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On MoMA's "Applied Design" Exhibit (2013)

This opinion piece was [published](#) by *Guardian UK* on 7 March 2013 under the title "A designer's take: MoMA is wrong to pretend video games are art," accompanied by the subhead "I like seeing good work honored in my field, but we shouldn't ignore the consensus of the centuries: games are not art."

This title and subhead were composed solely by the *Guardian*. The title is sensational and inaccurate, and makes me sound even bitchier than I actually am.

Nowhere in the article do I accuse MoMA of "pretending" that video games are art. Their exhibit, entitled "Applied Design," clearly presents the games in the context of *design*, not art.

I hope it's obvious that video games involve design.

The wisdom of Roger Ebert's decision to stop writing about games as art is becoming obvious, too.

A few other publisher's edits have been amended here to match my original submission.

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Last weekend, New York's Museum of Modern Art joined the growing list of prestigious institutions that are acquiring and exhibiting video games as art.

Like the Smithsonian's recent offering, many of the titles now on display at Moma aren't actually playable by visitors, and the selection has been culled of any distasteful vulgarities (gratuitous violence, sexual piggery, etc) common to mainstream releases. Still, it's a pleasure to see the work of fine designers, like Jason Rohrer, Jenova Chen and Will Wright, honored this way.

For some, the appearance of video games in major collections is seen as evidence that the medium is finally earning acceptance as a "legitimate" art form. Others, myself included, remain unconvinced.

Some years ago, film critic Roger Ebert enraged both players and the industry by flatly declaring that "video games can never be art." My own reservations were expressed in an address at the 2011 Game Developer's Conference, in which I lamented the predilection for kitsch, technological instability and a chaotic business climate that have persistently retarded games' aesthetic development. Aside from a few passages that could have been worded more diplomatically, I stand by that lecture;

indeed, subsequent research leads me to suspect that my argument was too timid.

A survey of the past 2,500 years of art philosophy offers no support for the classification of games as art. If games are mentioned at all, they are dismissed as a pastime, harmless at best, or an evil destroyer of youth at worst. Schopenhauer appears to be alone among the major authors in offering games more than passing consideration. His assessment was not sympathetic.

In his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-44), he condemns game-playing as an egregious form of "excitement" precisely opposed to the experience of sublime art, and he specifically calls to task "the invention and maintenance of card-playing, which is in the truest sense an expression of the wretched side of humanity." This is possibly the first allusion to game designers in a major philosophical text.

It's fair to ask whether the opinions of crabby old philosophers like Schopenhauer are relevant to a discussion of video games as art. I would respond that when deciding value, ignoring the ideas of history's greatest thinkers seems reckless, and that the novelty of interactive video does not invalidate the wisdom of ages.

Speaking of the ages, it's pertinent to ask why mildly interesting game designs like *Canabalt* are being enshrined by MoMA while *Chess* and *Go*, the most

elegant and durable rulesets ever devised, find no place in their exhibit.

If their excuse is a focus on contemporary artifacts, the omission of Allan Calhamer's *Diplomacy*, widely acknowledged as one of the greatest game designs of the past century, is also cause for regret. Mr Calhamer's passing a week before the MoMA opening makes the slight more tragic.

There are many good reasons to question the status of video games as art. Nevertheless, I find myself becoming cross and irritable when I read the particular objection expressed in Jonathan Jones' recent *Guardian* editorial (also found in Mr Ebert's writings), where he states that games cannot be art simply because they appear to abrogate the authority of the artist. This argument brushes aside nearly a century of vital artwork exploring the conventional boundaries between artist, exhibitor and spectator.

It may be that these experiments have so far failed to produce works capable of eliciting the experiences traditionally associated with sublime art. But this "failure," if such it is, actually validates the significance of the experiments. We must avoid falling prey to the File Drawer Problem, in which research that doesn't yield interesting results remains undervalued or ignored.

It is the nature of art to renew and redefine itself, both as a

reflection of evolving culture and as an active catalyst of that evolution. Questioning and healthy skepticism will always be an essential part of this historical process, but we must remain alert to the possibility of a breakthrough.

If and when a video game achieves this breakthrough, we doubters and Romantic old fogeys will fall respectfully silent. No one quarrels over a lightningbolt.

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