

Avant-garde Videogames

Draft

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Playing with Technoculture

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Foreword by Jay David Bolter

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Chapter 1: Videogames as Avant-garde Art

Videogames are art. In order to value videogames as art, or a cultural force, we need to understand how the videogame avant-garde works. The avant-garde challenges or leads culture. The avant-garde opens up and redefines art mediums. The purpose of this book is to illuminate how the avant-garde emerges through videogames. Videogames shape the avant-garde, while the avant-garde shapes videogames. How does the videogame avant-garde diverge from contemporary and historical avant-garde movements such as tactical media, the Critical Art Ensemble, Net art of the 1990s, video art of the 1960s, Fluxus, the Situationists, Dada, and the impressionists? The contemporary avant-garde faces constraints and opportunities, both cultural and technological in nature, which historical avant-gardes did not face. Videogames were born of a marriage between the military-industrial complex and midway arcade games. The social anxieties and economic outlays of the Cold War were formative for many of the metaphors of power and domination that still frame videogames today. Contemporary culture flows in an elaborate and networked form of digital capitalism—a context that precludes some avant-garde tactics and affords others. As a convergence of technology and cultural practice, videogames are uniquely situated. They are ruled from the bottom, through mass consumption, and from the top, via multinational corporate power. In response to the sheer complexity of the cultural and technological structure of videogames, the

avant-garde deploys a host of strategies, ranging from radical to complicit in degree, formal to political in nature, and local to global in scope.

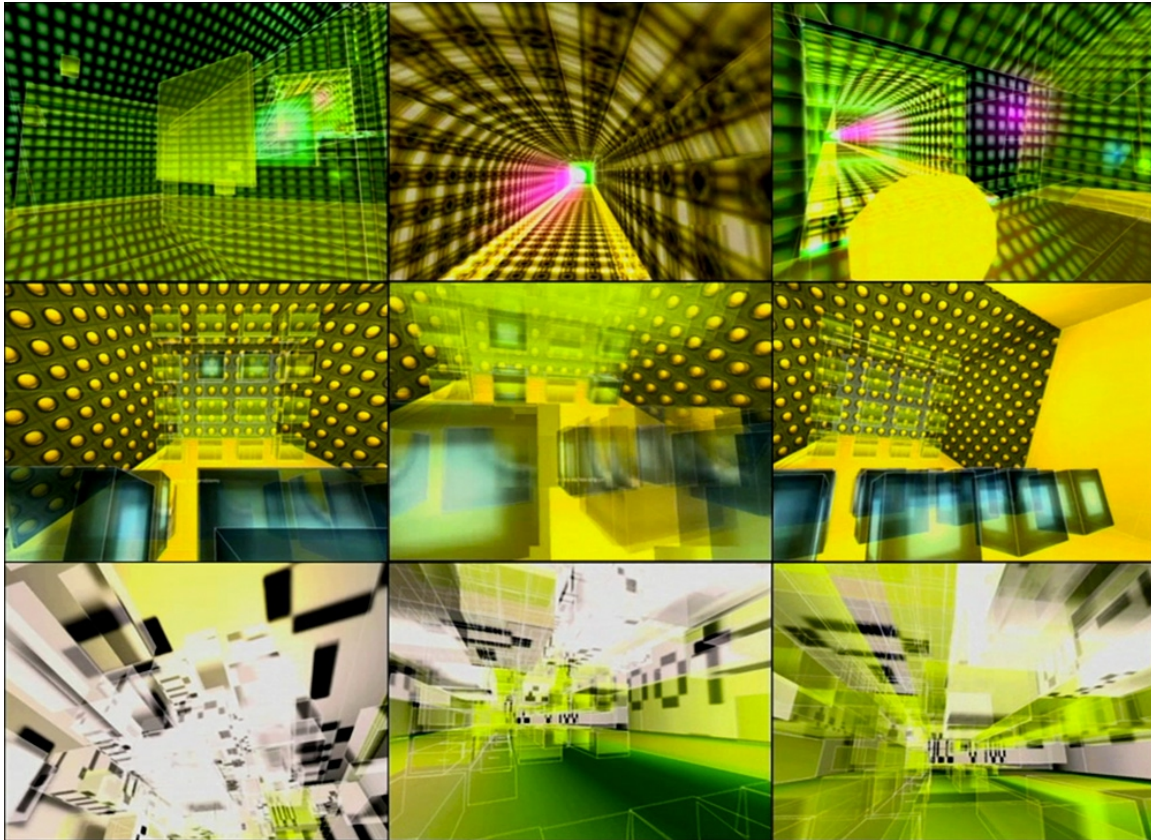


Figure 1.1 Quilted Thought Organ's unusual gameplay opens up new ways for players to perceive, feel, and perform movement through virtual space. Image courtesy of Julian Oliver.

Julian Oliver's *Quilted Thought Organ* (1998–2001) is an avant-garde game. It was built with id Software's first-person shooter *Quake II* engine. The familiar tunnels and mutant enemies, however, are replaced with colorful lattices saturating the space. The environment is navigable, but acting in the world is a

strange negotiation. You walk around and atonal music is spawned when you brush through the diaphanous lattices. Turn around to glimpse hypergeometries transforming in your wake; if you stop, so do they. *Quilted Thought Organ* is a “game-based performance environment,” a playable version of the call-and-response scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The allure of *Quilted Thought Organ* comes from trying to determine the nature and logic of this unusual experience. Reclaiming the experience as a game is its challenge.

Quilted Thought Organ is an avant-garde game in a similar way that modern, abstract paintings were historically avant-garde. In traditional painting, perspectival space (the illusion that an image is a virtual window on a scene) guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting. The rise of avant-garde painting techniques, such as impressionism and cubism, opened alternate ways of viewing and making paintings, calling into question how painting was defined as a medium. Games, like paintings, have their own patterns of perception, interpretation, and participation. Whether they are 2-D or 3-D, games use standard regimes of spatial representation as well as entrenched formulas that guide and control players. Games reward certain behaviors, and in doing so, encourage specific actions in the pursuit of particular goals such as progression, dominance, or a high score. Avant-garde games are distinguished from mainstream ones because they show how the medium can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how

we make, think, and play with games. The avant-garde democratizes games, and makes the medium more plastic and liquid.

Although it may seem surprising to suggest that the avant-garde is relevant to any contemporary creative practice, this is not a novel claim. Author and new media artist Mark Amerika (2007, 24) writes that “artists who are immersed in digital processes are contemporary versions of what in the twentieth century we used to call the *avant-garde*. Thankfully, they no longer have to pretend to be ahead of their time.” The avant-garde has never been about newness or innovation; that is how the avant-garde has been co-opted by institutions and markets. For videogames, the avant-garde is the force that opens up the experience of playing a game or expands the ways in which games shape culture. And since culture is continually changing, the avant-garde must change as well. For example, in the 1990s, the Critical Art Ensemble (1994, 3) recognized that the avant-garde had evolved with the times:

For many decades, a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorized. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the extent that participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and politics.

Perhaps this is a clue as to why this practice has remained unnamed for so long. Since the avant-garde was declared dead, its progeny must be dead too. Perhaps this brood is simply unrecognizable because so many of the avant-garde’s methods and narratives have been reconstructed and

reconfigured to such an extent that any family resemblance has disappeared.

Videogames too have employed methods that have been “reconstructed and reconfigured” but are still avant-garde. What makes videogames interesting is how their relation to culture and technology is distinct from mediums used by the historical avant-garde. They are also distinct from the cultural materials in use by contemporary avant-garde figures like Orlan, who has undergone plastic surgery as theatrical performance, contending that the “avant-garde is no longer in art, it is in genetics.”¹ The avant-garde uses materials that resonate with the time. Because videogames are both caused by and result from change within technoculture, they are especially relevant to contemporary avant-garde practice.

The term *technoculture* is used in media studies to describe the growing interdependence between technology and culture. Of course, technology and culture have always been interdependent, but the level of granularity at which they commingle rapidly grew in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Marshall McLuhan (1964, 3–4) describes this trend in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central

nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.

This convergence of human and machine should be viewed as neither positive nor negative. It is simply the material and social reality that the contemporary avant-garde must face if it is to be relevant and effective. Our interaction with the world is increasingly mediated by computer technologies.² We experience ever more frequent interactions with machines. In technoculture, the contrasts between public and private, local and global, and human and nonhuman are breaking down. Not only are videogames an advanced product of technoculture, they are also a major site on which culture naturalizes the ways in which we think and play with technology. In this way, each game becomes a microcosm of technoculture itself. Games teach players how to engage and optimize systems as well as how to manage their desire in a contemporary world. This makes the world of games a principal site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture.

Mainstream and Avant-garde

If we compare two ostensibly similar games, we can generalize some differences between the mainstream and avant-garde. A mainstream title that follows the familiar flow of games is *Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank* (2005), a commercially successful casual shooter.³ An avant-garde game that does not serve the familiar flow is *September 12th*

(2003), a shooter that makes the requisite skills reflexive and awkward. Although both games are 2-D, browser-based Flash games that use the mouse to point and shoot, they manifest remarkably different experiences.



Figure 1.2 Players frenetically eliminate all that moves in a tight cycle of flowing action in *Heavy Weapon*. Image courtesy of PopCap.

In *Heavy Weapon*, a 1984 backstory lampooning America's mood in the Cold War collides with pre-9/11 war references. The player guides a tiny "atomic" US tank, the last line of defense against the invading Red Star army. The game opens with a cutscene, featuring a US official advising the president to surrender. The secretary of defense retorts, "I've heard enough liberal whining! This is freedom's last stand. . . . Send in . . . ATOMIC TANK!" The kitsch irony

sets the perfect mood. The abundant references in *Heavy Weapon* (including atomic weapons, Cold War history, cartoon violence, etc.) jibe together in a jaunty postmodern style that cancels out the need to associate anything at all with the experience. The ensuing gameplay lights up the center of the brain with eye-fluttering finger clicks. According to PopCap, *Heavy Weapon* “brings classic shooter action to the casual gamer.” It is a cartoonlike, side-scrolling shoot ‘em up with “easy-to-learn mechanics.” The real appeal of *Heavy Weapon* is the contrast between its two core modes of fight and flight requiring the player to employ offensive and defensive skills simultaneously. The player tracks objects with the mouse to shoot at everything that moves while steering a vehicle to dodge a storm of bullets. Unexpected complications arise to keep the player off guard; an aid helicopter, for example, flies into the heat of battle to drop power-ups, nukes, shields, and upgrades. The entire experience collapses into a typical twitch reflex cocoon that is apolitical and ahistorical.



Figure 1.3 *September 12th* simulates the ideology of the war on terror as a positive feedback loop of escalating violence. Image courtesy of Gonzalo Frasca.

Developed by Newsgaming and designed by Gonzalo Frasca, *September 12th* immediately positions the player as a political subject. On launching the game, the screen reads, “The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror.”⁴ When the player hits play, they gaze on an isometric Arab town where residents circulate peacefully down narrow streets and a few terrorists, wearing kaffiyehs or white headdresses, mix in. The player might be inclined to aim and fire a missile at one of them. A short delay prior to launch makes clean, accurate kills

nearly impossible. Bystanders die, and onlookers grieve, or a few become enraged. Flashing and bleeping, the mourners morph into a new generation of terrorists. As more terrorists are targeted for destruction, more are created and the euphemism of “surgical strikes” unravels along with the flow of the game.

Heavy Weapon and *September 12th* deliver two opposing experiences. *Heavy Weapon* channels players into a tightly closed circuit of play; *September 12th* opens up that circuit, revealing and reveling in its own nature as a game. Instead of training players to aim clicks quickly, *September 12th* makes it obvious just how entrained and established these skills as well as expectations have become. A microcosm of twitch reflexes spirals out into a macrocosm of geopolitics. *Heavy Weapon* has the opposite effect. An expansive set of geopolitical references flush players into a singular flow of familiar experience. Mainstream games strengthen the prevailing paradigm of flow, while avant-garde games weaken it, opening play to alternate paradigms.

Opening Up the Definition of *Videogame*

One of the difficulties with studying games is that definitions are often design documents in disguise. In this book, we will need the broadest workable definition of videogame possible, or the subject we set out to explore will be blinkered from view from the start.

The problem of prescriptive definitions is certainly not unique to games. The Renaissance definition of *painting* was a design document of sorts. It described what painting was, while elaborating on best practices to maximize its unique illusory power. In his 1435 treatise *De Pictura*, Leon Battista Alberti defined paintings as a virtual “window” and expounded on pivotal mechanics, such as establishing a vanishing point to achieve a convincing illusion of depth. The avant-garde ultimately challenged that definition at the turn of the twentieth century, and began folding, warping, cutting up, and reassembling the window. In “Definition of Neotradition,” published in 1890, artist and critic Maurice Dennis advised the salon public, “It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.” According to Dennis, then, painting was no longer to be defined as a virtual window but instead as pigment on a surface—which Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings potently embodied a few generations later.

As expected, subsequent avant-gardes challenged Dennis’s definition. Mediums are always in flux, most of all for the avant-garde. Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt conceived of painting as an idea rather than a material construct. For LeWitt, the defining element of a painting was in the series of choices made in its construction, not the presence of fibers and pigment. Thus, anyone can produce a LeWitt painting, which called for bright acrylic paint or India ink washes, and

read like a series of instructions: *Wall Drawing #46* (1970), for example, is “vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly.”

Who is right: Alberti, Dennis, or LeWitt? Are paintings illusions, materials, concepts, or something else still? Each definition presents a viable approach to understanding or making a painting, and suggests that painting is not advancing toward a specific predestined purpose or goal. In fact, the medium of painting is increasingly open, plastic, and malleable in the hands of each succeeding avant-garde.

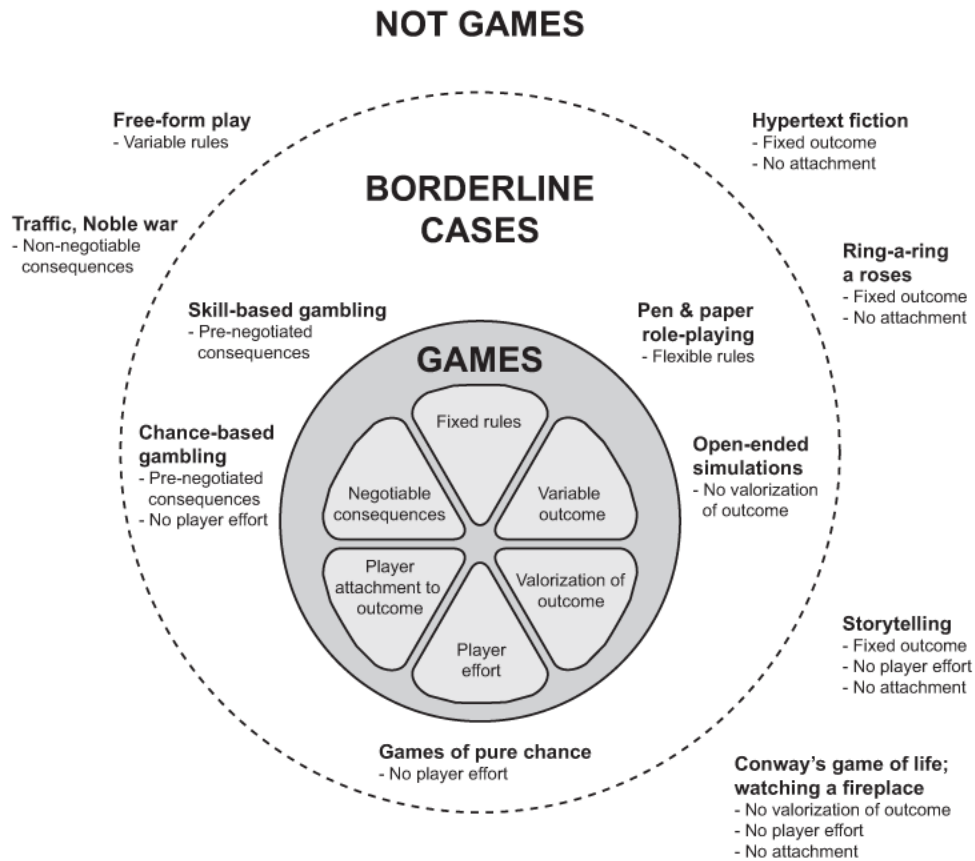


Figure 1.4 Jesper Juul targets a fictional center “gameness” in the medium of videogames. Image courtesy of Jesper Juul.

Like many writers, I have been using the terms game and videogame interchangeably, but only for the sake of brevity. How have others used the terms? In *Half-Real: A Dictionary of Video Game Theory*, Jesper Juul defines videogame as “a game played using computer power and a video display.” Most accept the tautology that videogames are defined by their gameness. Juul (2005, 36) elaborates:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.

In this definition, the dance of visual phenomena on-screen serves almost exclusively as evidence to direct the player into certain courses of action. Such features are given attention, but only according to how they inform the subject as a game in the most conservative sense. Juul (*ibid.*) does discuss the role of fiction, however, noting that to “play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules *while* imagining a fictional world.” Although Juul’s definition is useful, it omits from view forces that are material or sensual, so we must expand his conception.

In contrast to Juul, who targets games (again, in the most conservative sense) as the core of the medium, game industry pioneer Chris Crawford targets something else. Crawford acknowledged in the 1980s that videogames, by definition, have a core material component. In fact, that core material affordance must be fully exploited by game designers if the medium is to reach its full potential:

Interactiveness is a central element of game enjoyment. . . . [T]he computer’s plasticity makes it an intrinsically interactive device. Yet, the potential inherent in the computer can easily go unrealized if it is programmed poorly. A program emphasizing static data is not very

dynamic. It is not plastic, hence not responsive, hence not interactive. A process-intensive program, by contrast, is dynamic, plastic, responsive, and interactive. Therefore, store less and process more. (Crawford 1984)

Although Crawford goes further than Juul by grounding his formulation of the medium in the physical properties of the computer, he cannot leave these open to play. There is just one path to follow: maximize procedural power above all else. He leaves no room for a diversity of play in games—say, for an artwork that stores more and processes less.

The technological affordances of specific hardware, software, and their contingent sensual signatures also comprise the formal nature of videogames. The commercial industry doesn't ignore these, so why should artists, designers, or academics? One of the lowest common denominators in recent decades has been the drive toward convincing photorealism and beyond. If we are to cultivate the potential of the medium, we cannot afford to overlook critical characteristics that don't fit our definition or narrative of what videogames are supposed to be. We cannot ignore what is happening right now with games. Indeed, a key strategy of the avant-garde is to engage videogames as they are, not just as we wish them to be. Sensuality, materiality, economics, commercial trends, and popular conventions are as definitive as well as integral to videogames as a platonic ideal of gameness. The avant-garde is not afraid to explore and exaggerate these affordances as it makes games more open, plastic,

and liquid. This is how the avant-garde unravels and outstrips mainstream games and game culture.

For game culture, the idea that “videogames are games” is irrefutable. But turn this around. Why not also examine the idea that “videogames are videos”? Videogames are played on LCD, LED, and plasma screens, so video in the traditional sense does not describe the hardware. Nevertheless, it does stand in for all the support technologies that constrain and allow games to function. The avant-garde is able to see unique artistic potential in the *video* of videogames.



Figure 1.5 Looking up through the trees in *The Night Journey*, a collaboration of Bill Viola Studios and the University of Southern California's Game Innovation Lab. The work foregrounds the video in *videogame* by bridging laser disc games like *Dragon's Lair* and video art. Image courtesy of Bill Viola Studios and the USC Game Innovation Lab.

The Night Journey is a game collaboration by Bill Viola, a renowned video artist, and the Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California. *Night Journey* is a videogame-enabled dream, one part *Dragon's Lair*, one part uncanny video art, and one part virtual camera controlled in 3-D space. The artists call it "explorable video." Intensity in games normally comes from rising challenges that demand an increase in skill or effort. In *Night Journey*, though,

intensity comes from the visual slurring of a living environment and the player's warped presence within it. It does not feel like the player is traversing the environment, although that is what is happening. It feels more like the player is a ghost melting through a black-and-white dreamscape. There is a lugubrious sensual logic that the creatures and slow-dancing plants emanate. When a fish or bird hauntingly appears, for instance, it hovers there like some endearing bug-eyed hallucination. It is trying to communicate something that is just beyond the edge of making sense, and in order for the player to "get it," their sanity must slip a bit into that dreamworld. Once the player has slipped, it takes a moment to realize that they are already moving on in that undulating dreamtime.

Night Journey explores videogames both as they are and as they could be. Instead of rendering the visual spectacle as subservient to the gameplay, a popular practice among game enthusiasts, *Night Journey* accepts the game industry's quest for greater graphic intensity and doubles down. The artists leverage this feature as an affordance to focus on and exaggerate. In looking at videogames as they could be, *Night Journey* goes beyond photorealism, dynamically connecting the spectacle to player action. The conventional qualities of immersive space fold inward, oozing through the dreamy wrinkles of zoned-out gameplay.

Game designer Will Wright has asserted that *The Sims* and *SimCity* are software toys rather than games. That is unfortunate. Mainstream culture refers to them as games. If we accept *The Sims* and *SimCity* as games, the challenge they

present to our academic definitions becomes an opportunity to cultivate a richer appreciation of the medium. If we hold to the idea that not only *The Sims* but also *September 12th*, *Night Journey*, and *Quilted Thought Organ* are in fact videogames, then the cultural frame that holds them fractures, diversifies, and expands. If we can allow many definitions of videogame to aggregate into a composite, fractured image, we have an avant-garde perspective. It is a vision as uncomfortable as it is lively, challenging, and historically grounded.

Rather than carving out a perfect definition of videogames and holding each game up to that ideal, we can reverse the process. Each avant-garde game presents its own definition of the medium that challenges the status quo. If avant-garde games were to compose a collective definition of the medium, that portrayal would hang awkwardly open: *videogames are playing with technoculture*. Avant-garde games crack open the patterns of the world in games and beyond so we may reengage in a radical kind of play with them.

Avant-garde Is a Diverse Field of Formal and Political Strategies

Historically, multiple avant-gardes have existed simultaneously, sometimes in direct opposition to one another and clearly contradicting the popular myth of a single avant-garde ideal. This is a feature as opposed to a bug. In 1914, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, a British émigré to the United States, surveyed modern feminism in a way that

emphasized this quality of diversity in the avant-garde. Hale described feminism using avant-garde rhetoric: "The metaphor of an army to delineate the main body of parliamentary suffragists, the rear of municipal suffragists, a vanguard of 'advanced feminists,' and an ultra-radical group of 'skirmishers.'"⁵ According to Hale, certain kinds of feminist work could only be accomplished from certain positions of power. She recognized that radical, anarchistic actions could subvert government power and threaten social stability. On the other hand, complicit feminist forces within government could leverage those radicals in order to gain progressive concessions. This need not be seen as a leader-driven conspiratorial plot, however, nor is it limited to the suffragist movement. A similar dynamic was reflected in the 1960s in the tensions between Martin Luther King Jr. and the early Malcolm X: they opposed each other's strategies. From a position of peace and a position of violence, they flanked the white middle class from both sides, like a vise, creating an emergent, collective effort to seize equal rights. As an expansive, chaotic system, the avant-garde thus develops and distributes its efforts without a single coordinator (who would not likely be obeyed in any case).

Hal Foster (1996, 8), an art historian and theorist of the "contemporary avant-garde," similarly disputes the assumption that "one theory can comprehend *the* avant-garde." This realization is growing among academics. Regarding contemporary avant-garde theater, James Harding (2010, 12) criticizes the "notion that there is 'the avant-garde' rather than a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions."

Another popular myth is that the avant-garde is about negation, and presumably, the more critical or offensive it is, the better, or at least the more avant-garde. That story is not true either. Visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker (2005, 251) argues that the avant-garde “is not what the academy has made of it. Every instance of playful engagement, of serious exchange, of complex attraction and adoration and longing” has been overwritten.¹³ Drucker (ibid., 251–252) summarizes the problem: “The legacy of oppositional criticism, of a negative position claiming moral superiority and distance from those ideologies, . . . can’t be sustained any more. Mythic though they were, these belief systems do not accurately describe either our current condition or our past history.” The historical avant-garde has been mischaracterized, which has perpetuated a popular misunderstanding regarding the contemporary avant-garde among many theorists and academics. We must broaden and diversify our framing of the avant-garde if we are to understand it.

We can begin by distinguishing two broad avant-garde strategies, a *formal* avant-garde and a *political* avant-garde, thus opening up and supporting difference across communities of practice. The avant-garde described by the iconic modern art critic Clement Greenberg in “Avant-garde and Kitsch” advances the formal view. The avant-garde depicted by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-garde* presents the political view. The formal avant-garde is realized in individual experience, letting art advance itself without regard for social concerns; the political avant-garde is realized in collective experiences,

politicizing art or using art to change society. The formal avant-garde champions the old adage “art for art’s sake.”



Figure 1.6 Stan Brakhage glued moth wings and grass onto celluloid in the film *Mothlight* (1963), so we might “imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective,” and see images without perceiving them as narratives, symbols, and spaces. Image courtesy of the Estate of Stan Brakhage and Fred Camper (<http://www.fredcamper.com>).

The formal avant-garde investigates the properties of a given artistic medium. Each medium has unique affordances, sensual capacities, and a cultural history from which to construct work. The task of the formal avant-garde artist is to expose, challenge, or redefine these features. Greenberg (1939) portrays avant-garde painting in medium-specific terms:

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.

Greenberg's formalist category of avant-garde art is synonymous with modern art of the last half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. According to formal theory, mediums should seek to be reflexive and reveal their own form. Abstract splatter paintings revel in their own flat surface rather than trying to create illusions of receding space and dimension. Likewise in music, arrangements of the twelve tones need not sink us into reverie, evoke a preset series of emotions, or convey a story; dissonant tensions and collisions among tones can shape the experience instead. Avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage glued grass and insects directly onto celluloid. As the film clacked and flickered through the projector, the actual apparatus of film—the projector, celluloid, light, faculties of perception and cognition, the darkened roomful of people, and so on—was foregrounded and illuminated. In this way, Brakhage explored what the experience of film might be, beyond its established eventful, narrative structures.

Employing similar strategies, formal avant-garde games manifest the irreducibility of play that lives beyond the familiar flow. *Quilted Thought Organ* is

a good example. Oliver's work offers a novel mechanic of movement as sound, emphasizing one of the core features of first-person shooter engines: the moment-to-moment act of navigating Cartesian space. Trying to make sense of that distorted gamespace presents a meta-challenge that compounds the usual challenges. The conventional challenges of games are displaced, leaving a rawer, more essential experience to play with. Game art enthusiasts often get snagged on the demand that the player must read the artist's intent or expression in the work. Perhaps, but the more that formal games are able to "speak" for themselves, the more provocative the experiences of playing them can be.

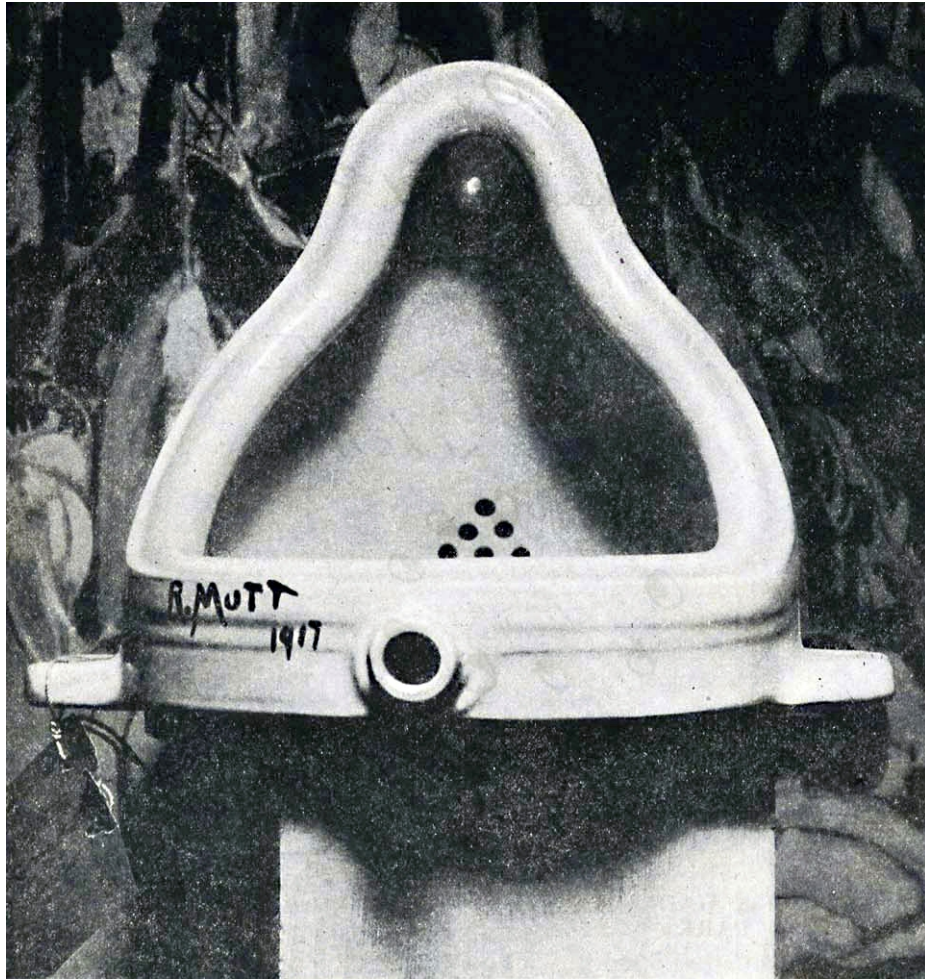


Figure 1.7 Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) played *with* the rules of art, reworking its definition, rather than playing *in* the established rules of art.

Historically, political avant-garde artists played with the category of art itself, frequently denying that the work they were making could even be categorized as art. This is similar to contemporary game artists who deny that what they make are games—an assertion so common that leading mainstream figures, such as Wright, as mentioned earlier, make this claim. The Dadaists provide examples of the historical political avant-garde. Responding to the upheavals of World War I, Dada created shocking theatrical events as a means of

provoking and transforming culture. Richard Huelsenbeck, a Dadaist, asks: “What is German culture? Answer: Shit!” Opposing the formal avant-garde, Dadaists mocked Édouard Manet and Paul Cézanne, two prominent painters of the nineteenth century.

In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, however, Foster argues that we must adopt a more nuanced perspective and less dualistic perspective on the historical avant-garde if we are to understand the contemporary avant-garde and all that has changed in the past century. Foster (1996, 16) begins with Duchamp, whose “aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation of art and life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice is at its best contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical.” Duchamp placed a rotated urinal on a pedestal, signed it with a pseudonym, titled it *Fountain*, and submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp was a member. The society agreed that they would accept all submissions in alphabetical order—a transgressive move in its own right. But they rejected *Fountain*, a piece of art that toyed with the institution of art, its arbitrary assignments of value, and its adherence to entrenched definitions. *Fountain* makes another move in plain sight, though, and one that is often missed. It foregrounds and aestheticizes the ways in which we normally sense—or more accurately, fail to sense—technology. As the institution of art is brought down, an industrial object that we routinely interact with in private is

lifted up from its conventional use. It becomes a heavy object in pristine gloss, a familiar thing that gazes back, asserting its presence and mass in an unfamiliar way. *Fountain* is surreal, sitting useless, glistening and gaping. Like other readymades, it manages to flout artistic convention while still evoking the irreducibility of artistic experience. This is how the political avant-garde creates and destroys art. Art is made impossible and possible again. Failure and success lose much of their meaning in avant-garde art.

So what of the contemporary political avant-garde? Each avant-garde emerges from and contends with its own cultural moment. Today, it engages the category of technocultural entertainment rather than art in the traditional sense, because that is where the action is. Foster (*ibid.*, 21) summarizes it best, stating that a “reconnection of art and life *has* occurred, but under the terms of the culture industry,” and rather “than render the avant-garde null and void, these developments have produced new spaces of critical play and prompted new modes of institutional analysis.” Culture increasingly mobilizes its values through entertainment and technology instead of through the church, museum, or academy. That is where routines of control, violence, and desire are normalized as well as propagated.

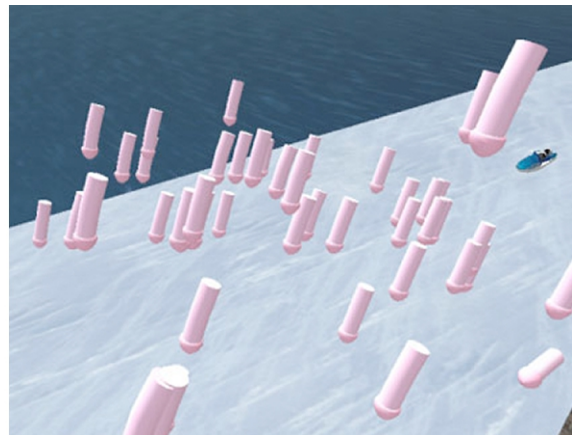


Figure 1.8 A griefer attack at a CNET conference in *Second Life* spawns grey goo objects that self-replicate beyond control. Images courtesy of Richard “Lowtax” Kyanka.

Politically avant-garde gameplay targets social institutions, as games are destroyed and reborn in public. Grieferers provide a good illustration of this. They are players who challenge other players beyond the established scope of a given game. Grieferers question and manipulate the rituals as well as protocols of massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft* and virtual worlds like *Second Life*. One Griefer tactic is to deploy “grey goo,” self-replicating objects that multiply beyond the system’s ability to model and present them. In *Second Life*, grey goo can take any form, ranging from the golden rings in *Sonic the Hedgehog* to severed heads. It can begin with a single ring falling from the sky. It spawns two more rings, which then spawn four. Growing exponentially, the rings outpace the capacity of the server at Linden Lab running that section of the world. If a server crashes or slows, everyone logged on is affected; hence the term *grid attack*. Grey goo is a visual-spatial analog of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack that floods Web sites with spoofed data requests until the server is crippled.

Grieferers break down games and rebuild new kinds of games with the pieces. They open up alterior play patterns that restructure the very systems that make the games possible. The presence of computer protocols—normally veiled and subservient to the flow of consumption—erupts as grey goo that pushes

back. Griefers reframe the gamespace as a contested public space. They demonstrate that virtual worlds have diverse and previously unrealized aesthetic properties with which to play. Scripting, social engineering, and hacking the collective flow become core gameplay mechanics. Academics once wrongly assumed that the avant-garde of the early twentieth century brought about the end of art, only to realize decades later that the avant-garde had actually redefined art itself. Although it may seem that today's radical political avant-garde is merely breaking games, it is actually opening up the definition of games in the twenty-first century.

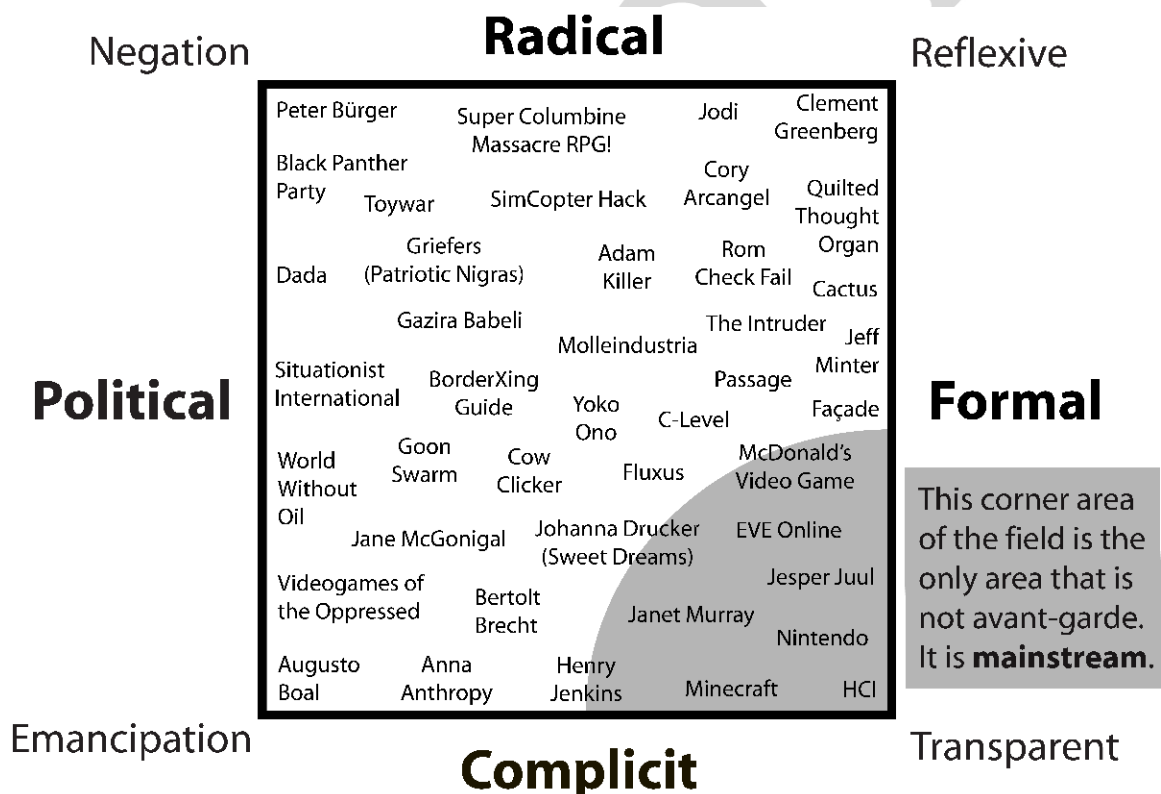


Figure 1.9 The avant-garde is comprised of a diverse field of figures. The only area that is not avant-garde is the lower-right one, because it is both complicit and depoliticized.

The avant-garde varies in intensity from radical to complicit as it ranges in purpose from enacting politics to crafting formal works. To comprehend its diversity, we might imagine its members spread out across a field, organized around two intersecting continua: a radical-to-complicit axis and a political-to-formal axis. For example, most political figures are not as radical as Dada or griefer. Bertolt Brecht, a prominent playwright after World War I, used theater as a way to propagate political thought through popular culture. He valued theater as popular entertainment, curving its force toward political ends rather than overtly challenging it. We can think of Frasca's *September 12th* in the same vein. Frasca and Brecht are not griefer. *September 12th* challenges the medium, of course, but not in an extremely radical or difficult way. The game implicates the player in an argument on the futility of the war on terror, while also being a fun game. Frasca and Brecht belong to the more complicit or accessible political avant-garde. The relative ease with which we engage their work is evident when compared to the incendiary Dada and griefer. The latter could be seen as a radical or hard political avant-garde. To play through a griefer attack is difficult, if not impossible, for most people. Complicit works or political events are less mind bending, sense assaulting, or code demanding to play than radical works. Players are given greater opportunity to find their bearings, give their senses and computer a break, and lean more heavily on conventions.

We can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens up the experience of games (formal art) or the experience of being in the world (political art). The common feature of the formal and political avant-garde is how it deviates from our own adaptations, such as our training in the efficient use of computer interfaces and networks to enact our desire and extend our control. The avant-garde helps us to unwork the flow of power as well as act according to alternate logics that are neither agonistic and dominating nor submissive and instrumental. The constituent parts of technoculture are given room to drift, giving us slack to appreciate a blended and open way of being. The goal is neither a better synthesis with technology nor a decoupling from technology via some idealized return to nature. The aim of the avant-garde is to open up games and the world to what is unfamiliar to each. Different artists use different strategies to achieve an avant-garde perspective. Some fixate on form, and others on politics; some take radical positions, using extreme measures, while others take more complicit positions. In chapters 2 through 5, I examine those strategies and the artists who take them up. I look closely at four families of the avant-garde—radical formal, radical political, complicit formal, and complicit political—while noting that there are yet other avant-gardes to be explored and other ways to slice through the field.

Chapter Summaries

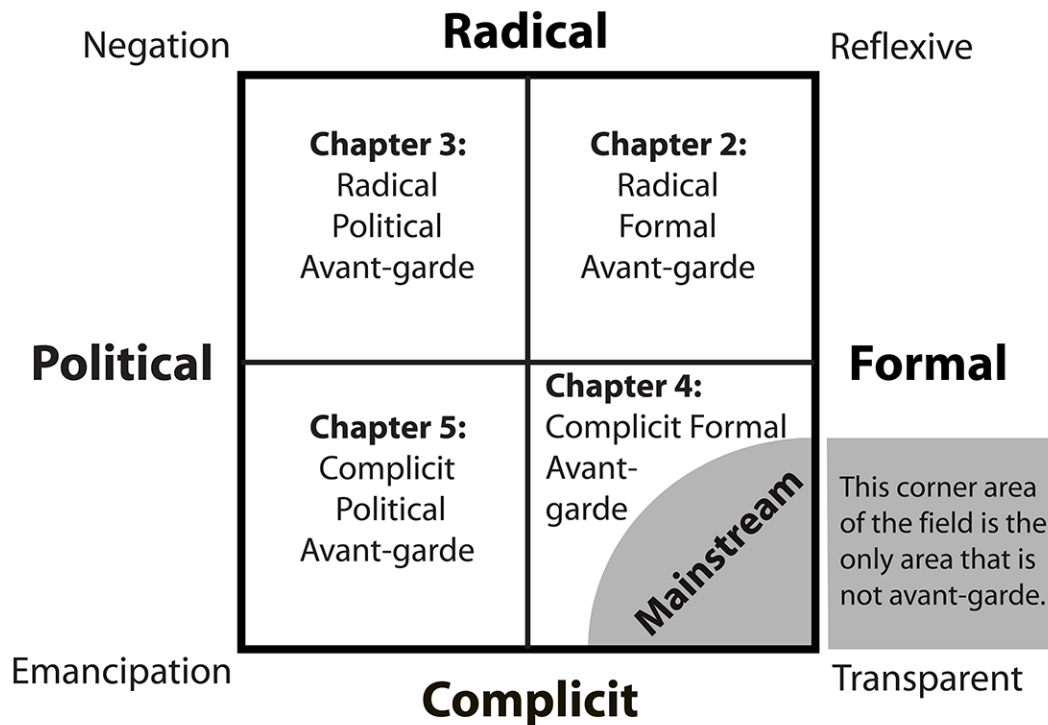


Figure 1.10 Each of the four following chapters examines a category of avant-garde strategies. Every chapter touches on mainstream games, which occupy the lower-right area.

Chapter 2: Radical Formal

It is standard in the game community to desire gameplay that puts players into the zone or flow.⁶ Flow is the “sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing” (Csíkszentmihályi 1991, 71). Although most games do not consistently offer a sense of flow to all players, most designers strive for it. The contemporary radical

formal videogame avant-garde opens up alternate ways of engaging and playing videogames, calling into question what defines them as a medium. Formal games break up the flow in richly reflexive ways. They set up situations in which we can play more explicitly with the materiality, sensuality, and conventionality of videogames as an artistic medium.

The use of linear perspective in naturalistic painting is analogous to the creation of optimal gameplay flow. Just as perspective both guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common formulas guide players toward flow in videogames. Perspectival space guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting. The rise of such formal avant-garde painting movements as impressionism and cubism rejected perspectival space, and revealed alternate ways of looking at and making paintings. These changes called into question how painting was defined as a medium.

Chapter 3. Radical Political

The radical political avant-garde challenges the definitions of play established in the mid-twentieth century by recalling the premodern magic circle, which blends worlds rather than divides them. This avant-garde strategy reminds us that reality is in play and that play requires real risk. Political avant-garde works like *Toywar* play with art and politics as well as fictions and everyday life, blending and transforming these categories in the process. In 1999, billion-dollar toy retailer eToys.com threatened to sue the artist

group etoy for trademark infringement. In response, etoy launched *Toywar*, an MMO in which players could drive down the actual price of eToys' stock on NASDAQ.

Similarly, the highly stylized marches and protests organized in the 1960s and 1970s by the original Black Panther Party were a form of avant-garde political theater, inspired by such Harlem street theater groups as the Black House (Reed 2005, 49–50). In spite of the internal violence that weakened the movement, the Black Panthers nevertheless helped redefine “black people” in US popular culture as self-assertive subjects versus submissive objects of history.

Chapter 4: Complicit Formal

The complicit formal avant-garde does not advance specific mediums. On the contrary, it questions whether videogames or any other art medium (painting, film, video, and so on) are indeed unique mediums. Videogames are treated as a resource from popular culture that can be used to make fun and relevant contemporary art. Individual mediums may be illusory, but art as a cultural practice is not. Complicit formal artists still pursue art for art's sake, yet are mischievously liberal and humorous in what they consider to be art, because they have learned from the failures and successes of the historical avant-garde. For example, Nam June Paik, a Fluxus artist, humanized and demystified Cold War technology in the 1960s by assembling a tottering robot that defecated beans while broadcasting a Kennedy speech. This avant-garde creates “art games” in the loosest possible sense, making use of diverse strategies such as putting games in traditional gallery spaces, constructing manic cyborgs, and affordance mining

household materials for their hidden, play-enabling properties. In *Cockfight Arena*, a game by C-Level, for instance, players wear awkward, feathered costumes wired to control two fighting roosters on-screen.

Chapter 5: Complicit Political

The complicit political avant-garde uses the magic circle to blend life, art, play, and reality, in a manner similar to that of the radical political avant-garde. The difference is that the complicit political avant-garde blends worlds using more inviting, populist methods. We are asked to risk the stability of the world so that we may collectively generate ad hoc utopias and moments of collective, festive anarchy. The word *utopia* evokes a fantasy of perfect governance, thanks to writers such as Sir Thomas More, who coined it. The problem of utopia as a literary genre is that it is something already written—a dead law on a page. In contrast, avant-garde utopias can be continually rewritten in play. In the 1960s, the Situationists used new media in an attempt to reshape everyday life. They took the remix tactics of Dada and made them accessible to a broader public, reframing urban space as an open artwork and game. A contemporary example can be found in alternate reality games (ARGs), which bring Situationist strategies to a contemporary public. ARGs are collective, participatory narratives played by scalable, networked communities across new and old media platforms.

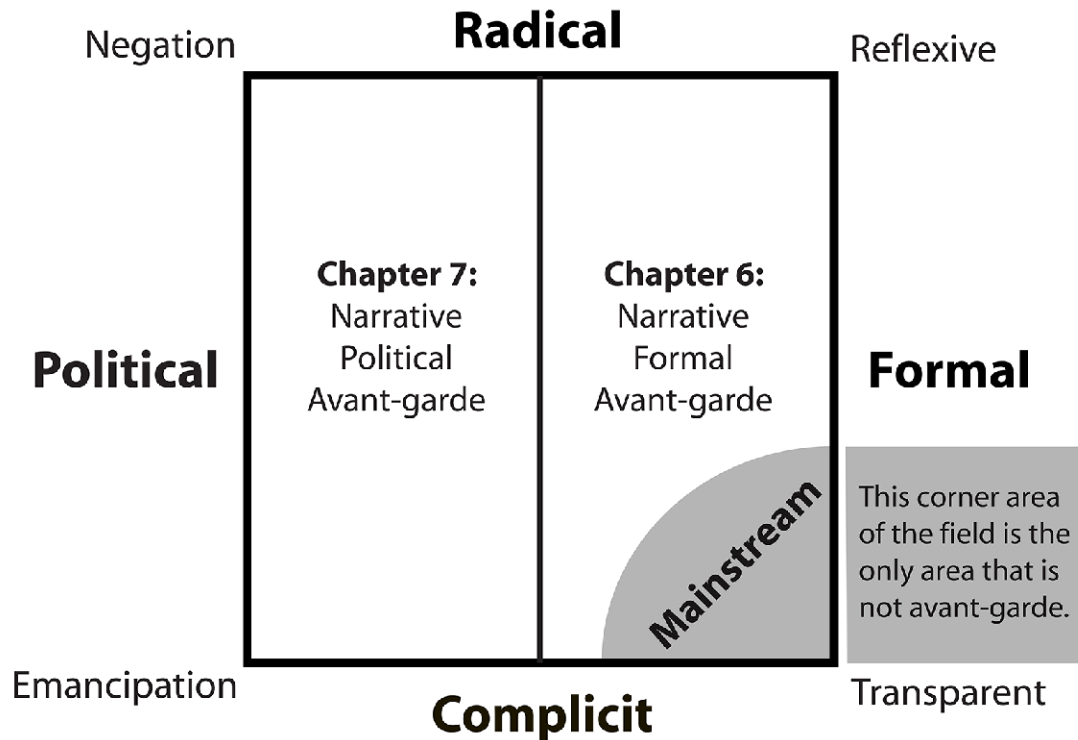


Figure 1.11 Chapters 6 and 7 examine the narrative avant-garde along formal and political perspectives.

Chapter 6: Narrative Formal

The narrative formal avant-garde expands how narratives and language are structured as well as engaged in both radical and complicit ways. For new media theorist Janet Murray (1997, 142), a “game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest.” The narrative formal avant-garde does not merely resemble the world through games; it disturbs that resemblance to make it stand out in relief. The historical precedent for this avant-garde is Russian formalism, a progenitor of various modern literary and aesthetic philosophies

in the twentieth century. The Russian formalists were the first avant-garde to formulate theories of medium specificity in general along with the autonomy of poetic language and literature in particular. Their goal was to pull “us into a dramatic awareness of language, [which] refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more ‘perceptible’” (Eagleton 1996, 3). The key tactics are to *defamiliarize* and *estrangle*. Interactive fiction (IF) is a treasure trove of narrative formal avant-garde games. In classic text adventures, the player types commands to control their avatar, manipulate objects, and advance the story. Because of the parser’s inability to accept the plasticity of everyday language, the effect of defamiliarization is often unintentionally realized.

Chapter 7: Narrative Political

The narrative political avant-garde uses popular entertainment to transform culture. Brecht, as noted earlier, was a prominent playwright after World War I who bent the force of theater toward political ends instead of uncompromisingly challenging the status quo. *September 12th* is a Brechtian game in which players experience the causal structure of the war on terror. Augusto Boal, a contemporary activist, founded the Theater of the Oppressed movement, which builds on the Brechtian model of political art. In Brecht’s theater, the audience is still passive. For Boal, spectators must breach the stage to tell their own stories. To distribute knowledge and power over the social “weapon of theater,” Boal traveled to rural villages and urban ghettos throughout Latin America. In Boalian games, players become programmers, easily reworking games. The long-term goal of the narrative political avant-garde is to democratize or liquefy artistic

mediums so anyone can reconfigure and use them. It will eventually be easy for the average person to make, remix, and share videogames, just as the average person can now make, remix, and share digital texts, photographs, videos, and music through social media.

Conclusion

This volume is not an exhaustive account of the videogame avant-garde. It is instead a map of some of the territory that the avant-garde is currently exploring with games. Although critics commonly label examples of videogame art and the avant-garde as a single type (political, formal, radical, narrative, expressive, critical, etc.), that kind of reductionism is misleading, as each of those strategies represents just one perspective on a sprawling, disordered, changing, and complex movement. The strategies of the avant-garde can only be realized and understood in collective, counteradaptive, and ad hoc ways. We must recognize that many kinds of forces perpetuate the status quo in game culture. If we wish to counter these forces, we must develop a diversity of tactics ranging across technical, aesthetic, and cultural strategies in order to break open game culture and advance games as an artistic medium.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Ziarek 2004, 89.

2. The next few sentences are argued at greater length in Lister et al. 2009, 270.
3. PopCap, the developer of *Heavy Weapon*, is famous for its *Bejeweled* series, which sold more than twenty-five million copies from 2001 to 2008. See Ward 2008.
4. Gonzalo Frasca, *September 12th* (2003).⁵ Quoted in Delap 2007, 1.6. Flow, as a media concept, dates at least back to Raymond Williams's observation that television maintains a flow within and between programs.

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Chapter 2: Radical Formal

Rise of Avant-garde Painting

Art Medium

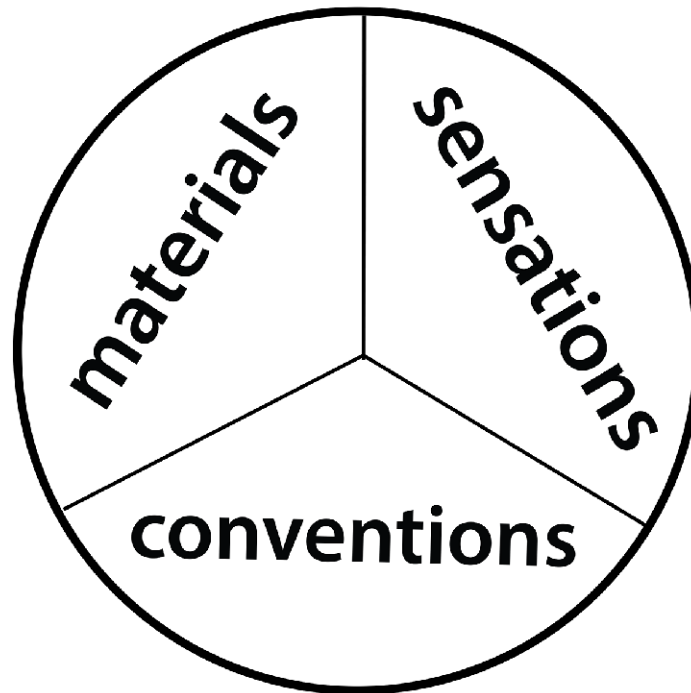


Figure 2.1 A graphic representation of an art medium's three formal dimensions: physical materials, social and cultural conventions, and sensations and aesthetic experiences.

The radical formal avant-garde both deconstructs and develops artistic mediums. Avant-garde painters historically revolutionized the medium of painting, just as formal avant-garde artists

cultivate and redefine the medium of games today. Whether they work in paintings or videogames, avant-garde artists play with a medium beyond easily consumable formulas.

The term *medium* has a different meaning in the discipline of media studies than it does in avant-garde art history. According to media studies, medium refers to material and technical supports (e.g., the medium of painting is the paint and canvas). According to the avant-garde, an artistic medium has three formal dimensions: material supports, the social and cultural conventions at work, and the range of sensations and aesthetic experiences afforded.¹ Formal artists (a term synonymous with formal avant-garde artists) can manipulate mediums in such diverse ways because they grasp them in three dimensions, according to their materials, conventions, and aesthetics. Each dimension is in play, which is why formal art can seem incoherent to casual players or novice viewers. As avant-garde artists collectively advance a medium, what was shocking or incoherent for one generation of viewers or players becomes conventional for the next. If we trace the historical rise of formal painting, we will be able to draw parallels that can help us identify how the formal avant-garde is emerging in today's videogames.

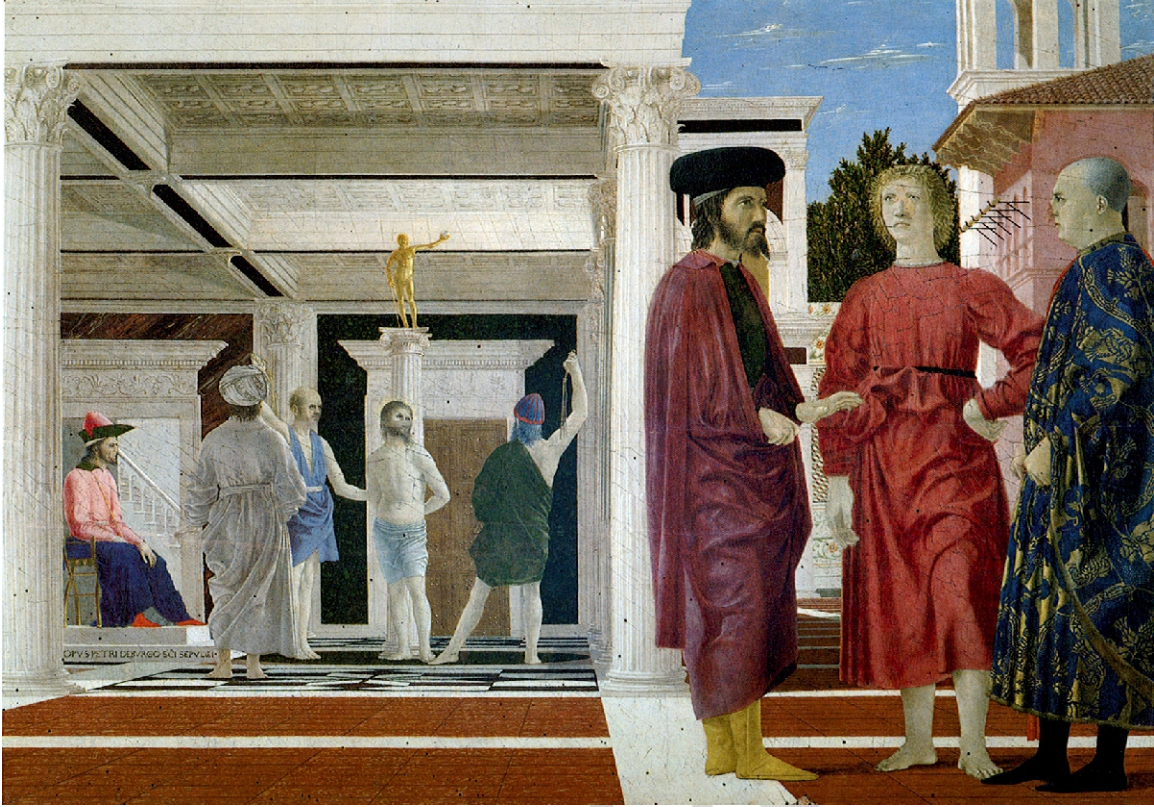


Figure 2.2 *Flagellation* (1455–1460) by Piero della Francesca is conformed by grid lines ruling its construction of space similar to those of the holodeck.

As mentioned in chapter 1, Alberti defined painting as a virtual window and explained many pivotal mechanics, such as the implementation of a vanishing point in a picture to achieve a convincing illusion of depth.² Renaissance artists perfected such techniques to achieve a gravitational sense of receding space. *Flagellation* (1455–1460) by Piero della Francesca presents a strong representation of 3-D space with grid lines organized to intersect at a central vanishing point. Human figures are rendered to be as strikingly naturalistic as possible—limbs and torsos are proportionally measured and

fleshed out with chiaroscuro, highlights and shading, and the almost-magical effect of foreshortening.

Renaissance painting fixed the viewer in a single, optimal position before the canvas. According to Alberti, the illusory plane on which the painted figures stand should feel like an extension of the floor on which the viewer stands. The closer the viewer is standing to the optimal viewing position, the stronger their feeling of immersion in the scene.³ The Renaissance conception of painting with its evenly ordered distribution of space represented the Creator's control over the world. God was reframed as the great celestial engineer, and it was as though "man was the eye for which reality had been made visible" (Berger and Spencer 1993, 172).

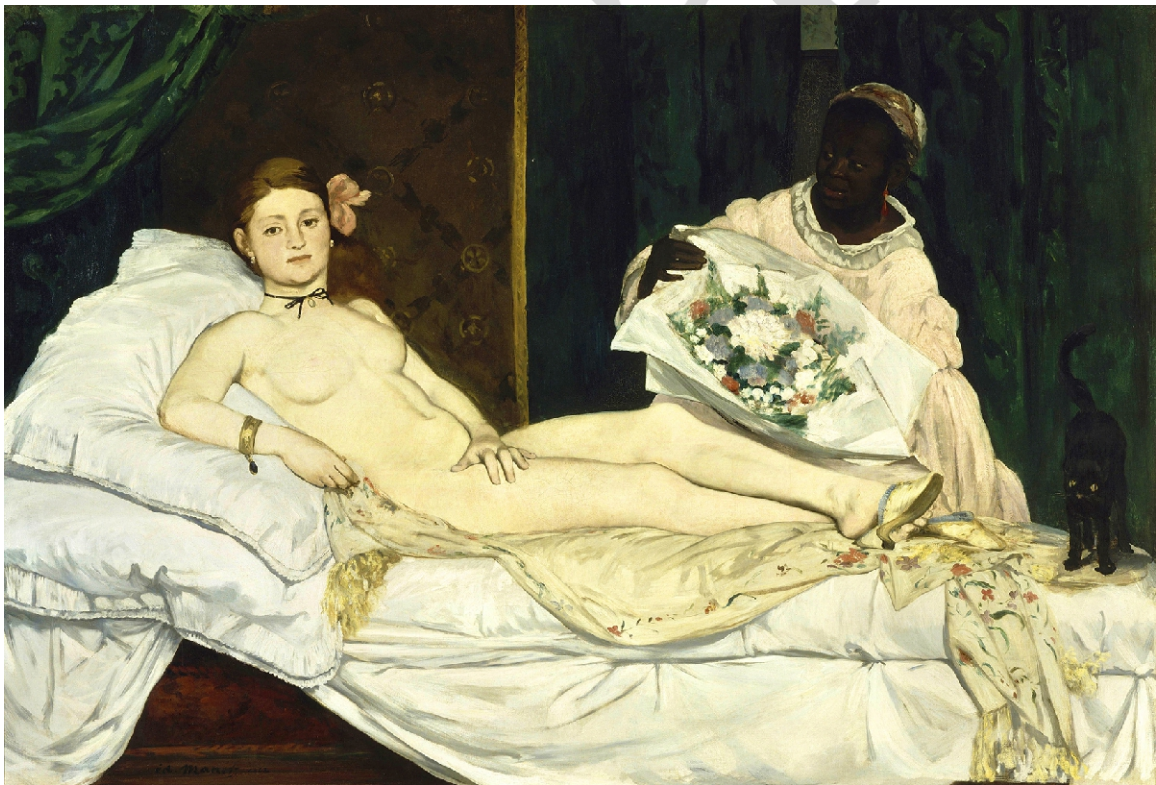


Figure 2.3 *Olympia* (1863) by Édouard Manet mixes historical and contemporary references by depicting a prostitute in a classical pose.

Manet was the first artist to consistently and systematically break up and reconstruct Renaissance conceptions of space and representation in painting. *Olympia* (1863) depicts a recognizable subject—a young, strong-minded prostitute—gazing in an unimpressed manner at the viewer. Unblended pigment is piled up here and there, while large swaths remain barren, dressed only in underwash. Jean Ravenel, an art critic at the time, lambasted, “What on earth is this yellow-bellied odalisque, this wretched model picked up God knows where and pawned off as representing Olympia?”²⁴ It was common to dismiss Manet as an unskilled dilettante because of his choice of subject matter and what appeared to be a lack of accomplished technique.

Thanks to maneuvering by his compatriot Claude Monet, Manet’s work hung in the Louvre within a generation, ultimately garnering popular recognition. Manet gave no story, framework, or reason for why he painted *Olympia* the way he did. Surrealist writer and theorist Georges Bataille (1955, 67) explains:

Her real nudity (not merely that of her body) is the silence that emanates from her, like that from a sunken ship. All we have is the “sacred horror” of her presence—presence whose sheer simplicity is tantamount to absence. Her harsh realism—which, for the Salon public, was no more than a gorilla-like ugliness—is inseparable from the concern Manet had to reduce *what he saw* to the mute and utter simplicity of *what was there*.

Bataille captures the beginning of an epistemic shift in modern art. Art did not need to persuade people or tell stories, whether these stories were biblical, beautiful, political, critical, or otherwise. In Manet's work, "the picture obliterates the text," and the force of "the picture is not in the text behind it but in the obliteration of that text" (ibid.). Painting had begun to defy the cultural conventions that had constrained it for hundreds of years.

It is important to situate the emergence of formal painting within the greater historical context of the last half of the nineteenth century. It coincided with the ascendance of modern science. Popular conceptions of the universe and humanity were exploding into a composite of theories in the modern age. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche observed that "God was dead"—reality itself was in play, malleable to the superhuman will. This opening gave Manet and his contemporaries the cover as well as impetus to reject a godly order dictating the rules of space and representation in painting. Each artist, as a kind of microcosmic god, could now rewrite the rules of the medium of painting *within each painting*.



Figure 2.4 *Autumn Rhythm* (1950), an abstract expressionist work by Jackson Pollock, presents a raw aesthetic experience of painting. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, New York.

Tempting as it may be to imagine an art medium as a wild beast that needs to be tamed by a skilled artistic master, the history of modern art is more ambiguous. The idea of artist as hero was both celebrated and undermined. Some art critics, such as Greenberg (1940), cast the modern painter as submissive to the medium, not the other way around: “The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to ‘hole through’ it for realistic perspectival space.” Modern painting continued to experience many transformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notably during the impressionist and cubist movements. By 1950, Pollock’s *Autumn*

Rhythm provided ample evidence of the dramatic nature of these transformations, foregrounding its own construction even more strongly than Manet's *Olympia*. The canvas is unprimed, exposing the naked weave of tan fabric. Black-and-white drips are pure and unmixed paint. As recorded traces of creative action, the bright streaks appear as they did when first striking the canvas, flung from Pollock's sweeping arm. Denied even abstract subject matter (such as the geometric forms of Paul Klee or Wassily Kandinsky), the viewer is left to float in a noisy, dancing visual field. There is no obvious way to position or construct oneself as a viewer. The viewer grapples with a raw aesthetic experience of painting.

Monopoly of Flow

Renaissance perspective is analogous to optimal gameplay flow. Just as perspective guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common formulas guide and control the player in traditional videogames by rewarding and regulating behavior along certain paths and goals. In a videogame, perspective is mobilized in time as well as function, so that game experiences can flow. Flow is "optimal experience," according to psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. While feeling flow, a person has the

sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces

such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous. (Csíkszentmihályi 1991, 71)

Csíkszentmihályi's examples of activities that afford flow are broad—playing chess, rock climbing, sculpting clay, and religious prayer. The degree and consistency of an experience's optimality depends on many factors, including the individual's motivation as well as the social framing and cultural purpose of the activity.

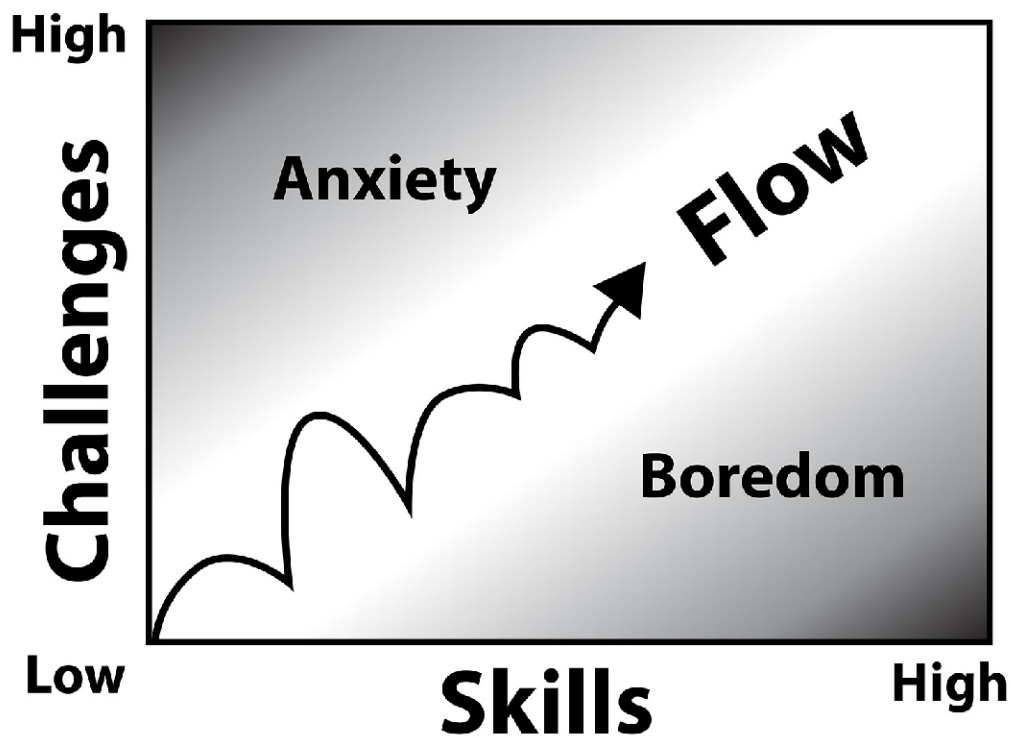


Figure 2.5 Author's reproduction of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's diagram of flow integrated with the ideas of Noah Falstein. A videogame with flow constantly pushes the player's abilities just enough to keep them fully engaged.

A dominant cultural convention of games is the expectation that they should flow. To encourage flow, players might be allowed to select their preferred level of difficulty before a game begins. To manage in-game flow, the system might use dynamic difficulty adjustment, periodically assessing whether a player is progressing too quickly or slowly. Based on those data, the game system can determine whether to increase or reduce enemy strength, add or remove contextual supports, and so on. Designers go to great lengths to develop systems with reliable flow. As game developer and theorist Jesse Schell (2008, 122–123) advises:

Once you notice a player going into flow during your game, you need to watch them closely—they won't stay there forever. You must watch for that crucial moment—the event that moves them out of the flow channel, so you can figure how to make sure that event doesn't happen in your next prototype of the game.

A host of playtest questions can be asked to determine if a game flows for its target demographic. Is the objective appealing and clear? Does the core mechanic feel juicy and pleasurable enough to continually perform? Are both positive and negative feedback as strong as they need to be? Is the difficulty curve surprising yet manageable? The upward arrow of flow (indicating that the game's challenge is increasing to match the player's increasing skill) must fluctuate, or the game will feel cold and calculated.⁵ Schell argues that the arrow of flow has a fractal-like quality: the experience of an entire game is congruent with that of a single level, which in turn is congruent with many fleeting

moments within a level. Despite the range of things to be considered when developing games that flow, the aim is always the same: players lose self-consciousness in the enveloping action.

Mainstream Games Are Formulaic Kitsch

If we situate mainstream videogames in relation to popular culture, we can appreciate and value the work of the videogame avant-garde in a more comprehensive way. In the twenty-first century, technoculture demands that we categorize ourselves according to computational productivity.⁶ Game theorist Mark Wark asserts in *Gamer Theory* that “the game has not just colonized reality, it is also its sole remaining ideal.” Mainstream games assimilate players into contemporary life and vice versa. Wark (2007, 1, 8) continues, “You are a gamer whether you like it or not,” and “we all live in a gamespace that is everywhere and nowhere. As Microsoft says: *Where do you want to go today?* You can go anywhere you want in gamespace but you can never leave it.”

Csikszentmihályi (1991, 81) agrees; games that flow are models for successful, happy cultures:

Games provide a compelling analogy to cultures. Both consist of more or less arbitrary goals and rules that allow people to become involved in a process and act with a minimum of doubts and distractions. . . . When a culture succeeds in evolving a set of goals and rules so compelling and so well matched to the skills of the population that its members are able to experience flow with unusual frequency and intensity, the analogy between games and cultures is even closer. In such a case we can say that the culture as a whole becomes a “great game.”

Games or cultures that foster flow allow people to be perfectly subjugated within their systems. When a system is designed with optimal flow, people forget that they are being subjugated: their doubts and distractions are kept to a minimum, and all human labor is positively absorbed into the system. Subjugation without guilt or humiliation is a universal fantasy, according to Michel Foucault, a twentieth-century theorist of social power structures. We want stern and solid constraints, but we do not want them to feel like constraints (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 97). We want the illusion of freedom—freedom to question the rules, but not the actual freedom to break and rewrite the rules of the systems in which we live, love, work, and play.

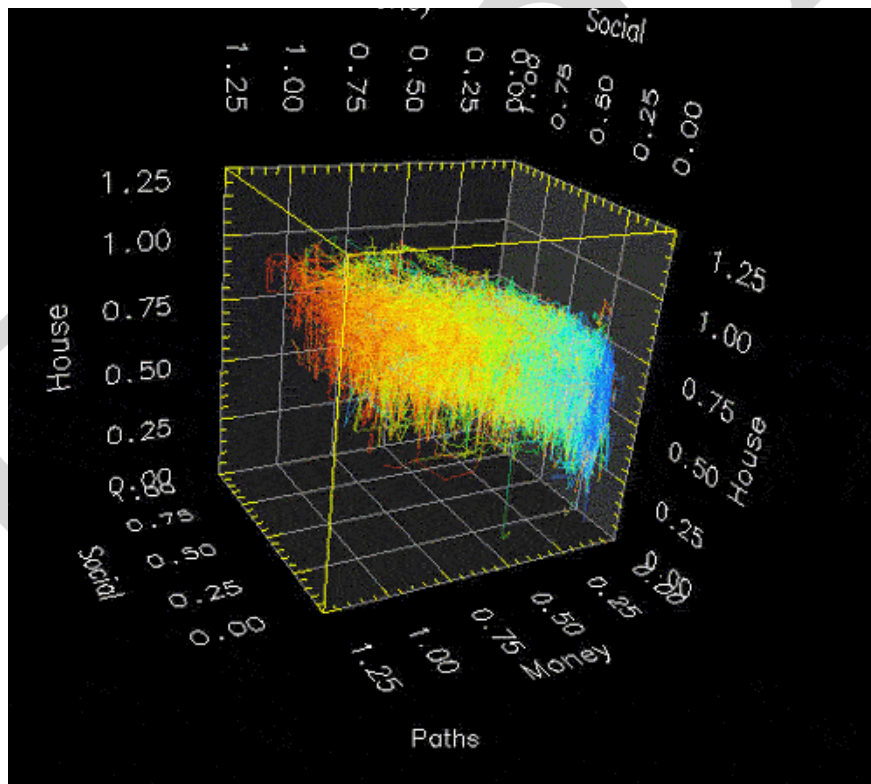


Figure 2.6 Will Wright's visualization of the "solution space" of *The Sims*. Image courtesy of Celia Pearce.

According to Wright, the most distinguishing feature of games as an artistic medium is that they can stimulate, contain, and manage our desires (Chaplin and Ruby 2005, 153). Players are given the illusion that they may freely act. Yet they will increasingly perform the few behaviors that lead to the most powerful engagement with the system. A game may thus be understood as a psychological-procedural matrix.

Pondering a data cloud of player choices from *The Sims*, Wright notes that you're getting a sense of what the more mainstream play pattern is. But basically you can see that there's kind of this trajectory that's fairly close, there's not a lot of variance in it. You can see the area that represents the house. So typically people build up their house, . . . and then at some point they just kind of level out. And there's definitely some point they reach where they don't really care about the house anymore.⁷

It is popular to assume that we can measure the progress of the evolution of games as an artistic medium by charting the expansion of their systemic complexity. From this perspective, Wright has perhaps single-handedly developed the medium more than any other designer, because he abstracted a playable model of everyday urban life in his best-selling franchises *The Sims* and *SimCity*. Wright advises game designers:

I try to keep focused on . . . enabling the creativity of the player. Giving them a pretty large solution space to solve the problem within the game. So the game represents this problem landscape. Most games have small solution landscapes,

so there's one possible solution and one way to solve it. Other games, the games that tend to be more creative, have a much larger solution space.⁸

Solution space is a way of quantifying the possibilities of play and rendering them tangible within a computational system. No matter how large or complex the system of a game is, if it is designed to transform the player into its ideal subject who can perform their part perfectly, then the game is a form of contemporary kitsch—the antithesis of formal avant-garde art.

Kitsch is the term used by Greenberg to describe easily consumable media.

Greenberg (1939) defined the US version of kitsch as

popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. . . . Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy.

The achievement of universal literacy comes at great creative cost. The potential of a medium is constricted because a universal system of representation is only possible through drastic oversimplification. Kitsch “changes according to style, but remains always the same.” It is harmful to popular culture because it is “mechanical and operates by formulas” (ibid.). Consumers of kitsch know exactly what to do and how to feel. Ironically, this is what some game enthusiasts say is necessary to make great games: the designer must orchestrate the emotions of the player in an intentional, predetermined

way. That is precisely Roger Ebert's (2007) criterion for great art: a film love scene crescendos with matching music; rain drenches the lovers; and everyone is spent and satisfied, including the audience.

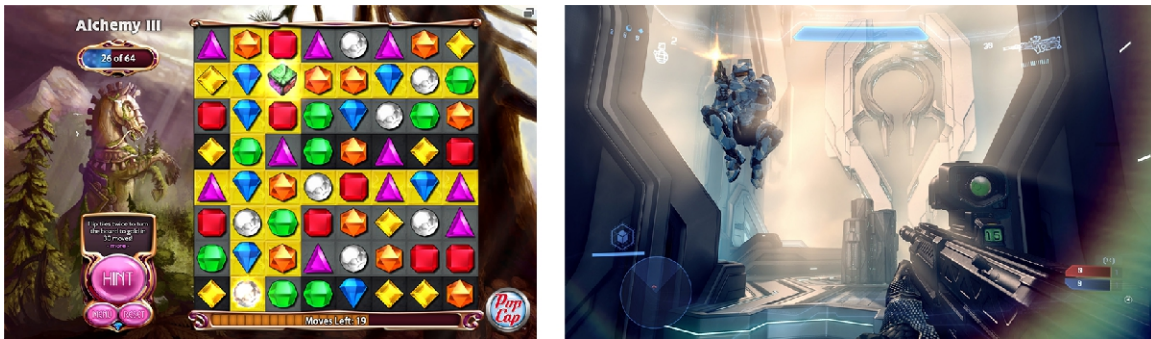


Figure 2.7 The match three and hyperreal shooter genres show the breadth in theme as well as gameplay that videogame kitsch represents. Image of *Bejeweled 3* courtesy of PopCap; image of *Halo 4* © courtesy of Microsoft Corporation.

Kitsch rapidly proliferated from the 1960s to the 1980s. Literary critic Matei Călinescu sees the global spread of kitsch into emerging markets as one of the best indicators that rising economies around the world are on their way toward modernization. In wealthy economies, Nintendo and Apple have produced and disseminated the most powerful kitsch products in recent history, easing millions of new gamers into the medium. Multinational corporations spread game literacy by standardizing formulas. In postmodern cultures, kitsch permeates as the norm. It leaks into every circuit of life in technoculture, from social networks to casual videogames. As Călinescu (1987, 8, 228) explains: “In the postmodern age, kitsch represents the triumph of the principle of immediacy—immediacy of access, immediacy of effect, instant beauty. . . . [T]he essence

of kitsch is probably its open-ended determinacy, its vague ‘hallucinatory’ power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy ‘catharsis’.”

Following this trend, Steven Spielberg has famously said that videogames will have attained high art cultural status “when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17.”⁹ Spielberg is really talking about how videogames can become better formalized into kitsch products—how they may come to cause catharsis on cue. Formal avant-garde art performs the opposite function by reclaiming the diversity and richness that universal kitsch strips away. It deviates from established formulas and cues by definition, requiring additional effort and work to play.

Breaking Up Flow



Figure 2.8 *Space Giraffe*, an avant-garde game by Jeff Minter, offers sublime gameplay. Image courtesy of Jeff Minter.

Fascinated by the medium itself, the formal avant-garde is guided by a “games for games’ sake” stance akin to that of the historical art for art’s sake movement. Jeff Minter, founder of Llamasoft, is a formal avant-garde artist working in the game industry. While developing the classic *Tempest* games, Minter also created surrealist pieces such as *Attack of the Mutant Camels* (1983) for the Commodore 64 and Atari 2600. Llamasoft released a formal avant-garde game, *Space Giraffe*, in 2007, available on Xbox Live Arcade for about five dollars. In this game, players manipulate a “space giraffe” along a geometric surface in a shoot ’em up similar to *Tempest*. Fire flowers and “sparkling grunts” throng the player in a pulsating purple space. Like modernist painting, *Space Giraffe* breaks conventions in ways that encourage players to reflect on the medium and fixed-shooter genre as they play. The familiar mechanics of flying around, shooting, and powering up are present, but they are also warped and shifting. When a “feedback monster” is killed, the structure of space itself appears to wrench in pain. “Rotors” are more surgical, disorienting the player by rotating the surface just underneath the giraffe. Odd combinations of attack/defend possibilities are in play—from steering bullets to psychedelic power-ups and off-the-grid jumps—and the function of each change according to context.

To normally achieve flow, players depend on adapting to challenges in games. *Space Giraffe* disrupts the player’s ability to adapt, however, because it is meta-challenging and deconstructs gameplay in real time. Although reviewers have complained of “trouble getting to grips with the basics of playing the game,” that is *Space Giraffe*’s best feature. The first press review of the game in *Xbox Magazine* rated it two out of ten:

“You’ll frequently die because you couldn’t pick out the pulsating assassin from the warped playfield floating over the throbbing LSD nightmare that is the background, which makes this game uniquely aggravating” (Amrich 2007). The reviewers are trying too hard. Minter explains: “You’ll always make progress in *Space Giraffe* . . . even as you die repeatedly” (Diamante 2007). *Space Giraffe* does not seek to produce flow; instead, the game creates a strange alchemy in which the play experience is simultaneously too hard and too easy. It is like playing a game in reverse. The game is riled up and raring to go with or without the player. You button mash, sit and watch the results for a second, swirl the analog stick around, and so forth—intermittently experimenting with and reflecting on gameplay as it progresses. It is easy to slip into a semi-disassociated state, and catch glimpses of yourself performing half outside and half inside the flow. Processing another pink Chernobyl or a throaty “mooOOOO!” becomes the core challenge. *Space Giraffe* frustrates the player who is seeking a traditional game experience, much as modernist painting frustrates viewers, past and present, who seek the traditional structures and dependable interpretations of traditional painting.



Figure 2.9 *Ctrl-F6*, a level of *Untitled Game* by Jodi, presents gamespace in a way that radically breaks convention, wavering along on the edge of the discernible. Image courtesy of Jodi.

Untitled Game (1996–2001) is another example of a formal work that is even more unconventional than *Space Giraffe*. Created by the artist group Jodi (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans), *Untitled Game* was featured in the landmark game art exhibition *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art*, curated online in 1999 by Anne-Marie Schleiner. *Untitled Game* is a collection of unusual game mods using the *Quake* game engine (the first fully 3-D engine). While the original *Quake* game

was a first-person shooter in a dungeon maze teeming with demon offspring, with *Untitled Game*, Jodi attempted to

erase the story and the figurative site of these games. The starting idea was to find very basic forms . . . [and get] a better view on how such a game is driven, what are the dynamics of the game. . . . On the one side, what we wanted to do was to undress *Quake* from all the skins, the graphics and on the other side we dress up the code a little bit. The code gets “something” so you—as the user—get some kind of idea of what the code is doing. (Hunger 2007, 152, 156)

Many kinds of “skin”—graphic, narrative, functional, and procedural—are peeled off the original game. Not only is the stuff that is contained in space peeled away, space itself is dissected. Jodi refers to game engines as “perspective engines,” which promote a way of seeing and thinking about space as well as organize player behavior to dominate that space, all via Euclidean mathematics. In *Untitled Game*, Jodi cuts the medium apart by deconstructing its perspectival engine.

In the levels of *Untitled Game* titled *ctrl-space*, *ctrl-9*, and *Ctrl-F6*, space is not presented in what we generally think of as 3-D or even 2-D. In *Ctrl-F6*, spatial representation chaotically erupts all over the screen as you push the W key to walk forward. After a minute, you lose the sense of walking; it feels more like swimming through data. Scroll the mouse, and a hyperdimensional checkerboard eats the screen in almost-discernible patterns. “Output far exceeds input”; the slightest nudge sends the chunky static reeling (Schleiner 2003). After a minute or two of playing *Ctrl-F6*, a prickly horizon line becomes detectable if the mouse is swept in a looping arc. A vague

ground plane takes up the lower portion of the screen. Just finding your bearings in this space is a hard-fought battle.

Ctrl-F6 replaces the visual projection of space with an almost-tactile sensation of its technology-afforded conventions, creating a contemporary sort of frottage. *Frottage* was a surrealist technique of Max Ernst, who created intricate visual patterns through paint and charcoal rubbings of rock faces and other textured surfaces. Paint stains the paper in “nauseating” ways that cause “unconscious irritations” for the viewer. *Untitled Game* affords similar unconscious irritations for the player as the wheeled computer mouse, plastic keys, and illuminated screen seem to push back against the player in one instant, and give way the next. Click-slaughtering enemies is possible in *Ctrl-F6*, but only if you can consciously recall and hold in the front of your mind exactly how conventions should work—for example, using the sound cues of footsteps to help interpret visual cues. Space is sensible beyond the usual conventions because the game leverages more of the sensual capacity of the player’s body, creating affectivity. Affectivity, according to new media critic Mark Hansen (2004, 7–8), is “the capacity of the body to experience itself as ‘more than itself’ and thus to deploy its sensorimotor power to” extend its communion with artistic mediums. While playing *Ctrl-F6*, the “wetware” of the player’s sensorimotor system becomes a kind of coprocessor that chugs along with the hardware. The more earnestly the player commits to playing the game, the more they will feel—rather than see—space.

It is important to differentiate *Untitled Game* from games that are merely mind bending, such as *Portal*. The difference is that *Portal* is based on clever dialogue,

exquisite lies, and spatial logic puzzles—all of which become progressively twisted as players climb the flow channel. In contrast, figuring out how to become the player of *Untitled Game* is its challenge. Like modernist painting, *Ctrl-F6* takes conventions that have become invisible and intuitive, and makes them extraordinary and visible again. The mapping of WASD movement and mouse looking, which have become naturalized and ingrained in regular players, are brought into high relief. In the way that modernist art served as art for artists, *Untitled Game* is truly a game for gamers and more “hard core” than any best-selling AAA shooter.

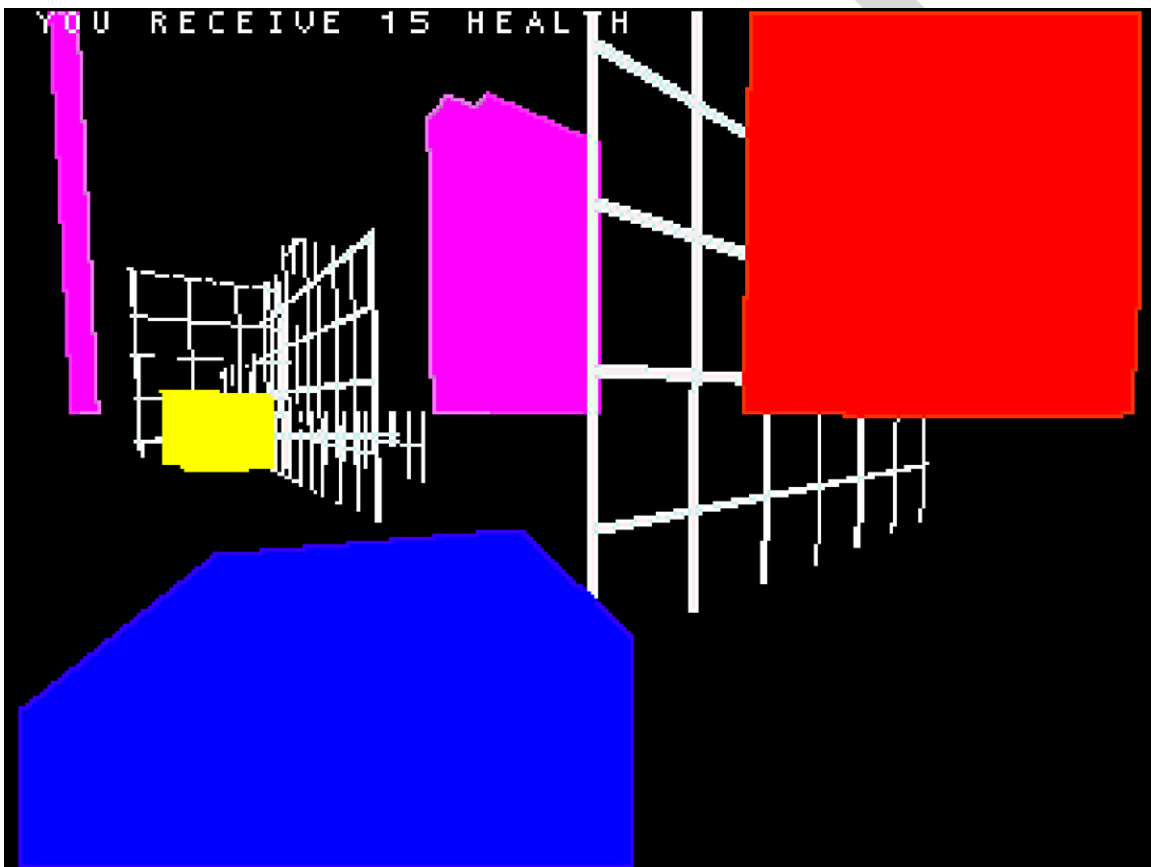


Figure 2.10 In Jodi’s *Slipgate*, visual space is out of sync with the collision space, enabling the player to play in the gulf between the two. Image courtesy of Jodi.

The level of *Untitled Game* called *Slipgate* is less visually tactile than *Ctrl-F6*. In fact, it represents its opposite: a black void sparsely occupied with Mondrian-like abstractions, white grids, and primary cubes. The invisible collision geometry of walls is out of sync with their graphic representations. This causes players to penetrate through the visual depiction of walls, but abruptly stop at the invisible walls several feet behind them. Walking around, you feel as though you are randomly slipping in and out of proper space, like a distracted ghost. Split between physics and graphics, one of your halves feels out of phase with the other.

A blue cube slides behind white lattices in the distance. Approach, and it turns to leap, ferociously snarling and barking. Attempt to flee, and it pursues, fatally assaulting you. So you restart the level. Through some experimentation, it becomes evident that when you collide with an invisible trigger at a specific location, the blue cube's programmed behavior is visibly disrupted and a seek-and-destroy function is called. The brutally simple logic is uncanny, funny, and startling. On the one hand, the experience of the game is an ordinary and familiar composite of collision detection, pathfinding, melee attacks, and sound effects. But on the other hand, it seems eerily threatening, like an aggressive drive stripped of any pleasure or desire. What is ultimately threatening about *Slipgate* is the symbolic violence the game applies against itself in the operational breakdown of gamespace. As a result, the role of the player breaks down as well, perhaps even to the extent that the player appears no different than the blue cube, from the

perspective of gamespace. Exert dominance, lose, or win. It does not matter, as long as the player moves, clicks, and becomes further enmeshed in the matrix.

The stroke of genius in *Slipgate* is locked up in the basement. If the player drifts into an invisible elevator to descend a level, dozens of primary cubes of various shapes and sizes mob and engulf them with grating color and sound effects. Then suddenly the player is returned to the tranquil, black beginning of the game, where the blue cube is pacing. The familiar itch pricks up—if you could just play perfectly, you might be able to order all this offensively boisterous, out-of-whack stuff. But of course that isn't possible. A drive we have naturalized as players is beautifully frustrated and exposed.

Like formalist avant-garde painting from the mid-twentieth century, *Space Giraffe* and *Untitled Game* both dissect game culture's fixation on graphics along with its dependency on logical Cartesian space, albeit utilizing differing strategies. Jodi formally interrogates the medium from outside the game industry. Jodi was the first to widely disseminate *Net art*, formal artworks made with Internet protocols and culture.¹⁰ Minter, by contrast, formally interrogates the medium from the center of the mainstream game industry. *Space Giraffe* uses "Neon," the default music visualizer for the Xbox 360, which was built by Minter himself. While *Space Giraffe* exemplifies excess, juicing so much performance from the graphics card that it ends up parodying itself in a campy fireworks show, *Untitled Game* strips the skin of the medium away, revealing the raw, procedural guts and players' drives pulsing at the core of the medium.

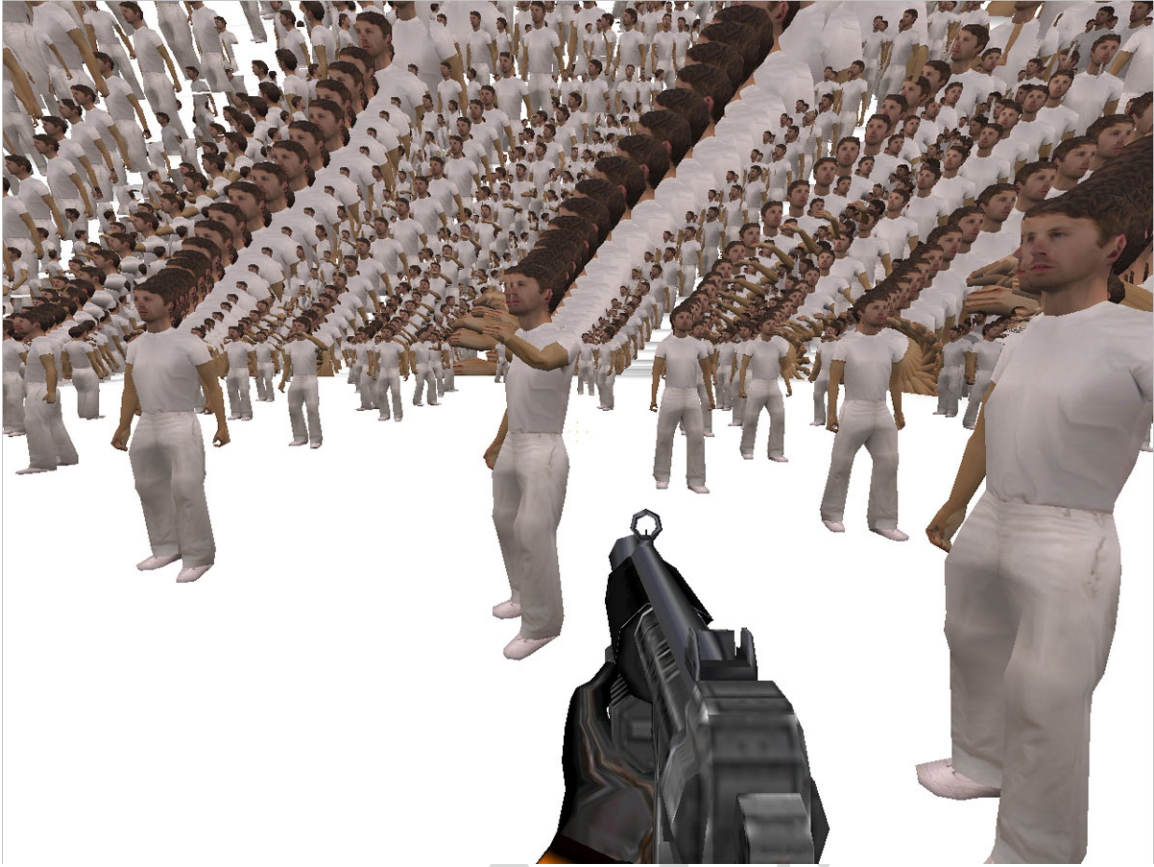


Figure 2.11 *Adam Killer* allows players to unravel the common shooter mechanic by supplying it in immediate, overflowing abundance. Image courtesy of Brody Condon.

Space Giraffe and *Untitled Game* are formal games that are meta-challenging to players because of their complex, reflexive nature. Other formal games can be too easy, too rewarding, and too empowering. Built with the *Half-Life* engine, *Adam Killer* (1999–2001) isolates a cause-and-effect loop in first-person shooter games so players can pry it apart in detail. Space is populated with an array of idling “Adams” wearing white clothes on a white floor and background. The unspoiled columns of breathing virtual bodies are neatly set up for a hearty slaughter. There is no waiting, no need to move or improve. As

the player rains bullets, images of Adam, bullet shells, and blood trails smear in the air. Shooting in mainstream games is limited and reinforced as an intermittent, rather than constant and monolithic, behavior. *Adam Killer* short-circuits the reward cycle into a nauseating overflow. The slaughter fantasy is supersaturated and held in place until it becomes an abject spectacle.

As psychologists Geoffrey Loftus and Elizabeth Loftus explain in *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Videogames*, there are two types of player reinforcement: continuous and partial. Continuous reinforcement occurs when a certain behavior is consistently rewarded, as when a rat presses a lever and a pellet of food always appears. Partial reinforcement is intermittent and sometimes random, encouraging persistence in a given, partially reinforced behavior. Through a concert of mechanisms that offer partial reinforcement, players learn to persist in their play, retry tactics on the fly, and occasionally rethink their overall strategy, pondering, for instance, whether a particular action might yield gold, a power-up, an enemy, or nothing at all.

Loftus and Loftus (1983, 16, 19) note that successful “game designers have apparently stumbled on the optimal strategy for reinforcing people,” so they will continue playing a game by offering unpredictable and irregular reinforcement: “For example, the player might achieve three complete boards in *Pac-Man* only once every ten times, or so.” Unlike *Pac-Man*, reinforcement and reward in *Adam Killer* are continuous. By involving the player in the constant construction and control of the representation, the game undermines its own illusion. The player pushes through the flow to come to grips with operations that are usually cloaked inside intermittent reinforcement. The player

prickles against their revealed unconscious drives that normally compel their actions in the dark.

Videogames, the Desperate Art

If videogames do not need to make players cry at level seventeen to become widely recognized as an artistic medium, what must they do? If we examine the historical process through which painting arose as a high art medium, we can gather some clues. In the romantic era, which peaked in the nineteenth century, art increased in cultural prominence to become Art. Art was finally classified alongside the cultural giants of Religion, Philosophy, and Science with a capital R, P, and S, respectively. The operative term had previously been *the arts*, an ancient concept meaning skill and mastery, as in the arts of war, love, and conversation. The ascent of Art in the romantic era was paralleled later by the ascent of painting in the modern period. Before modernism, the term painting did not connote grandeur and status as a medium in and of itself. It derived from the material choice, and was not especially distinct from clay or paper. Within modern Art, painting became a de facto medium—culturally transformed into Painting with a capital P.

A convergence of factors contributed to painting becoming Painting. With art becoming Art, it was only a matter of time before each medium would break from the pack and claim its own unique cultural domain. A common strategy that artists use to gain independence and prominence for a given artistic medium is to combine all its major genres within single works. The more this is attempted, the better. In so doing, a medium

can acutely distinguish itself from others, because each medium has a specific set of dominant genres and styles.



Figure 2.12 Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–1863) combined historical genres of French painting onto one canvas, which helped foster the concept of Painting with a capital P.

Manet contributed much to the transition from painting to Painting, from traditional realism to modernism. Manet's first major painting was *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass), completed in 1863. For its audience, *Le déjeuner*

appeared poorly executed, a mockery of established cultural conventions. It referenced Renaissance masters like Raphael, but scandalously placed a nude female model among men clothed in modern garb. The skin of the foreground nude appears washed out, as if lit by a flashbulb. The lone figure bathing in the background is a bit too large, resulting in perspectival inconsistency. Broad swaths of color in the background are loosely patched together, revealing the textured canvas. Although many of these attributes are at work in *Olympia* and other of Manet's paintings, the most prominent feature of *Le déjeuner* is its combination of all the major genres of painting within its frame. *Le déjeuner* contains still life, nude, landscape, contemporary portraiture, and classical style. Not only did Manet combine them but he also did so on a huge scale, using an expansive canvas measuring over eighty by a hundred inches. Paintings of this magnitude were reserved for grand "history paintings," such as major battles. But this odd, tranquil scene was not historical, at least not in the conventional sense. Instead, the painting presented the history of French painting itself.

Novelist Gustave Flaubert boldly observed that after *Le déjeuner*, "every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface" of Painting.¹¹ *Le déjeuner* was both a single work and a small museum of painting genres and techniques of the past few centuries. As art critic and historian Michael Fried (1984, 530), a protégé of Greenberg, explains: "Manet's multiple and often overlapping references to the art of the past [is] evidence of an attempt both to represent a certain vision of the authentic French tradition and to surpass that tradition in the direction of a universalizing or a totalizing of the enterprise of painting." *Le déjeuner* was a compendium of conventions that bumped

against each other in a single viewing experience. Through summary and synthesis, the viewer could gaze on many types of paintings. In this way, *Le déjeuner* demonstrated how painting could ascend as Painting with a capital P (Foster 2003, 68). The art establishment, salon patrons, and general public in France soon accepted Manet's move. Although Manet did not single-handedly transform the medium, his contributions have led to his association with the advent of modernist art.

How could all the genres of videogames possibly be similarly summarized in a single work? Based on interactivity models, Mark Wolf (2002) has identified forty-two genres in games:

Abstract, Adaptation, Adventure, Artificial Life, Board Games, Capturing, Card Games, Catching, Chase, Collecting, Combat, Demo, Diagnostic, Dodging, Driving, Educational, Escape, Fighting, Flying, Gambling, Interactive Movie, Management Simulation, Maze, Obstacle Course, Pencil-and-Paper Games, Pinball, Platform, Programming Games, Puzzle, Quiz, Racing, Role-Playing, Rhythm and Dance, Shoot 'Em Up, Simulation, Sports, Strategy, Table-Top Games, Target, Text Adventure, Training Simulation, and Utility.

It is daunting to imagine a summary vision of so many game genres. If we consider, in addition, the range of available technologies, platforms, and input devices, the challenge is further compounded. How could the global flow of games in technoculture, fractured across many dozens of categories and demographics, be brought together? One potential solution commonly offered by game enthusiasts is that videogames must have their own *Citizen Kane* as a gesture to advance Videogames with a capital V. Yet the problem is that

these advocates do not understand the entire implication of this proposal. *Citizen Kane* did combine many techniques and genres that film had developed up to 1941, and also presented a grand vision of film. It satisfied critics and popular audiences alike, although not immediately—there was a cultural lag in its acceptance, as with Manet’s work. From a formal perspective, however, *Citizen Kane* is a hybrid of kitsch and formal avant-garde art. Orson Welles used many formal “tricks,” but subsumed them into new, discernible patterns of melodramatic tragedy. Audience expectations were piqued and satisfied, swept along with the epic rise and fall of the protagonist.

The videogame that might correspond best to *Citizen Kane* would not be *Zelda*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Civilization*, *World of Warcraft*, or any of the other games nominated to fill this role by Jason Rohrer, Cliffy B, and other game enthusiasts. The closest exemplars to date would be more summative games, such as *Little Big Planet*, *Super Smash Bros.*, *Minecraft*, or *WarioWare*.



Figure 2.13 *WarioWare* references an array of historical conventions from Nintendo games, but collapses them into a flow of self-similar, fast actions.

The *WarioWare* franchise by Nintendo is a kitsch agglomerate of random bits of videogame history, especially that of Nintendo. Each *WarioWare* level is comprised of a series of quick microgames, each lasting a few seconds. The player must rapidly discern what classic convention is being called for and then immediately execute it. If a screen is reminiscent of *Zelda*, the player must run into the black cave. If *Punch Out* appears, the player should jab Mike Tyson's face.

The breakthrough of *Le déjeuner* was that it represented and synthesized a nude, still life, landscape, history painting, and portrait of daily life, all at the same time.

WarioWare is not an actual compilation of a shooter, sports, role-playing game (RPG), pinball, platformer, and so on. It is not an avant-garde game, because genre conventions are reduced to simple, similar mechanical actions. Analyzing a *WarioWare* microgame, Chaim Gingold (2005) observes that the "conventions of a RPG have been transformed into an action game," because the cursor blinks between menu items and the player must push the button to stop it at the right option. Rather than synthesizing multiple videogame genres and history into one avant-garde game, *WarioWare* combines and flattens them into a kitschy action game caricature of other genres.



Figure 2.14 *Arcadia*, by Gamelab, enables the play of four minigames simultaneously, totalizing the medium in a more comprehensive and diverse way than *WarioWare*. Image courtesy of Eric Zimmerman.

Arcadia (2003) presents an alternate example for comparison. It is an avant-garde game by Gamelab (2008a), a studio once headed by game designer Eric Zimmerman that has since closed. In *Arcadia*, four minigames are played simultaneously on four on-screen panels. Each panel periodically cycles through one of eight different minigames, which are simplified genre abstractions from the 1970s and 1980s: *Pong*, *Tetris*, baseball, racing, and so on. *Arcadia* is distinct from *WarioWare* with its more variegated space, time, and action. *WarioWare* consists of *microgames*, which last mere seconds. *Arcadia*'s

minigames can last up to a minute. In *WarioWare*, microgames are played sequentially in the same space or screen window. *Arcadia* splits the player across four flow channels rather than condensing play into a single channel. In *WarioWare*, players scramble to abstract the microgame logic in order to progress rapidly through a series of actions: jump, gas, select, forward, and so forth. In contrast, *Arcadia* is about *handling the difference between actions among game genres* versus collapsing them into the same flow of actions. The feel of flow in one panel leaks into other panels. For example, after getting into the shooter minigame, you might notice an enemy in the platformer panel and try to shoot it—and surprise yourself as you jump to your death. A near-miss *Pong* deflection spills over, and you overshoot a lane change in the racing minigame. You want to play *Arcadia* like an action game such as *WarioWare* and unify the system, but you cannot. The flow never stops. Dying in one panel does not let you rest in the others. Without this usual respite, you feel the awkward pressure of the flow yanking you onward.

Arcadia is a formal avant-garde work because it helps players appreciate how the medium shapes and structures flow across many genres. *Arcadia* separates minigames in the microcosm, while totalizing and synthesizing games as a medium in the macrocosm. Gamelab later released *Arcadia Remix* in 2006, apparently to rectify *Arcadia*'s deviation from the usual flow ideal.¹² Instead of presenting four minigames right away, a neatly manageable two are played for a long training period. *Arcadia Remix* is a less formal work than *Arcadia*. Although Gamelab touted it as more “addictive” than its predecessor, *Arcadia Remix* is actually less provocative, less fun, and certainly less avant-garde than

Arcadia. Like *WarioWare*, the remixed version of the game has a more manageable, transparent, and predictable flow.



Figure 2.15 *ROM CHECK FAIL* by Farbs is a formal avant-garde game that mashes up avatars, music, enemies, mechanics, and background screens. Image courtesy of Farbs.

ROM CHECK FAIL, created by Farbs in 2008, presents another avant-garde example for comparison. It is a mashup of microgames played in sequence, as in *WarioWare*—but there’s leakage between them, as in *Arcadia*. The leakage in *Arcadia* is a product of the player trying to unlearn their ingrained rituals of play. In *ROM CHECK FAIL*, the leakage is programmed within the game itself. On starting the game, you might find yourself as *Pac-Man*, careening through a *Super Mario Bros.* world. Ghosts from *Gauntlet* appear, and you transform into the car from *Spy Hunter* replete with the MIDI “Peter Gunn” theme powering the mood. The spacebar changes from blaster to jump button to sword jab. When mechanics are transcoded across microgames, you

occasionally gain an advantage. *Zelda* has a top-down perspective, so Link can walk around the entire screen and kill Goombas with ease. But this same transcoding that can yield advantages can just as easily yield disadvantage and death. One second you are the formidable *Asteroids* ship, and the next you are the *Space Invaders* laser cannon, trapped within horizontal movement, firing impotently upward as *Qix* strobes shock you from below.

ROM FAIL CHECK is an object-oriented work comprised of many avatars, enemies, environments, and forms of music. The unique nature of each object is exaggerated as it churns against the uneven nature of the collective. The genius of *ROM FAIL CHECK* is in how it summarizes Videogames with a capital V, taking a variety of objects from videogame history, carefully retaining many of their original characteristics, and bringing them together into a singular pattern of emergent gameplay. Each object is able to retain certain aspects of its original context as it performs in the new synthesized context of a heterogeneous collective.

Game enthusiasts are envious of film when they say that the medium of games needs its *Citizen Kane*. In “Movies, the Desperate Art,” film critic Pauline Kael (1959, 66) states, “Other arts show an internal logic in their development, the constant solving of aesthetic challenges; films have changed simply by following the logic of the market.” Kael was writing in 1956, when avant-garde and art house filmmakers suffered from Painting envy, not unlike the Film envy that videogame enthusiasts suffer from today. Similarly, at its dawn, photography pined to be painting. Still life photographs were set up for long exposures on chemical plates in an effort to make photos look like paintings.

One of the most important formal questions we can ask is one that mainstream culture already poses: How can great games be made? Formal artists ask the same question, but frame it more openly and beyond the kitsch parameters of mainstream videogames. Just as formal avant-garde painters revolutionized the medium of painting, formal avant-garde videogame artists cultivate and redefine their medium, playing with the materials, conventions, and sensual aesthetics of videogames beyond easily consumable formulas. If mainstream culture ignores these artists, in much the same way as Kael suggested that mainstream culture ignored avant-garde film and filmmakers, then games will continue to simulate technoculture itself and be no more than commercial products constrained by market forces. If game culture—and indeed mainstream culture—is willing to appreciate, play, and create games beyond the flow, though, then the next ascendant medium—whatever that technocultural Frankenstein might be—will suffer no end of Videogame envy.

Endnotes

1. Critical theorist Fredric Jameson (1991, 67) describes an art medium similarly, “The word *medium* . . . now conjoins three relatively distinct signals: that of an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production, that of a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine; and that, finally, of a social institution.”

2. The loaded term *realism* is often used to describe this style of representation. The realism of the Renaissance is doubly relevant because the game industry has been following an analogous program for decades. The ghostly grid that merely guided the drawing of perspective is now the emblematic feature of computer graphics, applications like Maya, and game engines like Unreal.
3. Standing to the side warps the effect. In contrast, during the Middle Ages, a viewer could stand to the side of a painting and not have the same sense that their viewing position was wrong.
4. Quoted in Bataille 1955, 61.
5. Noah Falstein (2005) first fleshed out the idea in game design terms that there must be an irregularity to the flow line.
6. In the 1980s, Jameson (1991, 16) noted that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.” Time was the dominant cultural category of the nineteenth century and space was the dominant cultural category of the twentieth century.
7. Quoted in Pearce 2001.