How can video games transcend craftsmanship and become art?

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Introduction

"I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art."

- Roger Ebert, film critic

2009 was the year that saw the UK video game industry overtake cinema, recorded music and DVD sales in revenue (Chatfield, 2009). Platforms such as the Nintendo Wii and free-to-play titles on social networking websites like Facebook have seen the appeal of video gaming stretch beyond its perceived core fan base of teenage boys and young men. The reach and allure of the medium is unquestionable, but it has yet to prove itself as a channel for serious expression; no video game created thusfar is comparable to the greatest works of art in other media.

The viability of video gaming as a medium for art continues to be fiercely debated. It is not uncommon for a failed attempt to be written off as it is of course 'just a game', its chief purposes being to occupy and amuse. However an ever-growing contingent of players, critics and developers are expressing their belief that the

video game can be just as significant as any other work of art, and can often be so with no impact upon its capacity to entertain.

It is the purpose of this dissertation to investigate the viability of this concept, initially by forming a working definition of art to direct the course of the discussion. In addition to this definition, certain distinctions will be made; firstly that between art and craftsmanship, secondly between the fields of Narratology and Ludolugy, and finally between "blockbuster" video games, which focus on entertainment, and "arthouse" video games, which focus on expression. Evidence will be gathered of developmental issues in common with emerging forms of the past, significantly the tendency to emulate those forms which have come before, to demonstrate the gradual maturation and acceptance of new media. This will be focused further by emphasis and exploration of the peculiar obstacles video gaming faces, and must overcome, as highlighted by Jonathan Blow. Finally, case studies will demonstrate the conflicted nature of contemporary game design with reference to the aforementioned points.

1. Art and Craftsmanship

Art

Art is a difficult term to define, being subjective for the most part. It is outwith the remit of this dissertation to establish a definition all can agree upon, nevertheless a definition was first needed. Roger Scruton states that "at any time between 1750 and 1930, if you had asked educated people to describe the aim of poetry, art or music they would have replied 'beauty'", a consensus that changed with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917. Intended to mock the art world, it was misinterpreted as a sign that anything can be art (Why Beauty Matters, 2009).

In the 21st century the label of 'art' need not be approved by a critic, it can be applied by either artist or spectator. Art is simply any work which someone claims is art, "it's then the viewer's job to determine whether it's valuable art or not" (Gaynor, 2009). Beyond being simply labelled as such, art must allow people "to see the world in which they are living in a way that gives it more meaning" (Craig-Martin, Why Beauty Matters, 2009). Great art provokes thought on the nature of our existence. It is often beautiful, but in this age beauty need no longer be a fundamental part of the experience. Although the playing field has been levelled somewhat in the last century, skill and perhaps even mastery of craft are still required to create the most significant art. Furthermore, ideally its purpose is not the pursuit of political or financial advancement (McGovern, 2009) but something more profound. Accordingly, everything written hereafter was done so with the following definition of art in mind:

Art is the application of skill and creativity to express a message, meaning, feeling

etc, with concerns beyond aesthetics, financial or political achievement.

This is by no means a conclusive explanation of what art is. Instead it is a tool, a fundamental basis for identifying art for the purposes of this paper.

The Art of Games

The topic of games **as** art should not be confused with the art **of** games. Predominantly conceptual illustrations and sketches produced during the planning of, for example, a character's appearance, they are created by in-house artists during the design phase of video game production. When a concept has been approved it is passed on to the members of the team responsible for the digital fabrication of the in-game characters, who would use the 'art' as reference material. These images are more often than not subsequently released to the public digitally, or in exhibitions or companion publications.

To illustrate, in 1999 SoftBank Publishing released *The Art of Metal Gear Solid*, a book of artwork by concept artist Yōji Shinkawa for Konami's *Metal Gear Solid*. Produced in a numbered collector's volume, it was split into two sections. The first contained publicity illustrations for advertising, magazines and goods, such as postcards given as an incentive to those who ordered a copy of the game before its release. The second section contained detailed sketches of characters, vehicles and environments, examples of cutscene storyboards and directions for visual effects.

The sketches of the titular "Metal Gear", a walking tank capable of launching nuclear weapons, are noteworthy for their demonstration of the iterative development process. For example, in one development sketch (Fig. 1.2.1.) the vehicle is displayed with the continuous tracks associated with a traditional tank, in place of the feet with which it was equipped in its final incarnation. The sketches where the tank most closely resembles its final in-game appearance include magnified details of items, such as the main gun and the driver's cockpit, for the reference of the three-dimensional artists who transfer it from page to game.
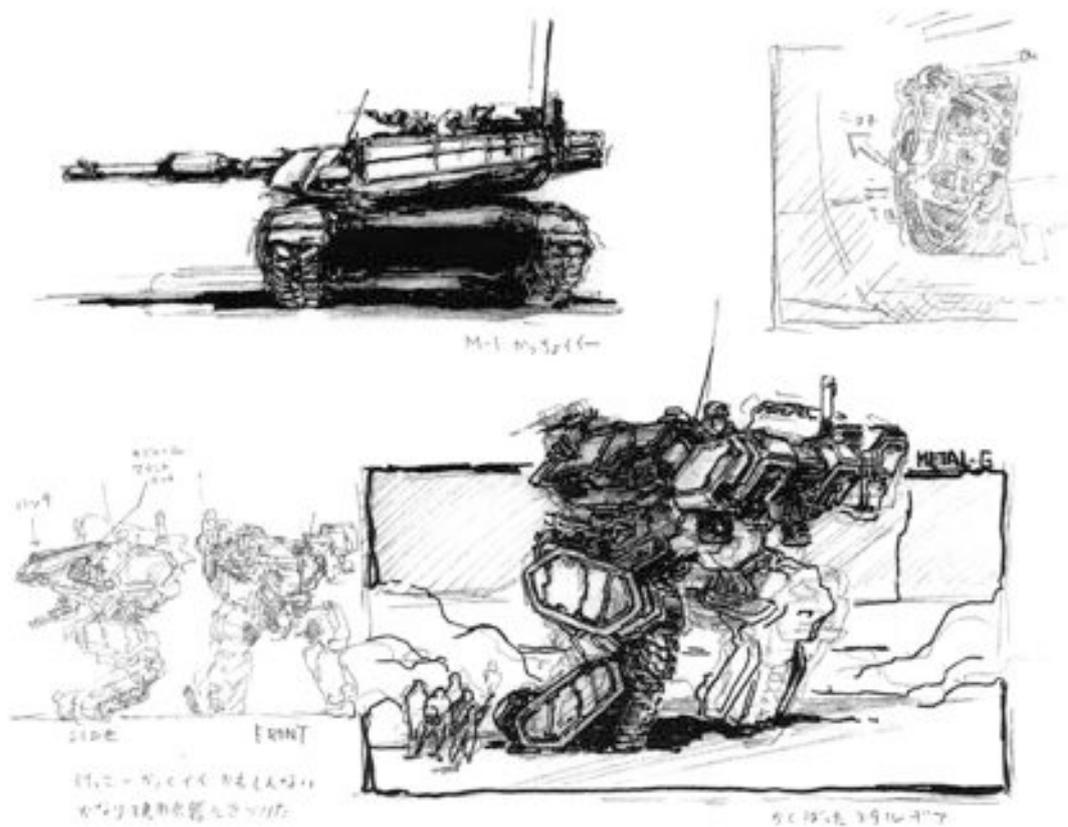
Fig. 1.2.1. This development sketch of the walking tank "Metal Gear Rex" shows continuous tracks which were not included in the final game.

Craftsmanship

The difference between art and craftsmanship must also be stressed. These concept illustrations and sketches may often have a high degree of craftsmanship, and with little reference material they may come primarily from the imagination. Although they aim to successfully communicate both thematic guidance and specifics regarding the subject matter, their overall purpose is purely informational, there is no commentary or expression to be interpreted (Fig. 1.3.1.). By the definition set out beforehand this is not art, no matter how beautiful or skilled the execution.

Fig. 1.3.1. This character sketch is undoubtedly skilful, but its purpose is purely informational.

Similarly, visual style can be mistaken for art. Thousands of hours are spent refining photorealistic visuals (Fig. 1.3.3.), and conversely representing the in-game world in an abstracted manner (Fig. 1.3.2.) can lead to confusion. Crafting either is no mean feat, and visual style can of course be manipulated to artistic ends, but this alone is not enough to qualify as art.

Fig. 1.3.2. Steph Thirion's *Eliss* for Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch has an abstract visual style which could be mistaken for art.

Fig. 1.3.3. Crytek's *Crysis* for Microsoft Windows is well known for it superbly realistic visuals.

2. Parallels in Other Media

It is no new phenomenon to see a young medium struggling to discover its unique strengths or widespread acceptance, particularly when it comes to new forms of art and expression. For video gaming, parallels can be drawn with the early days of cinema, the Impressionist movement, digital comics and even rock and roll music.

Video gaming is perhaps closest in essence to the medium of cinema. Cinema, too, was once considered to be wholly a source of mass entertainment. It was not until the 1950's, some six decades after the emergence of moving film, that public recognition of the medium as an artform came to be, and it would be another decade still before this acceptance predominated. A change came about as the industry recognised that the consumer would no longer accept the "superficial product that was a staple of the past" and films began to be marketed by their artistic strengths and not their entertainment value. The statement that films can be art seems now to be an "astoundingly simple fact" (Solomon, 1972).

Both video gaming and cinema are predominantly visual and in fact share many of the same mechanical and narratological devices, for example camera movement and dénouement. Their methods of distribution are similar; in this day and age video games, feature films and television series are packaged and presented in the same way, and sold alongside each other in stores. It is not surprising then that many games can be perceived as (or are even knowingly created to be) interactive films.

Cinema too went through a phase of emulating the forms which came before it, specifically theatre; "early cinema took over many features of the stage quite literally" (Brewster & Jacobs, 1997). It is understandable that those working in a new medium will be uncertain of its strengths, and seek to use it for purposes for which is not necessarily fit. This was certainly true of cinema, and it suffered for it, only as technology advanced could it be properly distinguished from theatre (Brewster & Jacobs, 1997). The conflicts which arise from such matters are discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

If the evolution and perception of video games follows a similar timescale to that of cinema, beginning with the emergence of commercial consoles in the late sixties and early seventies, another quarter of a century may pass before we see widespread acceptance of the idea. Cinema also saw significant technological advancement in the intervening years, most obviously the introduction of colour film. Video Gaming is perhaps moving at a pace even more rapid thanks to regular iterations of platforms and control systems (the Sony Playstation has seen three such major iterations in fifteen years, three more minor ones, and new motion sensing control schemes in development for the current platform). Considering the nature of those first games as manipulations of cathode ray tubes or oscilloscopes, and modern computer graphics which are approaching photo-realism, the video games of 2035 may be unrecognisable to us today. It remains to be seen how this almost constant state of flux will affect the developing perception of video gaming in the minds of the public.

When discussing early attempts at creating comics on the personal computer, Scott McCloud describes similar confusion over identity when moving to the new platform. The "shape" of the old technology, literally the shape and layout of the comic book page, was mistaken for the "form" of the new technology in what he calls "a classic McLuhanesque mistake", referring to esteemed media scholar Marshall McLuhan. The first digital comics were laid out in an identical fashion to print comics, only with sound, motion and interactivity dropped in on top, breaking the temporal continuity that is part of the power of comics. What revolutionised the concept was the realisation that the computer monitor need not be a frame in which single pages are viewed consecutively, it in fact had the potential to be a window onto an infinite scrolling canvas. This canvas can be made larger or smaller, navigated in two or even three dimensions, opening up whole new realms of possibility for the medium.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' acclaimed 1986 comic book series Watchmen is said to have legitimised the genre (Parkin, 2009). The work of two experienced artists proved that the medium itself was no less capable of delivering artistically than any other. In an interview with Parkin, Gibbons points out that although its roots are in children's entertainment, as the audience matured the output of the industry they bought into followed suit (Gibbons, 2009). Despite continual reassertion of its potency with works from Joe Sacco, Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi and many others, the work of mainstream publishers is still recognised to be derivative to a large extent (Burch, 2009). If the publication of Watchmen is assumed to be the dawning of a new era in comics, the medium as a whole has enjoyed a quarter of a century as a 'credible' medium. Yet despite this it is clear that

even after so many years, works which aspire to be more than simply entertaining are a relatively niche market. This seems to mirror the situation in video games today somewhat. A small community of independent developers on the fringes of the market continue to experiment, while large studios sustain production of principally uninventive titles.

Gibbons makes note of the passion some people in their sixties and seventies still have for the music of their youth - The Beatles or the Rolling Stones - "acts that were culturally looked down upon when they were teenagers." This is by no means a new occurrence. Perhaps the most notable example is the Impressionist movement of the late 19th century. In Paris the path to recognition was long and convoluted, the artist had to receive the sanction of authorities like the Academy of Fine arts to be taken seriously. Thus the Impressionists had to band together as their radical style was deemed inferior by the powers that be (Taylor, J.R., 1993).

Evidently all new media struggle to define their specialties and justify their existence. Consequently years of being looked down upon may need to be endured before acceptance into mainstream culture is possible, and this is true of gaming today. The issue fades as young adopters grow older, their horizons broaden and they expect more of their art. It takes time for technology and perspectives to mature, and thus empower new forms of expression.

3. Ludology and Narratology

Those who argue the case of video games often fall into one of two schools of thought regarding the nature of art in the medium; Ludology or Narratology. The two are sometimes seen to be mutually exclusive.

In video games the real 'art' as defined is found in the more subjective interpretation of the mechanics, systems and simulation created and implemented by the developer (Schubert, 2009). Mechanics and systems are common to all forms of games, not limited to video games. Traditional board games such as *Reversi* (better known by its trade name of *Othello*) use a grid system to constrain and standardise placement of pieces within the 'world' of the game. A turn based system upholds fairness by constraining the number of moves a player can make. The act of placing a piece on the board is a mechanic which in turn induces another system, in this case defining which opposing pieces may be captured. The study of these aspects is known as Ludology and is correspondingly not limited to video games (Frasca, 1999).

Where video games differ from board games is in simulation, perhaps its most striking feature. In the virtual world of a video game it is possible to produce a convincing three-dimensional recreation of a human being, which can be controlled by the player. Should the player bump into a table whilst moving around within the game world, the effects of momentum, friction and gravity may be simulated,

causing an item placed on the table to topple and fall to the ground. The freedom to abstract visual style as mentioned previously extends into the simulation; the effects of gravity can be amplified, diminished or altogether ignored.

The study of Narratology focuses on aspects which are shared with other traditional storytelling media, like character and setting (Frasca, 1999) and the innovation possible with such devices in an interactive environment (the inherent difficulties in the management of interactive narrative are discussed in more detail in Interactivity vs. Pre-baked Delivery, chapter 5). However, if art is only to be found in the areas over which creators of traditional media can boast a mastery, video gaming is reduced to "a redundant and less-competent medium" (Blow, 2009). To flourish, the aspects unique to this domain must be discovered and harnessed.

For this reason, this dissertation pursues a more 'Ludic' approach to the study of art in video games.

4. Blockbuster and Arthouse

For the purposes of clarification the terms "blockbuster" and "arthouse" are borrowed from cinema to make the distinction between two types of video games I believe coexist in the medium. These classifications are polar opposites on a large spectrum, and are doubtlessly imprecise, but serve to illustrate the point.

The blockbuster's gameplay focuses on entertainment over expression, is the product of a large development team from an established studio (with a management hierarchy, shareholders etc.) and is designed to appeal to a large portion of the current market - profit is valued above innovation.

Conversely the gameplay of the arthouse video game focuses on expression over entertainment, is created by a relatively small, independent team (perhaps with one or a handful of figureheads pursuing a personal vision) and will initially appeal to a niche market. Neither is inherently good or bad, but as with cinema each has its audience.

5. Blow's Fundamental Conflicts

Jonathan Blow is an independent video game developer and vocal advocate for the viability of video gaming as a medium for art. He is perhaps best known for his successful 2008 video game *Braid*, which he believes to be a piece of art (Blow, 2009). In his lecture at the Montreal International Game Summit in 2008 he discussed three common "fundamental conflicts" identified in contemporary game design which must be overcome for the medium to mature.

Story Meaning vs. Dynamic Meaning

Blow's first conflict underlines the common disconnection between story and gameplay. In other media messages are expressed through narrative, but the video game alone has the unique ability to communicate with behaviour, often in tandem with "perceptual primitives" (sounds, shapes, colours etc.) (Blow, 2008). Despite this, video games often strive to impart messages through a story which is at odds with game behaviour. Blow uses 2K's well received *BioShock* to illustrate his point. In *BioShock* the player can choose to rescue or kill young girls known as Little Sisters. By choosing the latter option, "harvesting", the player receives resources called ADAM, which can be spent to purchase upgrades which increase potency in battle, increasing odds of survival. Plot and dialogue make much of the morality in these decisions, however, should the player instead decide to rescue all of the Little Sisters, their benevolent guardian will reward the player with a near equal amount

of ADAM. Despite a delay, the ultimate outcome is the same, suggesting that either route is equally appropriate. The gameplay and plot are delivering different messages, impairing the overall meaning the writers wanted to impart.

In UK studio Lionhead's 2008 adventure game *Fable II*, the player is accompanied everywhere in the world of Albion by his or her dog. More than a mere accessory, the dog will find buried treasure and useful items in the world and defend its master from attackers. As the player progresses their appearance changes in accordance with their actions, an 'evil' character will ultimately spout horns, a 'good' character will earn a golden halo. In keeping with the overtones of good versus evil, the dog will also begin to show signs which echo its master's alignment, in appearance and demeanour.

In the final stages of the game this loyal companion sacrifices itself to save its owner, taking a bullet from Lord Lucien, *Fable II*'s protagonist. After Lucien's subsequent defeat, the player is offered three choices which will greatly impact their moral stance and standing in the minds of the people of Albion. First, resurrect the thousands of innocent people killed in Lucien's quest to rebuild the Spire, an enormous tower in the sea which grants one person colossal power. Second, resurrect the player's family: their dog, spouse(s) and children (if any) and sister, Rose. Third, simply receive a massive amount of money.

The first and last options are clearly typical good and evil choices. In many games which boast complex morality systems the available paths boil down to these two black and white options. The additional, second option presents a genuine

conundrum to the player. Whether good or evil the character may have formed an emotional bond with their family; to opt for their resurrection is both a selfish and selfless act. In my experience, having role-played a 'good' character throughout the game I had to stop and consider what to do. Finally, I decided to sacrifice the multitude of innocents for the second option, but not for the sake of my family - for my dog. Of course *Fable II* is 'just a game', so those thousands of lives had little significance, all I had to endure was some heckling from townspeople upon my return. I saved my dog because he helped me find buried treasure. I knew there was still treasure in the world I had not found, and I didn't know if it was possible to do so in his absence, within the constraints of the game. He had a use which I was not willing to give up.

Here, in contrast with *BioShock*'s Littler Sisters, game behaviour somewhat echoes the direction of the plot and underlying message. The player's 'love' for their dog is not restricted to a plot device, we are not simply told that we love the dog. The dog's mechanics unlock rewards which make it a cherished part of the player's in-game life. Lionhead force the player to value the dog as an asset, tying gameplay into narrative, steering clear of the uncanny gap which *BioShock* and other games have suffered from.

Challenge vs. Progression

The second conflict addresses the use of challenge as a friction force which prevents the plot from unravelling. In mainstream titles gameplay often simply fills the gaps between 'cut-scenes' as a method of plot progression, and indeed can be used to artificially lengthen a game reckoned to be too short. Cut-scenes are predetermined sections of a game which severely limit or completely remove control from the player, forcing them to watch a cinematic set-piece as a method of plot exposition. Aside from the "structurally unsound" inclusion of such a limiting mechanic, the level of challenge between each of these events can seriously impact the reception of the game (Blow, 2008). Casual players may not have the time or skill to see a game through to completion due to its difficulty, a fact to which Dara Ó Briain attests in Charlie Brooker's Gameswipe, and equally a game which is unchallenging leads quickly to tedium (2008). Ó Briain goes on to liken the experience to a book which refuses to allow the reader to progress to the following chapter until they have correctly answered a questionnaire on what they have just finished reading. In effect, this is a step behind an interactive film, which would in theory allow the player to participate directly in the shaping of the narrative. It is simply a film which requires the observer to jump through hoops before being rewarded with the next act.

Hideo Kojima's long-running Metal Gear series has seen titles released on multiple platforms in its near twenty year existence. For the most part the games centre around the character codenamed Solid Snake (often referred to simply as Snake) and his "father" Big Boss (from whom he was cloned). Over its lifespan it has come

to be known for its convoluted plot, cinematic approach to storytelling and lengthy cutscenes. The supposedly ultimate episode of the series, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, was released in 2008 for Sony's Playstation 3 and epitomises each of these characteristics. Plot is unveiled purely through the use of cut-scenes and conversations held between Snake and other characters via his Codec (a personal communication device) and there is little or no exposition between each of these set pieces. Furthermore, a few examples of these cutscenes approach ninety minutes in length.

Interactivity vs. Pre-baked Delivery

Blow's final conflict is between interactivity and pre-baked delivery. A preordained plot cannot be adhered to perfectly because of the player choice at the core of the medium, yet no human drama manager can hope to manage this trait to provide an equivalent experience. The player, the "agent of chaos", sabotages delivery, rendering an effective narrative comparable to those of literature or cinema unfeasible because where they came from and what they have done is unknown (Gaynor, 2008). As "interactivity gives too much control away to compete with master storycrafters" (Schubert, 2009) the marriage of this format to an engaging plot can be achieved only through the use of artificial intelligence beyond the capacity of modern technology (Crawford, 1982).

In 1982 Chris Crawford examined the differences between a story, "a collection of facts in time sequenced order", and a game, "a branching tree of sequences" that allow the player to create their own story through their choices at these branches.

> *"Indeed, the player expects to play the game many times, trying different strategies each time. A story is meant to be experienced once; its representational value decreases with subsequent retellings because it presents no new information."*

He concedes that although a game may offer longevity through multiple paths, it cannot rival the intricacy of the single story - although he does not view this as a weakness, only a contrast. Ultimately he states that the intricacy of a story and the branching paths of a game can only be married through the use of artificial

intelligence beyond the reach of today's technology. Crawford is not alone in believing that "interactivity gives too much control away to compete with master storycrafters" (Schubert, 2009).

Talking on Charlie Brooker's Gameswipe on BBC4, screenwriter Graham Linehan presents his theory that "a lot of writers, not only in games but also in films, have stopped reading books - they're just watching films," a notion shared with Blow (2008). He gives as an example *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, highlighting similarities between the game and the 1983 crime film Scarface, and asserting that only research can imbue the "texture and depth" necessary to construct a credible experience. He cites the survival horror game Left 4 Dead, in which four survivors of a pandemic fight their way out of a city of humans infected with a virus which transforms them into cannibalistic zombies. The developers of the game researched the Spanish influenza to achieve "the feeling of a society that's broken down", and although the event is not mentioned explicitly in the script this research was used to augment their understanding of such situations in order to more convincingly model their fictional pandemic (Charlie Brooker's Gameswipe, 2009).

6. Case Studies

The two titles examined in this chapter were chosen to demonstrate the degrees of difference between the hypothetical extremes of blockbuster and arthouse video games; *Gears of War* and *Braid*, respectively. In each can be found symptoms of (and answers to) the conflicts discussed in the previous chapters.

Both titles were released for Microsoft's Xbox 360 home video game console, published by Microsoft Game Studios, performed well successfully (albeit to different degrees) and were well received by critics.

Critical reception was gauged by the "Metascore" found at Metacritic.com, a weighted average of percentages calculated from the review scores of multiple respected journalism sources. Sales statistics were sourced from VGChartz.com, which has been quoted by organisations such as the BBC and the Guardian.

Gears of War

Gears of War was released in 2006 exclusively for Microsoft's Xbox 360 games console, developed by Epic Games and published by Microsoft Game Studios.

The game takes the form of a third person shooter, an action orientated title which the player experiences from a viewpoint 'camera' set slightly behind and above the character they control, allowing for reasonable spacial awareness in the three-dimensional game world. For the most part *Gears of War* is played by killing enemies with a variety of weaponry and navigating a linear path to the conclusion of each level. To survive it is usually essential to utilise a cover system which allows the player to hide behind an object (such as a car or concrete block) emerging only to attack enemies who will make similar use of cover. Occasional set pieces allow for cover to be moved, created or destroyed. Options for eliminating enemies are numerous, violence and gore are commonplace, and most weapons can be used in more than one way. The default player weapon is named the Lancer; in addition to its primary use as a rifle it is equipped with a "chainsaw bayonet" which can be used in close quarters to bloodily dismember enemies. Grenades can be thrown or attached directly to opponents to ensure a kill. Those who are not killed outright will attempt to crawl away, at which point they can be revived by their teammates or dispatched by crushing the skull with a stamp.

Fig. 6.1.1. Marcus fires his Lancer rifle from behind a concrete block, which provides cover.
The red circle in the top right corner indicates a teammate who is in need of revival.

In "Campaign" mode the player follows a set story, broken into five acts, each of which is divided again into multiple chapters. *Gears of War* is set on the ravaged world of Sera, on which a war for survival is taking place between humanity, led by the Coalition of Ordered Governments (COG), and the Locust Horde, a mysterious race who live in huge underground tunnel networks. Plot is mainly unveiled through regular cinematic cutscenes where control is taken from the player, but is also divulged using other techniques such as radio chatter between the player character and his superiors. The Locust revealed themselves and declared war on humanity fourteen years before the start of the game on a date referred to as "Emergence Day". Taking the role of Marcus Fenix, the player is released from prison by his friend Dominic Santiago (Dom), who can optionally be controlled by a second player. Together with a handful of other COG soldiers they are designated Delta Squad, their assignment to locate and deploy equipment to chart the underground dwellings of the Locust, then destroy them at their source, ending the

war. Somewhat predictably everything does not go as first planned, but Delta Squad recover a more complete map of the Locust's underground network from the home of Marcus' deceased father, Major Adam Fenix. With this data the squad deliver a second device into the network following a climactic battle with the game's primary antagonist General RAAM. In the closing scenes of the game an unidentified female voice suggests that their victory is nowhere near as complete as they believe, setting the scene for a sequel which was released in 2008.

In addition to Campaign there is a multiplayer mode where up to eight human-controlled players (connected via the internet or a local network) can compete in smaller, confined levels. Several game types are available, such as four-versus-four team death matches where the first team to score a set number of kills wins, and control focused matches where the goal is to defend a set point on the map from the opposing team for a set time. In multiplayer one team play as humans, the other as Locust, with each individual given a choice of appearance based on characters and generic units from Campaign mode. The human units are not immune to the tactics described previously, therefore it is possible for the player to witness their own brutal end. If the player is killed they 're-spawn' in the level after a set time with full health and full ammunition. This mode adds longetivity to the game by introducing the competitive element and an experience which is not finite like the Campaign, but can vary greatly depending on the nature of the players one is pitched against.

Garnering "universal acclaim" with a Metacritic score of 94 out of a possible 100, and selling almost six million copies to date, *Gears of War* is the fifth most popular

title for the Xbox 360. Evidently one of the most successful titles on the platform, substantiated by the decision to continue the series, it falls in the extremes of the 'blockbuster' end of the video game spectrum.

Throughout Campaign mode the player fights alongside fellow human beings against monstrous, anonymous creatures. These creatures fight in a manner equally as brutal as Delta Squad, their pale, lizard-like appearance and hoarse speech seem designed to induce loathing, and the squad themselves are equipped with copious derogatory sound-bytes often alluding to the foul smell of Locust blood. The suffering of humans is commonplace and used to induce sympathy; early in the game, upon finding the mutilated body of a fellow COG soldier, Marcus recalls the birthday of the man's daughter was not far away, and Dominic is searching constantly for his missing spouse. Gameplay and style are designed to make the player believe they are on the side of good. Backstory is unveiled sparingly throughout the course of the game, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the Locust's vow to destroy all human life is in fact an attempt to end their ruination of the planet Sera itself (Houghton, 2008). Many decades before Emergence Day, war erupted over the discovery of a new resource, "imulsion", a source of cheap and abundant energy. The resulting destruction forced the hand of the Locust. In response to the Locust attack humanity retreated into a few sanctuaries and employed a scorched earth policy, resorting to "Hammer of Dawn" lasers fired from satellites in orbit to leave nothing behind for their foes. At some points in the game the squad must enlist the aid of a band of "Stranded", civilians fending for themselves in abandoned cities, left to die by the COG in the aftermath

of the counterattack against the Locust. Humanity's disregard for the stability of the planet and even their own people is clear.

Through gameplay the Locust are portrayed as evil, humanity as good. When examining backstory it is clear that the Locust are fighting to halt the destruction caused by mankind; they are in fact the 'good guys'. This disconnection may be deliberate; a comment on the nature of war, power and karma; Delta Squad are tools of a corrupt government in its death-throes. It could perhaps be a metaphor for our own mistreatment of Earth's natural resources. It could simply be unintended; arguably setting and history take a backseat in development as they are there simply to explain the way the world is, to justify gameplay centred around killing. Other design decisions, however, would suggest that there is no intentional overarching meaning.

The men of *Gears of War* have cartoonish proportions and personalities; they are thickset, muscular and gruff, with hard attitudes. Their armour, varying only in tones of grey, reflects the colourless nature of the world around them. Combine this with the gritty, bloody presentation and the foundations of a macho-centric title emerge. It is unsurprising in this light that the game performed so well commercially, with the majority of gamers over the age of 18 (the minimum requirement to purchase the game as specified by the British Board of Film Classification) being male (Taylor, 2009).

Gears of War is similar to *Braid* in its high degree of craftsmanship, in this case working toward photorealism. The processing power of the Xbox 360 is harnessed

to produce a convincing, detailed three dimensional world complimented by a polished score, dialogue and level design. The game's structure suffers from Blow's second conflict in particular. Ó Briain describes his frustration at one section of the game which expects the player to destroy three impassable doors by fooling a large, blind Locust into running into them. Having destroyed the first two doors, he is always killed on the third attempt, forcing him to restart over again. The level of challenge is so great that he will never reach the game's conclusion (Charlie Brooker's Gameswipe, 2009). Similarly the story is dealt out in predetermined chunks by the use of cutscenes, not playing to the strengths of the medium. It is clear however that this is a blockbuster title, art as defined in chapter one is not the purpose of this game.

Braid

Anticipation for *Braid* was high. Jason Rohrer - an independent video game developer and advocate of gaming as an art form, like Blow - stated in 2007 that even the unfinished game had the potential to deeply affect the player and was a great artistic statement, not just in video games, but in any context. Rohrer is quite zealous in this regard, but critical reception upon the game's general release the following year would corroborate his claims. Blow has stated himself that he intended it to be a work of art, and believes he was successful in his endeavour (Blow, 2009).

Fig. 6.2.1. Tim finds disappointment when he reaches the castle at the end of each world.
The shapes in the top left show that all of the pieces in this sub-level have been collected.

Braid's genre, hierarchy of levels, and the creatures of its world are inspired or directly lifted from Nintendo's near legendary Super Mario Bros. The basis of the two-dimensional world, traversed by scrolling left-to-right, using a jumping

mechanic to move between suspended platforms, remains. Some of the basic enemies encountered are near identical, for instance the pirahna plant which emerges periodically from its home in a pipe to snap at the player character's heels. The most overt reference to Super Mario Bros. is the protagonist's quest to rescue "the Princess" from a monster, and his encounter with a benevolent messenger upon his arrival at a castle at the end of each world, who informs him that "the Princess is in another castle".

Fig. 6.2.2. The hub world, Tim's home.
Jigsaws can be seen in various states of completion.

Braid begins in the hub world, the home of the game's protagonist, Tim. There are in total six other worlds, each associated with a room in Tim's home, and each containing a handful of sub-levels. In each room there hangs an empty picture frame and a door. Upon entering a door Tim is transported to "the clouds", which act as a secondary hub to the various sub-levels of each world. Here a number of podiums bear books which project enigmatic passages concerning Tim's past into the air above. In each world the goal is to solve puzzles to collect jigsaw pieces

scattered throughout its sub-levels, which are then added to the initially empty frame, where they can be rotated and arranged to form an image from Tim's past. When all the jigsaw pieces have been collected and set out in the correct way, the world is considered complete. At the end of the last sub-level of each world Tim arrives at a castle. It is not necessary to collect all the jigsaw pieces to reach the castle, complete the world, or unlock any of the subsequent worlds. However only when all sixty pieces have been collected and their corresponding jigsaws completed will all six sections of a ladder in Tim's home slide into place, permitting passage to the attic, the door to World 1, and (in theory) the game's conclusion.

Fig. 6.2.3. The clouds, secondary hub of each world, in this case World 2.
Tim stands in front of the rightmost podium, its words projected above.

The twist in *Braid*'s gameplay comes from Tim's ability to manipulate time, which manifests differently in each world. In World 2, at the press of a button, Tim can reverse time, allowing him to undo mistakes. Doors once opened will close, enemies once removed will return to life. In World 3, everything is much the same, save for the addition of objects surrounded by a green aura, which are unaffected by the

reversal of time. A key will break when used to open a door, and where in World 1 time could be reversed to both repair the key and re-lock the door, if in World 3 the key has a green aura, there is nothing that can be done to repair it without restarting the sub-level. In World 4 time is bound to Tim's movements, moving forward when Tim moves forward, standing still when he does not move, and reversing when he moves backwards. In World 5, upon reversing time an "alternate universe" is created. This other universe is shown as a shadow behind the current one, and in it a double of Tim acts out the movements he performed before reversing time. This in effect allows the player to record movements, reverse time, and co-operate with a past version of Tim to complete puzzles. In World 6 Tim can drop a ring which slows down time around it, an effect that diminishes the further from the ring an item is. An item dropped from above the ring will appear to decelerate as it falls. In World 1 time simply moves in reverse, the use of Tim's ability forces time to move forward.

The ability to manipulate time is not a new concept in video games, or of course in fiction. The distinction here comes in part from the multiple twists on what seems to be simple at first, resulting in sixty distinct puzzles. What further differentiates *Braid* are the links between the gameplay mechanics which govern Tim's abilities, his backstory and the themes of the game. The narrative is too disjointed and distorted to arrange into one coherent sequence of events (likely the result of a conscious decision to leave it open to interpretation). It seems clear, however, that Tim was once in a relationship with the Princess, who shared his abilities, and the pair exploit this to undo their mistakes, keeping them "hidden from each other, tucked away between the folds of time, safe."

The capacity to undo in-game mistakes, for instance death caused by falling into a pit of spikes, allows for quick repetition and practice to overcome obstacles, essentially eliminating frustration and, to a small degree, challenge. There is a direct connection between the nature and consequences of these mechanics and the failure of the relationship Tim had with the Princess. A relationship where neither partner makes a mistake seems perfect, but they discover too late that it becomes suffocating. Tim's realisation that he "cannot defy her expectations or escape her reach" leads him to end the affair, leaving in search of something better. The game overtly comments on the trials of sustaining a relationship; fulfilling needs, keeping desire in check.

Thus, Blow smartly sidesteps both his first and second conflicts, the barrier to entry is demolished. The time manipulation mechanics reduce challenge to a trace amount without hindering enjoyment - the ability to simply skip a puzzle and return to it later means no player is incapable of progressing, at least until the major step into World 1. Gameplay and narrative speak in unison, freeing the player to ponder the underlying meaning rather than the rationale behind confusing design decisions.

Braid aims to be a piece of art, but does not surpass the great works of other media. In particular its use of text as a primary method of plot exposition harkens back to the problems associated with cut-scenes, relics of a different medium. There is no real interactivity to be had with the narrative until the final scene, a deliberate perversion of the game's mechanics which in fact strips away the player's control as a cutscene does. However, *Braid* is an eloquent discourse which touches on issues of the human condition, as great art does, built on a foundation of accomplished craftsmanship in writing, design and art. Returning to the definition set out in the first chapter, it is a game which most certainly has meaning to impart, and does so through skilful manipulation of one of video gaming's strengths - mechanics.

Conclusion

This dissertation has considered the question of how video games can transcend craftsmanship and become art in a variety of ways.

Firstly, boundaries are set through the establishment and explanation of a definition of art for the purposes of this paper. It is demonstrated that video games are capable of a high degree of craftsmanship and how this is immaterial when considering art.

Through comparisons with the initial reception and development of other media, it becomes clear that many new forms of expression traverse similar phases of ignorance, rejection and eventual acceptance. It is a question of 'when', not 'if' we will look back and wonder what was ever in doubt.

In examination of the two principle schools of the academic study of video games we see that the medium's specialties lie in the manipulation of mechanics, systems and simulation, not of narrative.

Through the close analysis of two video games each of the aforementioned points are corroborated in turn, with particular attention given to the distinction between arthouse and blockbuster titles, their purposes and popularity.

It is clear that Blow's first and second conflicts are conquerable with the application of thought and creativity. The evolution of cinema and digital comics imply that by continuing technological progress the third conflict may be surmountable in the near future. In the case of *Braid*, at least, the first two issues have been not only conquered, but adapted into powerful expressive instruments. On the whole video games do not capitalise on these tools, but not through ignorance - a game which seeks to entertain has little use for such subtleties, and with entertainment being the more profitable avenue it is unsurprising that these titles proliferate. In video games as in cinema neither blockbuster or arthouse prevails, instead the two coexist.

The term 'the Citizen Kane of video games', alluding to the widespread recognition of Orson Welles' 1941 film as the greatest ever created, is often seen as a momentous impending milestone in the history of video games. Also coined "Hamlet the Game" (Aarseth, 2006) some believe that this landmark event has already come to pass (Thomsen, 2009) however the consensus is that no game has yet surpassed - or even reached - the same standard (Bringsjord, 2001). The very existence of the comparison can be interpreted as a manifestation of video gaming's dependency on traditional media, particularly cinema.

Consequently we see that the majority of video games rely heavily on narrative, to which the medium is not best suited. Schubert rightly points out that an oil painting does not require great cinematography, classical music does not require an outstanding screenplay, a Ming vase does not require compelling characters; "narrative is a red herring in the discussion of games as art."

The acceptance of video gaming as a channel for serious expression is inevitable, but first we must learn to harness its inimitable traits.

"...for games to truly step up to the plate, they need to provide us with insights into ourselves."

- Ralph Koster

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Appendix: Email Correspondence

As part of my research I contacted numerous companies and individuals seeking opinions from people in the industry. Reprinted here are the answers I received. My questions are marked in bold, but otherwise no changes have been made.

The respondents are as follows, in chronological order of their replies:

- Pat McGovern, senior artist, 4j Games

- Steve Gaynor, designer, 2K Games

- Jonathan Blow, designer and programmer, Number None, Inc.

- Robyn Miller, co-founder, Cyan Worlds

- Will Skyes, programmer, Ruffian Games

For privacy reasons the full contents of the correspondence have been removed from this version of the dissertation.