VIDEOGAMES AND ART

EDITED BY ANDY CLARKE
AND GRETHE MITCHELL

First Published in the UK in 2007 by
Intellect Books, PO Box 862, Bristol BS99 1DE, UK

First published in the USA in 2007 by
Intellect Books, The University of Chicago Press, 1427 E. 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

Copyright © 2007 Intellect Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover Design: Gabriel Solomons
Copy Editor: Holly Spradling
Typesetting: Mac Style, Nafferton, E. Yorkshire

ISBN 978-1-84150-142-0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press.

INTRODUCTION

Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke

This book, *Videogames and Art*, is one of the first books to provide a complete overview of the field of videogame art – that is to say, art produced with or influenced by videogames. In selecting the essays and interviews to be included in this book, we have sought not only to give an indication of the current state of videogame art – and its major practitioners and genres – but also to place this work in a broader critical context. Its intention is to show that even though this area of digital art is comparatively young and exhibits a wide variety of different styles and techniques, it none the less forms a distinct and coherent artistic movement – united by shared aesthetic concerns – and is therefore worthy of being taken seriously as an art form.

As we have pointed out previously, in our paper for the Level Up games conference,[1] videogames are most people's first point of contact with computers. Videogames have also, through their immense popularity, become part of our shared cultural capital. As such, they are often recognizable even to those who have never played the original game and may also carry connotations beyond their original content, context and meaning. It is therefore inevitable that artists have used them firstly as inspiration and as a source of material, and then, over time, sought to create their own games and modifications to existing games.

Videogames have become a popular area of academic research and have spawned many books and conferences, so why then is a book needed specifically on videogames and art? The reason is that videogame criticism (whether from a background in ludology or narratology) has tended to concentrate on the mechanics of the videogame, rather than its aesthetics. As a result, the theoretical discussion has tended to revolve around how these factors contribute (positively or negatively) to the gameplay and/or the narrative of the game, rather than as qualities to be assessed and/or appreciated on their own terms. While this is a valid theoretical approach to take, implicit in this type of analysis is the assumption – whether made consciously or not – that what is being looked at is game *design*, rather than game *aesthetics*. In other words, it is game *craft* rather than game *art*. The intention of this

book is, on the other hand, to focus more fully on videogame art and to highlight the key concerns and voices emerging from this area of artistic practice so that they become more visible and start to occupy a more central position.

Videogame art is a constantly evolving and mutating field. This is inevitable as it is not built on one dominant application, programming language, medium, or aesthetic, nor does it consist of a single, homogeneous, community. But this also means that the work is very diverse and cannot therefore be easily or rigidly defined in terms of its themes, technology or techniques. Even so, the work shares a number of common characteristics, and although not every work will have or display all of them, we can use these to help to recognize videogame art and acknowledge it as a coherent genre of work (and a valid critical term to describe this type of work).

The first and most obvious of these identifying characteristics is the appropriation of videogame iconography. Space-Invaders.com, for example, take the characters from *Space Invaders* and other similar games and create graffiti in the same style by sticking bathroom tiles on the sides of buildings. Likewise, the *LHOOQ* series of works by Robert Nideffer (2000) takes screenshots and publicity images of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* and adds a goatee and moustache to her image in a conscious echo of the Duchamp artwork of the same name (which applied the same modification to an image of the *Mona Lisa*).

Although this type of appropriation often involves the use of game "icons" – Lara Croft, Mario, Pac-Man, the Space Invaders, etc. – this need not always be the case. Mauro Ceolin has, for example, produced paintings of "landscapes" from videogames in addition to his images of game characters. Another of his ongoing projects has been a series of portraits of people from the videogame industry – most of whom would be recognizable to game fans.

Miltos Manetas has likewise explored other aspects of videogame iconography, producing paintings, videos and prints based on videogame hardware and of people playing videogames. This shows how it is not just the characters of videogames that have become iconic, but also the hardware and the characteristic poses and expressions of the players. Mauro Ceolin has highlighted the iconic status of videogame hardware by even painting some of his images onto PlayStation consoles and mice.

Suzanne Treister takes a different approach to exploring videogame iconography in her early work (covered in her essay in this book). In it, she paints a series of images from imaginary videogames – imitating the distinctive visual style of these early computer-based videogames without appropriating any individual game icon. This brings us to the second characteristic that we can use to identify videogame art: even if it does not appropriate the iconography of videogames, it may adopt the iconic graphical style of the videogame.

This indicates how there is an identifiable videogame aesthetic, which is distinct from the content of the videogame itself. Examples include the pixellated look of *Space Invaders* and other very early videogames, the vector graphic style of slightly later ones such as *Asteroids* and *Battlezone*, the isometric view of *The Sims* and other "god games", and the glossy hyperreal look of the FPS (first-person shooter).

All of these graphical styles have, at times, been appropriated by artists in one way or another – indeed, the pixellated retro-game imagery has crossed into the mainstream media and become a design cliché. Even so, there are still artworks such as the *Screenshots* series by John Haddock (2000), which provide new and interesting perspectives on this idea. In them, he takes the isometric view of games such as *The Sims* and uses it to portray both real historical events (such as the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald) and fictional ones (such as the killing of Fredo in *The Godfather*).

It is interesting to note here that Haddock is still working with iconic people, events, scenes, and imagery, even though they do not come from videogames; he likewise treats real and fictional events equally. Although one must acknowledge that this work is only one in a series that Haddock has done presenting violent content in a naïve visual style (such as his *Cartoon Violence* and *Embedded* series, both works in progress), it none the less shows how videogame art fits into a postmodern aesthetic of sampling and appropriation with its conscious – and often ironic – remixing of cultural references. In a sense, videogame art is one of the most postmodern of art forms because it brings together such extremes of high culture (art) and low culture (the videogame).

But postmodernism is not the only tradition that videogame art can be related to. The use of iconic imagery and strong simple graphical styles in videogame art also brings to mind pop art. Videogame art is fascinated by its icons, and, like pop art, it revels at times in the ephemerality of its subject matter.

Videogame art is also art that retains a sense of humour. As a result, it must also be looked at in relation to broader themes of play, fun, and chance in art. It is easy to trivialize the in-game performances of artists such as Joseph DeLappe as just being "japes", but they have clear and conscious echoes of the interventions and happenings of movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism. One can also relate DeLappe's *Artist's Mouse* series of drawings to the Surrealists' experiments with automatic writing.

There is also is a strong undercurrent of conceptual art running through videogame art. In a way, this is inevitable – the game element of the videogame is so strong, and so problematic for the artist and viewer alike, that it requires the substantial distancing effect that this sort of intellectualization provides. In order for the viewer to recognize and respond to the message that the artist is conveying though their work, they need to be taken out of the game so that they can see the game for what it is. If this doesn't happen, then they will naturally tend to enjoy a work of videogame art as a videogame, rather than as an artwork (as this requires the least effort).

For example, the Cory Archangel artwork *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) is a hacked version of the Nintendo NES *Super Mario* cartridge, which has erased everything but the clouds which normally just drift by in the background. By concentrating the viewer's attention on this one aspect of the game, which has no bearing on the gameplay, it forces them to think differently about what is missing.

This highlights another characteristic of videogame art – that it often uses and subverts the videogame technology itself. A diverse range of techniques are used, but there is a

consistent motivation: to take videogame technology and use it in ways that it was not designed to be used.

The most visible example of videogame technology being appropriated is FPS modification – this is due to the power and flexibility of these games and the ease with which they can be modified. In these FPS games, the world maps and the various graphic elements within the game (such as the "skins" applied to the characters) are separate files that can be modified to alter their appearance; the game engine itself can also be scripted and patched to modify its behaviour. Together these techniques can produce modifications which are sometimes so comprehensive that they make the game almost unrecognizable as, for example, in JODI's *Untitled Game* series (1996–2001).

It is important not to make the use of game technology a *sine qua non* of videogame art as this puts too narrow a definition on this genre of work and fetishizes the technology to an inappropriate degree. Nonetheless, it is necessary to take the technology into account when considering certain forms of videogame art, particularly those which take videogames as their subject matter. *Adam Killer* by Brody Condon (1999) is an example of this – it criticizes the violence of the videogame (and its pointlessness) and it is therefore significant that it appropriates videogame technology to do this – as this makes its message clearer and its criticism more barbed. In such cases, the form and content of the artwork (or the medium and message) are inextricably tied up with one another.

Even where it does not use the *technology* of the videogame, videogame art often still appropriates the *form* of the videogame. For instance, Jim Andrews' *Arteroids* (2003) does not use the same programming language as the original game, or have the same graphical content, but is recognizable as videogame art because it still has sufficient elements of the original game/gameplay of *Asteroids*.

The appropriation of gameplay is the fourth characteristic of some videogame art, but it is important to look critically at what gameplay is being appropriated, as this allows us to identify videogame art as a genre distinct from the broader category of work which we have termed "playable art". The distinction that we are making here is one between, on the one hand, videogame art and, on the other, the other forms of digital art which take the form of games or have game-like elements.

Although this may at first seem like a petty distinction to make, it is nevertheless important as it allows us to more easily identify differences on a number of other levels such as those of aesthetics, technology, and motivation. Videogame art refers specifically and knowingly to videogame culture, iconography, and technology. Playable art on the other hand, does not necessarily refer to the world of videogames and can be understood primarily within the context of art history and contemporary art practice. Videogame art takes the videogame as its necessary starting point, whereas for playable art, videogames are just another form of interactive media – noteworthy because they are an important element of popular culture and so highly interactive, but not especially prioritized beyond this.

We do not, however, want to ignore the field of playable art completely as the boundary between playable art and videogame art is not distinct, nor is it rigid. Playable art is clearly

a significant form of digital art practice, though its role is different to that of videogame art, as are its techniques and aims.

Because of the close relationship between videogame art and videogames themselves, one must inevitably also address – even if only in passing – the issue of whether commercial videogames themselves are art.

This is a contentious issue which provokes strong emotion from both those arguing for and against the idea. We, personally, do not subscribe to the view that commercial games *cannot* be art. We do feel, however, that there are very few of these games which can be regarded, *in their entirety*, as art – there may be interesting aesthetic elements within certain games, and artists working in certain fields of game design and production, but it is rare for one game to be successful in all artistic respects *and* be sufficiently commercial to be released.

It is easy to regard the early videogames as art (or as the work of an artist) as they were clearly the vision of a single person or a small team. One can read, for example, an interview with Toru Iwatani, the creator of *Pac-Man*, and hear him speak about every aspect of the game – from how he designed the characters to how he programmed the speed of the ghosts, to how he chose the title.[2] This contrasts with the mostly anonymous and team-based mode of production in the modern videogame.

Of course, art can be made in other commercial fields, such as the film industry, which share this team-based mode of production. A crucial difference, however, is that mainstream (Hollywood) cinema exists alongside other forms of practice – music video, art movies, experimental film and video, television, and documentary – and there is a clearly identifiable crossover of ideas, techniques, and personnel from one area to another. This appropriation and assimilation is something that mainstream cinema is forced to do to stay ahead and survive, and as a result, it stops it from becoming complacent, even though it occupies such a dominant position.

The situation is different, however, with videogames. The mainstream games industry is dominated by franchise titles, spin-offs, and genre titles to an even greater extent than mainstream cinema, and this reduces the need to be innovative. There is also no pressure from outside forcing change; the so-called independent games industry does not fulfil the same role as independent/art-house film, as its products are, for the most part, indistinguishable from those of the major players in the industry. Truly oppositional forms of videogame practice – such as game hacking and patching, videogame art, and fan art – are entirely divorced from the mainstream games industry and there is little, if any, crossover. The game *Counter-Strike* – which is actually a mod for *Half-Life* – is one of the few exceptions to this, but it still remains just a genre game (the interview with Julian Oliver and "Kipper", included in the second section of this book, goes into some of the problems faced by those seeking to produce truly independent games).

But this is not to say that all modern games – or modern-looking games – are uninteresting. It is merely to indicate that if we are looking for art in videogames, then it is not in the surface gloss of videogames. It is found, instead, in the way in which people – whether they

consciously define themselves as artists or not – use videogames as a medium. The aim of this collection is to explore and map out that territory.

Although each essay or interview featured in the book is self-contained, they have been arranged in a series of themed sections so as to provide a logical progression. Even so, the book can be read in any order without compromising understanding or enjoyment, and our intention is that it will, as a whole, provide a comprehensive and rounded overview of the various forms of videogame art, and indicate the ways in which videogames overlap with art.

The first section of the book will, together with this introduction, serve to orient the reader and introduce some of the key artists, concepts, genres of work and terminology in this field. It consists of a general overview and a series of more in-depth studies of certain areas; also included is the curatorial note from one of the first exhibitions of videogame-based art. The second section focuses on individual artists and art projects. It features interviews with – or essays by – many of the artists mentioned earlier in the book and allows them the opportunity to discuss in greater detail the techniques that they use and the motivation behind their work. The third and final section of the book explores the relationship between videogames and art. It looks at the aesthetics of these games and their formal similarities to other (traditional) forms of art, and also examines the official and fan-produced art that surrounds these games.

Going on to look at the sections in more detail, section one opens with an essay by Axel Stockburger, which introduces some of the major genres of work in the field of videogame art and places them within a broader theoretical framework. Rebecca Cannon's essay follows on from this and concentrates primarily on mod art – that is to say, art which is created through patches or modification of FPS games. In this overview, she also describes the work of a number of artists (such as Julian Oliver, Brody Condon, JODI and others) who have contributed interviews or essays featured later in the book.

Jim Andrews covers another significant field in his essay. In it, he deals with art which appropriates the videogame form and consciously uses it as a vessel into which to pour other meaning. It is easy to trivialize this sort of art as just being novelty games or parodies, but to do so is to miss the point. Parody mocks the original, but these artworks treat the original game with respect – appropriating its form and using it as a medium for other content, such as references to art, literature or popular culture (anti-war and anti-consumerist messages are also common).

Further on in the first section, the essay by Henry Lowood provides an in-depth history of the field of machinima – animated movies made using the real-time 3-D rendering capabilities of FPS games. This essay on machinima concentrates on the early history of this genre and on its origins in "speedrunning" (the creation of movies showing a skilled player completing a level of an FPS game in the quickest possible time). It then goes on to describe some of the more narrative work now being produced by the gaming community.

Lowood's essay, with its deliberate emphasis on non-artist-produced machinima, shows clearly how videogame art exists at the intersection of a number of different communities

which may be producing similar work, with identical tools, but with radically different aims. This is true of all forms of videogame art as it lies, by definition, at the intersection of videogames and art. The contrast is, however, clearest with FPS-based mod art.

This intersection of communities can be problematic for the artist, the curator and the audience of this work. For example, what makes an artwork art? Also, is it appropriate for curators and critics to consider fan art as art if the people producing this work do not regard themselves as artists and did not intend their work to be exhibited as such?

These issues are highlighted by the inclusion in this section of Anne-Marie Schleiner's curator's note for the 1999 exhibition "Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art". Although there were earlier examples of videogame-based art – such as the work of Suzanne Treister covered in the next section – this was the first exhibition to show game modifications as art and, as a result, is somewhat of a landmark.

The curator's note is interesting as a historical document because it indicates the extent of the field of videogame art at that time. The exhibition itself consciously sought to include both work intended as art practice and that which was not. This was a brave decision, though one which may possibly no longer seem as appropriate given the greater number of artists working in this field and the extent to which they have coalesced through subsequent exhibitions into a more coherent movement.

We believe that videogame art presents interesting challenges to the community of artists, curators and critics. The technology and practices involved in this type of work demand a re-thinking – and perhaps a re-aligning – of the relationship between artist, fan, curator and critic (or at least a redefinition of these roles). This, in turn, highlights the need for curators who are experienced and knowledgeable in the field of videogame art and who are therefore able to provide the proper contextualization for this type of work. This is necessary because the videogame critic will often lack the artistic background, vocabulary, or knowledge necessary to place videogame art in its correct historical, aesthetic, or critical context (this is where we regard the contributors to this book as being exceptional). The art critic will likewise often not have the knowledge of videogames and videogame culture to fully understand or contextualize that aspect of the work (even if they are familiar with other forms of digital art).

The issue of contextualization is of crucial importance. In spite of its basis in such an available medium as videogames, videogame art is often difficult work for a general audience to approach, appreciate and understand. The audiences for videogames and for art (even digital art) have traditionally been separate and distinct. This means that most people will probably not come to a piece of videogame art with much, if any, prior knowledge or experience of this type of work (although we believe that this situation will improve due to the increasing "games-literacy" of the average viewer of these artworks – and, it has to be said, of the average curator – though there may currently still be some way to go in both regards). Conversely, the "game literate" viewer also can also present problems for the artist, as they will often want to engage too fully with the artwork as a game and will fail/refuse to appreciate it on its own terms as an artwork.

However, a knowledge of videogames can be vital for appreciating some videogame artworks. Familiarity with a specific game (or with videogames in general) is sometimes necessary in order to recognize what the artist's contribution is or to understand the meaning of the artwork. The physical requirements of gaming can also be important. For example, most FPS-based videogame art require the user to navigate within a 3-D space – skills which not everyone is currently familiar with (although this is likely to change over time and with succeeding generations). These points both possibly indicate why vintage videogames such as *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man* are the ones that are appropriated most often: these are more universally recognized and their simpler gameplay makes them easier for the viewer of the artwork to interact with. They are also less problematic than modern videogame icons which often come with negative connotations due to the original content of the games (featuring killing and violence).

Although many artworks appropriate the form of old videogames, one genre of work is worthy of particular mention, and that is the political work – those that provide an explicit anti-establishment, anti-globalization, anti-racist or anti-war comment. Examples of this include *Space Invaders* by Andy Deck (1995), *Alien Invasion* by Tony Ward (2002) and many others. A common thread running through these works is that they are all adaptations of simple retro-games, such as *Space Invaders*, that provide a simple, responsive and easily understood interaction. This is not essential for this genre of work, but is generally a deliberate strategy as a number of artists have commented that they find the accessibility of the videogame form – and the way in which a direct political message can be conveyed in this form of game without reducing its accessibility – to be attractive.

But this is not to say that videogame art can or should speak only to a videogame audience, or that it only comments on videogames – the work is more subtle, sophisticated and nuanced than that, and the intention of the second section of this book is to give some indication of the strength and diversity of work in this field.

Section two of the book consists of a series of interviews with artists working in the field of videogame art and essays on or by individual artists. Being limited in space, this book can cover only a fraction of the artists working in this field. Even so, we have sought to cover many of the major artists (as well as some lesser-known or less well-established ones), and to provide a balance between the various forms of videogame art.

When discussing videogame art, it is important not to overemphasize the importance of FPS-based mod art, or to equate videogame art solely with mod art (even though it is the most prominent, widely exhibited and controversial example of it). As a result, we also include artists who work in other fields. The essay by Paul Catanese, for example, serves to touch upon the area of console hacking, which forms a relatively small but important area of videogame art. In it, he outlines the technical and aesthetic motivations behind his work, which involves playing video loops on a hacked Game Boy Advance.

The diversity of videogame art is also reflected in the work of many of the individual artists. Brody Condon, for example, has produced work that includes FPS-based mod art, *Sims-*

based modification, machinima, in-game performance and sculpture – and the work of many other videogame artists is equally diverse.

Joseph DeLappe is best known for his series of in-game performances, such as *Quake/Friends* (2002), in which he and a number of colleagues acted out an episode from the series *Friends* in an online game, but the interview with him in this section allows these performances to be placed in the context of his other work. This includes other performances/interventions (both before and after *Quake/Friends*) and a series based upon modified computer mice.

There are two distinct genres of videogame-influenced performance art: in-game performance and real-life performance (which could also be referred to, for the sake of symmetry, as out-of-game performance). In-game performance covers works such as *Quake/Friends* and the others described in the Joseph DeLappe interview, but also includes works such as *Gunship Ready* by Brody Condon (2001) which are less of a formal performance.

In terms of real-life game-influenced performance, the more interesting works have been those such as Hillary Mushkin and S. E. Barnet's *Mario's Furniture* (2003, described in the essay by M. A. Greenstein) which explore the themes and issues of videogames in a less direct way, rather than those which simply provide a real-life embodiment of a videogame character (most commonly, it seems, Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*).

A number of the artists in this section explore themes of place and space. This is a common theme in videogame art, due in part – though not exclusively – to the supreme ability of FPS games to represent architectural spaces. Some works, such as Tobias Bernstrup's *Potsdamer Platz* (2001) have sought to replicate a real space within the virtual world. Others have replicated a specific gallery space, creating a self-reflexive installation. *Museum Meltdown* (Palle Torsson and Tobias Bernstrup 1995–1999), *acmipark* (Julian Oliver, Chad Chatterton, Andrea Blundell, Wayne Simmons 2003), and *Repeater* (Chris Cornish 2002) are all examples of this – each was designed for a specific venue and replicates that venue (albeit, in some cases, with deliberate modification). *SimGallery* (Katherine Isbister and Rainey Straus 2003) does this as well, though it uses *The Sims* rather than an FPS game to replicate the real gallery space.

As these – and other videogame artworks – create their own "site", it can be useful to open up our definition of "site-specificity". One could, for example, regard *Escape from Woomera* (Julian Oliver and others 2004) as a site-specific installation, but whereas a traditional/conventional site-specific work would take its inspiration from the Woomera detention centre and be exhibited there – at least initially – so as to create the resonance between artwork and venue, *Escape from Woomera* takes the detention centre and puts it *inside* the computer.

Doing this allows us to get away from the notion that a site-specific videogame artwork must seek to replicate the venue in question. It also allows us to open up the notion of installation art so that we can talk about an installation which is entirely within the computer. Digital art

installations have traditionally tended to involve things outside of the computer – sensors, projectors, props, kiosks, etc. The modification of FPS and other games allows us to create an installation entirely within the computer and for this installation to be unencumbered by issues such as the size and cost of the installation or difficulties in staging and transporting it; they also avoid the expense – both during production and exhibition – of using proprietary virtual reality hardware and software. It is therefore surprising how few artists have so far taken full advantage of this capability.

The *Expositur (Virtual Knowledge Space)* project by Fuchs and Eckermann (2001) stands as one of the rare examples of this type of work. It takes real objects from real museum collections and brings them together in a single virtual environment built using the *Unreal* engine. This creates, in effect, a virtual museum – virtual not only because it is a virtual space, but also because it creates a virtual collection from items which would be impossible to bring together normally.

A number of artists have sought not only to replicate real spaces, but also real events. Examples of this type of work include the 9/11-inspired *9/11 Survivor* by Jeff Cole, Mike Caloud, John Brennon (2003) and *Waco Resurrection* by Eddo Stern and others (2003), which is inspired by the FBI's assault in 1993 on the compound of the Branch Davidian religious cult.

Although these works have both made it clear that they only provide an artist's interpretation of events, and that their intention is not to be documentary, it is difficult not to regard them as such and this causes problems which are highlighted by Condon in his interview. The FPS comes with "baggage" because of the sensationalist way in which these games present and treat violence, and it is difficult for this not to "taint" the resulting artwork, detracting from the serious message that the artist is trying to convey.

There is also the issue of viewpoint. The FPS – by its very nature – forces identification and immersion, which in turn implies a subjective viewpoint. This explicit partiality, subjectivity and level of artistic interpretation should not be seen, however, to be inherently a problem with this work as it is also an important (and growing) trend in modern film documentary (as can be seen, variously, in the work of Michael Moore and Errol Morris, for example). Indeed, the negative response to *9/11 Survivor* shows how videogame artists working in this field may wish to exaggerate the level of subjectivity in the work so as to make their artistic aims clearer and avoid accusations that they have exploited and/or sensationalized real events (this is the approach taken in *Waco Resurrection*).

Of course, videogame art does not have to be as representational as this and some artists use videogames to explore the creation of abstract interactive graphics. In the case of JODI (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans), this has been through a fundamental and low-level hacking and recoding of the games, rather than just level editing, and they outline their techniques and the motivations behind their work in an interview with Francis Hunger.

Other artists have produced abstract or semi-abstract work by creating patches which deliberately exploit glitches in the game (or introduce them) in order to produce smeared,

fragmented or distorted imagery, or the "hall-of-mirrors" effect (endlessly repeated copies). Works that use these techniques include *white_picnic_glitch* (Brody Condon 2001), and *QQQ* (nullpointer 2002). *white_picnic_glitch* is an interesting work, technically, in that it produces these effects in *The Sims*, rather than within a FPS. *Max_Miptex* (Chad Chatterton and Julian Oliver 2001) is also interesting as it achieves a similar effect by modifying the hardware that the FPS game runs on. Artists can also introduce glitches in the artificial intelligence controlling the bots in the game, introducing jerky, repetitive or irrational movement which draws attention to the fact that this behaviour is more artificial than intelligent. This is done in *white_picnic_glitch* and in *Chinatown* (Brody Condon, with Eric Cho and Sky Frostenson 2002).

Because of the unpredictability of these patch-based abstract effects and the possible instability of the game when hacked in this way, these artworks mainly exist as DVD. The work by JODI, on the other hand, is meant to be interacted with (though it frustrates this action as an aesthetic strategy). *Gameboy_ultra_F_UK* by Corby and Baily (2001) is similar, though in this case, it takes the form of a modified Game Boy emulator (a piece of software which runs on a PC and allows it to play Game Boy software) which degenerates over time on the basis of genetic algorithms, making the game more and more disrupted (both in terms of its graphics and its gameplay).

These artworks show how it is possible for a piece to comment intently upon the nature of games without actually being a game or – more accurately – by frustrating the user's expectations of what a game should be and how it should act. The work of Suzanne Treister does the same, albeit in the form of a series of paintings. In them, she uses the graphical conventions of the videogame, but uses them to present obtuse messages or instructions, rather than more conventional in-game text.

This work is also interesting as it is one of the first examples of videogame art. Because of the "landmark" status of the Cracking the Maze exhibition, one could easily assume that videogame art started in 1999, the date of that exhibition. This was not the case, and the essay by Suzanne Treister places videogame art in a more complete historical context, highlighting her digital and non-digital work from the early 1990s.

After her *Fictional Videogame Stills* series, Treister went on to produce a series of artworks in the form of packaging for fictional software products. These works are interesting from a historical point of view as they are a relatively rare example of sculptural work in the field of videogame art. Another example is *650 Polygon John Carmack* (2004) by Brody Condon. This takes the form of a perfect real-life replica of a virtual model (of one of the game's creators) hidden inside *Quake III*.

As sculptural or three-dimensional art, videogame-influenced "cosplay" (costume play) is far more common, though this is predominantly a fan activity. Even so, a number of artists have experimented with it – the most notable being Pope and Guthrie's *Home-made Heroes* artwork commissioned for the Game On exhibition at the Barbican Gallery in London (2002). We discuss fan art – and its relation to art practice – in greater detail later in this introduction.

The emphasis of this book is visual art, but it is also worth mentioning, in passing, the music of the videogame. Although most videogame soundtracks are quite bland, some in-game music and effects have reached the same iconic status as its imagery – the most notable example being the soundtrack to *Pac-Man*. As a result, a number of mainstream musicians including Aphex Twin, Hexstatic and many others have sampled these sounds to use in their music. This appropriation does not restrict itself to videogame music as spot effects such as coin insert sounds, death noises, etc. have all also been used. Other less well-known videogames have also been sampled – such as *Zero Wing* being used in *All Your Base are Belong to Us*.

In contrast to these musicians, who are primarily sampling game sounds and manipulating them on computer, there is a separate group who are hacking the game hardware (usually consoles or hand-held devices such as the Game Boy) and using these more directly as their musical instrument. The work of 8 Bit Construction Set (Cory Archangel, Paul B. Davis and others) is a good example of this. A third example of videogame music/sonic art is using FPS games to create interactive musical environments. An example of this is *Quilted Thought Organ* (2001–2003) by Delire (A.K.A. Julian Oliver). An additional genre of musical work generally known as "soundtoys" falls primarily into the category of playable art, rather than videogame art, as it tends not to engage fully and specifically with the videogame – exploring, instead, more general issues of interaction.

Julian Oliver has more recently been involved in the development of *Escape From Woomera*, a videogame artwork – funded by the Australian Government – which has proven controversial as it comments critically on the government's treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers. The next paper in the book is a broad-ranging extended interview with Oliver and "Kipper" (also involved in *Escape From Woomera*) in which they describe the difficulties in producing a political work such as this and outline the problems facing both videogame artists and independent games developers.

The final essay in this section, by Maia Engeli and Nina Czegledy, describes another issue-based videogame art project, in this case a grass-roots workshop which they ran in Albania using *Unreal Tournament* to explore the issue of "blood feuds" in that country. Blood feuds are the "tit-for-tat" hostilities between neighbours, common in that country, which can lead to murder and last for generations. The success of the *Medieval Unreality* project highlights the ease with which these inherently violent FPS videogames can be modified in order to offer an overt or explicit criticism of violence – either both in real life and in the videogames themselves. The essay describes how the repetitive nature of the FPS game – with its endless routine of being killed and respawning, and the only possible action in between being to kill – perfectly mirrors the unbreakable cycle of the blood feud.

Although the situation in Albania is special (because the blood feud is perpetuated, at least in part, by local custom), the FPS is equally suited to producing works about other violence. Indeed, it is so suited to this purpose that it could be said that this form of videogame art is the right art form for the times. The Columbine massacre, the threat of terrorism, and the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere have all provided videogame artists with a ready

source of inspiration, and they have matched this with a willingness to address these difficult issues and the appropriate tools to do it (even though it has, at times, been problematic for many viewers and critics of this art). Much of this work provides an intelligent commentary on the violence in contemporary society and in the media, and as a result, it is important not to dismiss it all out-of-hand simply because of its subject matter (or the inappropriate treatment by a minority of artists).

The White Room series of artworks by John Paul Bichard (2002) is another good example of work in this field. In it, he stages a series of scenes which show the aftermath of violent action. There are two interesting points about this work. The first is that although there are many videogame artworks which deal with violence, this is one of the few which presents violence in a truly realistic way. The violence in the FPS game is generally extreme and, as a result, is often cartoon-like; even in games like *Counter-Strike* where the violence is presented "realistically", you still get to respawn at the end of the round. The work by Bichard manages to remove these fantastical elements and present violence as almost mundane. The casual realism of the violence – and the oblique and restrained way in which it is presented – makes this a very intelligent and mature work. The other interesting point is that John Paul Bichard refers to these artworks as being an "in-game photo shoot", rather than "screenshots". This is interesting from a semiotic point of view in that it implies that the artist is, in some way, working *inside* that environment, rather than working with the computer and seeing an image on the computer screen. It also returns us to the idea that this is an installation that is being created, rather than an image.

The third section of the book discusses videogame art and aesthetics in relation to other forms of art. Much has been made in videogame criticism of the similarity of videogames to film, but these essays provide alternative "histories" and "narratives" within which to situate the videogame and its aesthetics.

Earlier in this introduction, we touched upon some of the similarities that videogame art has with western traditions in art, including pop art, conceptual art and surrealism. The essay by Brett Martin picks up on certain aspects of this comparison, making reference not only to the video installation work of artist Nam June Paik, but also to earlier forms of technology-led art – most notably photography. But rather than explore the formal similarities of these media to videogame art, Brett Martin concentrates more on the reaction of the public and the art establishment to these new forms of art, using the work of the photographer Oscar Rejlander as his primary example.

The essay by William Huber performs a complementary role to that by Brett Martin, as it explores in some depth the relationship between the aesthetics of the videogame and those of non-western traditions in art. The most well-known example of this crossover/parallel is the similarity between the orthogonal view of games such as *The Sims* and the "floating world" or *Ukiyo-e* style of traditional Japanese art, but Huber also explores less familiar Japanese styles such as the "Superflat" aesthetic.

The essay benefits from Huber's substantial knowledge both of Japanese art and obscure Japanese videogames, and is interesting because it shows that there is not just one

videogame aesthetic or one artistic tradition within which to situate videogames as a medium. It also highlights how the often-made parallel between videogames and film is incomplete if it restricts its comparison solely to the conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

The orthogonal view of these "god games" is an interesting convention as it distances the viewer from the action. When we play *The Sims*, we are not "in" that world in the same way that we are when we play an FPS. Instead, we are constantly on the outside of that world, looking down at the little people inside it. This observation is one of the starting points for Tobey Crockett's essay in which she explores videogames in relation to the history, aesthetics and psychology of dolls and dollhouses.

Although we are limited in space in this book and can provide only an excerpt from her much longer Ph.D. paper, this contribution nevertheless provides a number of interesting and unique perspectives. The first of these is to place virtual environments – and by extension, videogames – in the context of the history of dollhouses. Although we now think of dollhouses as toys, they have a much richer history than this which makes the comparison with videogames particularly interesting. The act of playing with dolls has also been the subject of much analysis as a "transitional object" and Tobey Crockett highlights some of the ways in which this can lead to a greater understanding of the relationship that we have with to our in-game avatars and the worlds that they inhabit.

The next two essays offer contrasting perspectives on the art that surrounds the commercial videogame. The first of these, by Laurie Taylor, looks at concept art – that is to say, the artwork created by games companies for use in the design and marketing of a videogame. The second, by Gareth Schott and Andrew Burn, looks at fan art and provides interesting insights into the way in which games fans produce, use and consume "fan art" in general – that is to say, art created within and for that fan community, rather than by the games company. Because this art exists solely within this circle of fans, it is easy for it to be overlooked when discussing videogame art, but this essay goes some way towards redressing the balance, though its emphasis is rightly on the social aspects involved in the production of this art, rather than its aesthetics.

In many ways, concept art and fan art are two sides of the same coin: one is produced by the game company to sell the game to the fans, and the other is produced by the fans after they have bought it. In her essay, Laurie Taylor raises the interesting concept of holographic theory – that although there are inconsistencies between the various representations of the game world in concept art, none is less "real" than the others and each part can represent the whole – and this theory can also be used to explain how games fans can so easily "stitch" the art that they produce into the world of the game.

The issue of fan art raises many interesting questions in terms of the relationship between videogame art and the games industry. Videogame art does not exist in isolation, but is in a symbiotic relationship with commercial videogames. This is often referred to as a parasitic relationship, but we have deliberately avoided using that term. "Parasitic" implies that the relationship is in one direction and is harmful for the host – neither of which is the case here.

The videogame industry gains from cultivating the involvement of the games fan/hobbyist and the videogame artists. For instance, although early FPS games had the potential to produce machinima, this ability was not initially fully exploited by the creators of these games. Machinima emerged more from within the gaming community, as did many of the first (and best) tools for producing them. Machinima have now been taken up by mainstream games developers and live-rendered machinima have virtually replaced pre-rendered storytelling sequences in these games.

Yet this relationship with the games industry is a delicate one as videogame art relies heavily on the appropriation of game technology and iconography. In this respect, it is similar to fan art, which makes use of images or other intellectual property owned by the games company. Sometimes fan art is encouraged by the games industry, but increasingly, however, this type of activity is being actively discouraged by the copyright holders. It may only be a matter of time before videogame artists are similarly affected – particularly as their work is usually more critical than that of fans.

The final essay in the book "throws down the gauntlet" to the games industry, asking why commercial games lack originality, and offering a heartfelt plea for greater creativity in the videogames industry and for more incisive criticism from those who regard themselves as videogame critics. While such criticisms are not uncommon, these comments carry more weight as they come from Ernest Adams, a games industry insider with many years' experience in the field and an understanding of the production, marketing and economics of commercial videogame production.

It still remains to be seen, however, whether the crossover between art house and mainstream discussed earlier in relation to cinema can ever occur with videogames – or whether videogame art practice will always be a completely separate activity. They are, after all, driven by different aims and interests and have entirely separate distribution mechanisms. To a large extent, however, this separation from mainstream activity is irrelevant for the artists. Indeed, it may be healthy for it to remain, for the most part, an oppositional activity.

One can regard videogames such as *Eye Toy* as an example of this lack of crossover of ideas from art to videogames. Video tracking technology has been explored extensively in digital art over the course of several decades and *Eye Toy* seems like a simple, throwaway demo compared to this other, more mature and sophisticated work being produced in the art field. Sensor technology seems to have become another bandwagon for videogames to jump on to, with little engagement with the existing body of knowledge regarding its use. As a result, video tracking, sound sensing, motion sensors and touchpads are all being used to merely provide variations on tired genres such as fighting games and *bemani* (the rhythm matching games such as *Dance Dance Revolution*). This indicates how the separation between videogame art and mainstream videogames may ultimately be more of a loss for mainstream videogames, as they stand in danger of turning in ever-decreasing circles around the same (stale) content and the same (worn-out) genres – remaining dominant as objects of consumerist entertainment, yet becoming an increasingly meaningless medium.

In contrast, the outlook for videogame art is relatively optimistic.

FPS games are at the leading edge of computer graphics technology and by opening up the technology with scripting languages and level editors, the creators of these games are placing very powerful tools in the hands of the artist with comparatively little control over what is produced. In many ways, this form of videogame art fulfils the hype promised by early practitioners in virtual reality art such as Jaron Lanier and while purists may quibble over the physical and aesthetic differences between a screen-based virtual experience and a goggle-based one, there is no denying the fact that the quality and speed provided by the FPS games surpasses all but the most high-end VR equipment (and does so at a fraction of the cost).

The open source movement will clearly have an impact on this field, as it has on other forms of computing. The effect is likely to be particularly strong as videogames appeal to people who are young, technically skilled and have plenty of free time – an ideal demographic for an open source project. This community-led software development has already produced a number of significant developments, particularly in the area of FPS editing and machinima. Some of these projects have been truly open source; others are produced by clans and although not open source, share its loose and distributed mode of development.

Even though it was not built using a game engine, *The House of Osama bin Laden* (Langlands and Bell 2003) fits squarely into the growing trend in FPS art to replicate real spaces. Its inclusion on the 2004 Turner Prize shortlist is therefore a significant event for videogame art. The intention of the Turner Prize is to highlight new developments in visual arts and this shows that even if videogame art has not yet become mainstream, then at least art *resembling* videogame art is on the cusp of institutional acceptance. As such, it potentially opens the way for other, less well-supported, artists who will inevitably use more accessible materials – i.e. videogame engines – to produce more difficult, confrontational or experimental work.

What is particularly interesting about videogame art is the way in which we can see it evolving in front of our eyes. Although some genres of videogame art are becoming slightly stale, there is a constant flow of new ideas, technology and techniques to replace them. There is likewise a flow of new issues to explore through this form of art and this makes it an interesting area of art practice to work in, write about, view and curate.

Henry Lowood talks about speedrunning and the subsequent machinima as being "a progression from player to performer" while Rebecca Cannon asks rhetorically whether the game artists are gamer players who "just grew tired of killing and dying". If this is the case, then other gamers may well follow the same trajectory. The huge amount of fan-created *Sim* and FPS content indicates that if people are given tools for editing games, they will use them. It is only a matter of time before some people – even if it is just a minority – go from creating content for games they like to creating work which is intended as art.

Notes

1. Marinka, C. and Raessens, J. (eds), *Level Up: Proceedings of the 1st International Digital Games Research Conference*, University of Utrecht Press, 2003, pp. 338–349.
2. Lammers, S. (ed.), *Programmers at Work*, Tempus Books/Microsoft Press, 1986, pp. 262–270.