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A tale of two Eberts: Videogames and the arbitrariness of meaning

Abstract

The article revisits and examines in detail the so-called Ebert debate: an exchange of polemic voices between Roger Ebert, his opponents and supporters, on the issue of the relationship – both actual and potential – between games and works of art. Initiated by Ebert's famous remarks that games can never be art, the debate offers a variety of views on the nature of art, the role of experience in art and games, the possibility of artistic expression in games, and the autonomy of art.

The main point of the article is not so much to compare these views as to explain the contradiction at the heart of Ebert's own argument: the critic seems to be constantly torn between the idea that games cannot be art *in principle* and the more practical view that it is impossible to know for certain that no games will *ever* become art. This contradiction seems to stem directly from Ebert's inconsistent views as to the source of meaning in games, and it allows us to shed new light both on the nature of games as a medium, and on fundamental issues with contemporary games studies/criticism.

Keywords: Roger Ebert, games criticism, art, intention, meaning, Modernism

The following essay offers a metacritical re-reading of the debate surrounding Roger Ebert's famous remarks that video games should not be seen as an art form (see Ebert 2005, 2007, 2010). I seek to prove that the contradictions and ambiguities

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of Ebert's original position are too hastily dismissed today as either solved, dated, or generally made irrelevant by the more comprehensive, academic accounts of the relationship between art and games offered since.

On a methodological level, this essay may be seen as an attempt to apply to contemporary game studies – insofar as they remain interested in games' relationship to other media/arts, and in the ontology of the works of art in general – elements of what was sometimes called “strong intentionalism” (Goldsworthy 2005) or the “Nonsite school” of criticism: an approach to literature, art, and ontology of meaning that is perhaps most commonly associated with the work of Walter Benn Michaels. In *Against Theory*, a seminal essay co-authored by himself and Steven Knapp (1982), Michaels famously claimed that meaning is necessarily and strictly identical to the author's intention (i.e., they are two names for the very same thing). Based on the fundamental observation that the only way to decide whether something belongs to the work is by referring to the intention of its author (whoever or whatever that author might be) – i.e., that the authorial intent is the only “thing” that guarantees the work's identity, allowing us to define its boundaries and perceive it as a work in the first place – the argument made by the duo was anti-methodological in its essence. On a fundamental level, what we all do when we interpret is to make claims about the intention of the work's author; it is misleading to claim that various *methodologies* of interpretation make any difference to this process, as nothing may ever be said about any particular meaning in advance of interpretation – and making any a priori instructions as to the “method” of reading is a futile task.

In the decades that followed, this position was developed (by Michaels and others) into a somewhat comprehensive account of the ontology of literature/art, touching upon the issues of autonomy (Brown 2019), affects (Cronan 2013; Leys 2017), the politics of cultural theory (Michaels 2006), as well as philosophy of action and intention in general (e.g., Michaels 2019).

Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, Knapp's and Michaels' position does not necessarily entail a wholesale rejection of the argument against intention famously made by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their 1946 essay “The Intentional Fallacy.” As shown, e.g., by Jennifer Ashton (2011), this crucial piece of New Criticism is based on a set of essentially valid intuitions, and ultimately proves not the irrelevance of the authorial intention as such, but the impossibility of *reducing* intention to the external cause of the work. The lawn that the poet sat on before they wrote a poem is indeed meaningless, but that is because it serves (at best) as the external, material *cause* of the poem, rather than a part of the poet's intention expressed *in* and *through* the poem; intention is immanent, rather than external, to the intentional acts/works. Hence Ashton's suggestion that the “intentional” fallacy should be more accurately called the “causal” fallacy. The reduction of the intentional to the purely causal, on which “The Intentional

Fallacy” is founded, results in what Stanley Cavell called the “bad picture of intention” in his own polemic against Wimsatt (Cavell 1976, p. 227).

The metacritical nature of the following essay is perhaps worth emphasising at this point.¹ Metacriticism – or the study of criticism, its history, methodology, and socio-cultural functions – may be seen as providing “proper” academic criticism and theory (for instance, game studies) with only limited and essentially archival value. However, as I will try to show, a re-reading of important critical debates about games (even, or maybe especially, debates that took place outside the academia), if done in a systematic and somewhat disengaged manner – by an outside observer, rather than an active participant of the debate – may offer valuable lessons that stem directly from the *practice* of critical interpretation, rather than high academic theory. If my argument is correct, Roger Ebert’s contradictory and ambiguous remarks were an imperfect articulation of a problem that, although presumably crucial to game studies, has yet to be solved. And in the last section of my essay, I will show how the contradictions of Ebert’s theoretical position may shed new light on various influential academic accounts of the relationship between games, meaning, and art.

Finally, it should be noted that despite the metacritical nature and a relatively narrow methodological scope of this essay, its conclusions – insofar as they touch upon the structural and inevitable relationship between meaning and games – should be seen as claiming universal validity. This is not to say that they offer an exhaustive account of what this relationship may or may not look like in practice; rather, what I mean by “universal” is that the argument presented here fails or succeeds depending not on its “applicability” to any particular interpretation of any particular game, but on whether it correctly grasps the nature of games as a medium, on an analytical level. In other words, if the conclusions are valid, they are valid for all games *by definition*; conversely, if there is a game to which these conclusions do not apply, the entire argument must be deemed flawed.

It must follow that practical variations between different types of games (even undoubtedly crucial variations, like the technological chasm between traditional board games and modern video games), as well as their impact on the *historical* development of games as a medium, lie beyond the scope of this article. To the extent that Roger Ebert and his opponents were primarily interested in video games, they are my main focus as well – this, however, is mostly incidental to the main argument presented below.

¹ Incidentally, this metacritical aspect also differentiates my approach from that offered by Trevor Strunk (2017). Writing for *Nonsite*, Strunk draws on many of the same inspirations in order to focus on various ways games problematize their own autonomy; I believe I share many of his initial assumptions, but apply them to a different area of interest.

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To make predictions about the future is a notoriously difficult and risky task for any critic – be it a critic of literature, games, visual arts, or anything else. To make bold public assumptions about the future of *an entire medium* is, obviously, even riskier: after all, in the absence of a supernatural insight into the things yet to come, to make such statements is to claim an extraordinary degree of knowledge about the present. Accusations of narcissism and megalomania are certain to follow.

In many cases, however, it is easy to mistake a logical argument about the nature of the medium for a practical prediction on its future. Does a claim that video games *can never be art*, for instance, constitute a practical prediction? Or does it seek to define what games *are*, to locate some essential features that they all seem to possess by their very definition, and that exclude them from being art *in principle* (rather than just for a very, very long time)?

Admittedly, when the influential film critic Roger Ebert repeatedly made exactly such a claim in the first decade of the 21st century, he gave some decisively mixed signals as to how his statements should be read. Were they logical arguments or practical predictions? On one occasion, he claimed that games cannot be art “by their nature,” i.e., that the entire medium is inherently incapable of fulfilling the definition of art (Ebert 2005). But elsewhere he seemed to restrict the scope of his claims to a single lifetime (Ebert 2010, April 16). Interestingly, there was no clear chronological progression to his argument either. After making some very explicit claims about the fundamental incompatibility of games and art (Ebert 2005), he seemed to backtrack a little in 2007:

A year or so ago, I rashly wrote that video games could not be art. That inspired a firestorm among gamers, who wrote me countless messages explaining why I was wrong, and urging me to play their favorite games. Of course, I was asking for it. Anything can be art. Even a can of Campbell’s soup. What I should have said is that games could not be high art, as I understand it (Ebert 2007).

The abstract and ultimately unelaborated upon distinction between “art” and “high art” weakened Ebert’s initial argument significantly by tying it to the issue of the quality of specific games – games *as they already exist* – rather than the nature of games as a medium. Then in 2010 the critic returned as forceful and insistent as ever, posing that “Videogames Can Never Be Art” in the very title of what was to become his best-known piece on the subject. Even here, however, Ebert was ultimately tempted to present his claims as practical predictions rather than an essentially logical, or structural, argument:

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 2010, April 16).

Is the principle in question historically restricted, i.e., could it change over time? Is it possible for games as a medium to develop in such a way and to such a degree that they achieve the status of art? Or would such a development necessarily mean that they transcend their own medium and become something else entirely? A few months later Ebert followed his comments with a series of predictably conventional and entirely unhelpful caveats:

I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place. I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself.

...

My error in the first place was to think I could make a convincing argument on purely theoretical grounds. What I was saying is that video games could not in principle be Art. That was a foolish position to take, particularly as it seemed to apply to the entire unseen future of games. This was pointed out to me maybe hundreds of times. How could I disagree? It is quite possible a game could someday be great Art (Ebert 2010, July 1).

I believe that this tension – between Ebert's forceful claims as to the *structural* or logical incompatibility of games and art, on the one hand, and his *practical* or empirical predictions that games will never become art, on the other – is telling of a deeper issue in contemporary games criticism, and stems from the critic's unwillingness to recognise (and ultimately, perhaps, resolve) an important contradiction in what is essentially a Modernist argument – but, crucially, an *inconsistently* Modernist one. In order to understand the nature of Ebert's dilemma, however, we first need to take a closer look at some of the counter-arguments presented by his opponents.

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Most of Ebert's opponents seem to agree with him on one point: indeed, *anything could be art*. However, in most cases this approach was rooted in the idea that art is defined by our experience of it. Games could be art not because they objectively

possess a set of features that they share with works of art – but because they are potentially capable of being *experienced* as art by the players.

Kellee Santiago's TEDx talk (Santiago 2009) – itself both a response to Ebert and the main object of his critique in "Videogames Can Never Be Art" – offers a handful of definitions of "art" that seemingly complemented one another. The first one, derived from Wikipedia, posits that "art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions." Another one, curiously adapted from Robert McKee's definition of explicitly *good* writing (rather than writing as such), defines art "as being motivated to touch the audience," "moved by a desire to touch the audience." Finally, Santiago herself defines art as "a way of communicating ideas to the audience in a way that the audience finds engaging."

What links those definitions together is an overt emphasis on the audience's experience, largely at the expense of what the work may be intended to express or convey by its author. After all, we can easily imagine a case where certain objects are "deliberately arranged," and while the arrangement does indeed "appeal to senses and emotions," it does so independently of its author's intentions, or the purpose of the entire process. A certain brick pattern, for instance, may be both aesthetically pleasing (think of all the blogs and forums dedicated to "things fitting perfectly into other things") and deliberately planned, but as long as its only purpose has to do with its function (say, to make the wall exceptionally sturdy), it is hard to see it as art. The aesthetic experience we may or may not have when confronted with such a pattern is incidental to its purpose. (Another way to put it is that while you can have a *wrong interpretation* of art, you cannot have a *wrong experience* of an object.)

Santiago's own definition is a little more precise in its consideration of meaning, in that it sees art as primarily a "way of communicating ideas." This might seem to narrow a definition for some, but both "communication" and "ideas" are just abstract enough to potentially include all sorts of different meanings. The second part of the definition is potentially more confusing. In addition to seemingly excluding bad, non-engaging works from the notion of art altogether, Santiago seems to propose that, when deciding whether something constitutes art or not, one should rely solely on its *actual effect* on the audience, rather than any *attempted appeal* to said audience. It is not enough for a work to seek to provoke a certain reaction – *it has to succeed*.

The confusing part of Santiago's argument is that while she seeks to define art as such, she seems to rely entirely on the audience's behaviour – our reactions to various objects – rather than on any objective features of the work of art as such. At times, it almost seems that Santiago sees art as a type of experience in itself: art

is not something we encounter in the world, it is a word we use to describe our own reaction to certain objects.²

Such a view may seem odd; but this is not to say that definitions offered by Santiago are incoherent. In fact, they seem perfectly coherent – in that they all suggest that whether a game is or is not a work of art relies on the reaction, or experience, of its players. In her subsequent rebuttal of Ebert’s counter-arguments, Santiago seems to double down on this approach, especially in the closing paragraph of her piece for *Kotaku*:

Art is in the eye of both the creator and the beholder. And as those two groups of people grow and change, so will the definition and perception of art (Santiago 2010).

In other words, games may become art because art itself may be redefined by its audience in such a way that it includes games. The latter is undoubtedly true; however, as a whole, Santiago’s argument relies on the assumption that the very act of redefinition changes the nature of the object in question. If by expanding the definition of art we can change what constitutes art itself, then the question “can games be art?” seems to have little to do with games, and everything to do with the audience’s subjective (which does not necessarily mean “individual”) approach. Clearly, Santiago considers the creators’ input only insofar as they participate in the social act of redefinition, or the “changing of perception.” Even if the “artness” of a work of art is partly due to the efforts of its creators, it still has little to do with any features of the work itself, and more with all the inevitably social practices that surround it.

A very similar intuition may be found in Eric Zimmerman’s rebuttal of Ebert’s views (Zimmerman 2014). Although rather than defend games-as-art, Zimmerman urges his readers to ignore the issue altogether, his line of reasoning is essentially the same as Santiago’s. He opens by claiming that “Anything can be, and has been, considered art. Games can be too.” This, again, seems largely true – allowing for a certain rhetorical exaggeration – but does not seem to answer the question of whether games can be art. That is, unless we locate the entire issue once more on the side of the audience’s experience, and assume that what art *is* depends solely on what the audience *believes it to be*. Zimmerman all but acknowledges this assumption, by posing in the next few paragraphs that

2 Arguably, McKee’s definition stands out in that it locates the essence of “good writing” in the writer’s own “desire” rather than the readers’ experience; however, this is the part that Santiago seems to skip over.

what makes something art is not the object itself. You can't split the atom of a Picasso and find an essential art particle inside. Much contemporary art is about appropriation and recontextualization – putting advertising on a canvas, or a commercial product in a gallery. It's not about the object in and of itself.

What makes something art are the social structures that surround it (Zimmerman 2014).

Meanwhile, Jim Preston – whose comments Ian Bogost relies on in his *How to Do Things With Videogames* (see Bogost 2011, p. 9) – offers an interesting variation on the same argument. Preston openly admits that he is not interested in what art actually *is*; rather, the blurring of its boundaries seems to him to create a peculiar *political* opportunity:

My suggestion to my fellow gamers is not to piss on Roger Ebert, as tempting as that may be. Instead of adopting a philosophical or aesthetic strategy, we should adopt a political one. Even if I thought Ebert had a coherent conception of art, there is little to be gained by engaging him in an essentialist debate.

Instead, we should learn from Joshua Bell's example and focus on creating the conditions in which video games can be viewed as art (Preston 2008).

Such an explicitly anti-essentialist approach may very well prove effective. However, the political imperative put forward by Preston – that one should strive for games to be socially recognised as art irrespective of whether one believes they are, in fact, art – has in practice the same corollary as Zimmerman's (and Santiago's) argument: an act of redefinition changes the boundaries of the object in question. Only now we are not necessarily urged to believe that ourselves – just to behave as if we did. Thus, we are expected to suspend our beliefs as to what art *is* in order to achieve a certain political goal. But this in turn poses another question: if we have no working definition of what constitutes art (of what art is on its own, rather than what the experience of art may look like), then how are we supposed to convince anyone to see games as art? Or, more precisely, if we seek to convince someone that games are art, what are we trying to convince them of? Or yet in other words – to go back to the core of Santiago's original argument – if it's only the people's perception that sets the boundaries of what constitutes art, what exactly is it a perception *of*?

One way to provisionally solve this dilemma is to go further than Santiago did, and openly reduce art to a type of personal and subjective experience (rather than something external to the subject – something that only *provokes* a certain experience). That is the road taken by Kyle Chayka, who opens his piece for *The*

Atlantic by accusing Ebert of denying that Chayka's own experiences are "real or meaningful." He then follows this accusation by asserting that

video games are nothing if not experiential. They are visuals and music and poetry all wrapped up into a single package. A video game isn't just a game – it is a controlled passage through an overwhelming aesthetic experience. This is also the basis for my own definition of art as any sensory aesthetic experience that provokes an emotional response in its audience, be it wonder, anger, love, frustration or joy (Chayka 2010).

Of course, no player would deny that their experience of games is "real," but neither did Ebert. In fact, he explicitly admitted that an experience may be moving, and yet its object does not necessarily constitute art:

Many experiences that move me in some way or another are not art. A year ago I lost the ability (temporarily, I hope) to speak. I was deeply moved by the experience. It was not art (Ebert 2007).

In Chayka's account, however, art is no longer an object or a root of an experience, but a *type* of experience: specifically, any "sensory experience" that provokes a certain kind of emotion (from a seemingly arbitrary pre-set list). What was only implied in parts of Santiago's essay here becomes an explicit foundation for Chayka's entire argument. Art is no longer something external, a "thing" encountered in the world – and as such, it does not need any features that would make it autonomous of its audience.

IGN's Mike Thomsen does not go as far, and in fact tries to give his argument nuance by negotiating a more moderate position: combining an experience-based definition of art with the notion of art as a tool of authorial expression, a vehicle for various meanings, beliefs, and ideas. But in the end, the focus on the audience's experience prevails:

I experienced the medium [of games] as an art form from the very first moment I played a videogame almost thirty years ago. Ebert says no critic has ever forwarded a videogame that could be compared to the great works of the old, canonized art. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, he's wrong on this count as well. I did just that six months ago when I described my experience playing *Metroid Prime* as of equivalent emotional and thematic value as my time watching *Citizen Kane* (Thomsen 2012).

Of course, it is easy to imagine that someone may experience *Citizen Kane* and *Metroid* in largely the same (if not identical) manner. A newborn, for instance, would

probably be unable to distinguish between the two. But when Ebert asserted that “no video gamers now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form,” he clearly meant something else (admittedly, his use of the word “experience” here seems unfortunate): not that no gamer could experience a game the same way they experience a specific work of art, but that there is – in practice, if not in principle – a *formal* difference between games and art. Such a difference would surely be located in the medium of games itself, rather than in anyone’s personal history with any particular title. Even Thomsen seems to recognise this, to a degree, by suggesting that games possess a “language” of their own that is neither better nor worse than that of other, more established media.

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These comments are just a small sample of some of the more influential voices dissenting from Ebert’s claims. However, even from such a limited sample a clear pattern emerges: the games can be art on account of being able to give us the same kind of experiences that art does; and if anything can be art, it is because potentially anything can give us the kind of experiences that art does. But this is clearly not what Ebert himself had in mind. Although he explicitly avoided offering his own set of criteria for distinguishing between art and non-art, on a few occasions he seems to have gotten close to a provisional definition of sorts. In his early comments, for instance, he emphasised the importance of “authorial control”:

I did indeed consider video games inherently inferior to film and literature. There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control (Ebert 2005).

Ebert reiterated this stance in his comments on Clive Barker’s talk a few years later:

I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist . . . 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).

Moreover, Ebert decided here to clarify some of his earlier remarks; where previously to demonstrate that anything could be art he used the example of a can of soup, he now referred to a *painting* of a can of soup:

I mentioned that a Campbell's soup could be art. I was imprecise. Actually, it is Andy Warhol's painting of the label that is art. Would Warhol have considered Clive Barker's video game "Undying" as art? Certainly. He would have kept it in its shrink-wrapped box, placed it inside a Plexiglas display case, mounted it on a pedestal, and labeled it "Video Game" (Ebert 2007).

Of course, in such a scenario it is not really "the game" that becomes art; it is just the physical object that the game is recorded on. This rhetorical slight of hand aside, Ebert's position seems now more clear, and easier to distinguish from that of his opponents. Whereas for Santiago, Chayka, or Zimmerman to say that anything can *be* art means that anything can bring about the same *experiences* we have when confronted with various works of art, for Ebert it means that anything can be *made into* art. And whereas for his opponents to say that anything can *become* art is to say that art can be (and indeed has been, historically) redefined in such a way as to include almost anything, for Ebert this *becoming art* is of a distinctly more material nature: for an object (or a material) to become art, it needs to be *transformed* into a work of art by the work's author. Crucially, this does not mean that the experiential aspect of art is incidental or insignificant – rather, Ebert seems to point to a fundamental difference between the experiences the audience is *supposed* or *meant* to have (as an "inevitable conclusion") and the experiences it *just has*, independently of the work's meaning.

Nonetheless, this does not explain or solve the contradiction at the heart of our inquiry, namely: why is Ebert torn between the feeling that games are *in principle* (by nature, definition, or logic) incompatible with art, and the idea that they simply have to do much, much better, in order to *become* art in the future?

The tension between what a work of art compels us to do or think and our own subjective experience of it is of course one of the grand central themes of modern and contemporary criticism, especially within the broad Modernist tradition. It lies, for instance, at the very heart of Michael Fried's argument in his seminal *Art and Objecthood* (see Fried 1967/1998). In *The Shape of the Signifier* Walter Benn Michaels, one of Fried's most insightful readers, offers an interpretation that seem pertinent to our inquiry:

[T]he Modernist work refuses to be absorbed into its site. It is "exclusive" rather than "inclusive," and what it excludes is precisely the beholder; the context in which you encounter the work – where you see it, when you see it, who you are – is not a part of what it is. This is why Fried will invoke "the concept of meaning" (161) as against experience on its behalf. The idea here is that our experience of any work will vary with place, time, and so forth – the experience of reading some text on an airplane will be different from the experience of reading the same text in one's study – but the meaning of the text will not (Michaels, 2004, pp. 90–91).

Described in terms of meaning and experience, this tension is also crucial to Michaels' own work. The novelty of *The Shape of the Signifier* lies, however, not in the pointing out of the incompatibility of these two perspectives as such, but rather in the way Michaels links the entire issue to some more fundamental remarks on the nature of meanings, first offered by himself and Steven Knapp in *Against Theory*, a seminal piece of literary criticism from 1982 (see Knapp & Michaels 1982). There, Michaels and Knapp famously claimed that the meaning of a text is, by definition, always *strictly* identical with its author's intention (as in, these are just two names for the very same "thing"). I am unable to summarise their argument in any sensible level of detail here – extraordinarily concise, deflationary in its polemic attitude and clear in style, *Against Theory* is extremely difficult to quote other than in extenso – but in *The Shape of the Signifier* Michaels essentially reiterates and recontextualises its core points, by positing that the only alternative to the logic of experience is to focus on the authorial intention. In the very first chapter of the book, after discussing at length the case of eighty-six blank pages in Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography*, Michaels provisionally concludes:

The effort here has been to think through the question not only of what a text means but, even more fundamentally, of what the text is – of what is in it and what isn't, what counts as part of it and what doesn't – without the appeal to the author's intention. And the point is that if you do this, you find yourself committed not only to the materiality of the text but also, by way of that materiality, to the subject position of the reader. You find yourself committed to the materiality of the text because, if you don't think it matters whether the author of the text did or didn't intend the eighty-six blank pages to count as part of it, the mere fact that they are there must be dispositive. And you find yourself committed to the primacy of the subject position because the question about what's there will always turn out to be . . . a question about what's there to you, a question about what you see. Once, in other words, the eighty-six pages count not because some author meant them to count but because they are there, in front of you, then everything that is there must also count – the table the pages are on, the room the table is in, the way the pages, the table, and the room make you feel. Why? Because all these things are part of your experience of the pages, and once we abjure interest in what the author intended (once we no longer care whether or not the author intended us to count the room the work of art is in as part of the work of art), we have no principled reason not to count everything that's part of our experience as part of the work. And, of course, while our experiences will often be very similar, they will always be a little different – where you stand will be a little different from where I stand, what you feel will be different from what I feel, who you are is not who I am.

So the argument, in miniature, is that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don't think the subject position of the reader matters, but if you don't think the intention of the author is what counts, then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters (Michaels 2004, p. 11).

In other words, the very same meaning that guarantees the basic autonomy of the work of art/literature – or provides its identity, in the sense of defining its boundaries – cannot be derived from anything *other* than the author's intention (and, strictly speaking, even here it is not as much derived from the authorial intention, as it just *is* the authorial intention).

These remarks seem to echo some of Stanley Cavell's comments on chess made in his seminal *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1976, pp. 25–30). Although Cavell does not touch explicitly on the issues of meaning/intention (at least not in this particular part of the essay), his general point is that the rules of a game are in fact descriptive, rather than imperative, in nature; they describe what it means to play a game (what actions may be said to constitute "playing" it), rather than instruct us on what we should do *in order* to play it. For instance, the list of acceptable moves in chess does not instruct us on how we *ought to* move any of the figures; it only describes what actions count as playing the game (pushing the Queen across the board in a way prescribed by the rules does; throwing "the little object called the Queen" across the room does not). To put it in layman's terms, the rules, rather than advise and instruct the prospective players on anything, simply describe which actions fall within the confines of the game itself, and which do not. This is not to say that in practice players will not obey the rules in order to play (and perhaps enjoy) the game – it seems self-evident that on most occasions they do – what is implied here is that *the rules themselves* are indifferent to the player's motivations, because they are by their very nature indifferent to intentions as such.

It seems obvious how Michael's (and Cavell's) remarks may apply to Ebert and his opponents. With his emphasis on authorial control, Ebert falls on the side of meaning (even if at times he fails to understand it³) and remains sceptical of the role of experience – which, as we have already seen, does not mean that he somehow attempts to devalue or erase the viewer's (or players') experience, but rather, that he distinguishes between experiences as such and experiences that we are led to by the work's meaning, as an "inevitable conclusion." [Michaels on Fried: "theatricality, which Fried understands as the production of objects designed

3 For instance, in the closing paragraphs of his final piece on the "art vs games" debate, Ebert seems to equate meaning with a purely narrative "message," quoting Archibald MacLeish's claim that "a poem should not mean, but be" (Ebert 2010, July 1). The issue, however, is largely semantic: here, Ebert defines meaning in a narrow (and arguably imprecise) way, which does not seem to affect the underlying logic of his argument.

exclusively to produce a response (or some range of responses) in the beholder and which he presents as ‘the negation of art,’ involves only incidentally the insistence on the object. What’s crucial is that the transformation of the art object into an object like any other requires the transformation of the beholder’s experience of it into a version of experience tout court”.]

Michaels’ argument in *Against Theory* and *The Shape of the Signifier* has another indirect consequence, or corollary, that is often ignored. If the author’s intention is indeed strictly identical with meaning (in that they are in fact one and the same), then the latter is also entirely arbitrary, in the sense of being entirely dependent on the specific acts of a particular author. After all, no physical object, and no material one, may possess any meaning on its own; it all comes from “authorial control.” “Anything can be used to mean anything” (Knapp & Michaels 1983, p. 799): Michaels (and Knapp) offer a more radical,⁴ less vague (indeed, less arbitrary) version of E.D. Hirsch’s famous remark that

Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meanings. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it (Hirsch 1992, p. 13).

Anything can be made into art: as we have already seen, Ebert seems to share this view. So why was he so consistently torn between the idea that games may become art *at some point* and the view that they cannot be art *in principle*?

Brenda Romero was probably the first to point out this particular inconsistency in Ebert’s thinking. In her talk 2016 TEDx talk “Are Games Art?” she claimed:

[G]ames invite us to be interactive. And that is perhaps what sets them apart from all other forms of art. It is their most exciting thing. Now, Roger Ebert had actually posited that games were not art because of that very problem. He says, “art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices” that you may have in games. But I’m going to argue that choice is the original expression. Choice is intentional. That is, as an artist, what I’m trying to present. Not a single thing. If you can do eight things in a world, it’s because I decided that you could do eight things (Romero 2016).

Unlike Santiago or Zimmerman, Romero does not seem (at least at this point in her argument – her own views on the relevance of experience are also arguably

4 Their view remains more radical – and more consistent – than Hirsch’s, insofar as they acknowledge that unless there is intention, there can be no “word sequences”; we only recognise words as words because we posit an author, and a meaning. There is no language before meaning, and no intentionless speech.

inconsistent) particularly interested in drawing parallels between the experiences we may have when confronted with art on the one hand, and games on the other. She seems to understand that any similarity of experience is, at least from Ebert's point of view, incidental, and it does not fundamentally alter his position. Instead, she points out that choice itself may serve as a means of expression. Whereas for Ebert to give the audience choice – to invite it to participate, or “be interactive” – is to relinquish authorial control, Romero claims that a game designer can exercise such control precisely by giving the player a choice.⁵ In other words, confronting players with choices may *mean* something.

This meaningfulness of choices seems crucial, because it clearly separates some of the audience's choices from others. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which certain choices are *allowed for* by the work's author, but they nonetheless remain meaningless – in that they do not serve to express any authorial intention. In fact, it seems difficult to imagine art *without* the possibility of such choices. No one can force their readers not to choose to skip pages, and no one can in practice force their viewers to only look at a sculpture from a single point of view; indeed, this would defeat the very purpose of making a sculpture (rather than, say, a painting). For Fried himself, what separated Modernist art from its literalist counterpart in the first place was that a Modernist work remained the same irrespective of the point of view chosen by any of its viewers. For a choice to be meaningful in this sense, it seems necessary that it be integrated into the structure of the work itself; obviously, this is exactly what games seem to offer, at least in Romero's account. A choice that is explicitly derived from the very rules of the game is fundamentally different from any choice that transcends these rules (such as a choice to cheat, or to “break” the game). Choice, in other words, may be *made into* art.

These observations, in turn, seem to lead us to something akin to Ian Bogost's famous notion of *procedural rhetoric*. Explained in detail in his seminal 2007 book *Persuasive Games*, it is meant to describe a specific practice of representation and persuasion, important to games in general, and video games in particular:

Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular . . . Procedural rhetoric is

5 Ostensibly, it might seem important that Romero considers a limited choice scenario, where the player has only a certain number of preset options to choose from; however, in principle this does not seem to change anything. If it is the choice itself that is meaningful – that is, if the meaning is expressed by the very act of allowing the player to choose, rather than just through various “things” that they might choose *from* – then giving someone unlimited freedom (within the boundaries of the game) can surely mean as much as giving them only limited options.

a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created (Bogost 2007, p. 3).

[A]bstract processes – be they material like watch gears or cultural like crime – can be recounted through representation. However, procedural representation takes a different form than written or spoken representation. Procedural representation explains processes with other processes. Procedural representation is a form of symbolic expression that uses process rather than language (Bogost 2007, p. 9).

Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes (Bogost, 2007, p. 28–29).

Although Bogost is careful to stipulate that “procedural representations do not necessarily support user interaction” (Bogost 2007, p. 40) (they might, for instance, be performed entirely by a computer), it is easy to see how the notion of procedural rhetoric, and procedural representation more generally, could explain the existence of Romero’s meaningful choices. As an action on the part of the player, any particular choice stems from and is enabled by the rules of the game, the procedural framework within which the player makes their moves. These rules are, in turn, defined in advance by the game’s creator. By emphasising the impact of certain relationships (at the cost of others), by establishing causal chains and so on, the author gives the game meaning *through* the rules themselves.

So far, Bogost seems to pin down intuitions that are probably shared by the vast majority of players. However, one might be tempted to point out that his definitions can get quite abstract in places. What does it mean, for instance, that an argument is made *through* a process, or *with* a system? Is the system in question a part of the argument, or something that produces or results in an argument, or can it be an argument in itself? Take, for instance, classic abstract games like chess or go. We may certainly “read” the rules of these games as a series of claims about the nature of war (the necessity of sacrifice, for instance). But how are we supposed to know that this is indeed what these rules are – that they are supposed to mean something at all in the first place, let alone tell us something about war? If we were to consider the rules themselves, as a purely logical structure – and abstract from any form of symbolic expression that is incidental to the rules themselves, like the shape or the name of the pieces in chess – how would we know that the game we are playing is an allegory for war? What does it mean for Bogost – who clearly does not share Michaels’ views on meaning⁶ – that in procedural representation, processes take the place of language? Can a process be meaningful in itself? Or, to

⁶ See, e.g., Bogost 2011, p. 17 for his views on the so-called intentional fallacy.

keep with the linguistic metaphor, are we supposed to see such processes as words (i.e., meaningful units) or just shapes and sounds (i.e., physical objects)?

Interestingly, when Janet H. Murray first coined the idea of *procedural authorship* in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck* – the very idea from which Bogost’s procedural rhetoric derives – she described it in terms of an extension or a broadening of the traditional authorship, a new type of authorship that builds upon the old one, rather than seek to replace it:

Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another. The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities (Murray 1997, pp. 152–153).

Here, it is very clear that procedural authorship consists, essentially, of two equally necessary elements: the author creates the rules as well as the “texts themselves”; a “world,” but also a “set of scenes.” The difference between Murray’s and Bogost’s approaches may seem insignificant at first, but it explains why the former stops short of claiming that the rules themselves – or the procedure itself – may represent anything, or be meaningful, on their own. In Murray’s view, the practice of procedural authorship requires that the author create not just the procedure, but also the symbols themselves – a sort of an allegorical surplus, or meta-commentary, that presumably explains the specific symbolic referents of the procedure’s various elements.

Does all this mean that Ebert was right in his initial assertion that games cannot be art after all? Are we now to conclude that although a game can certainly *contain* art – great writing, beautiful visuals – it cannot be a work of art *as a game*, in its own medium? But how would we reconcile such a statement with our previous claims about the arbitrariness of meaning? Is our inquiry fundamentally flawed?

* * *

Not necessarily. For even if art can indeed be anything, it still means that everything needs to be *made into* art first. And different things, objects, or materials may resist the artist’s efforts in different ways.

Helpfully, in an insightful footnote in *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels offers some interesting remarks on the difficult relationship of games and meaning:

Hence the difference between losing a game and losing an argument: you don't lose at chess when you are convinced that you cannot move your king out of check; you lose when, whatever your views, you cannot, within the rules of the game, move him. The point can be put more generally by saying that in any game the players' moves have a force that is utterly undetermined by their beliefs about them. Beating someone at chess has nothing to do with changing his or her mind. And it can be put more generally still by saying that just as two players in a game cannot be described as disagreeing, two players playing two different games can't be described as disagreeing either, not because they have the same beliefs but because, once again, their beliefs are irrelevant. Chess isn't a set of beliefs; it's a set of rules.

...

And the analogy of the game is just as problematic for language as it is for ideology. No one cares what you meant by moving your rook four spaces to the left – you don't need to mean to checkmate your opponent in order to do it. (You can just as effectively, although not just as easily, do it by accident.) And if the meaning of your move is irrelevant to the question of whether your opponent has been checkmated, your opponent's understanding of the meaning is equally irrelevant. Indeed, this point can be put more generally just by saying that the moves in a game don't have any meaning (Michaels 2004, p. 189).

Of course, Michaels seeks to make a point about language, ideology and beliefs, rather than games as a medium, but this in no way invalidates what he has to say about the latter. If our actions in a game – understood now in a very abstract way, where once again we consider the game to be a purely logical structure, a set of rules and nothing more – have no meaning, then it only follows (which is also clearly implicit in Michaels' argument), that the rules that govern these actions cannot have any meaning either. Meaning has to come from the outside.⁷ (Another way to put this would be to say that all logical propositions are, by definition, tautologies.)

By setting this claim off against Michaels' and Knapp's earlier argument – that “anything can be used to mean anything” – we may finally grasp the nature of the apparent contradiction at the heart of Ebert's comments on games and art. By itself, a game – a set of rules and choices derived from these rules, something to be played, a process that invites the participation of the players – cannot have meaning, it cannot convey any authorial intention, and it does not lead us to an “inevitable

⁷ We find a similar intuition in a 2011 piece by Brian Moriarty, game developer and a self-proclaimed “Ebert apologist”: “the identity of a game emerges from its mechanics and affordances, not the presentation that exposes them” (Moriarty 2011). Moriarty's use of the traditionally vague idea of affordances aside, what he clearly implies here is that “presentation” lies outside the underlying system of rules, as a sort of a meta-commentary.

conclusion.” Hence games cannot be art, *by definition*, and they never will be. However, the very idea of an objective meaning of a work (which, as Michaels and Knapp have shown but Ebert does not necessarily have to acknowledge, implies that meaning is strictly identical with the authorial intention) suggests that in principle, anything can be meaningful. Hence anything can be art, including games – once again, *by definition* – and we cannot rule out the possibility that someone at some point will make games into art.

Is then Ebert’s thinking inherently flawed? Or perhaps he unwittingly discovered a dilemma that undermines the very idea of objective meanings, and of the work of art as an autonomous object? I do not believe either is the case; in fact, I think that the two sides of his argument are quite easily reconciled, if one is willing to take two possibly counter-intuitive steps.⁸

* * *

What are the two steps in question?

First, we should recognise that the word “games,” as it is daily used by players, critics, and researchers alike, tends to have a multitude of historically shifting meanings. Even when narrowed down to a single category of meanings that are particularly relevant for our inquiry – games as external objects, or artefacts (see Stenros 2017) to be interacted with, rather than a type of activity – the term “games” still seems to mean at least two very distinct things.

Most commonly, what is meant by “game” is a certain *cultural* artefact, a meaningful (indeed, often even narratively structured) totality that we could probably term a “work of game,” to borrow John Sharp’s phrase (see Sharp 2015). These are the games that might be interpreted and debated, judged and criticised, but also downloaded and modded and so on. These are games as we usually consider them when asking if games can be art. There is, however, another common usage of the word “game,” a more technical or a narrower one, where it means something akin to “mechanics.” Here, the game is just the game-y part of the game, so to speak; it consists solely of the game’s rules, the purely logical structure underlying the

⁸ It should also be noted – which might have been prudent to point out earlier – that some of the inconsistencies in Ebert’s pieces may simply stem from his own indecision as to the importance of experience, his lack of knowledge about games, or his imprecise approach to issues of meaning and autonomy. However, what interests me here are not these obvious inconsistencies – that are, perhaps, inevitable in the thick of a heated debate – but the fundamental initial contradiction of his position, as described in the first part of our inquiry.

work of game, abstracted from all the symbolic or representational aspects. This is procedure *as procedure*, rather than Bogost's procedure-as-representation.⁹

The distinction between games as cultural artefacts (or meaningful totalities) and games as abstract rules or mechanics, though largely semantic, is nonetheless important in that it requires us to acknowledge that from every *work of game*, a game in a narrower sense – as a purely logical structure, an inherently meaningless set of rules – can be extracted, analytically (by the very nature of the medium) if not necessarily in practice. Such a possibility is telling of a fundamental tension inherent to all games – and hence, of the games' ultimately antagonistic nature as a medium. Whereas Bogost may urge us to see procedures as simply another tool in the artist's toolbox, something that facilitates the authorial attempts at representing various systems or processes, in reality *works of game* (or games-as-art) only allow for representation *in spite of* the underlying set of rules. Or, to be more precise, meaning is only achieved *both* through, and in spite of, the inherent meaninglessness of games as such.

This antagonistic nature of games as a medium is brought to the fore in our second step. Here, we turn back to some of the questions provoked by Bogost's comments on procedural rhetoric. What does it mean to represent something *with* or *through* a game? It now seems that we should think of games (in their narrower sense) not in terms of a tool – or a technique, or a form, or an art-producing machine¹⁰ – but rather in terms of a work's *material support* that is both a condition for its existence and the primary obstacle for its coming into being. The material resists the authorial control, it has its own shape and possible uses independent of the author's intention; in order to become meaningful, it needs to be overcome, subordinated unto the work's own logic. On the other hand, the work obviously

9 All of this is not to say, of course, that rules, mechanics, and procedures have some inherent "primacy" over all the other aspects of any given game, as it may exist in practice. On a case to case basis, it might very well be said that many actually existing modern games – perhaps even the majority of them – want the player to focus as much on their semantic content as on the rules themselves. The argument presented here makes no claims about the practical importance of rules, mechanics, and procedures to what any particular game seeks to achieve. (Indeed, to make such claims one has to reject the idea that meanings are entirely arbitrary.) Nonetheless, the existence of said rules, mechanics, and procedures is clearly what defines games as games, allowing us to perceive them as formally and necessarily (and not just thematically and contingently) different from books, movies, etc. In other words, although any given game as a work of art (or an object of interpretation) does not not have to follow any a priori rules about the importance of rules and procedures, games as games (i.e., as a medium) are all (by definition) subordinate to certain formal implications of their rule-based nature.

10 Thus, although I borrow the term "works of game" from Sharp, it should be noted that the view of games as a type of material support does not seem to fall into any of the basic categories of the art-game relationship as described in his book (Sharp 2015).

cannot come into being without material support; the artist requires an object that is, initially, external to their own intention. In other words, material support is what ultimately allows the work to exist in the world, but it also poses a challenge, and a formal problem. (Famously, for Modernist painters one such problem was the flatness of the canvas.) The games' seemingly inherent indifference to meanings, beliefs, and interpretation is another such challenge. And just like with painting, a Modernist-inspired approach to games would focus on emphasising, rather than hiding, this problematic dimension – by making it a part of the meaning of the work. After all, the culturally unique feature of games as a medium is the extent to which their creators are encouraged, or even required, to create their own forms of material support for their subsequent work(s).

However, the purpose of this inquiry is not to give advice or instructions to game *developers*, but to compare and examine certain views of their *critics*. What made Roger Ebert an inconsistent Modernist – at least in his approach to games – was that his belief in the autonomy of the work, in the objective and arbitrary meanings that are essentially indifferent to their audience's subject-position, ultimately did *not* lead him to appreciate games as a form of material support, which offers art both a challenge and a promise. Indeed, reading his comments today, one could come to a surprising conclusion that for Ebert art should come easy, with its creators preferably opting for tools that bend to their will with the least resistance; while the difficulties posed to artists by the medium of games are a cause for pessimism, rather than a formal problem to be understood and overcome.

Games – again, in the second, more narrow sense of rules, procedures, or logical structures – should not be seen as representations, or works of art in themselves. Rather than a kind of language, they seem more akin to canvas – or perhaps a tube of paint. Marcel Duchamp, who appeared on the margins of the Ebert debate on multiple occasions,¹¹ once remarked that

¹¹ And as always, remained tragically misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, shared by both Ebert's opponents (Preston 2008; Zimmerman 2014) and his supporters (Moriarty 2011), Duchamp's *Fountain* did not owe its status as a work of art to being exhibited in a gallery or a museum, but to the *authorial signature* (which allowed it to be institutionally confirmed as art, and exhibited in the gallery in the first place). The idea that Duchamp promoted a type of naive idealism in art, where the work of art changes according to its audience's definition, experience, or understanding of it, goes contrary not just to his practice, but his own declarations: see, e.g., Duchamp 1975, p. 140, where he entrusts the audience only with the very limited duty of aesthetic judgement: "the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale." He also makes clear that the creative act (in which the spectator is an active participant) is not the same as the work (which remains the product of its author's intention).

Since the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are “Readymades aided” and also works of assemblage (Duchamp 1975, p. 142).

Of course, games are not readymades; Duchamp’s point, however, was that for *any* work of art to exist in the world, it requires both artistic and non-artistic work. One of the goals of “readymades aided” was to bring the non-artistic labour into the fore – to emphasise the fact that non-artistic labour is a necessary *material* prerequisite for the very creation of the work of art. A cause for its existence, perhaps, though not necessarily a part of its meaning. It might seem counter-intuitive to think of rules or procedures in terms of something *material*, and of the game designer as someone akin to an artist mixing their own paint. However, to pose that games are inherently meaningless structures that may nonetheless carry meaning by the virtue of being integrated into the logic, or the structure, of the work – to pose, in other words, that games may indeed be art after all, not because they provoke experiences *similar to* art, but because they can (like quite literally *anything*) be used by an intention-capable subject to convey meaning – is, as we have seen, exactly that.

* * *

These conclusions, though largely provisional and inviting further investigation, may still be seen as having a direct impact on much of the work on art and games done within the field of academic game studies. We have already seen how Ian Bogost’s remarks on procedural rhetorics seem, from the point of view suggested in the essay above, painfully unclear as to whether procedures are capable of conveying meanings entirely on their own. However, it appears important to briefly compare the argument made here with other influential accounts of the relationship between games and art.

It seems that among academic researchers investigating the relationship between games and art, by far the most common approach is to compare the two on the grounds of experiences, affects, and emotions they provoke. According to this approach, games may be seen as art insofar as they are found to emulate the kind of reactions (affects, moods, emotions...) commonly seen as crucial to our experience of art. Elements of this approach, either implicit or explicit, may be found across the field of contemporary game studies; as we have seen, they were also crucial to many of the polemics against Ebert. Even when researchers declare an explicit interest in structural or formal similarities between games and art, at the end of the day they tend to rely on the somewhat obvious observation that both games and art may impact their audience in similar ways. Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche

and Rutten recognise, for instance, that “[one] traditional artistic motivation is the expression of emotions and beliefs” (Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche & Rutten 2017, p. 6); but they immediately jump from this relatively uncontroversial assumption to the idea that games count or do not count as art based on how successfully they manage to evoke certain emotions, i.e., what reactions they ultimately result in, and whether these reactions are similar to those provoked by art. Meanwhile, an artwork’s ability to mean does not depend on its ability to communicate the meaning *successfully*; every meaning may be misunderstood by definition. In fact, the idea that we may have a *wrong* reaction to a game is a better argument for counting games as art – it implies that a game has a purpose of its own, that it *means to* provoke a specific (“right”) kind of reaction. Where there is a possibility of misunderstanding, there is meaning. But Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche and Rutten, speaking in terms of “impact”, “effects”, and “transmission” (rather than meaning), seek to claim art-like status for games by pointing out that both games and art may give their audience similar experiences.

By itself, however, the presence of a certain experience tells us nothing; what makes art – art is that it *means to* provoke a certain kind of reaction, not the fact that it *does*. This is what Ebert seemed to suggest when he compared (negatively) art to the “deeply moving” experience of having had lost his speech: we may be profoundly moved by experiences that have no meaning (like sickness), and so the fact that someone experiences art and games in a similar way tells us nothing about games and art as such. Or, to put it in once more in Michaels’ terms,

what’s at stake in the distinction between meaning and experience has always been the distinction between two kinds of experiences, the ones you’re meant to have and the ones you aren’t . . . Affect matters insofar as it’s supposed to matter; it’s recognizing the intended affective response not actually having it that counts for understanding the work (Michaels 2018).

Still, the argument “from experience” – the idea that games count as art insofar as something in them may provoke a certain reaction in us, a reaction that is similar to those we have when experiencing art – crops up throughout contemporary game studies on an astonishingly regular basis, often in curious disguises. Grant Tavinor, for instance, combines the focus on players’ experience with a focus on games’ interactivity, in order to suggest that players’ ability to have aesthetic experiences *within* a game is somehow relevant to whether games may count as art (Tavinor 2009, especially chapter 1). But again, this is just a variation on the same theme: the fact that playing games *may result in* experiences or reactions of the kind we associate with art says nothing about their status as art; what matters is whether we understand specific games as *intentionally seeking* a specific response.

To the extent that we ourselves create our experiences within the “exploratory aesthetics” of games (Tavinor 2009, p. 3), however, we can hardly say anything about whether the content of said experiences was intended by the game’s designer. And, conversely, the moment we start making claims about what is intended in and through the game, we cross over from the domain of “having experiences” into the one of meanings and interpretations. But for this, pure abstract rules – as we have seen – never suffice.

Another variation of the argument from experience is to refer to *other people’s* account of art to decide whether games may in fact count as artworks. Two instances of such approach appear in Smuts (2005) and Tavinor (2009, pp. 175–195) both of whom employ the so-called cluster theory of art to prove that games fit within many common definitions of art, written as well as unwritten. However, although the “cluster theory” may indeed allow us to understand how art has been defined *historically* (socially, culturally, etc.), it hardly answers the question of what art actually *is*. Thus we could say that it shifts the responsibility for answering the question “are games art?” from the researcher to cultural institutions, society at large, or history in general: art is what “people” believe it to be, or what people *experience as* art (which, as we saw, was also Eric Zimmerman’s position), and if games fit the “people’s” definition of art, they should be counted as art. As such, the cluster theory of art is a way of postponing, rather than solving, the problem. We may very well say that art is what others believe it to be; but this does not tell us what it is that people believe in when they believe a certain object (for instance, a game) to be art, and neither does it say anything about whether their definitions are correct.

The account of the relationship between games and art that is in some respects close to the one I offered in my re-reading of the Ebert debate is the one put forward by Brock Rough (2017), who posited the inherent incompatibility of games and art. To the extent that what Rough means by “attending” to art’s “relevant features” is the interpretation of its meaning – and the observation that a work of art demands “appreciation” is similar to Fried’s idea of art as “compelling conviction” (see Fried 1967/1998) – Rough seems absolutely correct in his conclusion that the “purpose” of art is entirely different from the goal set before the player by the rules of a game (which, as we have seen, remain fundamentally indifferent to any player’s interpretations or beliefs – and are instead interested only in their “moves”). To interpret an artwork and to play a game are two distinct things. However, Rough’s account is still problematic. Obscure language aside, it seems unclear why he chose to attribute such importance to players’ motivations (can we really justifiably say that someone who was forced to play a game is not *really* playing it, from the game’s own perspective? Does it matter, for the game itself, if the player is secretly trying to lose?); more importantly, he seems to believe that in-game goals may be

achieved through means other than those provided by the rules of the game. It is unclear, however, how this could work in practice. Just to reference one of Rough's examples: it is hard to see how the act of physically blocking the King (or, as Cavell would put it, the little object called the King) with other pieces achieves anything at all within the game itself.

Perhaps even more importantly, Rough does not have a precise account of what it is exactly that we should "attend to" when we experience art: "it is correct to appreciate a painting *inter alia* for its painted surface; it is incorrect, *qua* artwork, to appreciate a painting for how it tastes" (Rough 2017, p. 8). But how can we know that? The only plausible answer is that we assume one of these "features" to have been intended by the author, and the other one not; this is what Rough omits in his attempt to stay agnostic on the matters of intention. Once introduced, the concept of intention (and meaning as the intention of the work's author) not only makes the terms such as "lusory" and "prelusory" largely unnecessary, it also explains – as we have seen, and against Rough's own conclusions – why games, despite their inherent meaninglessness, may ultimately be used to convey meanings, and thus be made into art. Games become meaningful when they are used as a part of material support for a certain meaningful totality – what we conventionally call a work of art – and to mean they require nothing more than to be subordinated unto their author's intention (i.e., the logic of the work); just as traditional artworks mean not due to some pre-set "relevant features," but solely on account of their authors' intentions. Contrary to what Rough seems to believe, the game of chess may indeed be seen as an allegory – perhaps for war, or the hierarchies of a feudal society, or the necessity of sacrifice – insofar as we believe it to be *intended* as such by its creator (whoever that might be).

* * *

Finally, the re-reading of the Ebert debate allows us to shed new light on the work of those researchers who are not necessarily interested in the relationship between games and art as such, but who still claim for games a unique type, or perhaps even a unique ontology, of meaning. Here, again, the idea that experience can be substituted for the author's intention seems to have particular allure. Jason Begy, for instance, employs the concept of "experiential metaphor" in order to bypass the issue of authorial intent altogether, and derive meaning solely from the experiences of the player: "metaphorical projection occurs when the player finds meaning in a game by analyzing how the experience of playing it is similar to another experience, thus enabling a deeper understanding of both" (Begy 2013, p. 9). Begy is careful to emphasise that experience in question should not be seen as random: "While interpretation is an act of the player, and thus cannot

be perfectly predicted, it is important to note that the formal properties of the game are essential to this process. Metaphorical projection is not about associating disparate objects or systems at will, but relies on systemic correlations” (Begy 2013, p. 9). Still, throughout his piece he seems interested more in the experiences the players actually *have* rather than the ones they are *supposed to have*.¹² Moreover, at various crucial points Begy seems to suggest that in order to properly interpret “experiential metaphors”, we need to find within the game a certain semantic surplus (for instance, a simulation has to signal what it is a simulation *of*: “the simulation must communicate to the player that it is based on another system in some manner” [Begy 2013, 14]). This more or less annuls any potential difference between an “experiential metaphor” and metaphor in general: the moment we understand that our experience of the game is meant to mean something, we are on the very familiar ground of “traditional” interpretation, and there is no need whatsoever for new methodologies or vocabularies.

Mike Treanor, an important representative of Bogost’s “proceduralist” approach to game studies, seems to fall into much the same trap. In general, similar to Bogost, Treanor seems unclear on whether he believes abstract games are capable of carrying meaning. In a 2011 article, Treanor, Schweizer, Bogost and Mateas state explicitly that they are not (2011, p. 118); in a piece from 2016, Treanor suggests that they are (Treanor 2016, p. 1). One naturally leans here towards the later claim; however, Treanor’s understanding of what constitutes meaning in an abstract game turns out to be founded on a very particular theoretical assumption:

As abstract games have no diegetic story arcs, soundtracks, cut scenes or imagery, the aesthetic experience of playing the game can be argued to be *the meaning* of the game (Treanor 2016, p. 2).

In other words, the sole reason for the substitution of experience for the meaning is the very fact that abstract games *do not seem to have a meaning*. As a theoretical proposition, such a claim may raise understandable suspicions. However, as a rhetorical sleight of hand, it allows Treanor to conclude that his

¹² It should be perhaps emphasised that an experience the audience is *meant to have* by a work of art is not the same as the experience the audience *has as a result* of the work’s form or meaning. We may very well react to objective formal properties of a work in a way that is not intended; the fact that our reaction is not entirely random, but rather provoked by something *in* the work, in no way transforms our experience into an interpretation. The crucial difference is not between experiences that are random and those that are a reaction to something in the work; instead, what is at stake is the difference between *us having* the experience and *interpreting* the fact that we are meant to have it. (Whereas our experience is linked causally to its object, interpretation is not linked causally to the meaning.)

chosen object of interpretation, an abstract game called *Sage Solitaire*, is *about* the habits it forms in its players, such as “conditional decision making.” It seems unclear, however, what this “aboutness” actually means or entails. Do we learn desirable behaviours simply through the act of playing the game? If so, how is this different from various forms of psychological conditioning? Is the game “about” economics in a way that a novel might be “about” an economic crisis, or is it more similar to the idea of school being “about” learning, a fastfood restaurant being “about” quick service and cheap prices, cocaine being “about” a boost of energy and short-term euphoria...? If the latter is the case, are we still doing interpretation – or are we just providing a psychological account of what happens to the player in the course of the game, and as a result of repeated playthroughs? (It is worth noting here that the “method” of criticism proposed by Treanor consists mainly of observing *other people* play the game.) And if the former is the case, should we not pay more attention to the semantic clues we have apparently unconsciously incorporated into our interpretation – such as the very idea of a “high score,” or the word “trash” used in reference to some of the cards?

This, however, would mean abandoning any *methodological* ambitions, and Treanor – like Begy – seems very much oriented towards inventing a new method of interpreting games. Indeed, it seems that what is at stake wherever game researchers make claims as to the unique status of meaning in games is the possibility of a new methodology of interpretation (or criticism) to be invented, theorised upon, described, and promoted through various academic journals. Meanwhile, conclusions offered by this essay have been essentially deflationary, both regarding the nature of meanings and the importance of method. If there is meaning to be found in games, it must be of the same general quality that we find in (other) artworks; hence, instead of new methods of interpretation, we need careful analysis – on a strictly case-to-case basis – of how the tension between the meaninglessness of rules and the meaningfulness of games-as-works is resolved in each game, every time anew. There are no easy answers, and no step-by-step methods to follow – because while games are based on rules and procedures, interpretations are not.

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