

Playing games as an art experience

How videogames produce meaning through narrative and play

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My aim is to provide clarity about the nature of the videogame as a meaning generating system, while I consider imagination a central concept. I approach videogames as a common part of culture, that can be looked at as a signification system, just like other common cultural products like magazines, art, tv-shows, newspapers, films, books, ads, fashion, design, et cetera. I have examined the artistic and aesthetic nature of games: could imagination in a game experience be comparable to our perception of art and literature? Grounded on a distinction between first and second order representation I have scrutinized the meaning generating capacity of game stories. First order representation is the concrete representation of (narrative) occurrences, while second order representation concerns involvement with a consciousness, with a perspective on the meaning-making process related to those occurrences. My hypothesis is that processes of signification in videogames are similar to those in literature and film, but that these signification processes betray a different nature, producing different effects - to a large extent induced by the gamers prosuming mental and physical input.

Key words: videogames, art, representation, semiotics, imagination, identification, consciousness, metacognition, constructing meaning.

About the artfulness of videogames

I will start with the basic assumption that we deal with art or literature only when it forces recipients to get involved with a consciousness. Afterwards I will elaborate on what exactly I am aiming at here, since I suspect some doubts and questions about my intentions already: why would anyone want to engage in this subject, why would anyone approach videogames as art? Videogames are entertainment, and not intended as art. To begin with I agree with you completely, but I still think there are reasons to look at games in another, unusual way. While reading work of game designers, game critics and game study scholars I often encounter art related intuitions and convictions. Hardly ever videogames are being compared to science, politics or religion: no, games are an art form. But are they really? In what capacity then? And what do promoters of this view mean by art exactly? It is worthy of remark that there seems to be a lot of disagreement on this matter in the domain of game studies. I simply mention the ludology-narratology debate. Ludologists exclusively focus here on play related,

structural and formal aspects of videogames (in an obviously anti-aesthetic stance), while narratologists are also interested in the *aesthetic* aspects of game and game story. I will not take a predefined position in this discussion. In my search for possible artistic attributes of videogames at any rate I intend to employ an open and interdisciplinary view, without the pretense of complete objectivism. I gladly refer to Jerome Bruner, who expresses some interesting views on both scientific interplay and objectivism. While stressing the impact of the cognitive revolution, he describes an important paradigm shift grounded on changing insights and interdisciplinary influences in psychology. The aim of this revolution was “to bring ‘mind’ back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism.”¹ Bruner strives for a more interpretive approach to cognition concerned with meaning-making - a plain and comprehensible perspective that I would like to take up here as well.

I have the impression that the notions art, aesthetic and artistic often are wrongly used synonymously. On top of that there seems to be a sort of general agreement about the matter, as if it is perfectly clear to anyone what we mean by the term art. When a game designer or game critic states that a game is art, he usually means it in the sense that it *is a highminded piece of handicraft*, executed by a *sensitive artisan*, or that a game is *aesthetically sublime*, or that a specific game *looks like art*, that the gorgeous virtual environments in the game provide us with *aesthetic experiences*. But art does not have to be beautiful at all - an acknowledged viewpoint since modernism and postmodernism: it is more often primarily about power of expression. By which statement I by no means claim that art *can not* be beautiful. On the contrary, there is a lot of art that interlinks a marvelous visual representation with an intrusive and urgent message. My concern in this matter is that there seems to be no general agreement between game designers, game critics, philosophers of art and cultural scholars about what we mean by art and the art experience. I daresay the label *art* is altogether granted too easily regarding videogames.

Evolution in art theories

A short review of two thousand years Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art clarifies that conceptions of art always depend on the perspective that someone, a society, or the art world holds concerning art. Does an author in his definition wants to stress the *intrinsic properties* of art, the *individual expression* of an artist, the *instrumental sociocultural functions* of art, or the *emotional and cognitive features of the art experience*? These various perspectives were conceived under what Stephen Davies identified as the three main theoretical approaches of art: Functionalism, Proceduralism (and within that Institutionalism) and the Intentional Approach. I will not elaborate on these conceptions. However, I have to acknowledge Davies’

favour for the procedural approach here, apparently because he believes the everchanging art world respects and answers appropriately to sociocultural evolution. The proper approach to art, and how it should provide enjoyment is governed by interpersonal conventions of the art world, conventions that can be changed, and in fact do change.² In other words, conventions and convictions about what we call art, or what art does, or what art means will change from time to time.

Whatever may change in art or our conception of it, one representational phenomenon seems to exist in all viewpoints: *mimesis*, which treats art as some kind of imitation. Van den Braembussche shows that we encounter this particular concept of art contemplation, already conceived by Plato and Aristotle, in almost all subsequent artistic or aesthetic conceptions. Until, in the twentieth century, post-structuralism finally banned all mimetic concepts from theory of art: representations are not grounded on similarity or identity, but refer to (their differences with) other representations and have no foundation in social reality whatsoever. In his later work the philosopher Lyotard developed the so-called Kantian Turn, in order to escape this postmodern arbitrariness, a perspective he more or less had created himself, among others in his influential *The Postmodern Condition*.³ In his new approach he attributes substantial significance to reflective judgement, which is grounded on emotion, imagination and the Idea for which no concept is in reach yet. He transforms this reflective judgement to a definition of aesthetic judgement in which the Sublime has to play a leading role. Because imagination, emotion and reason are incompatible at first, this experience of the Sublime initially arouses feelings of unease or crisis. Eventually however, it will very likely inspire to new moral ideas, and make intelligible what transcends our imagination.⁴

It is obvious that contemporary approaches of art ascribe an essential role to the *experience* of art. The artistic is not necessarily defined by intrinsic properties of an artefact, but is situated in the perception and comprehension of it. When we both read William Gibson's *Neuromancer* I have a different reading experience than you have. On the basis of my specific cultural baggage and personal experiences I make it my story, with my individual imagery, identifications and interpretations. All things considered I read a different book. Admittedly not completely different, if we may believe Stanley Fish's notions about *interpretive communities*. In their meaning-making strategy readers never fall into anarchy or unguided signification: they will always rely on a shared background, on a common interpretive framework within their culture or society.⁵

The artistic-aesthetic distinction

In my strive for transparency in the artistic-aesthetic discours I propose a slight adjustment or specification in terminology, in a way that in

my opinion better connects to what people intuitively feel with these notions. While most people primarily identify aesthetics with beauty, we easily can determine that art does not have to be beautiful, that the *artistic experience* is not always enjoyable. I only refer to contemporary artists like Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Damien Hirst, Marina Abramović, Marlene Dumas, Erwin Olaf and Dolores Zorreguieta, whose creations often on first sight arouse disgust and repulsion in their beholders. Literature and film can produce similar reactions, as demonstrated by novels from Marquis de Sade, William S. Burroughs, Bret Easton Ellis, and films like Pasolini's *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* or Haneke's *Funny Games*. It seems not entirely implausible to cross out the term *aesthetic* for now, just like the notion *aesthetic experience*, to describe the essence of an art experience. Stephen Davies offers an in my view adequate distinction between what is aesthetic and what is artistic. He maintains that we generally describe *aesthetic* properties as objective features perceived in the object. "Their recognition does not depend on information about the circumstances under which the item was made, or about its intended or possible functions."⁶

Artistic properties mostly depend on the content, on messages and meaning artworks communicate, that however by no means can be separated from the *aesthetic properties*. Examining a Balinese (narrative) painting Davies creates a clear insight into this distinction. The depicted story takes no part in the *aesthetic* judgement, because we can not follow or comprehend it without specific knowledge of the portrayed individuals and the conventions about how to 'read' the scenes. This particular painting not only represents symbolic functions, but expresses important moral values in Balinese culture and religion as well. Davies acknowledges the importance of the aesthetic qualities of the painting, but the main value unmistakable is embedded in the *artistic properties*. And in this regard this painting is not very different from any artwork in other cultures: everywhere the significance of artistic content will be appointed above the aesthetic properties.⁷

First and second order representation

Thus the artistic properties of art and literature relate to the *what* of the reference, the aesthetic on the directly discernable *how*. All art, all literature refers in some way to something outside itself, to something in reality, and the meaning of that reference is created mainly in the experience, in the artistic interpretation. But did we in the introduction not establish that videogames are intended for our amusement? In what way, then, does the artistic experience differ from the entertainment experience exactly? An attractive solution to this dilemma is to be found in the conception that for instance in light reading, soap opera or mainstream Hollywood film we usually do not encounter anomalies that force us to meaning-making. Therefore these amusement formats easily create an illusion of absorption in

the action. We are completely captured by it, but their meaning is generally fixed: this first order representation and our imagination both reach closure. In literature and art on the other hand, the evoked mental images force us frequently to look for meaning. This process is strongly encouraged by the multiplicity of interpretational levels, and the way the representation differs from the 'ordinary', from what we already know. The motivation or the significance of actions and occurrences is often unclear or even disturbed, and therefore offers insufficient explanation to interpret adequately (Did he kill his own daughter? Has this oil sheik got a hidden agenda?). Hence it forces us to imagine a consciousness of the occurrences, in which we actually witness the representation of a representation process (whether it involves the mind of a story character or that of the storyteller/creator). This is generally the only possible way to get engaged in a process of meaning-construction with the multi-interpretable, uncompleted representation. Readers always strive to obtain closure, to construct a coherent unity of meanings. Grounded on this second order representation literature creates an illusion of absorption in a consciousness: illusion, because it concerns our representation, our mental image (first illusion) of a fictional mind (second illusion).⁸

To illustrate the functioning of this signification process I refer to an exercise in observing by Boon and Steenhuis. Dialectically thinking aloud they analyse the Picasso painting *Musketeer with Sword* from 1972. Philosopher Boon firstly confesses that for a long time she could not cope with Picasso, because the comfortable notion *beautiful* is no longer a criterion in modern art. She stresses the abstract nature of this painting, that, as a deviation from the regular, forces beholders to a specific mode of interpretation. This disordered, deformed musketeer asks you to look in a different fashion, to step out of your familiar frame of reference. In this particular case one has to accept this is no imitation of a musketeer in reality, according to Boon. The abstraction of this painting facilitates the ability to see its separate parts in their own quality, and in that action we become aware of a certain perspective. We are now able to perceive what Picasso had in mind. With his particular style of painting he tries to express something that did not exist before: he clearly does not want to copy something, but to represent *the essence* of something with a few strokes. In order to achieve this, he attentively has to look at what he sees, and at what he wants to express. In this implied observation process Picasso draws us into his perspective, into his vision on reality. By means of exactly this form of expression he seems to delineate the contradictions and inconsistencies in human beings: we are not simple schematic creatures, acting in clearly defined patterns. Simultaneously he provokes us to reflect on our actual viewpoints on vitality, as Boon concludes. This musketeer does not match our image - or schema, or frame, as cognitivists would say - of the manly, vital musketeer, due to his multitude of facial expressions, in which we

perceive sadness, strength, pride, old age at once. Moreover Picasso's perspective stimulates reflection on what old age implies and what strength, on what it is to decline, to suffer, to be vulnerable, to be tough.⁹

It seems clear to me that observing this painting initially engages us in first order representation. While we perceive the concrete pictorial image, we try to find similarities with reality. Due to an obvious lack of this mimetic quality (the representation differs from the ordinary) we are pulled to a meta-level, into second order representation in our quest for meaning. We assume a consciousness, a perspective on what is represented, which supports and intensifies our signification. Especially in this case it is evident that aesthetic and artistic properties are merged and intertwined: Picasso's painting style directs us to this particular mode of interpretation. In a sense it invites beholders to identify not so much with the painter, but with his *perspective* - a thought that maybe we should hold on to for a while, in regard to our coming analysis of game identity.

The assumed distinction in first and second order representation, by the way, seems very similar to what Bruner already expressed in 1986 as the *dual landscape view*, in this case concerning literature. This twofold perspective allows readers to penetrate the lives and minds of characters, whose consciousness operates as an empathy magnet, according to Bruner.¹⁰ Conceived this way, artistic engagement with a consciousness entails much more than just knowing and imagining what goes around in characters, it provokes emotional identification as well.

Meta-cognitive artistic play

Our inclination to fill in gaps, to complete the openness in literature and art seems to be a partly evolutionary determined, partly acquired cognitive capacity, as literary scholar Brice Heath makes apparent. In a text on videogames I consider it noteworthy to observe she characterizes art as a specific type of game. This artistic 'play' offers us exercise in exactly those mental actions required to connect all things we perceive as incoherent to a unity. Discovery of deviations and incongruities is only possible due to the presence of a huge collection of harmonious 'units' in our minds (cf. schemas: a structural system of concepts - of objects, occurrences, situations and action patterns - stored in our mind). Art prompts us to detect differences between what we think we know and what we really see while reassembling the jigsaw puzzle. Brice Heath underscores our previous assumption that we need to step outside the frame of what is portrayed, to imagine what the artist herself saw or thought in the art creating - meaning making - process. Such artistic play offers the opportunity to lift the represented actions and intentions above the moment to transform them in multiple versions of something else. In her view this metacognitive process is play in more than one way, for it is exactly from this meta-level we are able to observe

ourselves as performer, and to control the scene, and in this very process we learn to improve subsequent mental acts.¹¹ Did it strike you as well how closely this resembles the observation of a third-person videogame?

Cognitivist Merlin Donald identifies *objects of art* in themselves also as a *cognitive construct*, in the sense that they are representations that influence the way not only artists, but art recipients as well perceive the world. Art is always aimed at a cognitive outcome, designed to engineer a particular state of mind in the beholder. Just like Brice Heath's, Donald's principles of metacognition connect remarkably well to our concepts of second order representation. For metacognition, he claims, is pre-eminently self-reflection, and art self-reflective: the artistic object - or literature, I would like to add - challenges to reflect on the very process that created it. And that is on the mind of the artist, and therefore on society she emerged from.¹² In the meantime we can hardly deny that *representation of meaning construction* is a significant aspect of the artistic experience.

Games as sign systems

We assumed the cognitive, meta-reflexive nature of the artistic experience. However, we do not know in detail yet how this process operates in art and literature, nor which properties initiate this process. Although the artistic experience in its constructive nature is mainly situated in the beholder, I nevertheless want to try to pinpoint some media transcending features in art, literature and videogames. What are the typical attributes that somehow trigger our cognitive and meta-reflexive signification process? In doing so I presuppose that not only culture products like literature and art are better understood with the use of a proper theory of symbols, as Nelson Goodman demonstrated plainly in his groundbreaking *Languages of Art*.¹³ As another cultural artefact a videogame as well refers to reality in some way, and can accordingly be treated as a sign system, in order to comprehend the fashion in which it triggers a signification process. In our dealing with representations (something that stands for something else), without exception we use our imagination, in our strive to comprehend their meaning. This occurs when we read literature, watch a movie or play a game. While reading we construct a mental representation of the occurrences, the situations and the characters presented in the text, if we watch a movie we imagine the backstory of characters and possible plot turns, if we play a game we not only transfer ourselves into the virtual world, but also into our game character, the avatar: we imagine being someone else.

At least for now, in this text, I assume that mainly the narrative capacity of videogames is responsible for mimetic imagination. By which I by no means claim that ludic or play elements lack this ability. We can identify a lot of different genres and game types, where some games scarcely hold any embedded, scripted story elements, like in *Tetris*, *Pacman*, *Pong*,

The Sims, *SimCity*. Other videogames however, entangle gameplay and narrative to such an extent that one aspect can not exist without the other: without narrativity there is no game, like in *Fable*, *Bioshock*, *Prince of Persia*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. In our confrontation with representations, that is to say, with all kinds of imaginations or imitations of events in reality, we are constantly engaged in assigning meaning to what is presented. In this signification process we unconsciously use the sign-functions icon, symbol and index. These sign-categories, originated from Peirce's semiotics, offer a system that delicately distinguishes specific modes in which representations refer to something else. Is the reference established by pictural similarity or identity (icon), by convention or agreement (symbol), or by resemblance with a structural coherence or a causality, in short, with a theory (index)? A common definition - conceived by Peirce - states that a sign is "something which stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity". Thus, an arbitrary object, like a letter, a road sign, an index finger or a photograph, is no sign in itself. Furthermore a sign is not a thing, but an occurrence: something becomes a sign when somebody assigns meaning to it on account of a recognized difference with previous representations.¹⁴ Analysis of semiosis, of sign usage, offers a sensitive methodology to comprehend the exact nature of these differences, to lay bare subtle nuances in our meaning-making process. I would like to explain the function of sign usage on the basis of an inevitably concise analysis of the role playing game (RPG) *Fable*, *The Lost Chapters*.

Meaning-making in Fable

Right after start up an introduction commences where image fragments of the game world take turns with credits of the game producer, accompanied by increasingly bombastic orchestral sounds. Unmistakably this refers to conventions from the motion-picture industry with the symbolic notion: attention, in a moment a thrilling story begins. After shooting some vague and diffuse images the camera focusses on an impressively armored warrior who is engaged in serious combat training, holding a huge sword. As a connoisseur of this game genre (the rpg-genre as symbolic sign, with its specific attributes and idiom) you know by convention that in a moment you step into the shoes of this protagonist, or as we say in Dutch, you slip into his skin: even before the real game starts it anticipates an identification process. Then we enter the game world, facing adventure. Static, two-dimensional wall paintings pass by, while a voice-over narrates about the village of Oakvale in the woods of Albion, where time seems to stand still. In semiotic terms we can mark this as dual iconicity: 1. as icons the wall paintings offer a tangible visual representation of the game space; 2. the narrator's story as an icon enables us to construct an even more extensive mental image of the environment and circumstances in Oakvale. Based on the text as iconic sign

we are able to construct a concrete mental representation: we visualise it, as if we see a film in our mind. In this particular case we imagine nothing else than what paintings and narrator show us: in an icon the sign and its meaning coincide.

Symbolic and indexical references in Fable

A symbol refers to something else by convention: the idea that a white pigeon refers to peace we only know by agreement, just like we have agreements about language signs. Likewise in such symbols there is no natural similitude between form and meaning. We learn this conventional relation in our childhood from our parents and at school: this letter as signifier refers to that sound as signified, this word as signifier to that semantic meaning as signified. The name *Fable* even on itself functions as a symbolic sign, due to its obvious connotation with fairy tales, their idiom and structure.¹⁵ Once we have acknowledged this, we realise it can hardly fail to occur that the hero will meet hardship and evil. Our alter ego - little Hero - just finished his mission to earn his sister Theresa a birthday present, as mischief strikes their village. Even before they see the merciless gang itself, Hero and Theresa witness a fellow villager crashing to the ground in front of them, an arrow in his back. Obviously the iconic representation of the dwellings and clothing refers to a past era, inducing a symbolical meaning that is even more intensified through the use of this particular weapon. Did you notice, by the way, that one sign category can enclose another? Umberto Eco already identified more than once that the different sign functions, as conceived among others by De Saussure and Peirce, interlink somehow.¹⁶ More recently Van Heusden developed this conception into an all-inclusive theory that in my view answers quite adequately to the capacity that one single representation can produce different sign functions.¹⁷ An icon as a concrete representation can also symbolically stand for something else, and furthermore it can refer indexically to theoretical structures or models in reality as well. The triadic *index* (as opposed to the undivided *icon* and the dualistic *symbol*), shows us a structure, often understood as a certain causal or physical connection between the three elements of that sign: our mental representation of smoke as (1) *representamen* (iconic sign bearer) refers through our (conventional, symbolic) (2) *interpretant* “where there is smoke there is fire” to the (3) *object* fire. We know that fire is the physical cause of smoke. Although this is one of the possible interpretations of this type of sign usage, it is not the essence of it. It is important to acknowledge that the index is not exclusively about indicating causal or physical relations between entities, it is especially about identifying essential, structural relations between phenomena: indexical sign usage offers logical or theoretical knowledge.

On a micro-level we distinguish a lot of indices in Fable. The distant sounds of villagers screaming during the raid can hardly refer to something else than to the violence inflicted by the bandits. A more interesting index on a meso-level we discern during Hero's first quest for good deeds, and is related to characters and their role in the story. On the hill he encounters a little kid whose physical posture iconically displays fear and submission. As the cause of his anxious behaviour we hardly can interpret something else than the big lad in front of him. We see a causal relation here, but it offers a pattern, a theoretical model as well. Somebody seems to behave submissively if he is intimidated by a stronger person. On the other hand we could conclude that there are physically strong human beings who mentally degrade themselves by torment the small and weak. Helping the kid earns you a goldpiece. The indexical relation seems to be here: a good deed leads to profit. In addition, while you cross the village square several villagers address you and each other admiringly and approvingly: "His mother will be pleased with his behaviour", "Isn't he just adorable?" And in collecting your reward your dad speaks to you full of praise with the pay off: "well done boy, take this goldpiece for those good deeds", which completes this index. The mechanism in Fable is rather unambiguous: a good deed is repeatedly rewarded with gold, money, goods and compliments, and a bad one with scorn, disapproval and evasive conduct of others. On top of that by the way, once chosen the evil path, you will develop a demonic appearance. Putting all indices on a meso-level with a moral meaning structure side by side, we end up with a game that, on a macro-level, seems to aim almost exclusively on the ethical domain. This videogame is evidently encouraging a stronger awareness of moral and immoral action. I must admit that the rpg-genre also comprises games that display some more subtlety and variety, for instance in choices on race-, skill- and personality traits and, as a result, an extremely wider range of corresponding possibilities in meaning and identity construction. James Paul Gee, to whom I refer afterwards, praises for example the multitude of options in *Arcanum: of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, to which I would add the recently released, and even more advanced *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

Constructing consciousness

Still, in what capacity exactly could playing a game become an artistic experience? Previously I identified the metacognitive nature of the artistic experience: a property that is mainly defined by involvement with consciousness and a signification process. Besides, in its openness it has to encourage multiple interpretation. A videogame mostly concerns action, performance and movement, and we perceive these occurrences mainly as iconic *first order* representation: as a gamer we are mentally and physically engaged in the *actions*, in the *events*. If there somehow would be an

indication of *second order* representation, of involvement with consciousness or a meaning-making process, then its function and effect must be of an entirely different quality. Because, opposed to literature and artfilm, in games we nearly never face preconstructed consciousness, well-defined *fictional minds* of game characters.¹⁸ If ever it would come to involvement with fictional minds, it concerns a consciousness we create ourselves. At least we believe we do. Of course I am well aware of the fact that in most games the possibilities are preprogrammed. The process of meaning-making that we would perceive is - partly - achieved by ourself. The latitude for multiple interpretation depends for a great deal on the choices we make in the game, and on the levels or categories in which we signify aspects of story and play. For example I alternately make an honorable moral decision, then a disgraceful one and so on. Then I examine in what psychological and physical manner my avatar evolves, which on a meta-level enables me to track down the specific game-grammar, and the intentions of the game designer. At the same time however I could get mentally involved in a consciousness which I actually disapprove of.

Signification of this reciprocal process of choices and actions, and the conceivable interpretations of their outcome could become even more complex. Because this dealing with *iconic* second order representations, with mental engagement in a meaning-making process is not the only possible approach. This represented process moreover can refer *symbolically* or *indexically* to certain aspects of reality. Suppose your character becomes a rather conventional prototype of a crook, and his behaviour and verbal expressions (reflecting his inner life) refer symbolically to evilness. At the same time however his actions could point indexically to all kinds of shrewdly constructed theoretical models, developed out of resolving quest problems and puzzles (which are of course mostly your own deeds). The difference between directly perceiving and interpreting symbolic references embedded in literary stories, and *discovering* these references in self constructed fictional minds seems evident to me. Personal ideas and thoughts wield a more intense psychological, cognitive impact than mental material of others.

Constructing identities

It is obvious we can identify meta-cognitive processes in the previous description, and this is by definition self-reflection, which becomes almost visible and tangible here. It brings to mind again Donald's supposition, as he nominates meta-cognition an essential property of art, because it forces us to reflect upon the proces it is created in, and therefore ultimately upon society. Playing (some) videogames also involves playing with meaning and meaning construction, and forces us to look at ourselves. It puts a mirror in front of us, which not only shows our own identity, in a

certain way we can even get to shape it. Some concepts of James Paul Gee I find rather demonstrative and clarifying in this matter. He approaches videogames specifically as entertainment artefacts that possess quite interesting intrinsic capacities for learning, which I consider a pre-eminently cognitive and meta-cognitive activity, but evidently not art. Gee distinguishes three identities within the gamer that exchange knowledge about the regular codes, common in the different semiotic domains which they usually attend: 1. the virtual character in the game: Hero in Fable; 2. the non-virtual, real world-identity of the gamer: Jef Folkerts playing a game, but who is also a lecturer on communication and media, a motorcyclist, an amateur photographer and a guitar player. This particular identity brings along a large and varied amount of expertise about common codes (sign systems) and conventions in these domains; 3. the *projective identity* of the gamer, implying two different meanings of the word *project*: a. to project one's values and desires on the virtual character; b. the project of the making of that character, of a creature that through a certain trajectory in time, defined by the gamers aspirations, gets shaped and moulded to the particular character he wants it to become. According to Gee this desire and strive for identity projection is so much forceful that gamers regularly redo a given fight scene, because they feel they "have let their character down". This 'responsible' conduct seems to occur even in first-person shooters (fps) like Halo, Doom, Quake, Unreal, in which the gamer usually can choose nor influence his avatar.¹⁹ Interesting in Gee's account, and confirmed by personal experience, is the notion that even if we can not construct the 'personality' of our avatar like in rpg's, we still seem to hold mental representations, convictions and intuitions about our alter ego. And even if we are not forced to interpretation, due to the lack of multiple meaning in straightforward fps-stories, we nonetheless seem to construct a personal reality in our imagination. In our private mental space the protagonist very much owns projected personality traits, including a moral and reflexive consciousness.

The concept of *ludic identity formation* from philosopher Jos de Mul adds a somewhat similar, but in one aspect substantially different perspective to the former. Ludic identity plays an essential role in the formation of human identity in real life, similar to the function of narrative identity. The main difference with previously mentioned concepts of identity I distinguish in what De Mul calls the third stage of ludic identity formation. De Mul adopts Paul Ricoeur's *narrative identity* concept, and substitutes Ricoeur's term *mimesis* with the notion *play*. In Play₃ the gamer identifies with the literal and metaphorical space of possibilities the game offers. While gaming he gradually embodies this *infinity of possibilities* as well as the essential key rules, and in this very process the gamer's own identity changes as well. De Mul assumes this spatial consciousness does not think in terms of past

decisions, but in terms of *parallel possibilities*. This seems to match somehow with the multiplicity of artistic interpretations, induced by literature and art. The same is applicable moreover to De Mul's opinion on the tendency to discordance and the absence of closure in videogames. We already identified these traits as fundamental in art and literature, but they become more and more approved and desired in games as well. In his perception games not only structure (our concept of) the world, but (our concept of) ourselves as well. Gaming is therefore a meta-cognitive, meta-reflexive process that, due to our stronger emotional engagement is even more thorough and fundamental than in stories.²⁰ An in my point of view substantial difference however, is the fact that we experience the multiple meaning-construction in literature only mentally, while games actually enable us to *perform* a creative equivalent of this. As an author/director/actor we are allowed the liberty to literally perform extensive experiments on character traits and moral attitudes.

Conclusion

Semiotic analysis of the narrative in the rpg Fable demonstrates we encounter most of the discussed artistic properties in games as well. Just like art and literature, the game as a sign-system refers in specific ways to a reality outside the game, whereas Fable particularly seems to express obvious and straightforward ethical intentions. Because of a general lack of embedded multiple meaning in games, the scripted game story triggers multiple signification to a lesser degree. On the other hand we are able to create interpretable meaning by our own choices and actions. Moreover, due to the way we project personal desires and aspirations on our Hero we seem to engage in second order representation. We inescapably get involved in a construction of consciousness, in a meaning-making process that is partly constructed by ourselves. It regularly triggers meta-reflexive thinking: 'it is just a game, so I carelessly bash my way around. I leave the door ajar for evilness, but... do I really want this personality and all accompanying reactions for my hero, for myself?' All in all it is quite clear that especially rpg's lend themselves rather well for this kind of experiences. Nonetheless even violent first person shooters seem to trigger mental involvement - even though our avatar is not shapable and the stories lack genuine motives for sociocultural meta-reflection.

To summarize I indicate the following aspects as conditional for the artistic dimension of videogames: the degree to which they enable involvement with a consciousness, with a meaning making process in a fictional mind, and the depth and diversity of meta-reflection they provoke about the world and our position in it, especially regarding symbolic and indexical references. It is obvious that furthermore the degree of realism and believability of these references also plays an important role. It is not the

realism of the imagery that I refer to here, but rather to the realism of signification processes, the believability of consciousness, imaginable in a possible world, with its own particular physics and logic. This could be quite dissimilar from our reality: we only have to believe it is true in this fictional world. Videogames that are capable to sublimate those conditions will in my opinion not only produce fascinating gameplay, but likewise a profound and meaningful experience that displays unsuspected similarities with art experiences. Amusement and art seem to merge and assimilate here.

We can reasonably conclude that it is not the *aesthetic* appearance, in the form of the iconical, visual imagery, that defines the artfulness of videogames. In fact, I suspect it is exactly this wrongfully conceived aesthetic preoccupation that causes the most common reason to credit games their assumed artistic qualities. In effect the artfulness of games seems closely related to the various modes in which the game story refers to reality, and prompts meta-reflection. We define the artistic nature by its content and by what it refers to, which we determine partly ourselves. In stead of being forced to meta-reflection by unusual occurrences in literary texts, the equivalent of this in games seems to be that the outcome of our own choices forces us to do so. We continually signify the consequence of a decision after resolving a quest or puzzle, and compare this particular outcome to all other imaginable alternatives. Did we choose well? Does this outcome lead to the imagined course of the story, or to a desired state of our character? From a meta-level we are able to observe ourselves as performer, and in a reciprocal action with ideological or ethical content we choose ourselves the particular issues to reflect on. In this very process we seem to shape ourself in the mirror our avatar is holding out in front of us. It somehow appears to me this is not miles away from what art and literature are aiming at. In the end it will nevertheless always depend on the eagerness and imaginative urge and aptitude of gamers to engage in this kind of artistic, meta-reflexive thinking. Which is admittedly not self-evident. We have to bear in mind we are dealing with videogames here, intended and appreciated in the first place for the enjoyment they provide.

Notes

- ¹ J S Bruner, *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1990, p.1.
- ² S Davies, *Definitions of art*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991.
- ³ J F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, A Report in Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985.
- ⁴ A A v d Braembussche, *Denken over kunst- een inleiding in de kunstfilosofie*. (3rd. ed.) Coutinho, Bussum, 2000.
- ⁵ S E Fish, *Is there a text in this class? - The authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1980.
- ⁶ S Davies, *The philosophy of art*. Blackwell Pub, Malden Mass, 2006, p. 53.
- ⁷ Davies, pp. 52-58.
- ⁸ B van Heusden, *Literaire cultuur - Handboek*. (1st ed.) OUNL / SUN, Heerlen / Nijmegen, 2001.
- ⁹ M Boon and P H Steenhuis, 'Een ballet van zwart en wit' (A ballet of black and white), in *Trouw*, PCM Uitgevers, Amsterdam, 31-01-2009, pp. 30-31.
- ¹⁰ J S Bruner, *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1986.
- ¹¹ S Brice Heath, 'Dynamics of Completion', in *The artful mind - cognitive science and the riddle of human creativity*, M. Turner (ed.), Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, pp. 133-150.
- ¹² M Donald, 'Art and Cognitive Evolution', In *The artful mind - cognitive science and the riddle of human creativity*, M. Turner (ed.), Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, pp. 3-20.
- ¹³ Goodman used the term symbol in a broad and general sense, to indicate representations like letters, words, texts, pictures, diagrams, maps, models and more, and their modes and means of reference. Hence Goodman's symbols are not to be understood in the contemporary semiotic sense. N Goodman, *Languages of art - an approach to a theory of symbols*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, 1968.
- ¹⁴ U Eco, *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1976.
P Copley & L Jansz, *Introducing semiotics*. Icon, Cambridge, 1999. Van Heusden, pp. 27-46.
- ¹⁵ In the twenties of the 20th century Vladimir Propp examined the morphology of the Russian folk tale, which he divided in the smallest possible units, and identified a number of invariable action elements and characters (narratemes). All tales he analysed appeared to have almost the same structure, in which all occurring elements even had their own specific,

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- conventional function. V Propp, *Morphology of the folktale*. (10 ed.) Research Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind, 1958.
- ¹⁶ U Eco, 'Producing Signs', In *On Signs*, M. Blonsky (ed.), Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1985, pp. 176-183.
- ¹⁷ Van Heusden, 2001.
- ¹⁸ A Palmer, *Fictional minds*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2004.
- ¹⁹ J P Gee, *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. (1st Palgrave Macmillan pbk. ed.) Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004.
- ²⁰ J de Mul, 'The game of Life: Narrative and Ludic Identity Formation in Computer Games', In *Handbook of computer game studies*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2005, pp. 251-266.

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