Klaudia Jancsovics*

Play the art: Artistic value in video games

Abstract

Playing a game does not mean that we are doing something childish and useless. Using a new technology to express our feelings and raise the awareness of social issues does not mean we cannot call it art. If we go back in time, we can realize that there has always been a resistance to novelty and machines. Sometimes, they were even considered harmful. The same life cycle happens with video games: they are valuable in many ways, they are far more developed than they were twenty years ago, and they have even reached a stage where we can find art in them. But how can they be art? Is the answer in the story or in the audiovisual elements?

Keywords: art, immersion, feedback loop, feelings

Introduction: Technology and art

Can we consider technology as an art form? What can be art? What is art? These are recurring questions in human cultures and the technological development that force us from time to time to reevaluate our previous notions. If we go back in time, we can see that the rise of photography also raised these questions. Louis Daguerre's invention – the *daguerreotype* – democratized art by making it more portable, accessible and cheaper. As Walter Benjamin highlights in his essay, commentators had expended "much fruitless ingenuity on the question of whether photography was an art – without asking the more fundamental question of whether the invention of photography had not transformed the entire character of art" (Benjamin 2006, p. 258).

* University of Szeged, e-mail: jancsovicsklaudia@gmail.com

As technical development – which has also become an inseparable part of humanity – questions the nature of art, it is getting more and more complicated to answer the questions asked above. With the rise of photography, painters started to be afraid that their artwork would not be needed anymore. As Benjamin mentions in his *Little History of Photography*, the agents who followed a "fetishistic and fundamentally antitechnological concept of art" (Benjamin 2005, p. 508) also raised their voices against the technology. They believed that such methods could not be called art because machines are responsible for the creation and it has nothing to do with humans. In the case of photography, the device captures the moment. The machine does the technical work, but somebody has to adjust and discover the beauty and/or the story in a setting or in an event. This machine extends our capabilities, it can place already existing things in a new perspective. As Laszlo Moholy-Nagy wrote in his *Painting, Photography, Film*, the camera offers outstanding possibilities: the visual image has been expanded and even the modern lens is no longer tied to the narrow limits of our eye (Moholy-Nagy 1969, p. 7). Taking a photo is not just a rigid, automatic process, it requires human participation since it mediates our experience of the world. We can express our feelings with photos, play with colours, brightness, and perspectives, and they can uniquely tell the unspeakable: one frame will speak instead of us.

Humans want to make everything faster, better, we try to create a more leisurely life with technology. Then these developments shape how we live our lives, and in many cases, we can find advanced ways of expressing ourselves with new technological tools. The newcomers (like photography or movies) have to undergo the same life cycle: they are "born," start to be popular, have to face many attempts to diminish their value, but then they show their artistic potential and eventually are accepted as a new form of expression. Video games have made the same journey. But how can they be art? Can the answer be found in the story or in the audiovisual elements? In the next few sections, I try to show how video games can have artistic values. To showcase a wider range of examples, I will analyze several games from various genres, produced by different companies.

Feedback loop and feelings

While playing video games, we have to follow the given rules and we also enter a virtual space, where our everyday rules no longer apply. Regulations, characters, environment, story, audiovisual elements, gameplay: all of these take part in creating an enjoyable experience and are responsible for the players' immersion.

According to Janet H. Murray, immersion is a metaphorical term based on the experience of being submerged in water: "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our

attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (Murray 2016, p. 99). When we become a part of a game, the same happens because we have to understand and apply its rules to achieve success.[1] While we are playing video games, our everyday environment becomes secondary – or at least we ignore it – and we direct our attention to the game. We have to become familiar with the different commands and explore how we can defeat the system or make it cooperate with us (Anable 2019, p. xii). This requires our active agency to which the game gives answers, and we have to react to those answers. In my opinion, "feedback loop" is a suitable term to describe this activity. From the beginning until the end, we are "communicating" with the system and this continuous feedback loop creates interactivity. We cannot change the ending of the game, but we have a mindset, a gaming style, that determines how we take the journey and what kind of routes we choose to reach the closure, or, in other words, how we experience the game's world.[2] This process is similar to when we have a colouring book: there are given shapes – in the case of video games, these are the fixed codes, commands and storylines – but we can fill these shapes freely with our preferred colours. We can decide how we want to play the game (e.g., when stealth is optional during a quest, we can still choose to be loud and reckless).

Alexander Galloway highlighted: "If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then *video games are actions*." He adds that without action, "games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book" (Galloway 2006, p. 2). The player becomes a co-author because their participation is needed to unfold the story or go on to the next level and this continues until they reach the endpoint.

I would like to complete Galloway's statements with one more aspect that plays a significant part: the importance of feelings. In order to truly immerse ourselves, we need an emotional connection. The way we experience a given scene in the game depends on our background (cultural, emotional, etc.). For example, many YouTubers play the same games, and it differs from player to player how they react to the same situation. Of course, there are cases when the most important motivation is to experience the success and joy of achieving something. It is hard to find the boundaries between a "simple game" and an artgame (Sharp 2015, p. 49) but one way to distinguish them is when the player encounters strong emotional impacts while playing, and they are able to identify with the characters' feelings. In this case, the game can be considered as art.

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1   In this case, *success* means different goals based on the player's moral and ethical attitude. Players can have the goal to win the game, trigger new endings or just move around in the virtual world.

2   Some games have more than one ending, but the numbers are limited.

"Reading" between the lines

What we need is not great works but playful ones . . .
A story is a game someone has played so you can play it too.
(Waugh 2001, p. 34)

In many cases, video games try to touch the untouchable and tell the unspeakable, just like art. Several of these games – mainly those that belong to the horror and psychological thriller genres – illustrate the different types of trauma and mental illnesses in symbolic ways. During the gameplay the player can feel that there is something more than what the story's surface shows, but usually only in the last few minutes is an explanation provided (or a twist offered).

Among the Sleep[3] tells a story of a two-year-old boy chased by two monsters. The little boy (David) can only rely on his talking teddy bear (Teddy). This causes a feeling of vulnerability, compounded by the fact that the world seems huge and the kid's movement is limited: David cannot jump high, but when stealth is needed, he can crawl. At first, *Among the Sleep* looks like a horror game with interesting gameplay, but in the end, it turns out that the game contains several clever symbols. For instance, each of the monsters represents how the toddler views his abusive mother in various stages of her alcoholism.

At the beginning of the game, the mother has a round body shape, her face is a circle (Figure 1), which represents harmony (Solarski 2017, p. 16), but later she becomes much taller, skinnier, with messy, floating hair and glowing eyes (Figure 2). This represents the drunken mother, a threat, but also a source of sorrow. Yet another stage is when she looks like she is wearing a trench coat and does not have a face, except for two glowing eyes (Figure 3). This inhuman appearance represents her hung-over self. These two appearances are more threatening than her original self and the environment also changes with her, which is a crucial element for the consideration of this video game as art. These changes are responsible for immersing ourselves more, and we can feel like a little kid who tries to understand what is happening around him and where his mother disappeared.

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[3] The original game came out in 2014 and a remaster titled *Among The Sleep: Enhanced Edition* was released for PC in 2017.

Figure 1, 2 and 3. The appearances of the mother. At first, she has a round face and the colours are warm. Later her shape changes, the colours become much colder, and the environment is less colourful. (Source of the last screenshot: Heap 2021)

The "game feel," according to game designers, is an intentional quality in the designs. As Aubry Anable states:

> Crafting a game that a player will find challenging but not overly frustrating, visually compelling, and narratively satisfying, with mechanics and a game structure that produce the right amount of tension and gratification, is a hugely complex endeavor, and game companies have invested a great deal of resources in trying to figure out how to meet all these criteria (Anable 2019, p. 44)

Among the Sleep aligns the audiovisual elements with the mother's state, which builds up the whole atmosphere. She has a nice, calm voice, but when she is drunk and David cannot find her, we can hear her humming a tone. This tune and the dark, oppressive images create a terrifying impression. If we can read between the lines, we can discover that the game raises the awareness of domestic violence, the abuser in this case being a woman. The game also reflects on alcoholism's side effects. The mom is afraid of losing her child, but her addiction is harmful because she cannot take proper care of David. At night – when, we can assume, she starts drinking – the kid tries to find her, but instead encounters a huge monster. He and Teddy will not realize that this beast is his mother. The player can connect the dots at the end, when they see the mother on the ground with a bottle in her hand (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The mother is sitting on the floor, the wine bottle is empty and she is crying.

The whole game tells a story about a little kid trying to make sense of his surroundings, imitating a two-year-old's point of view, which is an exciting and unique choice by the developers. *Among the Sleep* is not just a challenging horror game with a well-built fictional world, it also reflects on serious issues.

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter has several layers of symbols and storylines as well, it embraces art in many ways – I believe the whole game is art itself in the sense of its topic and the audiovisual methods. The plot starts when Paul Prospero, a supernatural detective, arrives at Red Creek Valley after he had received a letter from Ethan. The detective tries to find the young boy while solving murder cases in which the victims are the members of the Carter family. As we learn, the Sleeper, an unknown entity – that had been accidentally released by Ethan when he opened a room – infected the Carter family and they turned against each other. Their main goal is apparently to sacrifice Ethan to break the curse. To stop the Sleeper, Ethan tries to burn down the mysterious room. Even though he gets trapped in the Sleeper's room, he does not stop and starts the fire that burns down the whole house. Paul Prospero is too late, the boy is already dead. But this is not where the story ends. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* is much more complicated than it seems at first. The following part is my interpretation of the game, based on the fictive world's hidden symbols and influenced by Yaroslav Kravtsov's (2014) online analysis. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* builds on so many layers that some players can decode the story differently, which supports my claim: the game is art, and its interpretation is based on the recipient.

As it turns out, Prospero's journey is Ethan's last story. The truth is the boy wanted to finish a private detective's story, but he forgot about the time and missed the dinner. His family tried to find him and when they realized that Ethan had immersed himself in his own fictional world again, they became furious and started to argue. Ethan's mother accidentally broke a lamp and their old house caught on fire immediately. Ethan had no chance to escape. He had been trapped in his room and suffered smoke inhalation. It is 7:00 when Ethan lays down on his bed, Prospero finds him and wakes him up at 7:04. He tells Ethan that he can leave now, new stories are waiting for him. To sum up, the entire world that we see in the game is Ethan's dream. During the gameplay, every clock in the town shows 7:00 or 7:04. Paul Prospero's journey in Red Creek Valley is a four-minute dream of a dying boy, who wants to survive. The dream, the murder cases, and the stories show how Ethan saw his life and his family.

The young boy has a rich fantasy, he likes to write stories, but his family does not like this hobby. Some of them are also afraid of Ethan's imagination, they find his stories odd. During the game we can see the boy's fantasy through his writings and supernatural events: Prospero avoids several traps in the forest, chases an astronaut, finds a magician's house and a witch's tent, and encounters a sea monster in the depths of the mine. Of course, these "random" events have meanings. After these scenes, the player always finds a piece of paper with Ethan's story. The stories are heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, or Jules Verne, to list a few. Even if we cannot recognize the references at first, at some point of the game we can see a collection of books in the Carter's house that have been written by the mentioned authors.

To give one example: the sea monster is a tentacle, resembling Lovecraft's Cthulhu, which has a tentacled head and is also related to the underwater environment. As we can read in the young boy's writing, some miners wanted to perform a ritual to unleash the "sea-thing." However, one of them realized the ritual would cause a flood on the world and he stabbed the others. The sea-thing cursed the miner to wander around the mine forever.

Ethan's stories also represent his family. The miner who turned against the others can be Ethan's father, Dale, who never helped his son, even though he felt sorry for him. He had good intentions, but he was not able to do anything until the very end, when it was too late. Dale also seems like a cursed man, his dream to be an inventor is ruined. Ethan usually describes his father as "sad." It seems that both Dale and Ethan are dreamy people, but their environment does not understand them and they separate themselves from others. Dale, just like the cursed miner, wanders alone. As Solarski mentioned, players can experience a one-sided approach to communication through written materials, which is usually not a welcomed approach, because players want interactivity. But this depends on the

game style. "Written narrative information may be a necessity for development budget reasons or a welcome story layer for players who enjoy delving into every aspect of a plot" (Solarski 2017, p. 55). In the case of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, the written materials give more depth to the game.

The game – developed by The Astronauts – has an outstanding graphical design (Figure 5). The atmosphere suggests that the events of the story occur in an abandoned, quiet place. However, as Prospero states, "No place is truly quiet, and nowhere is really ordinary," and players can feel that something is not right and the town has its secrets.

Figure 5. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* has amazing landscapes.

Both the landscapes and the music create in the player a strong bond with the story. The shapes and the sound radiate harmony, but then we can see blood and corpses. On the other hand, the player and Prospero know that something bad happened to Ethan. The main goal is to focus on the story that can evoke strong feelings.

God of War, Detroit: Become Human, Titanfall 2

Games can not only present a story or an issue artistically. *God of War* was released in 2018, and it won several awards: Game of the Year, Best Game, *BAFTA Games Awards for Music*. Among the others, it also deserved the *BAFTA* award for its narrative.

God of War has an incredible set of soundtracks. The music creates an intense atmosphere and helps the players to immerse themselves in the fictional world.

> Video games would only deliver a fraction of their immersive potential without the support of audio. Audio alone can transform the aesthetic experience of gameplay by providing an ambient atmosphere for the player's actions. Audio is a term that covers two principle categories in the context of games: music and sound effects (Solarski 2017, p. 77).

We can hear the music in the background while the characters are on their journey, exploring an abandoned building or fighting against deadly creatures. The music also represents their feelings. Bear McCreary (n.d.), the composer, highlighted in one of his interviews that this game has well-developed characters and he wanted to capture their spirit. Kratos' character's song expresses age, wisdom, power, and masculinity, but these tones also develop through the game, the same way as the story evolves. *God of War* articulates strong emotions like anger, sadness, loss of a loved one, happiness, and hope. It also follows the development of the father-son relationship.

When Kratos fights, the player can feel his power, the controller – depending on the platform, because now it is possible to play the game on a PC as well – starts to vibrate. Kratos is a muscular man with a pillar-like body shape, which implies his powerful nature. But at the beginning of the game, he carefully touches a tree which has his wife's handprint on it (the music also expresses sadness). These small details can help us to understand Kratos' feelings. The character's artists (Rafael Grassetti and Dela Longfish) stated in an interview that when they created Kratos, they wanted to resonate with the Nordic region. In the beginning, they relied on different artworks – pictures and 3D models – to create the game's mood and represent the relationship between father and son. Their goal was to get an overall feeling (The Characters of *God of War…*, 2018).

The game also won an award for its narrative. A game can get this prize for excellence in creating and delivering the best story or narrative that captivates and engages the player. This award category also shows the importance of a story in a video game: not only the gameplay, but the cause and effect explanation is crucial too, it is not negligible how the story develops. *God of War* has a complex and engaging story, which builds on Norse mythology. It uses well-known mythological characters and elements, but in some cases gives them new backgrounds and meanings. The game also tells the story of a father (Kratos), who has to deal with his past, while raising his son (Atreus) on his own. We can also see how the young boy tries to understand the world around him and find his place in it.

We can find art and creativity in less obvious elements as well. If the player has little knowledge of Norse mythology, they are in the same position as the main characters, they have to explore the world together. Kratos has a different cultural background – he came from Sparta – and Atreus is too young to know everything about the gods, the Nine Realms, and the many threats to his and his father's lives. Atreus takes notes and draws so that the player can check the weaknesses of the enemies and, in this way, can learn more about the fictional world. This is a clever method to create a "help menu" for the game. Thanks to the cinematic motion capture, the graphics design and the characters' facial expressions are well-detailed and human-like. The game has breathtaking views, all of the different realms have unique appearances and enemies. This can also be considered as a form of art.

Let us look from another angle. *Detroit: Become Human* has several valuable aspects. The graphic is well-detailed, and thanks to the motion capture technology, emotions are expressed perfectly (this game depicts many of them and the characters represent these emotions via their facial expressions and dialogues) (Figure 6). The audio also transforms the aesthetic experience.

Figure 6. Markus experiences grief.

The main characters are human-like androids and the conflict starts when some of them become sentient beings (they are labelled as "deviants"). The story shows the dark side of human nature: humans can be cruel and sadistic with other beings, just because others are slightly different from them. One of the main characters, who is an android (Markus), experiences segregation: on public transport, he has to stand at the back of the bus with other androids, as they are separated from

humans. He also has to tolerate when others hurt him and cannot fight back, because society treats him like an object. His mentor, the artist Carl, sees him as a human being and asks Markus to paint something. At first, the android creates a perfect copy of his environment, but Carl reminds him that painting (and art) is not just about replicating the world, "it's about interpreting it, improving on it." After this, Markus shows how he sees the world. I believe that this and the other already mentioned video games (as well as many more) do the same: they do not just simulate the world around us, they try to interpret it and improve it through raising awareness.

One more example is *Titanfall 2*. This game is story-based but not as much as the above-mentioned examples. It is an FPS, "a style of game that parks you behind the main character's eyes. All games let you control and manipulate your environment to varying degrees, but almost no other genre of video game drops you closer to the action than an FPS" (Soulban, Orkin 2009, p. 51). The player becomes the protagonist, there are direct corollaries. "Your adrenaline is the character's adrenaline, your racing heart is the character's racing heart. And sometimes, even the reverse is true" (Soulban, Orkin 2009, p. 51). Even the reverse is true, because if the player is nervous, they can miss the aim.

In *Titanfall 2* the protagonist's (Jack's) partner is a huge robot (BT), who can carry and protect his pilot. This changes how the player can see the environment and how they feel about it. When Jack pilots BT, the player can almost feel how powerful the robot is, experiencing the feeling of invulnerability: they have more ammo and they do not die so easily. Whenever Jack is inside BT, the point of view changes and he can see the enemies from above. But in many cases, Jack has to leave BT and he has to fight alone. These parts make the player vulnerable and slower. In addition, these parts can be nerve-wrecking, because we do not know if BT is alright or if someone destroyed him. The story builds up the bond between BT and Jack, the player can relate to their feelings.

On the way to the future

What other ways can art merge with a technological tool? One great example of this is virtual reality (VR) games that offer the opportunity to create artworks within the fictional world. Most VR games are based on player immersion, typically through head-mounted display units or headsets and controllers. In 2021, there was a unique exhibition in Hungary, which showcased some interesting VR artworks. The event was co-organized by Random Error Studio and Zip-Scene Conference in the frame of the 3rd Zip-Scene Conference on Immersive Storytelling in Budapest. It showcased some of the most groundbreaking augmented reality (AR) and

VR productions that tackle the sense of immersion in various ways (Zip-Scene Conference 2021).

It was fascinating to experience how a VR headset can bring us to a virtual world of art. These electronic works were exhibited just like artworks in museums: next to the object (in this case, the computer, which contained one creation), the title, the creator's name, and a small summary were visible. Compared to conventional exhibitions, the biggest difference was the degree of interactivity: the visitors had to put on a VR helmet and look around to see the fictional world. In these creations, the artworks were not static objects, they were moving productions. It was something we could call game art. "The game art phenomenon is not a movement per se but rather an unaffiliated group of media artists using games to make works of art" (Sharp 2015, pp. 21–22). Thanks to the earphones, visitors could only hear the sound of these works and could only see the fictional world due to the VR helmet. In another sense, visitors were "locked inside" the artwork, they were "alone" and could experience everything without interruption.

One of the exhibited productions was *Nightsss*, a sensual VR experience of poetry, dance, and nature. This artistic animation is based on ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response). The poet Weronika Lewandowska uses sounds characteristic of the Polish language, creating onomatopoeic landscapes that cross language barriers. The spatially composed poet's voice takes the immersion to a virtual night environment where one meets a dancing character. The dancer's organic movements blend with her virtual body. *Nightsss* explores the possibilities of VR storytelling, creating an interesting tension of boundaries. As we can see, video games have reached a level where they can be exhibited like artworks and can "lock" the visitors inside them.

Another important aspect I would like to highlight is that games can be given awards due to their artistic performance. The previously mentioned BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Games Awards recognize and reward outstanding creative achievements. The award categories reflect the richness and diversity of the games sector. We could mention the Music, Artistic Achievement, Game Design, or Narrative categories, but the list continues. As BAFTA states on their website:

> Excellence. In a word, this is what the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) is all about, through its support, promotion and development of the film, television and games industries. We celebrate it, through our internationally renowned Awards ceremonies. We champion it, through an array of events, platforms and forums with the best practitioners in the business. We nurture it, through our innovative new and aspiring talent initiatives. We safeguard it, through our invaluable heritage work. And, as the leading UK charity supporting the moving image art forms, we actively promote it for the benefit and appreciation of all (Mission, n.d.).

As we can see, they recognize and celebrate outstanding games and their artistic values. In my opinion, this shows us that not every video game is "just a mean of entertainment," a game's plot can be as complex as a movie's or a book's, and games can express various feelings. We can find art in their audiovisual elements and in their story as well. It is worth mentioning that the above analyzed *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* won the BAFTA Game Innovation Award in 2015.

Closing thoughts

The paper aimed to show different examples and angles to shed light on the artistic values of video games. How can they be more than a tool of entertainment? I believe emotions have an outstanding role in answering this question. Video games, just like art, can express how we see the world and help us to be more emphatic towards others. With the help of a complicated technological background, we can connect playfulness, our desire to experience a great story, and different art forms. Genre is not an obstacle: we can discover the values mentioned earlier in story-focused games (*The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*) and even in FPS ones (*Titanfall 2*).

Visual elements are important – as we saw in the cases of *Detroit: Become Human* or *God of War* – but developers do not need to use up-to-date technologies to create an immersive world. *Among the Sleep* bases the audiovisual elements on the mother's state, and the combination of colours (dark or bright) and sounds can build up the atmosphere. Even though David cannot speak, players can feel and know when he is terrified or happy. In *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* players can hardly see the characters' facial expressions, they are not as detailed as in *Detroit*'s, *God of War*'s or *Titanfall 2*'s protagonists. But the dialogues and written pieces tell the story and expose all of the emotions. In addition, the environment in many cases looks like a painting and the sounds intensify the overall feeling of the different scenes.

Paintings, music, poems: all of these are considered as art and now we can also find them in video games. The paper highlighted many examples to show how these elements become essential in games. If we go further, we can see the next step in VR games: they belong to a technology that is younger than video games, artists are still experimenting with how they can merge technology and different art forms. In my opinion, this also shows us how technology can be art and how it can express our feelings. Now we can even paint pictures with a virtual paintbrush, we can see artworks from different angles. The question is: are we still in Huizinga's magic circle or are these games more? It is hard to find the boundaries, but I believe that, with technological advancement, we will find out soon. Until then, let us see how video games are interpreting and improving the world.

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Klaudia Jancsovics – is a doctoral student at the University of Szeged in the Department of Comparative Literature. Her research belongs to game studies, and she examines video games with the methods of literary and film studies. Her aim is to prove that video games can tell stories in unique, interactive ways while using the methods of literary writings and films. So far, she has published several studies focusing on different video games (e.g., *Heavy Rain*, *Detroit: Become Human*) and various approaches (like the characteristics of detective stories, movie language, or horror stories in video games). She has also been interested in narratology, game studies, digital humanities, intermediality, and film studies.