

The Art Edge with Brian Sherwin

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Video Games as Art: The debate continues

by Brian Sherwin on 1/9/2015 2:43:11 AM

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*This article is by [Brian Sherwin](#). Brian Sherwin is an art critic, blogger, curator, artist and writer based near Chicago, Illinois. Sherwin is the Editor of [The Art Edge](#). His articles are featured on the [FineArtViews](#) newsletter -- which currently reaches 26,000+ subscribers. He has been published in *Hi Fructose Magazine*, *Illinois Times*, *FineArtViews*, *Myartspace* and other publications, and linked to by publications such as *The Huffington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Consumerist*, *Juxtapoz Magazine*, *Deutsche Bank ArtMag*, *ARTLURKER*, *Blabbermouth*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Conservative Punk*, *Modern Art Obsession*, *Citizen LA*, *Shark Forum*, *Two Coats of Paint*, *Vandalog*, *COMPANY*, *artnet*, *WorldNetDaily (WND)* and *Art F City*. Sherwin graduated from *Illinois College (Jacksonville, Illinois)* in 2003 -- he studied art and psychology extensively. [Click here to sign up for his newsletter](#). The author's views are entirely his own and may not reflect the views of FASO.*

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) plans to add Nintendo's "Super Mario Bros." to a collection devoted to a 'new category' of artwork. (Image via [forevergeek.com](#))

The exploration of video games as an art form has been a buzzed about topic in recent years. In 2011 the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) decided to [list videogames](#) as eligible for artistic funding. At the time, many sources noted the NEA's decision as a 'legal recognition of video games as an art form'. The support for video games as an art form was fueled further in 2012 with the Smithsonian American Art Museum's exhibit titled [The Art of Video Games](#). The Smithsonian's push has spurred a number of art museums, including [MoMA](#), to acknowledge video games as art. Institutional backing aside, the debate over whether or not video games should be considered art still rages on various online

forums and blogs.

It is not hard to find passionate arguments concerning the 'art of video games' debate. Film critic [Roger Ebert](#) marked himself as a target for art-minded video gaming fan boys when he stated, "*I remain convinced that in principle, video games cannot be art. Perhaps it is foolish of me to say 'never,' because never, as Rick Wakeman informs us, is a long, long time. Let me just say that no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form.*". Ebert's position has been championed by individuals who feel that institutional critique of video games boils down to mere hype (a way to lure art museum visitors with nostalgia... rather than a 'serious' exploration of art).

On the other side of the fence, art critic [Hrag Vartanian](#), of Hyperallergic fame, has stated, "*With the institutional stamp of approval by MoMA and other museums, video games are being firmly established as part of the art world.*". (Note: This is a contradictory statement considering that Vartanian – and Hyperallergic as a whole – often questions 'institutional stamps' of approval within the art world.) Vartanian adds, "*Any attack on the integrity of video games is something that should concern the art world in its entirety.*". Vartanian's statement implies that the art community should stand against politicians / groups that strive to censor video games... just as they would against politicians / groups that call for the censorship of an art exhibit.

Where do I stand on this issue?

As an art critic I feel that certain games can be viewed as art – just as anything can be when it comes down to the line DEPENDING on context (I don't think the creators of *Super Mario Bros.* viewed the process as an art project -- they simply wanted to create a fun / marketable game). At the least... some of the elements involved in a video game can certainly be considered art. That said, I'm not so sure that we, the art community, should rush to acknowledge ALL video games as art. Furthermore, I don't think it is wise to suggest that video games like "*Super Mario Bros.*" (1985), "*Tetris*" (1984), or "*The Legend of Zelda*" (1986) are on the same level of artistic merit, for example, as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* or Leonardo DaVinci's *The Last Supper*... no matter what the BIG art institutions declare.

I take issue with these bold institutional declarations for a number of reasons:

Issue #1: Why are some of the most respected art institutions – and art writers -- in the United States hailing video games as art while at the same time insisting that other accepted forms of art should be considered

nothing more than craft? How can they champion video games as art while ignoring specific long-standing directions -- both nationally and internationally -- in art? Case in point, some of these same individuals tell us that [Stuckists](#) are 'just painters' -- that their work is 'not real art' -- while informing us that video game developers are 'artists'. These are valid questions that should be answered. Depending on the context... art-minded tax payers should be demanding answers!

I'm certain that anyone reading this can think of a few forms of art -- as defined by the public as a whole -- that have been 'stamped' as mere craft by some of these same institutions and writers. I'm certain that even more can think of directions in art that have been ignored by the mainstream aspects of the art world / museum world. In that sense, this institutional / critical acknowledgement of video games as art distracts from various outstanding arguments about what art can be -- issues that, in my opinion, should have been higher on the priority list (that goes 10 fold for the institutions that receive any form of government funding).

Issue #2: Those within the art world who strongly support the institutional positions of the Smithsonian and MoMA tend to have a history of supporting New Media Art involving video games. In other words, their support of these 'institutional stamps' concerning video games as art is at best convenient... and at worst, deceptive. They had their minds made up long before the Smithsonian chimed in. It comes off as 'career-support' (for their artist friends AND own work) rather than authentic support, if you will.

For example, art critic Hrag Vartanian is a fan of (and has written about) artist Justin Berry... who is known for creating 'video game landscapes' -- as well as artist Pippin Barr, who created "The Artist Is Present" video game. By supporting the position held by the Smithsonian and MoMA concerning video games as art... Vartanian is showing support for artists who utilize aspect of video gaming culture (apparently he has been long-time friends with several artists exploring these directions) -- which directly supports the validity of his extensive writing about these artists and his [art blog ad network](#) (thus, profit). Pointblank, it does not surprise me that Hrag Vartanian was quick to jump on the 'video games are art' bandwagon spurred by the Smithsonian and MoMA.

It would be interesting to know if any of the most vocal supporters from within the art world have direct ties -- professional OR personal relationships -- to the curatorial processes of these institutions... and how their influence may have impacted decisions for self-serving ends.

Issue #3: If ALL video games are considered art -- does that mean that

consumers have less of a voice concerning false advertising / inferior products in regard to the business practices of video game companies? Allow me to explain: Consumers -- in this case, video gamers -- have a strong voice today due to the Internet. Thus, product complaints that may have went unchallenged in the past can now make or break a video game company IF angry gamers 'storm' video gaming blogs and forums. These consumers are now able to take timely action against an inferior product (video games that simply don't work as advertised). The 'this is art' rhetoric changes the game.

With the above in mind, it is no secret that the video gaming industry has been faced with a wave of consumer complaints in recent years. In fact, the [Better Business Bureau](#) has chimed in on specific situations -- supporting consumers who were not happy with advertising claims and technical issues concerning specific video games. That kind of action may be off the table if we are to acknowledge ALL video games as art.

The problem is that many video games are released with a number of 'game breaking' glitches / bugs that are patched *fixed* later. In some cases the games fail -- even with patches -- to function as intended. Think of it as buying a DVD that stops playing halfway through the film -- or a novel that is missing pages -- upon release... and hoping that the company will 'fix' the problem by truly providing a functional product as advertised. The Better Business Bureau has only recently started to acknowledge the complaints of video game consumers. That said, if ALL video games should be viewed as art... doesn't that mean that consumers won't be able to make a formal complaint about an inferiorly developed video game anymore than they can complain about an underdeveloped painting? Art is in the eye of the beholder, right? Food for thought.

I argue that some video game companies -- pawing at the 'institutional stamp' from the Smithsonian and other institutions -- may use the 'this is art' defense if legally challenged by consumers over inferiorly developed products. Pointblank, 'this is art' could be used as a cop-out to avoid corporate responsibility -- an excuse for not being committed to consumers if a video game does not function as advertised -- or allegedly designed. False advertising is just an act of performance art, right? Call me cynical... but legal-wise I'm not surprised that the majority of video game developers are [ecstatic](#) about video games being viewed as an art form. It may give them a 1-up over consumers.

In closing, I do feel that some video games can be considered art -- and that specific aspects of a video game can certainly be considered art. That said, I think the art community needs to be a tad careful in supporting the idea that ALL video games should be considered art. Artistic merit can be

debated... but it should still be on the table. I fail to see the artistic merit in a classic arcade video game such as *PONG*. I will NEVER acknowledge *Farmville* as a collaborative work of digital performance art. I want to know what YOU think though. Consider this an open debate about video games as art.

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin - Editor of The Art Edge

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