Barlow does say "I wouldn't mind [Her Story] being seen as this huge feminist agenda. That to me isn't a bad thing."<sup>127</sup> An artist being open to the idea of a work of art they created having a feminist agenda does often seem to be half the battle to getting it recognised as such - some artists refuse to acknowledge that their work might be considered feminist art, and if the artists says that it is not feminist art then it becomes very difficult to argue that it is in the majority of cases.

What I would like to focus on regarding *Her Story* is the idea that feminist art history is not solely about women artists, but also on how women are depicted within works of art. Leaving aside the debate about whether Barlow is a feminist artist it is possible to concentrate on the female characters within the works of videogame art that Barlow has created. All three of the games considered in this case study contain female characters that are more than one dimensional props used to facilitate a story even when they are not the protagonist. The characters are women with their own nuances and histories and *Her Story* deals with themes such as mental illness, infidelity, and identity. The characters in all three videogames by Barlow could believably be real women plucked from the outside world, so good is the writing and characterisation.

This really is the crux of what makes Barlow such a great feminist artist, he simply makes great works of videogame art that feature interesting independent yet vulnerably women who are depicted in ways that are believable. In a world where the Bechdel Test is still failed routinely in much fictional entertainment it is

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127. Jake Laverne, "Her Story Interview: Sam Barlow on Storytelling and 'Not a Game' Claims," *International Business Times*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/her-story-interview-sam-barlow-storytelling-not-game-claims-1509473>.



refreshing to find art about women which celebrates their diversity rather than just showing them in relation to men. Of course in all of Barlow's works of videogame art there are male characters, but only *Aisle* is a work primarily revolving around a male protagonist - although arguably the two women characters in *Aisle* are every bit as important as the central protagonist.

It is evident that biographical and feminist methodologies from history of art can be applied to a substantial body of work by a single artist comprised of videogames just as easily as they can be applied to a more traditional medium. We are now reaching the point in the development of videogames where some artists, such as Barlow, have built up interesting and varied catalogues of work that revolve around strong repeating themes that together really say something important about society. It is up to art historians to interpret and record what is being said through the medium of videogames in order to document this information for the future, just as we do with any other important art that is being produced today.

### **3.3 Summary**

These two very different case studies demonstrate that a wide variety of approaches are possible to writing about videogames as art. It should theoretically be possible to write about videogames using almost every traditional art history methodology, not just the social and biographical approaches that I have taken in this chapter.

The only real difficulty in writing about videogames for art historians would be the amount of time required in order to play and truly understand a videogame. With a traditional form of art such as a painting or a sculpture the information is generally immediately accessible to the viewer and available time and time again. Videogames are more difficult however, with larger big budget games often lasting over forty hours in their primary story arc. It is easy to see how producing deep analysis in an art historical style of a single game would be difficult due to the sheer amount of time required into just "looking" at the work. However this is really no different to analysing a longer piece of video art or a novel. I feel that the analysis of videogames, for these reasons, lend themselves to approaches that view the social context of the game and its context or the artist and their motivations.

## Chapter 4: Why Should Video Games be Art?

In this chapter I will address the question of why it matters that videogames are considered a legitimate form of art and why it could even be considered important to do so when it comes to the inclusion of women in the art institution.

In a world where true gender equality had been attained there would be no further questions about how to encourage female participation within the art institution because an imbalance would simply not exist. But the reality of our society today is that the art world has not yet reached gender parity, even though we have had a good number of superstar women artists. This should hardly be surprising considering that there are structural problems with equality in the industry that go all the way to the top. In encyclopaedic art museums in the US the directorships are fifty nine percent male, and women directors in this field earn on average just sixty-nine cents for each dollar that their male counterparts earn.<sup>128</sup> However a positive also comes out of the AAMD (Association of Art Museum Directors) report containing these findings - interviewees indicate that there is a recent trend for a higher than before turnover in art museum directorships which could bring

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128. "The Ongoing Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships," Association of Art Museum Directors, March 22, 2017, <https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/gender-gap-report-2017>.

significant changes to leadership and management within art museums if inclusivity policies are managed proactively. It is my belief that we will only see significant demographic change amongst artists when we see demographic and policy change from the institutions that represent and inspire them.

In the past the management of art museums has been predominantly male, and these men have acted as the gatekeepers of the institutional world. It is unsurprising that the collecting habits of museums have reflected those responsible for guiding their policies, something that the Guerrilla Girls pointed out in 1989 with their poster that asks "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" The poster says that less than five percent of the artists in the Modern Art section of the Met were women at this time, a statistic that must have been influenced by those who guide the institution and compile the canonical history of art.<sup>129</sup>

Opportunities have undoubtedly got better for women artists; there are more solo shows and retrospectives of women artists than ever before in the major art institutions and the collecting habits of institutions and individuals are slowly becoming more diverse. However in 2014 the East London Fawcett's art audit revealed that out of one hundred commercial galleries in London, only five percent represent equal numbers of female and male artists.<sup>130</sup> Admittedly this takes into consideration historical work where male representation is skewed, however

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129. Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, screenprint on paper, 280 x 710 mm, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>.

130. Ami Sedghi, "The London Art Audit: How Well Are Female Artists Represented?" *The Guardian*, May 24, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/may/24/london-art-audit-female-artists-represented>.

women did not fare much better when contemporary commissions were considered either. Only a quarter of artists selected to create work for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square have been women.<sup>131</sup> Although this statistic is better than other public art commissions the numbers are still not equal. When looking at modern and contemporary galleries full of more recent works of art the percentages are still showing a bias against women; in 2012 eighty three percent of artists in the Tate Modern were men and seventy percent of artists in the Saatchi Gallery were men.<sup>132</sup> Even in the Turner Prize, a British prize that is awarded for an outstanding exhibition or work in the previous year (with restrictions on upper age limit introduced in 1991), only seven women have won compared to twenty four men.<sup>133</sup> That means out of thirty two years that the prize has been awarded solo women artists have won only twenty two percent of the time.

If it is accepted that the reality is that the art institution is structurally biased against women, even if this bias is slowly improving over time, then the natural next step is to ask how the institution can make even more positive changes in order to encourage participation of women at this high level. Obvious steps are policies in art museums to collect more art by women and put it on display - when young students go to art museums in order to find inspiration there need to be examples that they can relate to and study. It is no longer acceptable to have an encyclopaedic gallery of recent work which contains only artists that are men.

More effort must be made to seek out work by women and put that on display too

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131. Ibid.

132. "New Findings: Men Still on Top in the Arts World," *Womensgrid Archive*, July 13, 2010, <http://www.womensgrid.org.uk/archive/2010/07/13/new-findings-men-still-on-top-in-the-arts-world/>.

133. Audit of winners of the Turner Prize. In total there have been 32 prizes awarded from 1984 to 2016. Mixed sex collaborations were excluded, while same-sex collaborations were counted towards the relevant gender (as a single figure - e.g. two person collaborations did not count in the statistics twice).

(and of course it goes without saying that art museums must also take an intersectional approach to the collection and display of work alongside feminist approaches).

It is not the art museums alone that can influence the participation of women. It is anecdotally reported that women make up a large percentage of those studying history of art at university level. These individuals are potentially the future of the art industry. They are the ones who will go on to be the collectors and curators, the directors of museums, and the dealers at art fairs. However, there is no doubt about it that university syllabuses are still largely comprised of male artists, patrons, and historians. There is little that can be done to change the fact that the art institution has historically favoured male participation. I have to wonder if teaching young people at university to accept non-traditional forms of art (that women have better access to) it might be possible to influence the future collecting strategies of the art museums. In turn this could mean that our art museums become more representative of women artists quicker than if art museums were just left to continue on their current trajectory. Disruptive change is not likely to be possible within the art institution or industry due to the way it is structured, however it might be possible to speed up social change by introducing progressive policies and educating young people in a different way to how we have approached education before.

By accepting videogames into the art institution we create more opportunities for both women and non-women to create art due to the conditions that Virginia Woolf highlights in her essay *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>134</sup> The UK's National

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134. Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*.

Curriculum now provides all students with the opportunity, while at school, to learn the skills required to create videogames in their own homes. In addition the BBC are currently providing all young teenagers with the physical technology to study computer sciences at home, meaning that even young people without much financial ability can study and learn computer sciences. When combined with a room of their own young people now theoretically have all of the education and materials required in order to create works of art using this hugely malleable medium.

There have always been barriers to entry into the art institution for women. Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" considers the problems that women have historically faced when trying to become artists and many of these difficulties are still applicable today. Social factors and the "white Western male" viewpoint are both listed by Nochlin as reasons why it can be harder to achieve greatness as a woman artist and they are still somewhat true today.<sup>135</sup> It is not, of course, that women are incapable of achieving greatness, but rather than society prevents them from doing so structurally. By exploring alternative paradigms for which art mediums might be suitable for institutional collection, exhibition, and study we open up a wider range of possibilities for artists - particularly for young women. My argument is that opening up institutional collections in this way and seeing the possibilities in videogames as a medium will disproportionately affect young women artists in a positive way, as well as those who are also oppressed by other kyriarchial structures of power.

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<sup>135</sup> Nochlin, "Great Women Artists?"

#### **4.1 Virginia Woolf and *A Room of One's Own***

It was Linda Nochlin who asked in 1971 why there have been no great women artists.<sup>136</sup> One of the reasons offered by Nochlin was the difficulty that women artists often had in navigating the world outside of the domestic sphere. If we compare writers to artists, there was an explosion of great women writers as we entered the nineteenth century proving that women could be every bit as successful creatively if they are given the opportunities. The main difference was that writing is an activity that can largely be carried out within the domestic sphere thus nullifying the issue faced by women artists of having to get specialist training beyond a regular education and a space to create art works in. At this time printing technology moved on and enabled books to be printed cheaply and in large quantities, thus meaning that the demand for women's writing went up because other women could afford to purchase books that resonated with their lives. The unique combination of education, supply and demand, technology, and the requirement of limited resources allowed women writers to achieve success in a way that women painters have never managed. It is not that women are biologically more suited to being writers, but rather society has set up social conditions that make it easier for women to achieve greatness in this field compared to the field of fine art.

As a central figure in the Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals Woolf would have been acquainted with the art scene of the early twentieth century not least because her sister was Vanessa Bell, the inimitable Modernist artist. Bell met and married Clive Bell in 1907 so it is reasonable to assume that Woolf was familiar with Clive Bell's theory of Significant Form. In addition, the critic Roger Fry was also a member of the Bloomsbury Group and therefore we can assume familiarity with

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<sup>136</sup>. Ibid.



his ideas too. So while Woolf was not writing specifically about being an artist I believe that there are correlations between being a female writer in the early twentieth century and being a videogames artist which I will discuss fully.

Virginia Woolf most eloquently discussed the barriers for women to be active as independent creatives in her book *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>137</sup> If Woolf had been alive today surely she would have seen the potential for artists in the ever progressing and widening field of computer sciences and other digital technologies. No longer does being an artist require extensive (and expensive) education and facilities, but instead there is the opportunity to become an artist with the minimum of outlay and space. Just a laptop, or even a left over BBC micro:bit from school, and a prospective young artist (or writer) can get started on their dreams and ambitions. Access to university has become easier recently too, with a loan and grant system that covers the cost of fees and living expenses for students. It is no longer an unobtainable dream for someone from a traditionally lower class background to attend university and study fine art, so long as they have the talent.

But even those who do not wish to study formally, or who consider it an impossibility due to the financial burden, now have the entire internet at their disposal. If an individual does not have the internet at home then there are public libraries, cafes, and other places in which it is easily accessible. There is so much information about art and on working as an artist available freely on the internet that any potential young artist could equip themselves with knowledge that previously would have had to have been gained through a formal art education or long and low paid workshop apprenticeships.

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137. Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf would also have been overjoyed at the flexibility that young women now have compared to when she was writing. There is no longer quite the same social pressure for women to be managers of the household from a young age which means that it has become socially acceptable in most Western circles for women to hold down their own jobs and indeed have spaces of their own where they can work with freedom and privacy. Pursuing a creative career is no longer something that must be done in brief snatches of time between looking after children, running the house, and entertaining guests.

#### **4.2 Linda Nochlin and the Myth of the Great Artists**

Difficulty in navigating the world outside of the domestic sphere was not the only argument that Nochlin gave for the lack of "great" women artists, she also suggests that art historians have historically been one of the reasons that women have had difficulties succeeding as artists. Nochlin discusses how men are often "reluctant to give up [the] 'natural' order of things in which their advantages are so great," going on to say that men demand submission from women, presumably in all areas including the intellectual.<sup>138</sup> Nochlin asks the question whether the men with the power to shape the art world would have paid as much attention if, for example, Picasso had been born a girl instead of a boy.<sup>139</sup>

The art institutions too, not just the individual, must take some responsibility for the act of holding back many women who may have been talented and successful artists. Nochlin points out that there was a simple issue that stopped many women artists becoming "great" - the availability of nude models. Not being permitted to

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138. Nochlin, "Great Women Artists?" 152.

139. Ibid., 155.

study nude models because it was considered improper by society prevented women from producing history paintings, the "great" genre that would provide the most fame for an artist.<sup>140</sup> As recently as 1893 the Royal Academy in London did not allow women to attend life drawing classes, and even after this time when it became more acceptable the models apparently still were required to be "partially draped."<sup>141</sup>

Nochlin comes to similar conclusions as Woolf regarding why women were more successfully competing with men in literature than they were in art. Anyone can learn to read and write in the privacy of their own room, and in the same way they are free to put pen to paper to express their experiences.<sup>142</sup> This was simply not true of the art institution and academies - certain educational procedures had to be followed and many of the prescribed avenues were simply not open to women. Of course this is less true today in our modern society, but history informs so much of the art institution that it is impossible to disregard its influence on women hoping to become artists.

Another issue brought up by Nochlin is the idea that women should be amateurs rather than professionals. It has always been good to be a keen amateur when you are a woman, it entertains people (especially a husband), but it is not so good to be excellent at something. Nochlin suggests that both at the time she was writing (1971) and in the nineteenth century the only worthwhile work carried out by women was the kind that "directly or indirectly serves the family."<sup>143</sup> Even if a

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140. Ibid., 158.

141. Ibid., 159.

142. Ibid., 163.

143. Ibid., 166.

woman was serious about art Nochlin points out that she was expected to drop her career and any commitments when she fell in love and eventually married.

1971 is not so long ago, just under five decades have passed since Nochlin wrote her important essay on why women have not been as prevalent as men in the art institution. As much as many would like to think that everything has changed by now and we have a much more equal society and institution it is still not the case. Women are still seen as primary care providers, expected to forfeit some or all of their careers in order to start and look after families and men are still predominantly the gatekeepers within the art institution as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. It is very fortunate that now the art institution has the chance to make good on the institutional sexism that it has committed in the past and speed up the process of equal opportunities becoming available to women. However, a difficulty of progress is that even if the art institution quickly makes great changes society will not do the same at the same rate and so care has to be taken to see that opportunities made available can be taken. That is why I believe that the promotion of mediums that can be undertaken in a room of one's own are so important; they allow women who are still being held back by wider society to progress within the art institution. In this way the art institution can not only promote change within its own remit, but can also encourage change in wider society by making opportunities specifically available to women who must primarily remain within the domestic sphere.

### 4.3 The UK National Curriculum

In September 2013 the UK Government released a new section of the National Curriculum aiming to provide children with basic computer science skills.

At Key Stage 1 (ages five to seven) children will now be taught to understand how algorithms are implemented on digital devices, create and debug simple programs, and use technology to create, organise, store, manipulate and retrieve digital content (amongst some other subject content).<sup>144</sup> By the age of eleven, when children leave primary school, they are expected to design, write, and debug programs that achieve specific goals - such as controlling physical systems. They are also expected to understand networking, collaboration and communication, and use software on a range of devices to design programs, systems, and content. At fourteen years old children in the UK are now expected to design computational abstractions to model the behaviour of real world problems. They should be able to use two or more programming languages to solve problems, and crucially young people in this age group should undertake creative projects utilising multiple applications and a variety of devices to achieve challenging goals. For GCSE and above the UK Government specify that *all* pupils must have the opportunity to study technology and computer science in a way that allows them to progress to higher study or a professional career.

This addition to the National Curriculum means that, theoretically, all young people will have the access to education that can allow them to code their own computer

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144. "National curriculum in England: computing programmes of study," Department for Education, September 11, 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-computing-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-computing-programmes-of-study>.

games in the future. Access to technology is also increasingly common, with eighty nine percent of households in Great Britain having internet access - up from just fifty seven percent in 2006.<sup>145</sup> In addition all children attending school should have access to IT infrastructure while at school. To ensure that all children have access to computer science technology in March 2016 the BBC announced that up to one million BBC micro:bits will be given away free to every year seven student in England and Wales, year eight student in Northern Ireland, and S1 student in Scotland.<sup>146</sup> The BBC micro:bit is a tiny computer that can be programmed by the user to be almost anything they want; simple gaming consoles, fitness trackers, smart watches - the limit is the student's imagination rather than the technology itself. There are also commercially available variants on the microcomputer, such as the Raspberry Pi which is available to purchase from about thirty pounds. This is easily available and accessible technology and there is no reason why most young people should not have access to it.

Although it may not seem like this kind of technology has much to do with art, I would like to propose that videogames should be considered one of the most important mediums for feminist art as we take a step into the future. The Tate website suggests that "the defiant use of media or techniques such as embroidery or patch working that has had traditionally low status or been considered 'women's work' has also often defined [as feminist art]."<sup>147</sup> The giving of raw materials to all

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145. "Internet access - households and individuals: 2016," Office for National Statistics, August 4, 2016, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2016#main-points>.

146. "BBC micro:bit launches to a generation of UK students," BBC, last modified March 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2016/bbc-micro-bit-schools-launch>.

147. "Feminist Art," Tate, accessed August 10, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/f/feminist-art>.

children mirrors this traditional feminist use of materials that could be easily obtained around the house. In the same way that patchwork quilts would have been made from handed-down old clothes that had surpassed their usefulness, works of videogame art can be created on the micro:bit once it has fulfilled its basic purpose as a hand-out for teaching coding. In addition, women have historically been prominent in computer programming - indeed Ada Lovelace is generally regarded as being the first computer programmer who saw beyond Charles Babbage's idea of computer as calculator.<sup>148</sup> The inspiration for young women to become artists working with the medium of videogames is present in history, we just need to ensure that it is being taught both in our schools and universities.

#### ***4.4 The Role of the Art Institution in Encouraging Women Artists***

When we, as an institution, ignore areas in which women are likely to be large contributors to the volume of art in our world we do a disservice to all potential women artists. Whether the art institution acknowledges it or not, young people are growing up fully immersed in a digital world which means that Mass Art, in its various forms, is something that is likely to feature more heavily in the artistic output of the future as I discuss in Chapter 3. By ignoring this kind of artistic expression the mainstream art galleries, journals, and academic institutions are preventing people from truly understanding all of the options available to them when it comes to both creating and appreciating art.

The art institution should be considering all ways that young women in particular could potentially be operating as artists, since equality of opportunity is not yet present in our society. Videogames is one of the mediums which has the potential,

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148. Ursula Martin, "ADA Lovelace Computer Scientist," *ITNOW* 57, no. 4 (1 December 2015): 54–55.

over the next decade or perhaps longer, to see an explosion of women artists. However this egalitarian future will not happen if the art institution is creating an environment where individuals do not feel empowered to experiment with various new media mediums in their artistic practices. By including new media mediums that can be produced in the domestic sphere the art institution becomes more inclusive towards women.

The coding and computer literacy of young people will only continue to improve over the coming decades due to the National Curriculum and ever widening access to computer technology. Combined with the heritage of information technology having such strong female role models it makes complete sense to champion videogames as a new feminist art medium. This is a medium that can be learned and sculpted in a bedroom by any young person who has the aptitude, education, and the minimal amount of other materials and technology required. Access to the internet for tutorials and forums for help, a monitor, keyboard, and mouse purchased second hand for pocket money, and the young artist has everything they need to create works of art.

But are they truly works of art if the art institution does not recognise them as such? Will the artists ever see funding from the Arts Council or similar boards if videogames as a medium have not been venerated in our sacred art museums? These are difficult questions that curators of feminist art and new media should be asking themselves. The institution itself could very well be stifling the growth of new art with its collecting and display practices and this must not be allowed to happen.



Of course many do believe that the art institution is not responsible for the growth of young artists in any way, especially those sections of the institution with a primarily commercial remit. Objections could easily be raised that suggest art museums should only show historical works of art of importance (especially if they are funded by government organisations), private commercial galleries should only trade in pieces that will provide financial payoff, and universities should teach mainstream and established history rather than venture into trying to push the future of art in a particular direction. It is therefore pertinent that, due to potential hostility, any moves taken towards the promotion of new media mediums must be backed up with rigorous academic reasoning and research in order to produce watertight arguments that this is in the best interests of the art institution and the individuals within it.

#### ***4.5 The Sexist Appeal of Videogames***

It is indisputable that videogames are a form of entertainment that have been aimed at, and dominated by, men throughout their relatively short history. More often than not videogames have picked up and riffed on themes that would traditionally have been considered "boys" pastimes and jobs. Motorsports, football, war, and gang violence are all themes that in our Western society would be more readily ascribed to men than women and they are the primary subjects of some of the biggest videogame franchises that have ever existed.

Of course there are many reasons why it has historically made sense to produce videogames aimed at men. For a long time men have been the ones who have dominated the videogames industry which is no surprise considering that the STEM industries in general have always had a higher ratio of men to women. Science,

technology, and engineering have always been fields where men have historically been considered "better" than women, although those ratios and attitudes are at least improving with time. Interestingly computer programming jobs in the infancy of the technology were largely performed by women, perhaps due to the repetitive nature of coding and the "administrative" rather than "creative" approach that was used. Now the role of coder is more prestigious and no doubt better paid - although one has to wonder if it was men entering this workplace that caused the change in status, or if men entered the workplace as coders *because* of the change in status.

In order to put women's participation in the videogames industry into figures, I will consider the surveys carried out yearly by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA). In 2005 their Game Developer Demographics survey discovered that in the USA (sixty six percent of the filtered responses), Canada (eighteen percent), the UK (twelve percent) and Australia (four percent), women make up just eleven and a half percent overall of the industry in these countries.<sup>149</sup> This ranges for jobs from programming (twenty eight and a half percent of the filtered responses) all the way down to Ops/IT/HR (1.2 percent) and Legal (0.3 percent) - essentially everything you need to run a successful videogame production business. Of course it must be noted that the eleven and a half percent does not apply across the board - in administrative roles such as Ops/IT/HR the percentage of women doing the job is very high at forty seven percent. However design as a job role sees only ten percent female participation, and programming is the lowest of all listed roles at just five percent women. Interestingly writing sees

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149. "Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workforce Diversity," International Game Developers Association, October, 2005, [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.igda.org/resource/collection/9215B88F-2AA3-4471-B44D-B5D58FF25DC7/IGDA\\_DeveloperDemographics\\_Oct05.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.igda.org/resource/collection/9215B88F-2AA3-4471-B44D-B5D58FF25DC7/IGDA_DeveloperDemographics_Oct05.pdf).

thirty percent female participation which seems to be a statistical anomaly - but as Virginia Woolf told us, all you need to be a writer is a room of your own; even in the face of disproportionately gendered authority.<sup>150</sup>

There is a difference too between videogames that simply do not have any sexism in them, and those that challenge sexism directly (or any other form of kyriarchical oppression). While there are a number of videogames that fulfil the criteria of the former, perhaps one day it will be possible to see mainstream AAA videogames that also do the latter. While there are those who will argue that videogames should not be a platform for politics, it would seem what many in this small, insular group of voices are actually arguing is that they do not want "politics" that disagree with their own ideologies in the videogames that they want to play.<sup>151</sup>

In 1996 David Novitz wrote an interesting article that was published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The article questions the nature of disputes around classifying objects as art or as non-art, but uses the idea of role-playing games being considered art as the case study for discussion.<sup>152</sup> Whether Novitz considers role-playing games to be art or not is beside the point here; what is interesting is the history of role-playing games that is presented in the article.<sup>153</sup> Novitz says that

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150. Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*.

151. irish Gr3nad3 (@irish\_gr3nad3), "What happened to the days when gaming wasn't full of political debates, racism, sexism and bullying. Why can't we just play games and have fun." Tweet, October 9, 2017, [https://twitter.com/irish\\_gr3nad3/status/919314704618655744](https://twitter.com/irish_gr3nad3/status/919314704618655744).

152. David Novitz, "Disputes about Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (1996): 153–63.

153. A role-playing game is a game where the group of players will assume the roles of various characters in a (usually fictional) setting. Players act out their roles and take actions according to a system of rules. Novitz is specifically discussing tabletop role-playing games in this journal article rather than live-action role-playing games.

role-playing games developed after and in response to the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. He suggests that feminism "posed particular difficulties for young middle-class boys" primarily because men were "explicitly associated with almost everything that was wrong with society."<sup>154</sup> Novitz speculates that this caused boys to look for entertainment, support, and approval that was not always readily available to them and therefore they developed "a space beyond the reach of adult condemnation" that was "enormously complex, requiring considerable effort on the part of adults to unlock its secrets."<sup>155</sup> I am not entirely convinced that feminism alone caused young boys to develop these hobbies, however at this point in history there is a demasculinisation of society taking place, with a decline of traditionally male roles within society. These games could well develop as a response to the loss of traditional male roles in society, allowing a space for these roles to continue in fictional worlds. Further on in this section Novitz notes that many role-playing games resemble quite strongly some forms of political art.

If Novitz is correct and table top role-playing games did emerge as a response to second-wave feminism (or at least as I theorise, to the loss of traditional male roles) as a way to escape the pressures of being "associated with almost everything that was wrong with society," then perhaps it is not a far stretch to say that videogames are a similar response to third-wave feminism and its related further demasculinisation of society. The timeline does fit together in a way that makes it plausible and as I documented earlier in this section videogames have historically been the domain of young men who lean towards being politically conservative. It would not be a huge leap to suggest that videogames are the same kind of retreat that role-playing games were; a way to escape the pressures of a world where you

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154. Novitz, "Disputes about Art," 159.

155. Ibid.

feel like you no longer fit in. This does raise an interesting question - if videogames are a medium that were created, at least in part, as a sanctuary for men escaping feminism, does this mean that they can ever truly be used as a medium to promote women's participation in the art institution?

Despite the apparent structural barrier to women working in the industry and the history of the medium I do not believe that it means videogames cannot or should not be considered an important feminist medium within the future canon of the history of art. It is perfectly possible for a medium to be used by both feminists and those who oppose them either accidentally or on purpose. At the most fundamental level the art of protesting and political rallies (signs, video evidence, etc.) is an example of a medium which is co-opted by both those for and against the feminist movement. There can be no doubt that these artefacts can be considered works of design at least, since the Victoria and Albert museum included them in their *Disobedient Objects* exhibition in 2014.<sup>156</sup> When looking at other political message mediums we find that they have been used by artists both for and against various causes. The anti-war message for example - Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* (1913-15) and *Torso in Metal from The Rock Drill* (1913-14) projects an anti-war message that is easily as powerful as any of the sculptures made throughout history that glorify the achievements of armies and warfare.<sup>157</sup>

Aside from any other reasoning it is a powerful message when a movement subverts a medium that has traditionally been used against an oppressed group of

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156. Victoria and Albert Museum, "Closed Exhibition - Disobedient Objects."

157. Jacob Epstein, *The Rock Drill*, 1913-15, plaster figure mounted on actual rock drill, 205 cm x 141.5 cm, original destroyed by the sculptor; Jacob Epstein, *Torso in Metal from 'The Rock Drill'*, 1913-4, bronze, 205 x 584 x 445 mm, Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/epstein-torso-in-metal-from-the-rock-drill-t00340>.

people. Videogames do often contain anti-women messages but the important thing is that the players do not generally actively speak out against these messages.<sup>158</sup> Indeed they are complicit in the spreading of the message because they purchase the object and then spend large amounts of time interacting with it for pleasure. To then take this medium and insert a pro-women message within mainstream gaming would be a very powerful thing indeed - at least as powerful as the way that *Battlefield 1* subverted a genre that is traditionally considered pro-war as discussed in my case study on *This War of Mine*.

In light of the evidence maybe it not that hard to consider videogames to be a feminist medium in itself. A medium can theoretically be co-opted by any cause an artist wishes (although arguably, some causes will struggle more with some mediums), but perhaps the problem is that it is hard to get enough women into positions of direction and creativity within the world of AAA videogames in order to produce games that are mainstream and bought by the masses. It is more possible than ever to form a small games studio and release games, or even release games that have been developed alone as an individual. Platforms such as Steam mean that theoretically anyone can release a game to the international market as long as they have the skills to do so.<sup>159</sup> However without a large budget it is going to be hard to get gamers to notice your game and then spend money on it. Indeed there are still plenty of gamers who will not stray from purchasing top end AAA videogames. There is a kind of pride in being able to own "the best" amongst this particular type of gamer, and they will often have "the best" games, "the best" gaming rig (computer), and of course "the best" taste in videogames.

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158. Moss, "These Stories Are Not For You."

159. "Store," Steam, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://store.steampowered.com/>.

## 4.6 Summary

The classification of videogames as art has wide-ranging consequences, but my motivation for writing this thesis is to further the enfranchisement of young women artists. There is every reason for the art institution to encourage young women to create digital art with the new National Curriculum and technology being so easily available and videogames are an ideal medium to explore the zeitgeist of today.

The trope of the young 'starving artist' may be a romantic one, however in encouraging the videogames industry to open its doors further to young women artists, it would create a commercial support network that could potentially mean that our young videogame artists do not need to literally or figuratively starve themselves in the name of art. They could instead work in relatively lucrative commercial jobs that also allow time and space for them to create their own works of art. It is crucial for the art institution to find ways to stay relevant to our changing (and increasingly digital) world, perhaps videogames could be the next medium to cause genuine shockwaves throughout the community.

This concept of encouraging artists to build businesses and work in conjunction with technical industries is not new, it is an idea that has been discussed at length for the last few years on the tech start-up scene. John Maeda wrote an article for *Wired* suggesting that the tech industry now needs to start seeing beyond pure technical skills. "[...] if we want to make the next generation of 'artpreneurs,' we need to add A for Art to turn STEM to STEAM. [. . .] Instead of just Kickstarters to fund budding entrepreneurs, we need more Upstarts to crowd fund art students to pursue their passions."<sup>160</sup> There is even an initiative from the Rhode Island School of Design called "STEM to STEAM" which encourages the fusion of art and

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160. Maeda, "If Design's No Longer The Killer Differentiator, What Is?"

technology startups in order to place Art and Design at the centre of STEM education.<sup>161</sup> The organisation believe that encouraging STEAM rather than just STEM will ensure a prosperous future for America in times of economic instability and this should be encouraged at least partially by influencing employers to hire artists in order to promote innovation.

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161. "What is STEAM?," STEM to STEAM, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://stemtosteam.org/>.



## Conclusion

My motives, let me admit, are partly selfish. Like most uneducated Englishwomen, I like reading -- I like reading books in the bulk. Lately my diet has become a trifle monotonous; history is too much about wars; biography too much about great men; poetry has shown, I think, a tendency to sterility, and fiction -- but I have sufficiently exposed my disabilities as a critic of modern fiction and will say no more about it. Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast.<sup>162</sup>

- Virginia Woolf

I look forward to the day when I visit an art museum and see not only the experiences of great men depicted on the walls but also the experiences of women in similar quantities. I would like to see a wide variety of women's experiences represented in those venerated collections that hesitate at no subject "however trivial or however vast." If as a society we are to preserve today's culture for the future, our art institutions must preserve and teach these stories for generations to come - the stories of what women did with their days as well as what men did. It may well be that videogames are the medium to tell those stories; the ability to create rich and interactive narratives are perhaps more suited to telling the stories of the participation of women in our society than the more static and traditional kinds of art. Women fulfil more roles than ever now due to the expectations put on them by a patriarchal society. Not only are women to go out to work and perform

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162. Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*, chapter 6.

the same daily duties as men, but they often are also primary carers for children or relatives, housekeepers, and doers of other emotional labour in relationships.

Women's lives are complicated, and as Woolf wrote "it would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men."<sup>163</sup> Perhaps art about women's experiences should be every bit as interactive as their changeable roles in society.

Ultimately it should be the art institution's goal that its collection and its teaching are both a space for thinking about the experiences of those around us, but also a space for progressive change. That change can be demonstrated by the acceptance of new mediums such as videogames into the accepted artistic canon allowing for young people to express their zeitgeist in a way that is relevant to their time and experience.

As this thesis has argued there is no intrinsic reason why videogames cannot be considered art, but it is fundamentally down to the institution to make this change. Without the art institution (the art museums, the educational system, the collectors) creating a climate where videogames can be considered serious works of art it becomes more difficult for the artists working in this medium to be taken seriously. If we are to open up as many avenues as possible for women to become artists, considering the particular circumstances of women when it comes to socialisation and domestic expectations, then the institution must consider those mediums which are perhaps not as grand as their traditional counterparts. A videogame may not have the immediate visual impact that a more traditional form of art such a history painting might have, but a videogame can be every bit as

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163. Ibid., chapter 5.

meaningful and full of meaning (and of course, can also be virtuoso in its presentation according to its own laws of creation).

As David Novitz says what is important is not any particular definition of art but rather "an understanding of how and why we classify objects and activities as works of art."<sup>164</sup> If we understand that the art institution exists in order to facilitate the creation of more art we may come to the conclusion that it does not particularly matter what or whose definition of art we use as long as the definitions we use are suitable for the task that is being carried out at that particular time. In the instance of encouraging more women to take up roles as artists it must be a definition that is open to works that can be made outside of the structure of art school, large workshops, and high level art education, since women are likely to be disproportionately affected by social barriers preventing access to this kind of facility and education.

In this respect perhaps it is not the place of art theorists and philosophers to try to define and classify what counts as art now and in the near future because it could be limiting to the particular requirements of the art institution and wider society at this time. Instead it is better to approach art from a historical point of view, documenting the way that it has been changed and the changes that art has on society. This does, however, largely depend on what it is believed the purpose of the art institution is, and if it is believed that the art institution can be flexible in its goals.

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<sup>164</sup> Novitz, "Disputes about Art."

It is my belief that at this point in history the goals for the art institution must be to work on promoting opportunities for those who have previously not had a full range of opportunities available to them. But equality of opportunity is not enough and we must focus on promoting gender equity as a priority. Women and men have different requirements in order to achieve equality of opportunity within the art institution and we must consider what each demographic needs as a separate but intersectional identity with its own particular needs.

By including videogames, or any medium that can be utilised with a standard secondary school education and minimal materials, in the artistic canon we open up opportunities to those who are still denied the chances that others might have due to social status or wealth. There is no expensive additional apprenticeship or education required in order to code videogames for a young person, no expensive workshop with employees, and no expensive materials. Just a room, a computer, and the desire to create art and be an artist.

Once the art institution agrees that videogames could be a way to speed up the rate of participation of women artists at the highest levels, where does it go from there? The answer is that there are all kinds of new challenges relating to the way that we collect and display videogames. MoMA has begun to explore some of these questions with their collecting and display habits, and the Victoria and Albert Museum will soon follow suit with its blockbuster exhibition on videogames in 2018. However, there are still many questions unanswered and debates do be had on best practices surrounding this still-novel medium. These discussions are really nothing new to the art institution, they have been conducted throughout the history of patronage and collecting. Debates on whether side lighting or top lighting

is best for paintings happened for years, and how best to restore and show antique sculpture is still an ongoing question. How we should best show videogames in our institutions may require some serious discussion and input from experts in many different fields, but the art institution is already experienced in asking and indeed answering these kinds of questions.

What might be more difficult are discussions regarding the content of videogames and about whether certain examples of the medium belong in art institutions at all. It could be suggested that blockbuster AAA videogames are more of a work of design than art and therefore would find their place in design collections worldwide, while smaller Indie games which aim to make political points or tell the stories of particular people are more suited to art collections. There is no need to designate all videogames as "design" or "art" when there is already precedence for the dividing of materials across collections. There are fine examples of design in the form of iron gates at the Victoria and Albert Museum, while a few miles away Tate Britain exhibits fine sculpture made from iron without a second thought.

This thesis throws up several possibilities for future research. An obvious line would be to examine how the visiting public feel about videogames being shown alongside art institutions. Convincing a major art institution to install a mainstream videogame in a curated art exhibition (as opposed to an exhibition focussing on design) would allow the examination of attitudes in an actual commercial and educational setting. As well as investigating the feelings of those who visit institutions, it could also be an interesting possibility to examine the attitudes of those enrolled on history of art courses, observing not only if there is a generational and educational difference

in attitude, but perhaps trends that can be seen alongside the kind of course content offered by particular universities.

If I were to extend this thesis into a longer document I would review more theories of art and how they might be applied to support the case for videogames as art, as well as writing case studies that demonstrate art historical methodologies applied to videogames. I would perhaps start by looking into Arthur Danto's writings on institutional theories and Clive Bell's ideas on aesthetic experience and significant form. In my case studies I would look to prove that almost all the standard art historical theories that are taught and used on university history of art courses can be applied to videogames. My aim would be to prove that videogames can be treated in the same way as any other piece of art which, drawing on Gaut's cluster theory, must mean that they are indeed a valid medium for works of art to be created in.

I believe that I have demonstrated in this short thesis that the popular arguments against videogames as works of art can largely be countered, that videogames can definitely be considered a legitimate medium for art, and that there is a solid reason for pressing the art institution to collect and display videogames as works of art. As Linda Nochlin said in her last anthology: "it is a critical moment for feminism and women's place in the art world. [...] We need to deploy all our intelligence and energy in order to ensure that women's art is seen, women's voices heard, women's excellence rewarded. And we must work to create an art world in which high qualities, rather than high prices, are the touchstones of success, for men and women equally."<sup>165</sup>

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165. Nochlin, "The Linda Nochlin Reader," 41.

Additionally I hope that I have laid the groundwork for a more in depth study that will utilise feminist methodology at its strongest - as a "transgressive and antiestablishment practice meant to call many of the major precepts of the discipline [of art history] into question."<sup>166</sup>

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166. Linda Nochlin, "'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' Thirty Years After," *The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 320.

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## Appendix A: Where Games and Art are Taught

Following is a list of all undergraduate courses in the UK where games and art are potentially taught together. To gather this data I used the UCAS website ([www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)) course search. I searched on the term “game” and specified the parameters of courses leading to undergraduate degrees for 2019-2020 entry. I then eliminated courses which did not lead to a BA (Hons) with the reasoning that any art or art history would be an insubstantial part of scientific or technical courses, for similar reasons I eliminated several joint honours degrees. I also eliminated duplication of degree programmes such as variations with foundation or industrial placement years.

Game Design and Production	Abertay University
Game Development: Art	ACM (The Academy of Contemporary Music)
Game Development: Audio	ACM (The Academy of Contemporary Music)
Game Development: Design	ACM (The Academy of Contemporary Music)
Game Development: Programming	ACM (The Academy of Contemporary Music)
Computer Games Art	Anglia Ruskin University
Film Studies with Game Design	Bangor University
Media Studies with Game Design	Bangor University
Professional Writing with Game Design	Bangor University
Video Game Design and Production	Birmingham City University
Video Games Digital Art	Birmingham City University
Scriptwriting for Stage, Screen and Gaming	Blackpool and the Flyde College
Games Design	Brunel University London
Independent Games Production	Buckingham New University
Games Design	Canterbury Christ Church University
Game Design	City of Liverpool College
Games Design and Concept Art	City of Liverpool College
Game Design for Industry (top up)	Cornwall College
Games Art	Coventry University
Game Art	De Montford University
Games Design and Animation (Top Up)	DN Colleges Group
Game Art	Falmouth University
Game Development: Animation	Falmouth University
Game Development: Art	Falmouth University
Game Development: Audio	Falmouth University
Game Development: Design	Falmouth University
Game Development: Programming	Falmouth University
Game Development: Writing	Falmouth University

Game Art	Futureworks (Manchester Media School)
Games Design	Futureworks (Manchester Media School)
Game Art	Glyndwr University, Wrexham
Computer Games (Top Up)	Leeds City College
Game Design and Development	London South Bank University
3D Animation and Games	Middlesex University
Games Design	Middlesex University
Games Art and Design	Norwich University of the Arts
Games Art and Design (including Year 0)	Norwich University of the Arts
Games Art	Nottingham Trent University
BA The Art of Video Games	Pearson College London
Game Arts	Plymouth College of Art
Game Arts (Extended Degree)	Plymouth College of Art
Games Design	Ravensbourne University London
Video Games Art and Design	Royal Holloway, University of London
Game Art Animation	SAE Institute
Games Design	Sheffield Hallam University
Computer Games (Art)	Solent University (Southampton)
Computer Games (Design)	Solent University (Southampton)
Computer Games Design (Top Up)	Solent University (Southampton)
Computer Games Animation	Staffordshire University
Concept Art for Games and Film	Staffordshire University
Games Art	Staffordshire University
Games Art and Animation	Staffordshire University
Games Studies	Staffordshire University
Business and Games Design	Teeside University
Computer Games Art	Teeside University
Computer Games Design	Teeside University
Indie Games Development	Teeside University
Digital Art for 3D Games and Media	University Campus Oldham
Independent Game Design (Game Art)	University Centre Grimsby
Independent Game Design (Game Development)	University Centre Grimsby
Game Art	University Centre St Helens



Games Arts	University for the Creative Arts
Games Design	University for the Creative Arts
Games Art	University of Bolton
Graphics for Games	University of Bradford
Computer Games Enterprise (Foundation Entry)	University of Central Lancashire
Games Design	University of Central Lancashire
3D Animation and Visual Effects	University of Chichester
Games Design	University of Cumbria
Computer Games Modelling and Animation	University of Derby
Computer Games Design: Story Development	University of East London
3D Games Art and Design	University of Hertfordshire
Computer Games Design	University of Huddersfield
Game and Entertainment Design	University of Hull
Communication and Media and Game Design Studies	University of Liverpool
Communication and Media with Game Design Studies	University of Liverpool
Philosophy and Game Design Studies	University of Liverpool
Games Design	University of Northampton
Game Arts and Design	University of Plymouth
Computer Games Design	University of South Wales
Game Art	University of South Wales
Games Design and Art	University of Southampton
Computer Games Design	University of Suffolk
Animation and Games Art	University of Sunderland
Game Development	University of Sunderland
Games Design	University of the Arts London
Creative Computer Games Design	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Games, Design, and Animation	University of West London
Computer Games Design	University of Wolverhampton
Animation and Game Art	University of Worcester
Game Art	University of Worcester
Games Art (Top Up)	Warwickshire College Group
Games Art and Design	Wirral Metropolitan College
Games Design	York St John University

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