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LEGITIMACY OF VIDEO GAMES AS A FORM OF ART

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ABSTRACT

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Video games' status in the field of communication has long been a subject of debate. Some wish video games to be classified as a form of art, others only as an extension of the long tradition of games and toys. The purpose of this essay was to collect, in one place, what has already been said regarding this debate, and to clarify the vocabulary and set a basis for critical discussion on video games' placement in the field of communication. The literature includes articles from several game developers and journalists, game research papers, and mostly entry-level literature on aesthetics and philosophy. No clear consensus was found within the industry, art world or media opinions. Games already seem to meet most of the requirements often set for art, though distinction must be made between popular art and fine art, and there was nothing in particular to be found that structurally excludes games from someday becoming art. Before the art form can be called mature, work by games media, consumers and developers needs to be done, but the evolution of the medium seems inevitable.

Keywords: Video games, esthetics, art

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Videopelin sijoittumisesta viestinnän kentällä on kiistelty pitkään. Jotkut haluaisivat määritellä videopelit taidemuodoksi, toiset pitävät niitä vain jatkeena pelien ja lelujen pitkälle perinteelle. Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus oli kerätä yhteen paikkaan, mitä aiheesta on aikaisemmin kirjoitettu, sekä selventää sanastoa ja luoda pohja kriittiselle diskurssille videopelien sijoittumisesta viestinnän kentällä. Tietopohja perustuu pelinkehittäjien ja pelitoimittajien artikkeleihin, pelien akateemisiin tutkimuksiin, sekä estetiikan ja filosofian perusteoksiin. Pelialan, taidemaailman tai median näkemyksistä ei ollut löydettävissä selkeää konsensusta. Pelit tuntuvat jo täyttävän useimmat taiteelle asetetuista vaatimuksista, vaikkakin täytyy selkeästi erotella korkeakulttuuri ja populaarikulttuuri. Ei löytynyt mitään rakenteellista syytä, joka sulkisi pelit pysyvästi taiteen ulkopuolelle. Vaatii vielä työtä median, kuluttajien ja kehittäjien tahoilta ennen kuin taidemuotoa voi kutsua kypsäksi, mutta kehitys vaikuttaa väistämättömältä.

Asiasanat: Videopelit, estetiikka, taide

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1 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI: Artificial intelligence.

FPS: First-person shooter.

GDC: Game Developers Conference

MDA: Mechanics-dynamics-aesthetics framework.

RPG: Role-playing game.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Never is a long, long time

*HAVING ONCE MADE THE STATEMENT ABOVE (VIDEOGAMES CAN NEVER BE ART), I HAVE DECLINED ALL OPPORTUNITIES TO ENLARGE UPON IT OR DEFEND IT. THAT SEEMED TO BE A FOOL'S ERRAND, ESPECIALLY GIVEN THE VOLUME OF MESSAGES I RECEIVE URGING ME TO PLAY THIS GAME OR THAT AND RECALL THE ERROR OF MY WAYS. NEVERTHELESS, I REMAIN CONVINCED THAT IN PRINCIPLE, VIDEO GAMES CANNOT BE ART. PERHAPS IT IS FOOLISH OF ME TO SAY "NEVER", BECAUSE NEVER, AS RICK WAKEMAN INFORMS US, IS A LONG, LONG TIME. LET ME JUST SAY THAT NO VIDEO GAMER NOW LIVING WILL SURVIVE LONG ENOUGH TO EXPERIENCE THE MEDIUM AS AN ART FORM.
(EBERT 2010A, RETRIEVED 15.8.2015)*

The inspiration for this thesis came in the fall of 2014 when I happened to read a blog entry by a late movie critic Roger Ebert (2010a, retrieved 15.8.2015), who stated that video games could never be art. Ebert also questioned the need to define games as art, wondering if it is just a means for gamers to justify their hobby to their close ones who think it's just useless fun. He isn't alone with this sentiment. Game designer Hideo Kojima, the creator of Metal Gear series compared the video game industry to the automobile industry as a service provider rather than artistic endeavour (Gibson 2006, retrieved 15.8.2015). If even some game developers clearly don't consider themselves as makers of art, is the question of artistic legitimacy relevant at all?

I'm an avid gamer and a video game artist myself, and while I can appreciate the incredible amount of craftsmanship put into game development, I too had trouble deciding if games can truly be considered art just yet. The way I see it, video games are at the stage of their history where the movie industry was somewhere between the 1900's and the 1920's, breaking through from a medium of mere entertainment and gimmickry, into the realm of expression of human emotions. Despite my immense respect for Mr Ebert, when it comes to art of cinema, I can't help but imagine that part of his sentiments about video games had to do with a lack of insight into the video games industry. I wanted to find out if there's a seed of truth in his views, and if there's at least a possibility of video games becoming a legitimate form of art some day in the future.

2.2 Are video games art?

The primary question I'm trying to answer here is whether video games can be presently defined a form of art. I also want to find out if there are some elements in the very definition of art or video games that will forever prevent any video game ever being art. What are the boundaries of the definitions of art and video games?

This thesis is divided into three parts. First I collect together what we already know about video games and art. I will dissect the definition of *video games* and define boundaries for the term. In the *Realm of art* chapter, I will discuss some different views on the meaning of *art*. The latter, being its own branch of science, I will only take a brief look at, and take into account just the prevailing views that are most practical for step-by-step analysis. I will attempt to find some boundaries on what can be considered as art and what by definition cannot. After that, I take a look at what can and what must be done in order to achieve the legitimacy.

During the course of this essay, I will occasionally compare video games to the history of cinema. I will not dwell too long on the historical details however, since that is a field too large for the scope of this thesis. I will not use the cinema as a benchmark for narrative quality or aesthetics for video games, because games have a potential to evolve into very unknown directions, and the narrative devices they use are not sufficiently comparable. Take, for example, the emerging technologies of virtual reality. Video games can use this technology to create a truly unique feeling of immersion in a make-believe world, but we have no way of knowing how this will change the industry (Hern 2015, retrieved 6.1.2016). The movie industry has little use for such technology, except for blocking out distractions while watching. The cinema is the best historical example we have of a totally new mainstream form of art that embraces the modern technology. Peter Von Bagh (2009, 8) has said: "The cinema is special amongst the arts. It is the only form of art whose moment of birth we have had a close contact with. Music, theatre and written word were born thousands of years ago. Cinema combines the other forms of art." I would argue that Bagh's description of cinema could be applied to video games too. Do we really have the front-row seats watching the birth of a new art form?

Finally, in the case studies, I will analyse three games, applying the framework I established in previous chapters. I will take three very different kinds of games, break them apart and try to reach a conclusion on if they can be considered art, and if so, if they can be considered fine art. This brings me to my secondary motivation for this thesis.

Where are the art critics of video games? Sure, we have thousands of video game journalists and amateur reviewers who judge games by their gaming aspects. We get opinions on gameplay, graphics, fun, challenge and technology. The word gameplay is thrown around a lot in these reviews, with little understanding of its exact meaning. That's just one example I'm going to discuss in the first chapter. We need a precise vocabulary for intelligent discussion on games. There might be the occasional insight on visual arts, audio or narrative, but as Ernest Adams (2006, 77) has said, in order to institutionalise video games as a form art, we need to have art reviews about video games. In the case studies I attempt to create a basis for artistic evaluation of video games. The cases are built upon my own interpretations, which, while based on preceding research, should not be taken as stone cold facts.

In the discussion I will situate the video games in the art world and take a brief look at the future of video games as an art form. I will also discuss where the need for artistic legitimacy stems from and if it really matters.

3 DISSECTING VIDEO GAMES

In this chapter I'm going to dissect the concept of *video game*. Similarly to art, the borders of video games, board games, simulators and toys are vague and fleeting. In order to properly find out if video games can be art, we need to have proper terminology to see if the case we're looking at is even a game.

3.1 What is a video game?

Oxford Dictionaries (Retrieved 7.1.2016) define *video game* as "a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display." This is a very broad definition, so I should break it apart. What is a *game*? Yet again, citing Oxford Dictionaries, it is "an activity that one engages in for amusement."

Game designer Matthew Gallant challenges the dictionary definitions of video games precisely because of this demand for amusement. Video games these days are so much more than amusement. His definition of a video game is a software product that needs to be played on a video screen, have player interaction and provide challenge and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. (Gallant 2009, retrieved 3.1.2016) There is an argument to be made whether *computer game* would be a more appropriate term because of the existence of video games that don't use a video screen. In the comments section of his article "Defining video games", Gallant acknowledges that while some games may not have visuals, omitting the term *video screen* broadens the definition too much (2009, retrieved 3.1.2016). I'm inclined to agree, as omitting the term would open the door for all kinds of electronic games, like electronic board games which are not relevant to this discussion. In Finnish academia, one commonly used term is *digitaalinen peli*, which translates literally to *digital game* (e.g. Mäyrä 2002, Ermi & Mäyrä 2005, Sotamaa 2009). Still, it certainly seems that the most widely used term globally is *video game*. It's also the word Petri Saarikoski uses in his 2000 article in *Uusi media ja arkielämä* (in English: *New media and everyday life*). From this point on, I'm using *video game* interchangeably with *digital game* and *computer game*, unless otherwise specified.

Getting back to the matter of amusement, in his 2014 article in *The Guardian*, Keith Stuart makes a notion that games are not always about the fun. He reminds us that Navid Khonsari is making a game about 1979 Iranian revolution and Ryan Green is making a game about his family's struggle with their youngest son's cancer. (Stuart 2014, retrieved 7.1.2016) Even when we're not talking about serious games, the word *fun* isn't always the one we immediately associate with the games we want to play. In many cases the game doesn't immediately feel fun, on the contrary, it might feel stressful and frustrating. In those cases it is the feeling of relief and accomplishment in the end that keeps us playing. (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005, retrieved 8.1.2016)

Games researcher Jesper Juul (2005) has recognized six features that are similar in what we call *games*. In his *classic game model* he introduces the following features as necessary and sufficient for something to be a game:

1. A rule-based formal system;
 2. with variable and quantifiable outcomes;
 3. where different outcomes are assigned different values;
 4. where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;
 5. the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;
 6. and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.
- (6 – 7.)

The first five points are quite self-explanatory, but I should expand a little on the optional and negotiable consequences. Juul (41 – 43) uses negotiability in a sense that the real-life consequences of the game are mostly harmless and generally do not lead to any physical harm, such as death. Boxing and car sports may cause injury but the organizers generally try to minimize the risk, and the audience might like some optional violence but wouldn't like to see someone die as a cause of it. Games in general are thus voluntary activities. Additionally Juul (52 – 54) also admits some limits in his model, saying the six points are not all there is to games, nor do they take every possible variation of computer games into account. The element of computer software modifies the model in several ways compared to board games, for example: rules are upheld by the computer rather than players themselves, the computer determines the outcome, some open-ended simulations remove implicit goals, the player effort changes drastically with the computer making the calculations, and games are no longer necessarily bound to any specific time or place.

The classic game model depicts and defines the concept of *game*, but it must be expanded upon to define a *video game*. Nicolas Esposito (2005, Retrieved 6.1.2016) gives the following definition: “A videogame is a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story*.” Play is the element that sets video games apart from other forms of computing, the feeling of joy, challenge and immersion. Players are also expected to do, not just watch, which is very different compared to most other media, like literature, music and movies. Audiovisual apparatus refers to input devices, computing and output devices like a monitor. That is a major difference between video games and board games. A story is not mandatory for every game, but video games are always systems of simulation. A player always manipulates virtual elements, not the real world. (Esposito 2005, retrieved 6.1.2016) This manipulation of virtual elements, together with rules, creates what is popularly called *gameplay*. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008, 102) describe *gameplay* as dynamics that emerge when rules and game geography play together. The rules and geography of *Super Monkey Ball* keep the pacing of the game hectic and competitive, while different combinations of rules and geography in *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings* can at times make it hectic or sometimes chess-like and deliberative.

As you can see in Esposito’s paper, one part of the element of *play* is *immersion*. What does it mean and what is its role in video games? According to Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, immersion is one of the key components of *gameplay* experience and the interactivity of the *gameplay* is the main cause of immersion. (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005, retrieved 8.1.2016) Ermi and Mäyrä identify three categories of immersion. *Sensory immersion* is related to the audiovisual presentation of the game. Players tend to immerse themselves in realistic representations of virtual worlds. A unique form of immersion for games is *challenge-based immersion*. It is the feeling of immersion invoked by facing challenges based on motor skills or mental skills. The third form of immersion is *imaginative immersion* commonly found in literature. It is when the player is absorbed within the story and the setting of the game and identifies with the characters. These forms are often overlapping but usually present in all video games. Novels and movies can provide one or two of these forms, but with the challenge-based immersion requiring interaction and active participation, only video games are able to evoke all three. (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005, retrieved 8.1.2016)

Possibly the most widely spread definition amongst the video game community is a one-liner by Sid Meier: “A Game is a series of interesting decisions.” (Alexander 2012, retrieved 4.3.2016) This suggests that decision-making, choice and interactivity are important elements of video games. Some games like *Super Mario* or *Tetris* are successful games while only giving a player

very limited choices. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008, 43.) They're interactive, and revolve around fast paced decision-making. In his 2002 talk in Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference in Tampere, Finland, Greg Costikyan didn't bring up the word choice so much, but rather treated interaction in games as decision-making, interaction with a purpose. What separates games from toys, are goals, set by players themselves. He refers to two games by Will Wright: *SimCity* and *SimEarth*. Both are simulation-based toys, but what allowed *SimCity* to become an iconic, successful title with many sequels, while *SimEarth* was all but forgotten, was the fact that *SimCity* let the player choose their own goals. *SimEarth*, on the other hand, ran its predetermined course without enough variables for different endgames. (Costikyan 2002, 12 – 13). *SimEarth* could thus be considered a pure simulation, you could let it run its course and still "win" the game. There seems to be a certain aspect of *choice* in the example of *SimCity*. Jesper Juul (2005, 43) also brought up *SimCity* in his classic game model. He was more conservative with his borders, stating that open-ended simulations like *SimCity* are not classic games because they don't have goals, valorisation of outcome. He places these games in the borderlines of his model, lending a little leeway, in that the player still wants to invest effort and cares about the outcome in these games.

Robin Hunicke's, Marc LeBlanc's and Robert Zubek's (2004, retrieved 15.3.2016) MDA framework is an abstraction that divides games into three dimensions: mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics. *Mechanics* refer to the rules and basic code of the game. *Dynamics* are the mechanics put into work as actual events in the game and the situations they create. Aesthetics are the emotional responses in players evoked by the interaction with the game's dynamics. Meier's definition and the MDA framework are more useful in the process of game production rather than academic research. Still it's important to make the notion that these are qualities not present in most other medium than games. Video games are dynamic systems, while novels and movies are linear structures. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008, 43 – 45.) In fact, being a rule-based system is one of the prerequisites for a game, according to Juul's (2005) classic game model.

Based on the various definitions above, we can construct a checklist for video games. While having a strong basis on Juul's (2005) classic game model, most of these elements are not prerequisites, but merely an unscientific tool to quickly address the possible borderline situations in my case studies later on.

Common characteristics of video games:

- Computer software that utilizes an audiovisual apparatus.
- Player's interaction influences the outcome.
- Some outcomes are considered preferable.
- Provides challenge and/or aesthetic response.
- Evokes an emotional response.
- Dynamic rule-based system.
- Gives the feeling of immersion.
- Voluntary activity.
- Often has a narrative.

3.2 The question of choice

Roger Ebert had a short debate in his blog with a horror novelist Clive Barker in 2007, regarding the video games' status as art. I quote an excerpt from Ebert's response post:

Barker: I think that Roger Ebert's problem is that he thinks you can't have art if there is that amount of malleability in the narrative. In other words, Shakespeare could not have written 'Romeo and Juliet' as a game because it could have had a happy ending, you know? - -

Ebert: - - I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist. Would "Romeo and Juliet" have been better with a different ending? Rewritten versions of the play were actually produced with happy endings. "King Lear" was also subjected to rewrites; it's such a downer. At this point, taste comes into play. Which version of "Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare's or Barker's, is superior, deeper, more moving, more "artistic"?

Barker: We should be stretching the imaginations of our players and ourselves. Let's invent a world where the player gets to go through every emotional journey available. That is art. Offering that to people is art.

Ebert: If you can go through "every emotional journey available," doesn't that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices. - -

(Ebert 2007, retrieved 15.9.2015)

Ebert and Barker seemed to have somewhat imprecise vocabulary regarding the concept of choice in video games. I will address the question of malleability in the narrative diminishing the artistic value later, but first I want to clear up some terminology regarding the said malleability.

Petri Saarikoski (2000, 139) writes that the varying levels of interactivity in games deceive you to believe in having freedom, which in reality is always limited by programmers. This refers to an interactive freedom. You get an illusion that you are free to roam around and choose your actions, while still operating under very strict rules. This relative freedom is present in every game. It is, after all, an absolute prerequisite for a video game to have some interactivity (Costikyan 2002). But I think Ebert and Barker were not talking about interactivity, but are instead thinking of some kind of *branching narrative*, an idea that your choices open up a new chain of events ultimately leading to a different ending. At the time of their debate there were some examples of these mechanics, like the *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces 2*, a game that had two possible endings, an ethically good ending and an ethically bad ending. Some games have more variables and more endings, but the situation could well be what Ebert thought at the time: some of the alternative endings in games are examples of "bad taste".

Furthermore, we have to distinguish *choice* from *problem*. Game designer James Portnow (2009, retrieved 15.3.2016) discussed this issue in an article in Gamasutra. He thinks that developers' habit of mixing up choice with problem solving is hindering the development of video games into a proper artistic medium. *Problems* are clear-cut multiple-choice decisions, where it is possible to choose the optimal course of action to reach a desired goal, whereas making a *choice* is a situation where the options are equal or impossible to compare with numbers. Choosing the best weapon for an upcoming fight in an action game is a *problem* that has one inarguably best option. Choosing whether to kill one child to save thousands of lives is moral *choice* with unknown repercussions.

In 2012 Telltale Games published *The Walking Dead*, a successful episodic adventure game series applauded by many for its branching narrative and freedom of choice, or at least an illusion

of such. What Telltale did with their narrative was the opposite of Barker's example of Romeo and Juliet with a happy ending. Telltale gave players a wide range of variation in the narrative, but what they didn't give, was a happy ending. Most of the players' choices are between two bad options, and in the end you're probably going to feel miserable, in one way or another. *The Walking Dead*, like many other Telltale games, are prime examples of giving the player choices instead of problems. Telltale's developers speak of a *tailored narrative*, by which they mean, that the narrative isn't driven by AI systems, but hand-crafted by writers and designers to respond to players' decisions (Gamasutra 2013, retrieved 10.2.2016). They have thus made sure that different "emotional journeys" are not necessarily devalued. Many of the choices you make do have real influence on the story, but on the second playthrough, when you intentionally make different choices, you will realize that some of the choices didn't really matter. Some choices are superficial, but they serve a purpose of making the player feel in control. It isn't necessarily the actual consequence of a choice that matters, but the weighing of the options and making the choice. This also supports the idea that the branching storyline isn't necessarily about offering a plethora of different emotions; it can be carefully crafted to retain a focused narrative and satisfying closure, just as in movies and literature. In fact, if a game is too open-ended, it might fall into borderline cases of games, resembling a software toy (Juul 2005).

In the case of *Dear Esther*, a *Half-Life 2* mod (player-made modification for an existing game) first published in 2008, the narrative malleability is minimized into a level where some might question if it's really a game at all. The only choice in *Dear Esther* is whether you choose to walk forward and unravel more of the story, or you make no progress and stop playing. It is close to the same level of freedom as watching a movie. What make *Dear Esther* a game are the other elements, such as the fact that it's a computer software that has interaction, narrative and immersion. It'd be easy to rush into the conclusion that the game has no gameplay, but the creator Dan Pinchbeck himself thinks that in this case, the story is gameplay (Pinchbeck 2012, retrieved 10.2.2016). *Dear Esther* falls short in several aspects with regards to the classic game model: a player doesn't exert a significant effort to influence the outcome and the outcome is not variable or quantifiable (although the narrative has several random variations). The game has rules, it evokes a strong emotional response through its narrative, it has some interactivity albeit negligible, and it is voluntary activity. So the spectrum of choice, interactivity and the branching of narrative in video games is wide indeed.

4 REALM OF ART

4.1 The walls of art

ART

ART [MASS NOUN] THE EXPRESSION OR APPLICATION OF HUMAN CREATIVE SKILL AND IMAGINATION, TYPICALLY IN A VISUAL FORM SUCH AS PAINTING OR SCULPTURE, PRODUCING WORKS TO BE APPRECIATED PRIMARILY FOR THEIR BEAUTY OR EMOTIONAL POWER: WORKS PRODUCED BY HUMAN CREATIVE SKILL AND IMAGINATION: CREATIVE ACTIVITY RESULTING IN THE PRODUCTION OF PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, OR SCULPTURE. (OXFORD DICTIONARIES, RETRIEVED 28.1.2016).

Let me start by setting some boundaries for this discussion. First, the meaning of art: this is such a difficult question to answer that there are entire fields of science dedicated to do just that. I cannot hope to summarize the output of decades of aesthetics research in a reasonable amount of pages for this thesis. Also, I feel I cannot go cherry picking the theories that seem to support either side of the discussion on whether video games are art. After a brief look on the history and terminology, I will try to note the more recent studies and theories that depend on the accumulated research of the field.

The English word *art* and the French *l'art* derive from the latin word *ars*. It used to mean basically just any profession that needs skill and craftsmanship and was divided into *artes liberales* and *artes serviles*. The former referred to intellectual and cognitive skills like poetry, music, mathematics and astronomy. And the latter was used for more common crafts like painting and carpentry. (Haapala & Pulliainen 1998, 36 – 37). *Ars* could then be really anything skillful and even today, we still use expressions like *art of war* in English.

During the renaissance painters started to demand more appreciation and inclusion of their craft into the family of *artes liberales*. Because of this, the term began to be used more for sophisticated activities, such that are considered time well spent for the nobility of the time. We often think of arts as these ancient and constant traditions, but the fact is the terminology is fairly recent. It wasn't until the 1600's, when the enlightened natural science took off with Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei, that the activities we now call science began to separate from the umbrella of *ars*.

For a little while it seemed that the only permanent members of *artes liberales* were music, poetry, literature and visual arts. (Haapala & Pulliainen 1998, 39 – 40). One could argue, that these are still at the very core of what the general public considers art.

Let's take a very brief look at the ontology of art. Type-token distinction often credited to Richard Wollheim was first introduced by Richard Rudner in 1950 (Livingston 2013, retrieved 10.2.2016). Crudely simplified it implies that every artwork has a certain type and number of tokens or occurrences in the world. For example, the type for Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would be the specific arrangement of the words that make up the setting, characters and narrative, not how the book was bound and what paper was used. Every subsequent copy of these words is then a token of the type *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. (Haapala & Pulliainen 1998, 73 – 78). In the case of literature and music, there could be any number of occurrences, but what about sculptures and paintings?

If you were to burn the *Mona Lisa* in Louvre, you would essentially destroy the only occurrence of the *Mona Lisa*'s type. How about *Isleworth Mona Lisa* or any other copy of the same subject then? It is unclear if Da Vinci had anything to do with the *Isleworth Mona Lisa*, but let's say for the sake of argument that he did. If Leonardo did make two similar paintings, and one of them would be considered a practice piece and another the finished one, are they tokens of the same type or is it determined that some form of art can only have one occurrence? We clearly do not appreciate near perfect counterfeit paintings the same way we do the originals (Livingston 2013, retrieved 10.2.2016). And if we do not, what happens to a work of literature when it is translated to another language, surely something has to be added or omitted?

Different works of art can be categorised into physical and metacognitive artefacts. Everything we call *art* falls into the category of artefacts, meaning something that does not exist in the nature without an intentional influence of man. Some forms of art, specifically literature, music and cinema can be categorized as metacognitive artefacts. They are works of art designed to guide our cognitive processes to a certain direction dictated by the author(s). A common feature shared by these types of art is that they are not necessarily physical artefacts but rather instructions to produce the work. If you were to destroy every printed copy of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the work itself would remain in existence as long as there is one person who remembers the story. An exception to this principle is the cinema, which possesses some elements that cannot be memorized and reproduced like poetry or music. Paintings and sculptures fall into the cat-

egory of physical artefacts because they are bound to the material they were made of. (Lång 1998.) You probably could not write instructions on how to paint another Mona Lisa.

Even a work possibly, but not without doubt, made by Da Vinci isn't nearly as prestigious as a certified, authentic Da Vinci painting. Does this mean we actually appreciate the artist more than the artwork? One of the arguments heard most often goes something like this: "It is art, if we think it is art." A point made ever clearer with the emergence of avant-garde movement and works like Duchamp's Fountain and Warhol's Brillo Boxes. I will not dive deeper into these examples, for they are a subject worth of decades of discussion, but instead I shall take a look at the institutionalism of art and who deserves the status of an artist.

4.2 The world of art

From the times of Aristotle and well into the 19th century, it was considered that art imitates the beauty of nature. The imitation theory was in fact so prevailing that new movements, like impressionism and cubism, that didn't try to accurately imitate real world objects baffled the art world for a very long time. (Haapala & Pulliainen 1998, 52 – 53). The institutions of art may well have accepted the modern arts by now, but it wasn't a long time ago that this debate was stirring up in Finnish politics. In 2011, a Finnish political party, True Finns (Perussuomalaiset) wanted to discontinue the government's grants for artists who create what they called "pretentious post-modern art" (Mankkinen 2012, retrieved 4.2.2016). They wanted to support artists such as Pekka Halonen and Akseli Gallen-Kallela who depicted nature romantically and represented the romantic nationalism period of Finnish art. This reaction indicates that imitating nature in art is still appreciated by the general public, probably because it's such an old tradition and easy to understand.

Even before the emergence of impressionism, the main problem with the imitation theory was that there were already forms of art like music and architecture that didn't imitate nature, and they were already being considered as part of artes liberales. It always seems to take a while for the art world to adjust to new conventions. But what is this art world?

Art doesn't exist in vacuum, but instead needs a proper ecosystem to flourish. Shyon Baumann (2007, 15) says that the artist is at the center of the art world, the status of art doesn't maintain itself, but needs the collaboration of many different entities, like publishers, critics and education. These institutions are essential to a formation of an art form. According to Baumann (2007) it took the rise of art-house cinemas, film festivals and movie academies to elevate movies from entertainment products into a meaningful form of art. This historical perspective supports the idea that art must be presented as art and criticized as art, but must art also be made by an artist? This was one of the questions asked during the *auteur movement* in cinema.

4.2.1 Auteur

According to the auteur theory, the main credit and prestige of making the film goes to the film's director, not screenwriter or producer. Auteur directors impose a strong personal touch on the movie, and that's why you can instantly recognise a Hitchcock or Tim Burton movie. Speaking of Hitchcock, the highbrow film critics didn't actually pay much attention to him before the late 50's. A docent of movie- and television research, Veijo Hietala (2012, 159 – 164), draws a line from the French origins of auteur theory in 1954 to the eventual rise of appreciation towards Hollywood directors a couple of decades later. At first the theory was used to describe individualist European directors who operated outside of the commercial Hollywood movie making machines. Once it gained foothold, even the more serious European critics started to apply the theory to Hollywood directors.

The Oxford Dictionaries (retrieved 21.3.2016) define *auteur* as "A film director who influences their films so much that they rank as their author." The theory has been challenged for dismissing many notable screenwriters in favour of the director. Terrence Rafferty (2006, retrieved 21.3.2016) wrote in the New York Times about a novelist and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga's criticism towards the "film by" credit on movies. Arriaga felt that a movie is a collective effort that has several authors. Rafferty concludes in his article that films can have more than one author and filmmakers should stop picketing over who gets the main credit. Director Sally Potter partially defends the authorship of directors. While she admits that cinema has to be considered a collaborative medium, she emphasizes that the director is still the one responsible of the film as a whole and the vision of the director always leaks through in some measure (Widdicombe 2003, retrieved 21.3.2016).

4.2.2 Common characteristics

Art theory can be divided into essentialism, which tries to provide a conclusive definition of art, and anti-essentialism, which holds that art is such an open concept that one can only find some common characteristics and draw the contours of art. (Mag Uidhir & Magnus 2011.)

Both views have been challenged, though not abandoned, but regardless of who is right, I can take a look at the various characteristics and later evaluate video games based on them. This does not produce any concrete conclusions, but seeing that these are characteristics associated with art, they can at least throw us to the right ballpark.

Philosopher Denis Dutton (2002, retrieved 24.2.2016) has compiled a list of universal characteristics in art. He does this with a reminder that they are not to be considered absolute criteria for art, nor are they by themselves necessarily unique to art, but nevertheless, he states that it is difficult to imagine an object sporting most of these characteristics not to be considered as art.

1. Expertise or virtuosity. Societies worldwide appreciate specialized skills in creation of artefacts or in execution of performances. Dutton brings up an example of sports, where technical virtuosity is kept in high value by society, but the admiration also extends to artistic craftsmanship.
2. Non-utilitarian pleasure. While art can teach important lessons and relay information, they can also convey feelings of pleasure separated from their utilitarian effects. This is closely related to the concept of “art for its own sake.”
3. Style. Art has rules of form and composition determined by cultural traditions that change slowly over time. Traditions build up upon themselves, borrowing and deriving from earlier works or sometimes suddenly spawning new styles. Dutton considers style as a crucially but not uniquely important characteristic of art.
4. Criticism. Art, and really almost every human activity, is subject to discussion and judgment. The act of criticism sets our standards for appreciation of activities.
5. Imitation. With exceptions like abstract paintings and music, art usually imitates real or imaginary experience of the world. Styles of imitation can vary from naturalistic representation to symbolism.
6. “Special” focus. Art is often seen as a break from mundane life. While there are artistic objects and activities, like communal singing to pass the time, which can be considered

mundane, art is often “put on a pedestal” and separated from ordinary life. We humans tend to like putting significance to important events with complicated ceremonies, like weddings and coronations.

7. Imagination. Art is always an effort of imagination, whether it is carving a realistic representation of an animal in sculpture, or telling a story of an ancient mythology. Art lifts us up from mundane practicality to world of imagination.

(Dutton 2002, retrieved 24.2.2016).

Dutton’s list refers to characteristics of art that are, in a way, present everywhere in the world. He wants to make a case for a universalist theory of art as opposed to aesthetic relativists who emphasize localized cultural influences on art. What’s important for us to remember, according to Dutton, is that Beethoven’s music and Shakespeare’s plays are highly idolized in Japan as well as in Europe, so it is clear that there are some aspects of art that are universal in humanity. (Dutton 2002, retrieved 24.2.2016).

Mag Uidhir and Magnus (2011) argue that both essentialism and anti-essentialism only succeed in monist definitions. Instead, they call for *art concept pluralist* view that allows different art concepts to be used for different purposes. Instead of viewing art as one monolith, Mag Uidhir and Magnus offer four distinct concepts of art: *Historical art* means historical artefacts that are found from and are embedded in our narrative and tradition. This concept is productive for historical inquiries. *Conventional art* refers to art tied into institutions, conventions and practices. It’s useful for sociological, anthropological, economical and legal inquiries. *Aesthetic art* describes artefacts that fulfil an aesthetic function and it is used for value assessment and inquiries involving perception. *Communicative art* is useful for cognitive inquiries involving learning and emotions. It’s a concept for artefacts that are used to deliver communicational content. (11.) Art concept pluralism allows us, they say, to stop looking for the one concept that applies to all cases of art, and instead apply the relevant art concepts specific for the subject at hand (15).

4.3 The gates of art

Do video games have the potential to enter through the gates of art? To answer that, one has to ask the right questions. Many of the following questions have been asked and answered before, but it’s time to do a recap and reflect on the definitions of art more closely.

4.3.1 Institutions

Can video games become a part of the art world? Can video games be exhibited in galleries or performances, can they be criticized as art and can there be academies to teach and research the art of video games? Video games have been exhibited in art galleries, at least on two occasions. MoMa, The Museum of Modern Art in New York announced an acquisition of 14 video games into their permanent collection in 2012, with plans of total 40 to be added in the near future. The senior curator of MoMa's Department of architecture and design, Paola Antonelli, (2012, retrieved 10.3.2016) has defended video games' status as art, but emphasizes their design qualities specifically in interaction design. She has also considered the visual aesthetic properties of the acquisitions, but it is only one aspect, the others being the handling of space and time, and behavior. The latter is a somewhat special property for games in that video games' controller puts you in an uncanny position of involvement. "A purposefully designed video game can be used to train and educate, to induce emotions, to test new experiences, or to question the way things are and envision how they might be" (Antonelli 2012, retrieved 10.3.2016).

The Smithsonian American Art Museum launched an exhibition titled *The Art of Video Games* in 2012. The Smithsonian exhibition explored the artistic values of video games more closely, albeit focusing on visual effects and creative use of new technology. Still, their introduction is intriguing: "An amalgam of traditional art forms – painting, writing, sculpture, music, storytelling, cinematography – video games offer artists a previously unprecedented method of communicating with and engaging audiences" (Smithsonian American Art Museum 2012). At the moment, video games industry employs their artistic personnel from traditional schools of music, visual arts and writing, much like the movie industry. Some of those academies even have special study paths for video games industry, such as the Master's Programme in New Media; Game Design and Production in Aalto University, Espoo, Finland (Aalto 2016, retrieved 10.3.2016). While there are a few examples of dedicated video game academies, their focus is usually on the technical execution and we have yet to see any major centers of video game arts research emerge.

There's also a slight lack of major video games awards. Instead of the "academy awards of video games", we have a myriad of smaller ceremonies. One of the largest by far is *The Game Awards*, where the jury consists of 30 members of international media. (The game awards 2015, retrieved 10.3.2016) It is a general industry awards ceremony not specifically concerned with artistic evaluation, though that might come up as one merit amongst others. Award ceremonies are of course

largely based on the sales numbers, but they are also kind of tell-tale signs of the state of media criticism. Game critics at the moment are not so much concerned with artistic interpretation as much as the quality of game design, mechanics and the craftsmanship supporting these. Forming a solid tradition of art criticism is important. For Ernest Adams the problem with games awards is that there are no awards for best acting or best story and that's why those tend to be the weakest part of games (Adams 2006, 72). According to Terry Barret (1994), it is a fundamental principle identified by aestheticians, that art demands interpretation. He said that "a work of art is an expressive object made by a person, and therefore, unlike a tree, a rock, or other mere things, it is always about something; thus, unlike trees or rocks, artworks call for interpretations." (Barret 1994, 8)

4.3.2 Aboutness

What are games about? Can video games touch serious subject matters? Can they teach us important lessons or convey new perspectives to controversial issues? A 2016 indie (independently published) release, *That Dragon, Cancer* aims to do just that. It's a game said to make you cry, to truly put you in the middle of immense grief and contemplate mortality (Tanz 2016, retrieved 13.3.2016). The game, designed by Ryan and Amy Green, makes you a spectator, and sometimes participant, to the Green family's struggle in coping with their son Joel's terminal cancer. According to an editor-at-large in the Wired magazine, Jason Tanz (2016, retrieved 13.3.2016), *That Dragon, Cancer* is a borderline case of a video game, with its low user agency and deterministic nature. He does acknowledge, however, that all video games are deterministic by nature. Some games merely hide it better than others, he adds.

There seems to be a trend in art games to reduce the agency in favour of conveying the message. The trend that's spawned the term *walking simulator*, which mocks the lack of traditional gameplay and implies the only activity involved is walking. *Stanley Parable* explores the theme of choice further. The game was originally released as a *Half Life 2* mod in 2011 and was later remade as a commercial stand-alone game. In *Stanley Parable* you play as Stanley, who one day realizes his fellow workers in an office building have disappeared, and he sets to explore the empty building. Guided by a narrator you can, in a very short time, discover a secret inside the building and the game ends. But you can also decide to disobey the narrator and choose a different path, or sometimes choose to do nothing. This opens new places to explore, new stories to

uncover and new endings. It also makes you feel, for a while, that you're in control of the events while still firmly trapped inside a carefully crafted system. (Munk 2013, retrieved 15.3.2016) The subject matter of *Stanley Parable* is a clear shift from merely parodying other titles to true intertextuality within the media, while still managing to be a game in a classic sense, not only a walking simulator. Ashton Raze (2013, retrieved 15.3.2016) says in the Telegraph "The exploration of choice and consequence feels more like a knowing nod to other writers, an 'I understand the various ways of constructing a narrative' rather than a condemnation." He refers to two significant games making appearances in *Stanley Parable*; the extremely open-ended *Minecraft* and a linear puzzle game *Portal*. The game's designer Davey Wreden has given the remake a lighter tone from the original mod, saying that he doesn't really want go into discussion of games as art, but simply wishes people to have fun playing it (Mattas 2011, retrieved 15.3.2016). The thing about the meaning of an artwork is that the interpretation of the audience and critics doesn't need to be the same as what the author intended (Barret 1994).

Indie developers, with little to lose, are the ones who boldly go where big media enterprises dare not. It's the indie scene where the more niche and untested subject matters flourish. In addition to aforementioned cancer and freedom, game designers have tackled such issues as slavery (Nelson 2014, retrieved 15.3.2015), suicide and Tourette's syndrome (Campbell 2013, retrieved 14.3.2016). While movies and literature can also spark sympathy, it seems that video games are exceptionally effective in giving you a new perspective to an issue. Many of the more serious issues presented in indie games are somewhat autobiographical. Game designer and professor of media studies Ian Bogost says that autobiographical games give you a role, where you can actually make decisions the author may have faced once, and that makes living in someone else's shoes a bit more concrete than movies or literature do (Campbell 2013, retrieved 14.3.2016).

4.3.3 Aesthetics

Can video games provide aesthetic pleasure? More specifically, in order to place them as a form of art separate from others, can they provide aesthetic pleasure unique to the medium and can you appreciate a video game by its aesthetics alone? While many aspects of video games' aesthetics derive directly from existing traditions of visual arts, writing and music, the unique aesthetics of games can be described with the MDA (Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics) framework, origi-

nally proposed by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek in 2004 (retrieved 15.3.2016). In a way, the MDA framework states that you can only appreciate video games by their aesthetics. MDA breaks video games into three separate concepts: **Mechanics** dictate how particular components of the game work, together with their co-operation and player inputs they create **dynamics**, which in turn evokes an **aesthetic** response in players (Hunicke et al. 2004, retrieved 15.3.2016).

For example: One of the mechanics in the 1985 Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros.* is that some of the pipes cluttered all over the levels might have hidden passages to secret levels. This creates dynamics where the player might feel inclined to try every pipe in hopes of finding the secret level, even at the risk of bumping into deadly plants sometimes appearing out of them. In the event of finding the secret, the rewards of taking the risks are aesthetics pleasures of discovery and challenge. In addition to those, Hunicke et al. (2004, retrieved 15.3.2016) also define aesthetic components of sensation, fantasy, narrative, fellowship, expression and submission in their effort to steer away from traditional, rather constricted vocabulary of *fun* and *gameplay*. The framework doesn't claim that these are the only possible forms of aesthetics. Ian Schreiber (2009, retrieved 20.3.2016), for example, has recognized the aesthetic of *frustration*, which makes the player try again until they succeed.

The MDA is not enough to describe artistic aesthetics in video games, for one has to ask the obvious question: "If the mechanics and dynamics can create aesthetic response, and you can appreciate the game purely based on these aspects, wouldn't you then be able to appreciate a game of chess as art?" Granted, there has also been debate over the question whether a game of chess could also be considered art, and we must acknowledge that some sports, like gymnastics and diving are evaluated using aesthetic criteria (Smuts 2005, retrieved 21.3.2016). Nevertheless, video games do have something more than board games and sports, i.e., the package of visual arts, animation, narrative and music. Not necessarily all of them at once, but in such combinations that the difference to non-video games is immediately apparent. According to Aaron Smuts (2005, retrieved 21.3.2016) the same principles followed in traditional art of motion pictures apply in video games. The art direction, set design, lighting and narrative can be every bit as intensive labour in video games.

4.3.4 Artists

Who creates art? Ask children and they will probably tell you it's an artist. If video games are art, then who is the artist? Are the people who make video games always artists?

When we ask who is leading the orchestra of game development, the answer is usually the lead designer, but the roles aren't always written in stone. It might just as well be a very hands-on type of producer, art director or writer, but that doesn't really interest me right now. The fact is, sometimes there is a creator with a strong influence to the overall feel of the game. Anna Anthropy is one of them. Also known by the name Auntie Pixelante, she's an indie game developer who has created video games based on her personal struggle undergoing hormone therapy. She's also written a book about video games counterculture, *Rise of Video Game Zinesters*, and exhibits a strong drive to transform the medium into an art form. She's a keen supporter of video games auteurism, saying that everyone needs to make games, and the games need to derive from personal experience and reflect the personality of the creator. (Kopstein 2012, retrieved 23.3.2016.)

Tyler Nagata (2007, retrieved 23.3.2016) asks in Gamesradar, who are the "Kubricks and Tarantinos" of video games. He throws in many names that are familiar to video game enthusiasts around the world: Tim Schafer, Sid Meier, Hideo Kojima, Shigeru Miyamoto. Nagata further explains the reasons he included these names, like recurring themes and devices used by certain designers. The most interesting notion to me was a quote from Shigeru Miyamoto. He said the following, in an interview on The Learning Channel's documentary, *Gameheadz*: "At some point, I realized that games could actually draw out people's emotions. Since then, my own childhood memories have been reflected in my games" (Nagata 2007, retrieved 23.3.2016). According to Aaron Smuts (2005, retrieved 21.3.2016), some have even gone as far as to compare Miyamoto to Sergei Eisenstein with his distinctive artistic stamp.

Art Historian John Sharp argues that games are so engaging that the designer and the player share a co-authorship (Murphy 2010, retrieved 25.2.2016). This is apparent in Starbreeze's 2013 game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. The game doesn't straight up give you all the narrative; instead you're free to make up your own understanding of the events unfolding and the relationships of the characters. It's a puzzle adventure with unique mechanics of the player using one controller to move two characters simultaneously. The game's director, Josef Fares, who is also a well-known film director, shares an example where he played the older brother leading the

younger, even when the game doesn't tell you to do that. Some of the other players seemed to do the same thing, he noticed, and apparently it felt natural in players' minds that the big brother must protect the young one. (Rose 2013, retrieved 22.3.2016.)

The co-authorship is also implied in the MDA framework, where it's suggested that designers and players use the same vocabulary when looking at the games, but they approach it from the opposite directions. Players see the aesthetics first and later deduce the underlying dynamics and the mechanics that make them, while designers work the other way around, using specific methods in mechanics to eventually make players feel something. In the fine tuning phase of the game design process, it's important to test the design with actual players, and thus effectively communicate both ways. (Hunicke et. al. 2004, retrieved 15.3.2016.)

4.3.5 Gatekeepers

The spark for this essay came from Roger Ebert's (2010a, retrieved 15.9.2015) post *Video games can never be art*. Let's take a look at his main arguments in that article.

Ebert's first argument was that games are something you can *win*, while great art is something you only experience. He argues that when you remove points or rules from an immersive game, it ceases to be a game. Founders of an art studio Tale of Tales have argued the same in 2010 Art History of Games conference. They have chosen games as a medium for their art, but don't want to make games, instead they want to rip apart the rules and goals from games and call their works not-games (Pratt 2010, retrieved 27.3.2016). Much of Ebert's argumentation, later on in the aforementioned article, was highly anecdotal, except for this one important notion towards the end: "No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poets." (2010a, retrieved 15.9.2015.)

He expanded upon this in another article, titled *Okay, kids, play on my lawn*, where he conceded, in some degree, that he shouldn't have written about the matter without any experience of playing video games. He held to the thought, however, that there is no game comparable to great works of literature, like those of Shakespeare and Mark Twain. He even put together a poll asking the readers, which do they value more, a great video game or the Huckleberry Finn. The poll came out preferring a great video game which, being a simple poll on a public website, signifies noth-

ing, save for a sign that maybe Ebert had kicked a hornet's nest with his writings. (Ebert 2010b, retrieved 15.9.2015.)

Ebert basically asked the same question that has often been asked in this debate, "What's the *Citizen Kane* of video games". The 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, by Orson Welles, has often been called the greatest film of all time (Ebert 2002, retrieved 26.3.2016). Many games have been suggested, but according to Ebert, amongst the thousands of suggestions there was no clear consensus, *Shadow of the Colossus* being the closest (Ebert 2010b, retrieved 15.9.2015). I also haven't found anything to suggest such a masterpiece being made yet. Aaron Smuts (2005, retrieved 21.3.2016) wrote that without masterpieces, it's premature to call video games art, but that some video games already surpass the level of excellence presented by the majority of popular cinema.

Yet these popular entertainment movies are not fine art, according to a veteran game developer Brian Moriarty, who shares the romantic view of art with Roger Ebert. He wants to make a distinction between the fine arts, which he calls sublime arts, and the kitsch art. Moriarty argues that kitsch is conventional surface art that only touches the simplest of feelings, like those of good and evil, happy and sad. Advertising, Broadway musicals, sequel and spin-off movies, Hollywood entertainment and Santa Claus are all kitsch. It's art that's designed to sell, always be what you expect and never challenge the consumer. And video games, Moriarty predicts, are destined to devolve into kitsch. (Caoili 2011, retrieved 26.3.2016.)

Moriarty's romanticism refers to cultivation of insight. To him, sublime art isn't about escaping the oppressive reality to a world where you feel you have control, but instead, art is a habit, a lifelong devotion and really being in control. He wants to turn off computers and reflect his life and gain insight, wisdom or consolation. Video games to him are more like a pleasant distraction for an hour or two; recreation. In line with Roger Ebert's statements earlier, Moriarty feels that the interactivity of games hinders the artist's ability to express himself. (Caoili 2011, retrieved 26.3.2016.) There might be some truth to this. Markus Lång (1998) wrote that an artist exerts violence, the word having a much milder tone in this context, on the audience and the audience willingly submits before this oppression in hopes of compensating their own limitations by identifying with the artist's superiority in the craft. This identification with the creator might be why we so stubbornly need to know the author of the work of art. Lång reminds us that collective works without a single genius behind them tend to feel dreary.

Ernest Adams also points out that in order for games to become an art form, the general public needs to recognize names like Sid Meier, Brian Moriarty or Will Wright, the same way they recognize Francis Ford Coppola. (Adams 2006, 76 – 77.)

5 CASE STUDIES

With these case studies I aim to apply the earlier discussed theory into practice. You can look at the case studies as sort of game reviews, but not in the traditional sense. I'm not viewing the games as consumer products; I don't give any scores, or otherwise suggest in any way whether you should buy the game or not. What I'm focusing on, is whether these games achieve the status of art, what emotions they evoke, what they mean, and what the developers' intentions are.

For the said studies I've picked three well-known games. *Civilization V* is a commercially successful title from a major publisher, targeted for heavy gamers. *Stanley Parable* originally rose from the modding community, and after an official release on Steam, managed to sell over a million copies (Hillier 2014, retrieved 23.3.2016). *The Graveyard* is an example of small budget art house game that intentionally deviates from the traditional video game tropes. The games I've chosen are all from approximately the same period of time, between 2008 and 2013, because most of the literature discussed earlier hasn't quite caught up to speed with the most recent games yet. I also left out console and mobile games, because I don't think including every platform brings anything substantial to the conversation. A comparison of qualities between platforms is a topic for another study.

5.1 The Graveyard

Walking down the gravel path leading to a small chapel in the graveyard, I hear songbirds chirping and a distant noise of dogs barking. The closer to the chapel I get, the quieter it gets. It's tedious for me to walk with my aching bones, but this place feels comforting. Small shreds of clouds throw a shadow over the midday sun every once in a while. I finally get to rest my legs on a bench. There are people I used to know resting here. It's not long before it's my time, too. Walking back, closer to the cemetery gates, The noise of traffic pulls me from this beautiful respite in the hectic world.

Tale of Tales' *The Graveyard* from 2008 is an excellent example of what is often called a walking simulator. The whole course of the game is simple to explain: using the arrow keys, you walk an

old lady through a graveyard, she sits on a bench, music ensues, and then you walk back the way you came from. The developers actually call it an explorable painting more than a real game. It's true that one would be hard-pressed to find it a thrilling experience, when the only thing you can do is walk. There isn't even much to explore, since you cannot take different paths or even turn the camera around, but due to lack of a better name, I'm going to call it a game.

What separates *The Graveyard* from a short film, for example, is the tiny bit of interactivity. To walk, you have to keep the up arrow key pressed. The lady limps forward very slowly and looks like she's really struggling, so you kind of get these moments where you think, "I should let her rest for a while." And finally, when you get to the bench, which is set in the middle of the composition in the distance, you can appreciate the moment of respite in a way that wouldn't happen in a film.

Out of the features commonly associated with video games, *The Graveyard* only lacks the player's influence to outcome and valorization of the outcome. In the paid version of the game, there's only one extra feature: the woman could randomly die. This is a different outcome indeed, but the player can't affect that in any way, and there is no clear way to say which ending is preferable. It's probably wrong to say that the game falls short in gameplay, instead it has been stripped clean from redundant features. It doesn't try to achieve much more than a snapshot of life, and doesn't need anything more to do that. The game is not intended for tricks and thrills, but to be taken as an aesthetic experience. A great deal of effort was put into creating a serene atmosphere with timing and sound design. The setting doesn't feel a tiniest bit scary or off-putting, but instead, conveys the feeling of accepting the presence of death as a natural part of the later stages of our lives.

Great art is always more than a good idea or message; quality craftsmanship has always been an essential part of art. Sadly, that cannot be said for *The Graveyard*. The graphical assets come off looking more unfinished than minimalistic by design. Making games independently is always a struggle with low resources and lack of time, but talented people can get around these restrictions. *The Graveyard's* visual art, however, is adequate but uninspiring.

5.2 Civilization V

When you're at war on three fronts, it's the duty of every citizen to aid the war effort. There's no time to waste in arts and growth. Producing tanks, artilleries and battleships goes before everything, expect for science. In just a few years we'll be the first nation to produce the nuclear weapon. Our enemies' pikemen stand no chance... wait, what?

It's easy to lose yourself into the illusions of grandeur, waging a war and expanding over the globe in the Civilization, until something like those odd non-upgraded pikemen break the immersion. Developed by Firaxis and published by 2K Games in 2010, Sid Meier's Civilization V is the latest installment in the Sid Meier's acclaimed Civilization series. It's a turn-based grand strategy game, where you lead a civilization from nomadic tribes to space age. Spanning the entire written history and more, one game taking tens of hours to finish, the game truly makes you feel the mass of time.

You can play the game competitively against human players, but many prefer to role-play it. Instead of imagining yourself as a specific character, you put yourself in the shoes of a benevolent leader, utilitarian governor, or maybe an oppressive tyrant. There are several ways to win the game, like conquest or space race, but winning the game isn't necessarily the only goal for every player. Instead, you're free to set your own victory conditions and play forever, until you meet the goals you've personally set for yourself. I've had games where I wanted to conquer every speck of land on the map. That meant unchecking every other victory condition but domination, and keeping at least one other nation alive until you have it all, and that's the illusion of grandeur I mentioned. It feels empowering. The passing of time creates a history for your nation, and that's the only kind of narrative you have in Civilization, the kind where playing the game creates a narrative only in your head.

Civilization V is a strategy game, open-ended simulation, a nation RPG, it's all of these things, but out of all the reasons you can play this game, I cannot imagine admiring the art being one on its own. The original designer of the Civilization series, Sid Meier, is still credited in the title even though he wasn't the lead designer of this game. He is one the most cited examples of game auteur, but I wouldn't grant him that term in the context of art. Meier gained his reputation with the first *Civilization* and *Pirates*, and his name was featured essentially for marketing purposes. The man wasn't even very well-known at the time, except amongst a moderate fan base around his

early simulation games. Players' expectations of the name Sid Meier are aimed at the main accomplishments of these games and nothing more. Since he hasn't made any attempts at art, you wouldn't name him an auteur on that front.

Civilization V certainly evokes a range of emotions: Pride, frustration and fear amongst others. But does it say anything meaningful? Not really, nor does it try to. As a player, you can find interesting narrative from every play-through, so perhaps you can regard the game as a tool, a fertile soil to breed stories, but probably not a work of art in itself.

5.3 Stanley Parable

Stanley Parable started its life as a mod for *Half Life 2* in 2011. The mod was such a success, with over 90 000 downloads, that it spawned a commercial remake in 2013. You play as Stanley, whose job is to push buttons on a computer when ordered. One day the orders stop coming and all his co-workers are missing. He wanders off to explore the empty building, following the instructions of a narrator with a pleasant British accent. That is, until the player decides not to follow the orders. And therein lies the core meaning of the game. You're seemingly free to deviate from the path laid in front of you only to realise, that there's just another planned path with more similar branches. And this is all declared aloud by the narrator, often breaking the fourth wall.

"Do my choices mean anything? Is this the way they wanted me to choose from the start?"

When playing Stanley Parable, the first thing that comes to mind is probably not going to be to describe it as a sandbox game. But that, I think, is exactly what it is; a sandbox to interactivity. The very concept of this game invites the player to fiddle around with the objects and try, in every possible way, to steer away from what the narrator wants you to do. You start to experiment with choices and think along the lines of "what if I just stood still in this closet for an hour?" It doesn't always pay off, but sometimes the game rewards your "rebellion" with some quirky narrative and possibly a different ending. You see what they did there?

Despite the game's designer, Davey Wreden, not wanting to take part in the discussion of "games as art", my opinion of Stanley Parable still is that it represents a new kind of artistic thinking in

video games, be it by accident or by purpose. The game makes you wonder if the current popular methods of video game narrative are the best we have or utterly redundant. There's a binary choice and after that, there's another binary choice and every one of these has already been thought out by the designer. You didn't ingeniously figure anything out by yourself. Yet these are the cages we willingly and gladly let ourselves be trapped into. In these linear, narrative games, we submit to the rules and guidance and this lets us have a well-curated, aesthetic experience, away from the mundane world.

6 DISCUSSION

It must be said upfront: I was a fool to dip my toe into the definitions of art. It may have been equally foolish to try and define what constitutes a video game. When you have two people discussing art, there are three opinions. We too a brief look at the history of art, saw that people have been trying to pinpoint meaning of art since antiquity and concluded that the debate continues even now and it probably is not going to stop anytime soon. The definition of art seems to be a fleeting concept that just cannot be grasped with a convenient one-liner. I can only look at the common features and some clear injunctions.

The easiest solution would be to draw a Venn diagram, where the borders of art overlap, just a little, with the borders of video games. There you would have most of the cases where art meets games, but then you'd have to deal with a multitude of exceptions. You could argue that *Dear Esther*, while being a borderline case of a video game, is not kitsch, but truly a fine piece of literature with an element of sight and sound. You might place *Bioshock*, an FPS game with something to say, to the other end of the same spectrum, but in my opinion, at the level of *Terminator* films.

But I think games are on to something. Even if the story of *Bioshock* was superficial according to fine literature standards, considering it all boils down to pressing a button for good and another for evil, I think the interactivity can sometimes add value to the story. There are scenes in the game where you have an option to either rescue or kill and harvest one of the Little Sisters, which are little girls that harvest genetic material from bodies. The game rewards you with short-term rewards for killing them and long-term rewards for saving them. Here we have a binary choice situation. If you were to make two short films of the same subject matter with different endings, you would end up with two mediocre stories. But *Bioshock* makes you pull the trigger or save the girl. Killing them will get you immediate material rewards, but many players have said the decision made you feel bad. It makes you feel the gravity of decisions more personally than a movie could ever do.

That said, the subject matters in games are still mostly juvenile and shallow. Games like *That Dragon, Cancer* or *Stanley Parable* are rare occasions in an outlandish mass of entertainment products, and even they do not reach a status of great art. In his presentation at *GDC 2011*, Brian Moriarty cites two eminent film critics, Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael, saying that hardly any mov-

ies are art. Great art is in such a short supply that it's perfectly acceptable to enjoy kitsch art. Moriarty ends his lecture with a notion that video games are now bigger than movies, and got there without a need of being great art. (Caoili 2011, retrieved 26.3.2016)

6.1 Validation, appreciation, legitimation

From where does this need for artistic legitimation stem? Ebert (2010a, retrieved 15.9.2015) also asked why the gamers are not content with just having fun playing the games:

DO THEY REQUIRE VALIDATION? IN DEFENDING THEIR GAMING AGAINST PARENTS, SPOUSES, CHILDREN, PARTNERS, CO-WORKERS OR OTHER CRITICS, DO THEY WANT TO BE ABLE TO LOOK UP FROM THE SCREEN AND EXPLAIN, "I'M STUDYING A GREAT FORM OF ART?" THEN LET THEM SAY IT, IF IT MAKES THEM HAPPY. (EBERT 2010A, RETRIEVED 15.9.2015.)

The phrasing of the question above seemed to have a somewhat belittling tone. Keith Stuart (2010, retrieved 27.3.2016) writes in *The Guardian* that he sees Ebert's dismissal of gaming as a sort of fear and misunderstanding. He bases his interpretation on Ebert's blog post, in which Ebert admits he doesn't know if gamers can learn anything about human nature and be inspired to transcend themselves, and he isn't willing to try and find out himself. Stuart, on the contrary, feels that games are all about the transcendence of self. On the whole, Stuart's article revolves around the idea that Ebert is a representative of the "old guard". Ebert (2010b, retrieved 15.9.2015) himself said that he's been getting a lot comments to his posts saying, "Ebert is too old. Ebert doesn't get it." We must not let this debate devolve into a level where we divide the participants to "old grumpy elitists," and "kids who waste time playing games." I defend the rights of institutionalized art to set high standards for new forms of art, lest the term melts meaninglessly by allowing everything to be called art. But I also defend the right to question, and the question of video games' status as art is a legit one.

In *Gaming Enthusiast*, Matt Marinett (2015, retrieved 28.3.2016) has four points why this question gets asked. He says that calling video games art highlights the medium, raising it above mediocrity and mundane, thus exposing the potential of games to wider audience. He also says that the current view on games discourages proper scholarly studies, research and preservation of the medium. His third point is exactly what Ebert half-jokingly stated, that gamers want justification for their choice of pastime, though he admits this to be the weakest point simply because nobody

should have the need to rationalize their recreation. His final reason is one of legal issues. He refers to the attempts to censure video games for their violence and sexual content. He cites an United States Supreme court ruling that stated that video games are an expressive medium that has the same rights of free speech as other art forms, like books and movies.

One good reason to legitimize video games as art would be that undeniably there are people already using the medium to create art. If we say outright that games cannot be art, we're not only closing our eyes from reality, but also belittling those people's choice of craft. This isn't the same as saying that all games are art. No, by all definitions, some games are sport. But we should allow artists of the medium to call their works art.

Also on a personal note: the whole debate might at times feel like beating up a dead horse, but when we stop contemplating art, then we can truly say that art is dead. Aaron Smuts (2005, retrieved 21.3.2016) wrapped this idea up nicely in his article in *Contemporary Aesthetics*:

BEYOND THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES THE ART STATUS OF VIDEO GAMES MAY HAVE ON CENSORSHIP ATTEMPTS, THE QUESTION "ARE VIDEO GAMES ART?" HAS INHERENT INTEREST. IT IS ESSENTIALLY THE SAME QUESTION AS "WHAT IS ART?"

6.2 Where in the world of art is a video game?

If we were to determine video games' placement in the art world, where would it be? We know that video games are man-made artefacts. I'm interested in the question of material that rises up when setting the ontological category of video games. Are video games bound by some material that makes them material artefacts, or are they, or parts of them, mental artefacts? Markus Lång (2002) stated that movies are both mental and material artefacts. On the other hand, a screenplay is clearly a memorisable literary work, but the movie itself is tied to its film (or more recently a digital record) which, when destroyed, makes the movie impossible to be reproduced again. Video games have been built upon the foundations of movies when it comes to narrative, and there's a long tradition of literature in games, all the way from text-based adventures, so without doubt there are some aspects of video games that are cognitive by nature. But what about the software, is it a material artefact like the film? I couldn't find a definitive answer for this, but Markus Lång (1998) writes, that musical compositions that have been written down are essentially similar to literature, in that they can be repeated and replicated. Therefore, it might not be too far fetched to argue that the program code for games could be looked at as instructions to make the program,

and that would make it a cognitive artefact. But in the same way you couldn't replicate the sets, costumes and acting of a movie, you wouldn't be able to replicate the graphical assets and acting of a video game from memory.

As I established before, John Sharp (Murphy 2010, retrieved 25.2.2016) and creators of the MDA framework (Hunicke et. al. 2004, retrieved 15.3.2016.) agree that the player and the designer are in a state of co-creation. Indeed, it's the designer's job to predict where the player wants to go and what emotions the different dynamics evoke. This firmly makes the games as a method of communication. Some games even take advantage of this by placing the player in another person's position to make a point. Due to this, when the art concept pluralism is applied to video games, it can be assumed that especially the *communicative art* concept applies to games particularly well. There are some aspects of *aesthetic art* involved in emphasizing the communicative aspects, but very rarely for the sake of aesthetics alone. Usually in mainstream games developers use aesthetics and mechanics to convey messages or emotions. The *conventional art* theory, however, isn't really productive for video games. There aren't yet many art conventions and traditions in the medium. We have game academies, game journalism, award ceremonies and even a couple of major gallery exhibitions, but the focus of these institutions is usually on the technical aspects of games.

6.3 The next level

Where does this leave us, what next? Ernest Adams (2006) put together several steps that need to be taken for the art form to evolve into maturity. Firstly, games need an aesthetic. Games must not be judged based on their technical aspects alone, but if they feature acting, narrative or editing, we must judge games based on those and the harmony they create or lack. In time we can learn to judge gameplay in terms of aesthetics too. Secondly, developers must experiment new things with the medium, much like the impressionists did with painting and expressionists with movies. Games must challenge the player not only with goals and victory conditions, but also with tough subject matters and meaning. Games awards must change to accommodate the said aesthetic aspects. In short, we need the Academy Awards of video games. Game developers have to become artists. Art is not committee work, there needs to be a vision behind the work. That doesn't mean we cannot make new ice hockey games and such, but the developers who want to be taken seriously, need to take themselves seriously and demand the attention they deserve.

One point from Adams, not listed above, was that game reviews must change to genuine criticism instead of mere product reviews. This topic has been more thoroughly explored by Kieron Gillen (2004, retrieved 23.3.2016) in his blog post *The new games journalism*. In the article shaped like a manifesto he declares that game journalism has sold its soul to the “money men”, as it has devolved from personal critique to buying guides. Game journalism needs to approach games not from the point of games as products, but from the point of people who play them. Writers should stylistically follow Hunter S. Thompson and write travel journalism to imaginary places, and remember that the worth of the game lies not in how it’s programmed, but how it makes the player feel. It’s actually this practice I tried to follow in my case studies earlier. We have too few examples of those kinds of writers. When I grew up, I used to read Finnish magazines like *Mikrobitti* and *Pelit* and there was one writer in particular who used to inspire me, Niko Nirvi. His writing style struck me as highly personal and creative, even if it was still riddled with some product specification, but it’s hard to write freely for game media that lives on game advertisement. This he admits in an interview on *Journalisti* magazine, saying, that if you’re critical towards game companies, you can’t expect to get to write three spreads preview article for the said company. (Pernu 2009)

Daniel Radosh (2007, retrieved 27.3.2016) writes in *New York Times* that video games are still in their infant state. He compares the situation to the history of cinema from 1895 to 1930, reminding us that there were only a handful of masterpieces in that period, but as the medium evolved, the films gained an ability to transform and not only entertain. He emphasizes that for games to achieve this, they will need to embrace the dynamics of failure, tragedy, comedy and romance, and stop pandering the player’s desire for mastery in favour of enhancing the player’s emotional and intellectual life.

I have lived my entire life surrounded by video games, dreaming of getting to make them one day, but I think I’m an oddity. For most of my generation games are not an integral part of their lives. What the art form needs to spawn its geniuses are the second-generation game developers. Mothers and fathers who make games have the opportunity to spark the interest for the medium in the minds of their younglings. Like Anna Anthropy declared, everyone needs to make games (Kopstein 2012, retrieved 23.3.2016). The medium has to become more like music and painting, so that you learn the basics in pre-school already.

7 CONCLUSION

While I cannot offer any concrete conclusion, this essay has given some interesting questions for further, more ambitious research. To determine the public view on the art status of games, there needs to be proper statistical research. Written literature or articles on the Internet don't offer any conclusion. Even the game developers themselves cannot reach a consensus. More inquiry is needed, but it can be concluded that it is clear that video games raise a lot of questions and are at least on their way to maturity as art form, if not quite there yet.

On the art side, the amount of existing literature is endless mire. For someone like me, who hasn't studied aesthetics, it was perhaps a mistake to approach the question from that perspective at all. On the video game side, I believe I have gained the needed literature and expertise to tackle the matter. I was delighted to find out how much quality research has been made on video games, though it rarely discussed the art status. The references, therefore, can be considered a successful package of literature for anyone who wants to continue my work from here. I also wish to urge those readers who are interested in writing game critique to consider approaching the critique from a more profound perspective than simply rating gameplay, graphics and sound.

Are games art? Some games are, but not all. Will games one day reach the status of fine art? Nobody knows for sure, but if that's ever to happen, the industry as a whole needs to take a different attitude. I asked a question before: "Do we really have the front-row seats watching the birth of a new art form?" We certainly do, hold on to your virtual reality goggles, but the evolution of games is a turbulent one and there is no way of knowing what kind of art form it will be tomorrow. It might be fine art one day, it might stay kitsch.

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