Spring 2017

Remembering virtual worlds: Painting and video games

Nathaniel M. St. Amour
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Game Design Commons, Interactive Arts Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Painting Commons

Remembering Virtual Worlds: Painting and Video Games

Nathaniel St. Amour

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2017

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair:

Lisa Tubach

Committee Members/ Readers:

Mark Rooker

Kathryn Stevens

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to my thesis committee for taking time out of their busy schedules to meet with me. Thank you for reading through this paper so many times to make sure it is the best it can be. I enjoyed talking to you all about a range of topics both inside and outside the scope of art.

My cousin, Jeffrey Palmer, deserves credit for polishing my paper grammatically. Undoubtedly, my extensive use of passive voice may still make him consider me "more passive than Gandhi." Credit goes to Nikita Hernandez for proofing earlier drafts of this paper and helping install my thesis show, everything about this program would have been a little harder without you!

Lastly, I thank JMU for providing me with the opportunities that it has. I will look back fondly on the time I spent here.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Video games create the feeling of great achievement and place the player into a role that turns them into a great hero. These experiences feel significant because they require great time and emotional investment. The monumentality of these experiences, however, are at odds with the transience of the electrical virtual worlds. The medium of oil painting helps overcome the sense of transience because of oil painting's durable permanent way of image making and stillness. Painting's inherent nod to history also creates a dissonance between the newness of the video game medium and the antiquity of painting, a contrast exacerbated by the rapid pace of modern media. I investigate how the feeling of painting and playing video games are related, and what one gains from the other. This paper and body of work seeks to find out what happens when labor-intensive forms of painting are connected to electronic virtual worlds.

When I started the MFA program I was exploring a very general theme of technology and humans. These paintings took the form of people realistically or surrealistically attached to their devices. As I went forward my attention started to narrow to video games specifically. Tech as a subject was too large of a subject to tackle without being specific. As a teenager video games were the most important aspect of my life. I would spend entire summers inside in front of the screen, from morning until night. My first interaction with painting was from video game concept art. Looking back it is silly to think I would make art about anything else. My constant drive to play video games however, came with guilt. Guilt about time I felt was wasted during the 12-hour long gaming sessions I would have whenever time allowed. Making art about video games has allowed me to override that guilt in part because any time spent playing now is put to a good purpose during the creative process. This topic, of course transcends beyond me as an individual as about one billion[1] people play video games across the world. It is my hope that my art will help those gamers come to terms with why they play.

Part 1: Virtual Worlds

Modern blockbuster games are created on the epic scale asking the player to spend hundreds, if not thousands, of hours playing to fully experience its content. Such games require the player to essentially live within the game because they have no

---

[1]   Spilgames. State of Online Gaming Report. Spilgames. The Netherlands. 2013.

definite end. They can be difficult experiences that ask the player to invest a lot of time and mental energy to play the game effectively. Mental resources go into generating virtual wealth, power, prestige, or even creating a world itself. Role-playing games like *The Elder Scrolls* encourage people to spend countless hours exploring a vast world and virtually helping others, all which lead to advancing or leveling the player's character.

These activities also make the player feel emotionally satisfied because he or she has chosen to help others, even if that person is virtual. Life simulation and world-building games like *The Sims* series are designed to lead the player instead to control a household of virtual beings that live and die in a simulacrum of real-life while navigating towards the goal of building a dream home. Both game series possess traits seen across most large modern games, especially aspects such as immersion, and mental engagement. My work is derived from these types of games, otherwise known as infinite games, because they offer intensive experiences that encourage large amounts of play-time. We enjoy these activities because they offer greater stimulus more frequently than our actual lives do.

There are several popular reactions to video games. One is the thought that they are bad because they lead to a sedentary lifestyle, social awkwardness, or a misplacement of effort. Another focuses more on the positive aspects of games as proposed by writers such as Jane McGonigal[2]. She sees games as a source of hope for

---

[2] McGonigal, Jane. "Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World" The Penguin Group, 2011.

the player, potentially fending off depression with frequent feedback, allowing the

player know that the work put into the game is producing change. This change fills the

player with a sense of empowerment, or a feeling of purpose that is often felt to be

lacking in reality. A typical person might go to school or to work for several hours each

day, only to go home, go to sleep, wake up and do it again. Very rarely do we feel a

sense of progress or that our actions make any difference at all. Fulfillment is not as

common in reality as it is in virtually.

The act of play itself is considered by Miguel Sicart to be a whole new level of

being, "a mode of being human."[3] Play in Sicart's manifesto-esque work, *Play Matters,* is

a complicated term, going beyond mere fun. "Play is not necessarily fun, it is

pleasurable, but the pleasure it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment,

happiness or positive traits"[4]. As is the case in many video games, play has the potential

to be stressful; the games I make art about are very rarely entertaining in the way a

blockbuster movie may be. They can be emotionally and mentally draining. Perhaps this

becomes the case when a player cares too much about the game they are playing, when

success within it transcends all other aspects. The pleasure received from such play may

stem from a sense of purpose, or accomplishment that is so prevalent in most video

games.[5]

---

[3] Sicart, M. "Play Matters". Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2014.

[4] Sicart, 3

[5] McGonigal

Video games are so meaningful to some people that they supplant reality all together. There are instances of players marrying their own virtual spouses[6], as well as instances of physical death due to sedentary behavior[7]. Disconnection from the world and lack of exercise aside, what these two instances show is a willingness for many individuals to separate from the world entirely. This separation, however, is not complete. Some games ask the player to make tough moral decisions. In such instances, scholars have found most players tend towards morally good options[8], suggesting that behavior in some games coincides with real-world morality standards. It also suggests that players care and empathize about the virtual world they live in enough to want to prevent any harm from coming to it or its residents.

Video games are an experience so compelling, engaging, and time consuming, that life can pale in comparison. Game experiences have the potential to create meaningful experiences in our lives that are so satisfying that the game can the consume reality entirely. This phenomenon deserves to be talked about with a level of depth otherwise reserved for more established mediums, such as novels, films or paintings. Gamers themselves need to realize that the games they play mean something, and the time they spend playing deserves to be spoken about in a way that does not mitigate its role in our lives.

---

[6] Lah, Kyung. "Tokyo man marries video game character" CNN Dec 17, 2009

[7] Parkin, Simon. "The Sometimes Fatal Attraction of Video Games" The Guardian. Aug 2015

[8] Lange

Part 2: My Work

The overall theme in my work centers around elevating the discussion of virtual worlds. I focus specifically on obscuring the gamer's reality, and through that, re-assessing where importance lies in life. I explore this in many ways. For instance, my avatar portrait "melds" where I overlay an image of my avatar over my own, raising the question of identity. I also explore this idea where my landscape paintings obscure the environment and narrative paintings obscure the origin of a story. In addition, I created a video game that investigates life priorities and how people make choices between the real and virtual. Some work is intentionally more obscure than others; at times it is apparent the subject matter comes from a game, in others it is unclear. In all instances, I am not interested in portraying the negative side of video games, but rather the experience as a whole. This section begins with my journey through this theme, ending with the current direction of my work and then an analysis of common characteristics.

My first foray into making art about the virtual world came in the form of landscape. Immersion, or the sense of being enveloped by a world, leads to the perceptual break down of the real and virtual. It is difficult to tell which elements are

real and which are fabricated. This concept of the real in competition with the virtual comes through in my "*plein-air*" video game landscapes. I use the word "*plein-air*" because I am "outside" within the video game, which means my mind is outside, even if my physical body is not. I have, however, also performed in outdoor spaces (fig 1). In such instances, there is a dissonance between experienced reality and physical reality. This way of working is inherently absurd; why not simply take a screenshot to capture the game far quicker and more accurately? In this case the act of painting itself is necessary precisely because of its prolonged temporal quality. The objective is not to simply make a beautiful picture, but rather to portray the sheer amount of time I have "lived" inside this alternate world. These paintings constitute a comment on the authenticity of virtual worlds. My preference for portraying these worlds over my own renders them as genuine as any landscape painted from real life.

From here I experimented with living in simulated worlds physically, through virtual reality headsets. My first iteration utilized woven electrical cable curled into a tube structure with a smartphone in the end, blocking outside visual information. (fig. 2) It forced the viewer to navigate the world through the camera of the smartphone, creating a disorienting experience due to screen lag. The next iteration of this series spoofed both painting and the headset, with the back of stretchers visibly showing on the exterior of the piece. It functions as a humorous piece that feeds off the dissonance created when you combine high and low technologies. (fig. 3). I wanted the viewer to physically exist within art in the way they might mentally exist within a game. These

projects encourage the viewer to reside in a personal alternative reality. The resulting experience contains a statement similar to that of the surrogate landscape series, only achieved through a different medium. Instead of the painter residing in a different space, it is the viewer.

After the headsets, I focused on the video game avatar as a point of exploration. Where the paintings focus on an obscuring of place, the portraits obscure being. An avatar is the character you interact with a virtual world through. After hours of gameplay and learning of controls it becomes an extension of your body and mind. The game body becomes the tool necessary for interacting with the virtual world in the same way your physical body does for the physical world.

In contrast to the paintings, these pieces work better as photographs because they preserve each game's stylistic markers (fig 4). This gives the viewer an ability to delineate between which aspects of the photos are real and which are not, but not reliably. Areas such as the eyes, that line up nearly perfectly between the two overlaid photos obscure traits of both and create a new being. If the image were painted the two portraits might read as a surrealistic meld. Instead of reading as one being, they read as three: me, my avatar, and a merged entity.

My video game, *Hope for Electric Meaning,* illustrates the inability to prioritize in a more direct manner than most of my other pieces. The game takes place in the bedroom of a gamer. It starts out clean and normal in appearance, but eventually grows

grungier as time advances. Time will advance slowly on its own, but speeds up rapidly whenever the character plays a video game. As each day passes the room becomes more and more in-hospitable until it gets to the point where flies, feces, clothes, and stains fill the room (fig.5). The area becomes an un-welcoming place, but the computer, in contrast, remains an oasis. Butterflies and rainbows literally fly out of the screen. Every time the player accesses the computer, positive messages display, telling the player their accomplishments within the game world. The room acts as a metaphor, alluding to hardcore gamer life in general, at least from an outsider perspective. The fact that the computer is the only form of interaction available to the player represents a one-tracked mentality. The game becomes the only thing worth living for, and the clutter is inconsequential to the gamer's mental well-being. If the clutter is literal the game becomes about the slovenly behavior of gamers, or divorce from the world in the face of perpetual video game praise and stimulus. If you read the clutter as metaphorical, the video game becomes about the player mitigating the impact of a world he has no control over in favor of one he does.

Unlike traditional games, the drawn world does not possess the requisite qualities of an addictive game environment. Gameplay is an almost non-existent element; it opts for the video game medium's ability to tell an interactive story with the player as trigger. The lack of gameplay forces focus onto the narrative elements, in this case the devolution of the room and the various displayed messages.

The final serious direction I moved towards is narrative painting. Initially, this took the form of portrayals of video game idiosyncrasies. Eventually it moved into talking about the role virtual lives play in modern existence. This work is more mysterious because of its obscured origin. Narrative work concerning video game life that is not somewhat didactic becomes, to an un-informed audience, indistinguishable from genre painting. If I am painting *The Sims*, a scene reads as an illustrated or cartoonish domestic environment. If I paint a period-inspired game like *The Elder Scrolls* series, the scene reads as medieval. Only those familiar with said games understand how the painting relates to their own video game experiences. For the un-informed most video game scenes might appear surrealistic, romantic, or possibly historical. I fluctuate between work that has an obvious origin such as in *Family Dinner* (fig. 6), and work that it is obscured such as in *Feast on the Virtual Meat* (fig. 7) to provide a bridge for an audience not aware of current virtual worlds.

The content of the narratives also fluctuates between scenes that are illustrative of video games fulfilling a social need within the gamer, and those that depict what may be an average scene for some gamers. When the gamer's body is present in the scene the painting becomes didactic, but it also becomes about the emotional relation between them and the screen. *Family Dinner* shows a shared meal between the player and his virtual creations in what appears to be a frequent encounter. For the gamer represented, the virtual world is, as is the case with the plein-air landscape series, choosing a virtual family over their own. Such a scene is intruded upon by the viewer,

who feels voyeuristic. When the body is absent as in *Feast on the Virtual Meat*, the scene contains a more direct connection between the viewer's being and the depicted scene.

For pieces like *Feast on the Virtual Meat,* framing is also an important factor. It contributes to the idea of status and privilege that painting brings forth by emphasizing the painting as an object. At the same time, however, it is a false wealth. The frame is 3-D printed, and the surface is ornamented with faux gold leaf. This brings forth a contradictory thread that runs through most of my narrative work. As a gamer, momentous accomplishments can feel shallow at the same time they are immensely fulfilling. As the game ends you are made aware that virtual experiences do not transfer to reality. It may be for this reason that even scenes such as *Family Dinner*, which depict a happy moment on-screen, appear to not imprint on the person in front of it.

Currently, I am interested in painting scenes that depict momentous events for the player that then become commonplace over time. Scenes of great accomplishment such as the slaying of dragons or the saving of the universe lose emotional strength, or become routine over time (fig. 8). In such scenes, and in many past scenes, the players show signs of fatigue from time spent in the virtual world, as evidenced by the bags under their eyes and the discoloration of their skin. This exhaustion is at odds with their persistent smiles, creating a dissonance between their external and internal characteristics. Time spent in the environment is referenced by the stillness of the figures, in some pieces resulting in plant growth over their bodies.

Recurring tropes hint at player accomplishment. One such trope is achievement badges (fig. 9), earned when a player beats a certain portion of the game, and are often rewarded as markers of the player's skill or devotion to the game. Another trope is the trophy item, or reward object (fig. 10). Such an item is often given for successful completion of a quest or other task. It usually takes the form of an item of value within the game, ranging from a powerful weapon, to currency, or even a memento of the quest itself. In some scenes these reward items are in the process of being gifted by virtual characters, and in others they have already been gifted. The non-player characters or "NPCs" that populate virtual worlds are often present in these scenes celebrating the player, contributing to the sense of stature given to the gamer in these environments. The gamers themselves are given a place of importance in the compositions as the largest entity, and often centered. This portrayal emphasizes the notion of the player as an entity the virtual world revolves around, as a being responsible for the success or failure of the world in which he or she is placed.

Many of the figures in these scenes are sexually or racially ambiguous. Each has a blue cast to their skin in order to allude to their physical location as outside of the game, basking in the glow of a computer screen. The blue skin serves a dual purpose, however, of also covering up the race of the human. These figures exist in such a way in order to reference the gamer as a cyborg, and more specifically, as someone who begins to

transcend traditional barriers, as put forth by thinkers such as Donna Haraway[9]. Gamers are an embodiment of this ideal because many games ask the player to assume the role of someone radically different from themselves on a regular basis. This can be a man who is asked to play as a woman or vice versa, a white person asked to play as a black person, or a human asked to play as an alien. The possibilities are limitless.

It should be said that the creation of art about video games is by no means a new concept. It is commonplace, for instance, for a fan to embody their favorite video game character through cosplay, or to create fan art illustration. Such illustrations, however, often emphasize very shallow characteristics of the game. If there is a particularly well-designed character it will often be drawn over and over in a variety of situations or versions. Such attention by the fan-base certainly shows a zealousness for the game, but is always in-line with commercial sensibilities, and almost never attempts to bring in any criticality. I always try to be careful about keeping my art from crossing the line into fandom by, in part, never directly referencing well-known characters. You will never see Mario, Pac-Man, or any other commercial property because any introduction makes the work about them rather than a more generalized experience of gameplay. Icons have the potential to derail any more meaningful discussion about what games mean for the player, and recalls the spectacle of gameplay. It is for this

---

[9] Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, by Donna Haraway, 291-324. Routledge. 1991

reason I also do not pull from the same game over and over, though I do focus on a handful of well-known ones.

Humor manifests itself in my work subtly through various absurd elements tied to the dissonance between traditional materials and ways of working with new high-tech culture. I use humor to open up the piece to greater viewer engagement. In my virtual reality wearables, this takes the form of exposing the low-tech construction of the headset, immediately creating a dissonance between the viewer's idea of a sleek commercial product and the object in front of them. The absurdity is heightened when another person is seen wearing the device. In the landscape series, humor arises from the tension between how *plein-air* painting traditionally operates in reality versus virtuality. Instead of recording the artist's experience in nature, I turn it around and make it function as a recording of the artist's experience in virtual nature. In the narrative pieces absurdity arises with the juxtaposition of an archaic way of working and storytelling combined with the newness of the message. A period piece featuring a figure wearing a t-shirt creates a quirky dissonance. Historically, genre or historical painting has portrayed significant events such as battles, coronations, or religious scenes. In taking a way of working with these historical connotations, I am making fun of these historically important events and conflating them with their video game equivalent. I am also saying that these scenes of triumph are as significant to today's society as the classical scenes were to people of past eras.

Humor aside, the paintings are also a type of memento of time spent in alternative worlds. It can be linked to the tradition of Memento Mori in the way it asks the viewer to remember their own time spent in virtual life, which is often lived a few hours at a time. Historically, Memento Mori calls attention to death specifically for the reason of reminding the viewer that all accumulated wealth will be meaningless after life. The more critical aspects of my narrative work references the notion of video game achievement as being similarly passing. The praise of virtual townspeople or the virtual gold acquired does not translate to reality. The game itself is also inexorably marching to its own obsolescence as it is replaced with a newer version or the hardware breaks down over time.

Open space within my work, as it is present in all my landscapes and even headset pieces, is meant to invite a viewer into the constructed world. Along with formal elements, it encourages the viewer to explore, and linger within the illusionistic world, in the same way video games do. For the critic Dave Hickey this is a characteristic of beauty, which he defines broadly as something that is open and welcoming to the beholder. It is democratic, as opposed to the authoritarian nature of non-beautiful art, in which the viewer is "ignored, disenfranchised, and instructed"[10]. For this reason, it has always been important to keep my work as visually appealing as possible without

---

[10] Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon*. The University of Chicago press. Chicago and London. 2009

sacrificing message. If a work of art is not appealing en masse, than its ability to ever be

widely relevant to society is crippled, no matter how pertinent its message.

In the next section, I will go more in-depth about how painting and its intrinsic

qualities relates to video games.

Part 3: Video Games and Painting

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

essay, states "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one

element: its presence in time and space."[11] The "aura" of a work that has been

reproduced mechanically is reduced with each iteration. For Benjamin the aura seems

to be almost synonymous with an original as possessing a type of fetishistic power.

Perhaps this lies with the inherent limit on mass appeal it possesses. A single painting

can only be viewed by a limited number of people at once, while a mechanically

reproduced art form is unlimited in that regard. Benjamin specifically compares painting

and video in one of his passages. "Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds

---

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968

with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation;

before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame

he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed."[12]

The time-based nature of a film allows only a few seconds for viewers to read the events

happening on the screen, eschewing contemplation on any single image present within

it. For the sake of this paper I am interested in how video games carry on or diverge

from elements of Benjamin's theories.

Video games are, in one sense, similar to other time-based art mediums such as

film in that they contain moving images, but they diverge in other ways. For Benjamin,

the rapid pace of a film prevents contemplation in the moment. In comparison, a game

contains elements of the film's inexorable movement forwards in time, yet also retains

the ability to stop whenever the player needs it to. The option to sit and reflect on what

is happening on the screen is always available, but it is one often not exercised. Even

during moments of pause there are usually moving elements, and the constant pull of

adventure. Video games are arguably also even less capable of possessing any

semblance of an original. Photography and film during the time of Walter Benjamin

would still have produced film and negatives, that although not viewed in such a state,

can be considered originals in some way. Digital photography, in contrast, has no such

negative; at no point is there an original. A computer file is, from the moment of its

birth, a type of copy. Such ruminations do little to change Benjamin's overall conclusions

---

[12] Ibid, 17

on what mechanical reproduction means for art, but it they do suggest that today's current ability to electronically reproduce art enhances the veracity of his claims.

The handmade object is the opposite of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin focuses on it as something that promotes contemplation because of its temporal slowness. Its inability to be mass-producible also separates it, and asks the viewer to fetishize it as a unique object. Given that video games are only able to exist on a screen as a copy of an experience, they are never capable of possessing that which an original can. The painted video game scene has the capacity to rectify this to some extent. It provides virtual characters or experiences with an aura and helps makes their existence seem legitimate by transcending the transience of the screen. In taking the video game scene away from its endemic environment painting asks the player to re-evaluate its meaning for them outside of a ludic context. In other words, a painting cannot be interacted with, it can only be looked at and thought about. Painting encourages the gamer to at most examine their own relation to the game world, and at least promote casual discussion.

In our high paced world, the type of contemplation that Benjamin references may be impossible to achieve through a screen. In taking video game imagery, narrative or quirks off the screen I am hoping to be able to encourage thoughtfulness for the medium. This is not only part of the intent for the viewer, but also for me, the player, as well. During the process of slow image making I am evaluating the meaning video games have for me. This can involve emotional or ontological considerations. Questions like,

"What does this virtual person mean to me?" or "what does the way I acted in a certain narrative say about me?" go through my mind over the course of the time spent painting.

The painted video game image also brings up comparisons to older scenes and images it is connected to stylistically or content-wise. I find myself looking at seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, for the way they pack in so much information about the people within the scene through various objects. The scenes are always both quiet, yet flamboyant, while simultaneously quaint. I cannot help but think "what would contemporary genre painting looked like if the subject was gamer experience?" There would be an obscuring of everyday life with the fantastical, but the fantastical has the capacity to become drudgery in the eyes of a gamer. Things like slaying dragons or building cities become almost tedious for any player over time. Like a modern viewer looking back on seventeenth-century century Dutch genre painting, the same viewer may look upon scenes of everyday gamer life with a similar level of disconnectedness or confusion. What may appear to be a rather trivial scene for a gamer may appear to be something otherworldly for an art viewer.

The process of painting removes the origin of the video game scene; it creates an illusionary surface that can exist anywhere between reality, imagination, or virtuality. In comparison to a screenshot, an allegorical painting based off a video game might appear imaginative or nonsensical, when it is actually coming from an experience. In contrast,

an uninformed gamer might look at a seventeenth-century century genre painting and assume it is concept art for an in-development game.

Like older paintings, contemporary paintings are connected to wealth. The art market exaggerates this connection, but even a small painting authored by an unknown artist is a privileged object. It is more expensive in time and materials to produce a painting instead of a photo. Does the painted image, for this reason, automatically deserve to be considered a status symbol? If a particular video game character or vista is captured in paint does that enhance its stature within the game and within life? At the very least, the act of painting evidences what is important for the individual making it, and all individuals are connected to a larger societal body. Therefore, all paintings represent the care of not just an individual, but the societal mindset they come from.

In alignment of painting with status, importance can be derived from its permanent nature. As far as images go, an oil painting is quite durable; it is not as easily bent, damaged, or faded as other ways of image making. It does not get lost either in the avalanche of media present on the internet. All physical images receive greater attention in a way screen-based images do not. Given the long history of painting you may also expect a well-maintained painting to be around for centuries. When this slowness is coupled with the fast-paced march of modern media it produces the unusual effect of encapsulating a moment that is otherwise highly dynamic. For video games this is especially unique because many of them fall victim to antiquation. Many game sequels, for instance, are revamped more sophisticated versions of the original games,

replacing them fully. Older games also fall victim to outdated graphics or technical antiquation. Some games are not possible to play unless you have access to equipment made around the time the game was released. Antiquation means that only videos, pictures, writing and artwork derived from the game are accessible. The old game in its original intended form of consumption is unavailable in much the same way as a concluded artistic performance is once it has been finished. Another similar barrier is the time and hardware commitment needed to play the game. Any recently released console game requires several hundred dollars in equipment to run as well as ample free time to complete. Such a barrier to entry prevents video games from being as widely approachable as a movie, especially to an older audience. Because of this, secondary artifacts, such as artwork, photos, or videos derived from the game, become the only material through which many audiences are able to interact with the work.

In all of my paintings I strive to create a luxurious surface. The goal is to inspire the beholder to exist within the seductiveness of the vast illusionistic space as they might within a video game. This type of working references current digital ways of painting, which are often used as the initial step in the creation of virtual worlds. Video games are built off of painting directly in this way. They are also built indirectly in the way many of them are inspired from pre-modern aesthetics.

The very act of painting itself can be connected to playing games. One of the central thoughts present in Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken*, is the push for gamification of everyday life. The traits that make a game addicting, engaging, and

worth playing can also be found in skill-based ways of working, such as figurative painting and drawing.

One such trait tying painting and playing is the presence of "unnecessary obstacles," which contain a clear goal, arbitrary restrictions, and instant feedback.[13] If we use Pac-Man as an example, the clear goal is to eat all the circles on a level, the arbitrary restriction is that you are walled off and only have a few lives, and the instant feedback is obvious; you win or you die. Skill-based ways of making art contain these traits. In representational painting, the clear goal would be to make the painting look like a subject, or like the image you have in your head. The arbitrary restriction is the use of only paint to make that image when there are much easier and faster ways of creating it. Instant feedback, can be obvious; if you are painting *alla-prima*, that is all at once, you know immediately if the brushstroke you just made is bringing you closer to your goal.

Another trait is "Fiero", an Italian word used in game theory that means "pride"; it is used to describe the feeling of triumphing over adversity. In a game the feeling of pride might arise when you beat a particularly challenging level.[14] This trait is present in painting when you reach the clear goal you have set for yourself without falling short. It

---

[13] McGonigal, 39

[14] McGonigal, 33

happens when you spend hours attempting to render a particularly difficult aspect of your work and finally manage to capture it.

"Flow" is a heightened mental state you feel when you are fully engaged in an activity. The psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi first observed this feeling as, "the satisfying, exhilarating feeling of creative accomplishment and heightened functioning."[15] Colloquially, you might think of it as "being in the zone." A goal, an obstacle, increasing challenge, and voluntary participation, are all aspects that trigger flow.[16] In video games, these are built into the game. For painting, increasing challenge is not built in, but rather determined by the artist. In order to infuse "flow" in art, you must always produce on the edge of your abilities. Failure is a part of this. Failure in games does not make you want to quit, but rather try again, making "fiero" easier to achieve when we finally overcome failure. It is the same with art. Raph Koster, in his book "*A Theory of Fun for Game Design* ", suggests failure is one of the most important factors in making a game engaging. Many players will continue to play until they have mastered the game, in the words of Koster, "being really good at something is less fun than being *not quite good enough – yet.*"[17] In many skill-based art forms it can be obvious when you failed to achieve an effect you were aiming for. If the hair looks like

---

[15] Csikszentmihályi, Mihály. "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games." San Francisco. Jossey-Bass. 1975. xiii.

[16] McGonigal, 41

[17] Koster, Raph. A Theory of Fun for Game Design (Phoenix: Paraglyph Press, 2004, 8-9

fur, or if the eyes are un-intentionally lopsided, this is a challenge to keep working until failure is overcome for the gamer artist.

Art making in general is even considered to have evolved from play, or at the very least is akin to it. Ellen Dissanayake in her "A Hypothesis of the Evolution of Art from Play,"[18] links several ontological aspects of play with those of art. One point of similarity is they are both self-rewarding and pleasurable, particularly in the overcoming of self-imposed difficulties, which leads to a sense of mastery over the world. Another is their reliance on metaphor or imagination. Play is about exploration; In art that can be exploration of self, aesthetic, or idea. In video games this takes the form of exploration of the game world.

The aspects mentioned above are inherent qualities of any labor-intensive figurative work produced in the twenty-first century. It is what is a desire for contemplation on a subject on behalf of the painter, and to a lesser extent, the viewer. Painting is intrinsically tied to the past and an idea of permanence, which is at direct odds with the limited age of the video game medium, and its transient nature. Lastly, painting is linked, possibly along with other skill-based art forms, to the very act of playing video games by activating similar states of being.

---

[18] Dissanayake

Conclusion

Virtual worlds in our time are immersive and engaging. They encourage us to reside in a place that promises great fulfillment. We spend countless hours saving the world or building an ideal only to walk away when the game is done. The experience can feel transient, yet these experiences effect the real world economically, socially, emotionally and physically, both individually and on a macro level. The transient nature of video games, however, mitigates their perceived impact upon our lives. Painting, as a static and historic method of creating a virtual world provides an opportunity to counteract the fleeting nature of electronic worlds. The painting becomes an artifact of play. A memento, simultaneously critiquing the place of games in our lives, while hopefully asking questions about what they mean to the viewer. Painting also opens video game worlds, and experiences, up to a wider audience that is not familiar with them.

Overall my work is about facilitating more discussion about video games. I am encouraging everyone to connect with each other about these intense, often secluded, experiences in which we spend so much time engaged.

Figures

Fig.1) Plein-air painting performance, 2015

Fig.2) *Virtual Reality Headset 1,* 2015

Fig. 3) *Virtual Reality Headset 2,* 2016

Fig. 4) *Portrait Meld XII*, digital photo, 2016

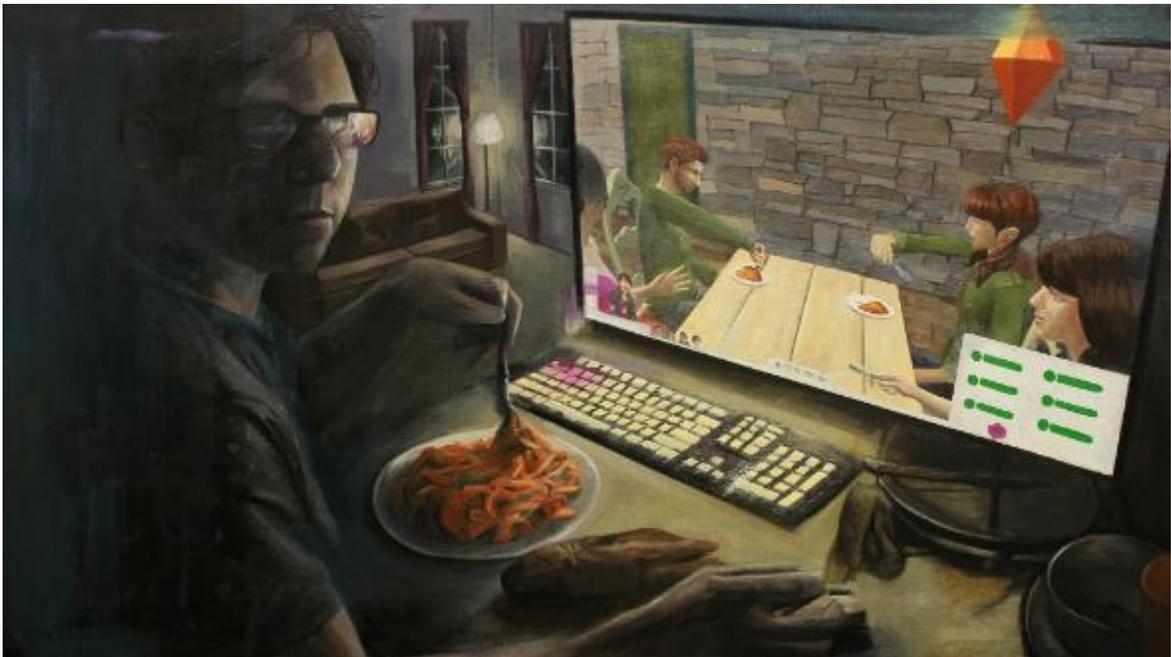Fig. 5) Screenshot from *Hope For Electric Meaning*, Video Game, 2017

Fig. 6) *Family Dinner*, Oil on canvas, 2016

Fig. 7) *Feast on the Digital Meat,* oil on panel, 3d printed frame, 2016

Fig. 8) *You Saved the Village 4 Times!,* Oil on canvas, 2017

Fig. 9) *You Explored 18 Worlds!,* oil on panel, 2017

Fig. 10) *Your Room Is Filled With Trophies!,* oil on canvas, 2017

Bibliography

Bardzell,S., J. Bardzell, T. Pace, and K. Reed. "Blissfully Productive: Grouping and Cooperation in World of Warcraft Instance Runs." In Proceedings of the 2008 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, San Diego, November 8–12, 2008 (New York: ACM, 2008), 357–60.

Berger, John, "Ways of Seeing". Penguin Books. London, England. 1973.

Crick, Timothy. "The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming". Games and Culture. 2011.

Csikszentmihályi, Mihály. "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games." San Francisco. Jossey-Bass. 1975

Debord, Guy. The society of the spectacle. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

Dissanayake, Ellen. "A Hypothesis of the Evolution of Art from Play". Leonardo, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer, 1974). The MIT Press. pp. 211-217. 1974.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, by Donna Haraway, 291-324. Routledge. 1991

Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon*. The University of Chicago press. Chicago and London. 2009

Keogh, Brendan. "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games". Jouranl of Games Criticism. Volume I, Issue I.

Koster, Raph. A Theory of Fun for Game Design (Phoenix: Paraglyph Press, 2004, 8-9

Lah, Kyung. "Tokyo man marries video game character" CNN Dec 17, 2009

Lange, Amanda. '"Just Gonna Be Nice": How Players Engage With Moral Choice Systems'. Journal of Games Criticism, Jan 2014.

McGonigal, Jane. "Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World" The Penguin Group, 2011.

Papale, Luca. "Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships between Player and Avatar". Journal of Games Criticism. Volume I, Issue 2, 2014.

Parkin, Simon. "The Sometimes Fatal Attraction of Video Games" The Guardian. Aug 2015.

Sicart, M. "Play Matters". Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2014.

Spilgames. State of Online Gaming Report. Spilgames. The Netherlands. 2013.

Turkle, Sherry. "Computers and the Human Spirit". Ars Electronica, 2004.

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.