

GAMING IN THE GALLERY:

the precarious position of artists' games
within the institutional setting



Third World: The Bottom Dimension © Serpentine. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

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Introduction

To play a *game* is to step into a fantasy. The rules have been set, the scene pre-determined, and you—as the player—are given the illusion of choice to move through it all. Yet, to even decide to step into a game is to leave behind a physical space—and is that place a gallery?

There is no doubt that the institutionalised art space is changing. Museums—and by extension galleries—have begun abandoning connoisseurship in favour of "promoting social inclusion [and] combating...multiple forms of disadvantage described by exclusion."¹ From a plethora of QR codes to playfully select Activity Areas, the museum space has begun to focus on active participation—involving the visitor in more than just passive viewing. In this way, it is only to be expected that interactivity is to be championed in the art world. Enter the digital game.

Games have a history before becoming "art," in the same way that art has a history before games. Yet, the intersectionality of the digital game as art is a modern invention, one perhaps defined by the post-digital aesthetic of participation.² As digital games become accepted into the art world as a new art medium, their position in the gallery is precarious at best and outrightly bastardised at worse. If games are to succeed as art, they must align their presentation strategy to that of the digitally-encoded mind—one that parses information through recognition, editability, and the ability to take ownership. In other words, they must lead the gallery visitor through READ-WRITE-EXECUTE.

READ-WRITE-EXECUTE forms the basis of computing technology.

¹ Joceyln Dodd and Richard Sandell. *Including Museums: perspectives on museums, galleries and social inclusion.* (Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 2001), 24.

² Judith Ackermann, Benjamin Egger and Rebecca Scharlach, "Programming the Postdigital: Curation of Appropriation Processes in (Collaborative) Creative Coding Spaces." *Postdigit Sci Educ 2*, (Dec 2019): 438

Two games in particular have recently been inserted into the London gallery context: *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley and *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* by Gabriel Massan & Collaborators. Both rely on transmitting conceptual ideas through the medium of games, and both self-contextualise their work in the gallery space. Using these two games as case studies, I aim to show that games are able to present themselves as institutionalised art, albeit to varying degrees of success.

READ: The Ability to Recognize

Games in institutional settings suffer in the way that they overlap in physical form to those of interpretive aid media.³ Headphones are not for immersive game audio, but rather for self-paced audio tours. An Xbox controller? Well, that's not something *I* typical use. In the popular mind, games do not *read* as art. It is here that the artist must intervene by supporting recognition of the dematerialized art object and by establishing performative materiality of it.

The dematerialization of art objects lie in the development of contemporary art that "emphasizes the thinking process exclusively" while discarding its "physical evolution."⁴ Though Lippard is probably referring to the likes of Sol LeWitt and his wall drawing instructions, so too are games conceptual in that they give players instructions for open-ended execution. What is needed to set up the game—the hardware, software, seats, the physical materials—is secondary to the act of playing it. The player experience is prioritised, the process of thinking emphasised.

³ Beryl Graham and Sarah Cooke, "On Interpretation, Display, Audience," in *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2010), 162.

⁴ Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12:2 (Feb 1968), 31.

This leads us to the concept of performative materiality. A game's artistic core is produced through the experience of playing it "as an effect of a dynamic relation between provocation of the object's characteristics and an interpretative process."⁵ There is no game, let alone art, if there is no one playing it. To recognize "the production of a work as an interpretative event"⁶ is to accept the performative quality of games as the artwork itself. That the experience of picking up a controller, engaging with a story, is the art object—not the physical setup itself.

Thus, the very recognition of games as art in the institutional setting is reliant on educating visitors that art can be interactive and experiential—not just a physical object. It is not enough to slap a gaming setup into the gallery and expect visitors to ignore its other meanings as interpretative media and hobby consumption. It needs to be recognized as art.

CASE STUDY: The Theatrical Set

There are many strategies to contextualise a game as art, of which the theatrical set seems to be the preference. Both *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* and *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* have arranged various props and supporting displays in addition to the actual game. Familiar in the sense of a theme park, these theatrical sets invites visitors into the immersive experience—transforming the physical into the experiential.

⁵ Johanna Drucker. "Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7:1, (July 2013).

⁶ Drucker. "Performative Materiality"



*figures standing outside and inside.
Installation shots of She Keeps Me Damn Alive.*

She Keeps Me Damn Alive immediately confronts the visitor with multiple "ghostly figures" standing guard around a red velvet curtain that leads to the "gameplay arena."⁷ Shrouded in darkness, this theatrical set establishes an arcade-like space—a place for an interactive play. *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* approaches the setup similarly. Scattered around the walkways are soundscapes and video renderings from the game as well as other sculptural works. Surrounding "The Play Room" and "The Broadcast Room" where the game can be played or viewed, visitors must enter an immersive world before reaching the game—converting the physical to that of performance.⁸ However, invoking a theme-park-esque introduction has its drawbacks. Borderline amusement park fun ride—it runs the risk of reading as a place for superficial fun and enjoyment, not a place for contemplation of deeper themes. Will a visitor actually understand the concept behind the game? Well, at least they will recognize the experience as an art object in itself.

⁷ Danielle Braithwaite-Shirley, *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* (London: Arebyte Gallery, 2021), 5.

⁸ Gabriel Massan & Collaborators, *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2023).



*extra displays and sculptures.
Installation shots of Third World: The Bottom Dimension.*

WRITE: The Ability to Intervene

To be a typical gallery visitor is to passively view art: to not touch it, to read its wall label, to be taken on a tour that explains it. The gallery is not the place to assert oneself, to actively engage and change the space. Yet, games inherently need change, an act of intervention in order to become art objects. Thus, art games must address this passiveness in order to create the active exploration core to any gaming experience.

Institutional galleries are much like museums in that they are reliant on ritual performance, "something an individual enacts alone by following a prescribed route, by repeating a prayer, by recalling a narrative, or by engaging in some other structured experience."⁹ Visitors are not encouraged to personally engage, to find one's own meaning, to take physical action. This deeply ingrained passiveness is at complete odds with games inside the gallery. After all, if no one engages with the game, does the game even exist—let alone as a work of art?

Thus, there is a need for encouraging active interaction. Like Georg Hein's idealised constructivist museum, art games must frame a space that requires active participation and

⁹ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1995), 12.

encourages visitors to construct personal knowledge from it.¹⁰ Individual experiences are varied, and every person can extract different meanings from the same, entirely predetermined game—if, and only if, visitors agree to actively intervene.

But perhaps passivity is already being casted aside by today's generation. Younger visitors are more willing to interact inside the gallery space.¹¹ They are able to ignore the gallery ritual in comparison to the older, typical gallery-goer audience. For everyone else though, an atmosphere of participation should still be promoted—a vital precondition necessary for games to be considered art.

CASE STUDY: Instructions & Alternative Passivity

Clear instructions that outline the process of interacting are present in both *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* and *Third World: The Bottom Dimension*. They both define what a visitor should do, where they should go, in what way to interact—though through different methods. In addition, they both provide viewings of live-streamed content—a sort of compromise between the pre-established passivity of the gallery space and the active participation required of a game.

¹⁰ George Hein, "Learning in the Museum," (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 34.

¹¹ FACT lecture.



*bold text disclaimers and descriptions.
She Keeps Me Damn Alive.*



*staff on standby.
Third World: The Bottom Dimension*

She Keeps Me Damn Alive instructs the visitor through a series of bold text scattered around the installation. From what should be considered—"DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE THE POWER TO PROTECT OTHERS"—to logistics—"STAND HERE" everything is clearly labelled, guiding a visitor through the "correct" experience. On the other hand, *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* provided an extensive gallery catalogue and quite a substantial amount of gallery staff. The catalogue explains the game in the familiar format of an essay, while staff are on standby and assist with any game-related issues in real time. Though different approaches, they both use language to define instruction to affirm the role of the active visitor.

However, they both incorporate loopholes to remain passive. Using the familiar medium of watching videos, both games incorporate—and even promote—the viewing of other people playing the game. Instead of playing themselves and actively intervening, visitors are allowed to remain comfortable in the museum ritual as a passive experience.¹²

¹² *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* is also offered as a downloadable, remote experience. Though clearly there is something different by interacting at home, I am focusing on the public sphere in the gallery and therefore have decided not to investigate it.

Perhaps a compromise for those who remain uneasy with newer developments, it does detract from the validation of games as an acceptable art medium.

EXECUTE: Ownership and Command (and own)

Recognition and intervention are but the base qualifying condition to setup acceptance of games as an art object. However, for a game to reach its true form—a deliverance of a specific concept—visitors must follow the rules of the magic circle and engage in meaningful play, exercising ownership and command of their own actions.

The magic circle is defined as "the space within which a game takes place," where "the game's rules create a special set of meanings for the players."¹³ Is it here in the alternate world, that experiences and opinions can form parallel to those in the real world. Providing a space both removed and familiar, it allows for a deeper exploration of conceptual work—a projection of the self into a work of art.

But it is the gameplay itself—the rules that one must follow—that must support meaningful play. Built on the recognition of "what has happened...[and] how it will affect the rest of the game,"¹⁴ meaningful play is directly correlated to how easy it is to receive the conceptual message—an experience beyond mere physical participation. What buttons, what abilities, what has been programmed are all limitations, predetermined variables that shape the experience of a game. If inordinately hard or misaligned to the conceptual message, visitors will be frustrated and barred from truly engaging with the work.

¹³ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "Chapter 9: The Magic Circle," in *Rules of Play: Fundamentals of Game Design*, (Cambridge, Mass: The Mit Press), 7.

¹⁴ Salen and Zimmerman, "Chapter 3: Meaningful Play," in *Rules of Play: Fundamentals of Game Design*, (see note 13), 4-6. As defined as discernable and integrated components of meaningful play.

Thus, after the setup and instructions, the game itself must articulate itself clearly through its gameplay. Though hard to do even in the best circumstances, games must provide enough simplicity that visitors do not just interact with it in a physical, tactical manner, but also converse in a broader commentary-forming emotional and psychological responses. To execute, in digital terms, is to adopt and make one's own. Games facilitate this adoption, making worthwhile changes in the real world.

CASE STUDY: Mechanics & End Achievements

Mechanics and end achievements make up the core of the gameplay loop. *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* has much simpler mechanics, while *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* is a bit more complicated. Furthermore, *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* declares a resolute end achievement. On the other hand, *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* is more vague and contemplative.

She Keeps Me Damn Alive is made in the likeness of an arcade rail-shooter. Practically a TV remote with one button, it is very easy to understand how to play: shoot things on the screen. The remote—in the form a disasterly goopy pink gun—directly implicates the gallery visitor in the key concept of violence, while the end screen actively condemns or absolves the player based on the overall score. In this way, *She Keeps Me Damn Alive* provides successful gameplay for conceptualization in the gallery space.



*goopy gun, TV screen and remote.
She Keeps Me Damn Alive*



*follow the arrow and collect energy crystals.
Third World: The Bottom Dimension*

On the other hand, *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* uses an Xbox controller, a more complex input method for more complex abilities. Open-world and propagated with NPCs, the main mechanic of collecting energy crystals does not particularly match the core concept of "transformation and expanded understanding" of different realities.¹⁵ Here, the overall game format of collect-a-thon, boss battles, and cutscenes are more reminiscent of a whimsical RPG, not so much of the aggressive coloniser. Furthermore, the end goal is dubiously defined. There is the finishing of the three-stage narrative, but visitors are equally encouraged to mint an NFT—a self-taken screenshot of the game while playing it. Many visitors only got through the beginning of the game¹⁶—perhaps a reflection of the obscure connection the mechanics to the conceptual message behind it.

¹⁵ Massan & Collaborators, *Third World: The Bottom Dimension*.

¹⁶ Reviews on Steam reflect poor UI and quality of life concerns, while observationally at the gallery most only played through the first level.

Conclusion

For better or for worse, games in galleries are changing what it means to be a game-as-art as much as it is changing what it means to be a gallery in today's age. Once an item of consumption and idle enjoyment, games have entered the gallery space and have gained the status of "art." Dependent on visitors interpreting the work through digital Internet terms—READ-WRITE-EXECUTE—games signal their "art-ness" through theatrical sets, instructions, and within the gameplay itself. This crossover between digital and physical, between Internet logic and social logic, is where game-as-art has found its place and where—perhaps—it will always remain on the fringes of "art."

But it is a two-way relationship: games in galleries also affect the institutions that house them. Games have the power to create a fuller sense of community, relinquishing traditional power dynamics in favour of holding every individual equal. It is this identity of modernity, one founded in decentralisation and belonging, that available to today's galleries. Choosing to align with this post-digital aesthetic means to brightened and intensified the individual experience, while letting the veneration for the problematically privileged few fade into the backdrop of the traditional, blank, white cube.

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