



Video Games and the Global South

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VIDEO GAMES AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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THE NUANCES OF VIDEO GAME CURATION

LESSONS FROM ARGENTINA

MARÍA LUJÁN OULTON

“Add the word ‘art’ and you instantly create a problem.”¹

Video games have managed to permeate all levels of society and are fast on their way to becoming the dominant medium of the 21st century, like the moving image was for the 20th century and the photograph was before both of them. Eric Zimmerman’s 2013 “Manifesto for the Ludic Century” summarizes in a concrete and direct manner the various reasons why we could assert we are living in the age of play.² Is there, then, no escape from this playful present? Characterizing games as the Copernican twist for the 21th century may be putting too much responsibility on a medium that is still fighting to shake its reputation as a form of entertainment alone, but regardless, video games are prepared for the battle.

So powerful is video games’ capacity to break down boundaries that even the normally hermetic and impenetrable art world has been drawn into their technological magic circle. Perhaps it was just a matter of time, after all a flirtation between games and art has existed for centuries, as Johan Huizinga noted in *Homo Ludens*, when he declared, “All art derives from play.”³ Dadaism is one of the usual suspects when analyzing the connections between games and art, but there are traces of this intricate relationship that can be found much further back, for example in hieroglyphic depictions of the ancient Egyptian board game of Senet, dating to c. 3100 BCE. On a parallel path, art has a lengthy history of experimenting with technology, and there is a broad and deep discussion among scholars, critics and curators regarding the place and role of new media art within the art world.⁴ In this context, video games represent another device with which to experiment, a logical continuation of the artistic exploration of the notions of interaction and immersion. As Arthur Danto has observed, “[n]ot everything is possible at every time,”⁵ meaning that certain artworks simply could not be inserted as artworks into certain periods of art history. Since 2005, new art media curator Steve Dietz has remarked on the explosion of artistic activity aroused since the invention of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. Dietz has long reflected on the impact that new media art has on museum collection practices, along with the importance of establishing new ground rules for this curatorship that must take into account research, presentation and conservation: “Regardless of institutional structure [...] it is important to consider how to integrate new media art into the museum’s collection practices as well as to consider how its distinctive features raise certain conceptual issues and pragmatic concerns.”⁶ Recent scholarship exploring the historical relationship between video games and the art

1. Geert Lovink, “New Media Arts at the Crossroads,” Paper presented at Conference at Argos Center for Art and New Media, Brussels, 2007.

2. Eric Zimmerman, “Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” *Being Playful: Eric Zimmerman’s Game Design Blog*, 9 September 2013, <https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2013/09/09/manifesto-for-a-ludic-century/>.

3. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Emecé, 1968): 65

4. For deeper insight into this matter, see Domenico Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art* (Link, 2013). Throughout the book Quaranta explores the historical, sociological and conceptual roots of New Media while suggesting new critical and curatorial strategies for its insertion in the contemporary art field.

5. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Harvard University Press), 44.

6. Steve Dietz, *Collecting New-Media Art: Just Like Anything Else, Only Different*, *NeMe.org*, 2005, <http://www.neme.org/texts/collecting-new-media-art>.

world, such as John Sharp's *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, shows that the time has come for video games to enter the art world and engage its debates.

Whether or not video games can be categorized as art is of no interest here—a wide range of scholars are already debating that matter and, like all discussions regarding the definition of art, it is likely to devolve into a never-ending cycle. The objective of this chapter is to deepen our discussion of how video games and the art world relate to one another. What does an *artgame* exhibition tell us? What insights can we glean regarding the society it represents? Curating video games involves merging diverse disciplines and areas of knowledge, including art history, technology and gaming. New media art is important to the art world not because of the technology it involves, but because of the uses it gives to these devices and the stories it tells. In the end, new media art it is like any other form of artistic expression—it is not about the materials, except when it expressly *is* about the materials.⁷ The same goes for video games. The inclusion of video games in the art world involves examining their use for “critical play [...] built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics.”⁸ But it also means using games to think about new forms of interactive narrative such as those envisioned by Janet Murray in her writings on cyber-narratives,⁹ pushing the medium to create new aesthetic experiences based purely on play. Video game exhibitions are a great window to these important ways in which games can push us to think and create differently.

With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will look into the way that art and video games have been interacting over the course of the last decade in Argentina, by critically examining my own experience over the past nine years curating the exhibition *Game on! El arte en juego (Game On! Art in Play)* in Argentina. This chapter invites readers to revisit the history of this exhibition as a way of understanding how video games have come to blur the limits of interactive art and create an aesthetic of their own. As Paul Callaghan, former director of the Australian independent game festival Freeplay, explains, “Games are an art, one of many ways of producing meaning of and about the world and our experiences.”¹⁰ Likewise, every exhibition can tell us something not only about the works exhibited but also about the society within which they were produced. Today in particular, exhibitions can speak to the transformation of the public from a passive audience into a conglomerate of curious protagonists, and about the mutations this evolution implies for art museums and galleries.

THE LATIN AMERICAN CONUNDRUM

Latin American artists and game designers have been experimenting with video games for a long time. The first approaches within the art field can be located by the early works of artists such as Venezuelan digital art pioneer Yucef Merhi, who began working with video games in the mid-1980s, and by the late 1990s games began to gain greater prominence in the Latin American art world, mostly in the form on artgame production like the game mods created by Mónica Jacobo in Argentina and the hacking activities of new media artists like Arcángel Constantini in Mexico.¹¹ On the other hand, the first artgame productions within the Latin American video game development community can be came at the very start of the 21st century in the works of independent Argentine developer Daniel Benmergui, who has become the leading figure for indie production in the region, in addition to being

7. For more on this matter, see Stephen C. Foster, “Clement Greenberg: Formalism in the ‘40s and ‘50s,” *Art Journal* 35.1 (1975): 20-24.

8. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009).

9. For deeper insight on this matter see Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1998).

10. Paul Callaghan, “Cultural Connections for Games,” *British Council Film*, <http://film.britishcouncil.org/comment/2017/continue> (2017).

11. For more on the work of Mónica Jacobo and the beginning of the Argentine game art scene, see her interview with Mathias Jansson on *Gamescenes*, October 2011, <http://www.gamescenes.org/2011/10/interview-monica-jacobo-and-the-argentinian-game-art-scene.html>. Regarding the career of Arcángelo Constantini and his video game-related works, see his website: <http://www.arc-data.net/>. For more on Yucef Merhi's works, see his official web page: <http://www.cibernetico.com/works>.