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The art presence of videogames

From the perspective of the mainstream history of videogames, 1980s can be perceived as turbulent times for the videogames' industry and market. Next to the technological developments, new personal computers and 16-bit consoles, given decade was marked with consoles war, successes and failures of small companies and big corporations, and most importantly – with the crash on the consoles' market of 1983, considered as the "historical milestone" on the medium's timeline (Newman 2017, p. 23). While the significance of given events is undisputable, need for a new perspective emerges. Because as Lana Polansky claims, the lens of "tech-progressivism" is not the only viable way of approaching the evolution of videogames and there is a lesser-known history of the medium, that instead of new developments or console wars, focuses on the "long heritage of games deliberately concerned with the artistic, political and personal" (Polansky 2016). Namely, the art history of videogames.

As Polansky explains, the connections between art and games transgress historical and cultural borders and can be traced way back to the medieval times, to so-called *volvelles*, a paper-based text generation machines. Astrid Ensslin says that the examples of literary games can be also found in popular in Persian culture parlour game Mosha'ere, in which players (bounded by the rules) recite the lines of poetries; or in traditional Japanese card game called Uta-garuta "in which players have to speed-match poetry lines written on cards to complete a full poem" (Ensslin 2014, p. 32). In twentieth century, games and art manage to get even closer, especially in avant-garde and experimental arts, including Surrealists games (like "exquisite corpse," "questions," or "one into another;" Brotchie 1995) or various board games created by Alberto Giacometti or by the artists from the neo-avant-garde group Fluxus (Flanagan 2009).

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While given examples may be considered as a non-digital prehistory of videogames art, their proper history begins around 1980s, presenting another "historical milestone" to the videogame's timeline. Because exactly in the year 1983 the magazine Video Games Player stated, that "videogames are as much an art form as any field of entertainment" (Video Games Player 1983, p. 49) presenting the first claim that videogames can be considered as a form of art. And few years later, in 1989, given claim was accepted by the institution that since the very beginning holds the power of appointing the status of art to processes and creation: the Museum of Moving Image[1] with the exhibition titled "Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade," considered the "first museum retrospective of video arcade game" (Slovin 2009). Lana Polansky proposes another significant event of that decade and points out the year 1984 similarly noteworthy, as a year when Automata ("a little outfit from Portsmouth") released *Deus Ex Machina*, a unique game that differs from traditional "shoot and jump" gameplays and focuses instead on reflective, meaningful and metatextual story (Polansky 2016). In other words, an *art game*.

But the concept of art games itself enters game discourse a little bit later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Today given term is quite universally accepted as a description for a genre of interactive works that "challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner" (Holmes 2003, p. 46). John Sharp defines art games as works that uses "the innate properties of games – among them interactivity, player goals, and obstacles providing challenge for the player – to create revealing and reflective play experiences," and compares that concept to the category of *game art* that can be simply explained as "art made of games" (Sharp 2015, pp. 12–14). Videogames and their elements become here not only an inspiration for works of art, but also a new medium for art, which brings unique ways for developers' expression, social critic and recipients' engagement.

However, the first decade of twenty-first century was not only the moment when the academic discussion about art games and game art emerges, but most importantly the time of great productions, which moved beyond accepted boarders and definitions of games, bringing unique aesthetics, new ways of playing and critically and socially engaged perspectives. The noteworthy mentions of art games include innovative and reflective production, like Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) and its problematization of the concept of time or Jason Rohrer's *Passage*

1 Nowadays The Museum of Modern Art in New York has thirty-five games in their collection. In the time of writing that article given games and several computer interfaces, icons or apps from MoMA's collection are presented in exhibition *Never Alone: Video Games and Other Interactive Design* (September 2022 – spring 2023). See: https://press.moma.org/exhibition/video-games/

(2007) in which basic gameplay and simple graphics conveys abstract metaphor of the human existence. In case of a game art and the presence of videogames in the gallery spaces, Mary Flanagan's [*giantJoystick*] – a large, fully functioning game controller (modelled after classic Atari 2600 joystick), that demands gallery visitors to collaborate in an impressive performance of playing – may confirm the notion that not only art changes videogames, but also, that videogames change art.

As thoroughly presented by the contributors of the special issue of "Replay. The Polish Journal of Games Studies" (vol. 1(8), 2021), idea of videogames art is lively and present, continuously evolving and reconfiguring players' experience. What seems to be outdated for the authors are considerations if digital games *are* art, so-called "Ebert's debate" that is perceived here just as the event on the timeline of the art history of videogames. But that does not mean that given issue is fully resolved, because as presented by the contributors, the concept of videogames art – with its categories and definitions – is broad and problematic, with several questions that still need to be answered.

The most important one focuses on the relations and parallels between videogames and art, investigating the qualities of videogames as a new medium of art. Are digital games some kind of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that synthesis traditional forms of art: such as music, pictures, stories? How inner elements of videogames reconfigure recipients' experience? How developers' intention affects creation of meaning? How videogames aesthetics influences humans' existence and becomes a part of cultural and social critic? Deriving from philosophy of art, aesthetics and critical theories (and much more) contributors of given special issue present thorough and important insights into the contemporary position of videogames art.

In *16-bit dissensus: post-retro aesthetics, hauntology, and the emergency in video games* (pp. 17–36) Patrick R. Dolan investigates videogames art through the lens of Santiago Zabala's concept of "emergency". In *Why Only Art Can Save Us* Zabala, philosopher and cultural critic, presents how contemporary society tends to repress the crises and accepts an "overwhelming consensus that everything is fine in the global West" (p. 18). Given ignorance leads to tricky situation in which "the problem is not only the emergencies we confront but the ones we are missing" (Zabala 2009, p. 3). That lack of a sense of emergency becomes the greatest emergency.

Dolan applies Zabala's proposition to the state of contemporary videogame culture, claiming that "the mainstream AAA industry and culture of video games [is] dominated by corporations that perpetuate exploitative labor practices, work to de-politicize problematic narratives and gameplay, and are locked in endless technological progression" (p. 19). The games are technically progressing, but the themes, genres or gameplays stays the same – the repetition is safer than the money-risking ideas, especially the ones breaking with the *hegemony of play*

(that promotes certain ways of playing and marginalizes alternate products; Fron et al. 2007). Given category, aligned by Dolan with Mark Fisher's *capitalist realism* regarding "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, p. 2) shows, that videogames add to the Zabala's emergency. However, as Dolan says, there is an alternative.

According to Zabala, what is needed to break through the emergency is a shock, an aesthetic force that can shake us out from the tendency to ignore the crises. Something opposite to consensus, a power that can disrupt accepted world picture and presents alternative understandings, namely, the dissensus. For Dolan, that transgressive, aesthetic force enters the videogame culture through post-retro games and exists in "their repurposing of supposedly superseded graphics, in simplified controls, in subversion of gameplay, and in representation of and accessibility for people outside of the core demographics of AAA" (p. 22). Games like Anna Antrophy's *Dys4ia* or Toby Fox's *Undertale* confronts capitalist realism and promotes representations outside the hegemonic, mainstream industry. Post-retro games gains here similar role to the one prescribed to avant-garde videogames (see Sharp 2015; Schrank 2014; Sell 2019; Flanagan 2009), including Bonnie Ruberg's concept of "queer games avant-garde", concerned with indie games that intervenes with the mainstream industry and promotes alternative and diverse perspectives.

In Klaudia Jancsovics' *Play the art: Artistic value in video games* (pp. 37–51), deliberations about videogames status as art shifts toward some crucial questions about relations between technological development and art. Photography brought us the possibility of capturing the moment and creating an image; films took the step forward and made the images move; videogames gave us even more, an action in which we can participate. And every one of those mediums demanded new kinds of engagement and reception.

Based on the terminology proposed by Janet H. Murray (2017), videogames aesthetics connect with the categories of immersion, agency and transformation. Recipient submerges into the virtual space and acts in that "other" reality, with their agency constrained by the system of rules that dictates the possible behaviours, but at the same time makes the action possible. Jancsovics compares that model to the colouring book, in which lines marks unchangeable shapes, but "we can fill these shapes freely with our preferred colours" (p. 39). Players, then, may choose their method of playing, but most importantly, they can create their own experience and interpret the game in individually meaningful way.

Jancsovics approaches the problem of videogames art from the perspective of the immersive virtual spaces and focuses on their inner elements that represents traditional medium of arts, including paintings, music, poems – elements that also

in videogames invoke powerful feelings and provides aesthetical pleasure. And the proposition of considering videogames as art due to their possession of common art qualities was quite important for the debate about the digital games' status. As said by Grant Tavinor in the definition of cluster theory of art: "art can be identified or even defined by its ownership of a significant proportion of art-typical features, such as representation, direct pleasure in perceptual features, emotional saturation, style, and imaginative involvement" (Tavinor 2009, p. 171). Jancsovics' analysis aligns with that description and presents videogames as a new medium for art.

But that belief was not always praised by the critics, and the status of videogames as art became a theme of long and problematic debate, exhaustively revised by Paweł Kaczmarski in the article *A tale of two Eberts: Videogames and the arbitrariness of meaning* (pp. 53–82). The long-lasting discussion, initiated by American film critic Roger Ebert's remarks that "Video Games can Never be Art" (Ebert 2010a) or even that for most gamers "video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic" (Ebert 2005), produced number of articles, blog posts, presentation and TED Talks, explaining why videogames are (not) art. Kaczmarski encounters given dispute from new, metacritical perspective, focused less on the presented arguments and criticised views, and more on what the debate says about the nature of art and games, but also on the thorough analysis of the contradiction in Ebert's claims.

The "Ebert's debate" may be considered as another important event on the timeline of art history of videogames. The harsh words from the prominent movie critic found number of opponents, who counterclaimed Ebert's statement with belief that almost anything could be art if we take into the consideration our experience of it. Given propositions were validated by chosen definitions of art, including the one borrowed from Wikipedia, describing art as a "process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions," that was used by game developer Kellee Santiago in a TEDx Talk directly responding to Ebert's words.

As Kaczmarski shows, Ebert in some way shared the belief that "anything can be made into art" which contradicted with critic's idea that videogames cannot be art "in principle" because of their inner features, especially interactivity and agency (p. 66). As Ebert claims "art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices" (Ebert 2010b) and William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would be quite disappointing and meaningless if both characters would survive in some kind of a happy ending chosen by the audience. Through detailed analysis of the notions of meaning, intention and interpretation applied to videogames rules and games-as-works, Kaczmarski tries to resolve those issues, asking crucial questions about the debate itself.

Problem of intention is present also in Benjamin Hanussek's *Playing distressed art: Adorno's aesthetic theory in game design* (pp. 83–97) concerned with the idea that games can be deliberately based on given art theories and designed to evoke aesthetic experience. Based on the examples of *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017) author shows how traits of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory can be found in videogames, but also how it can be intentionally implemented into the game. Author – from the perspective of the co-creator of a game – explains here how Adorno's understanding of art inspired the creation of indie cyberpunk title called *Distressed* (CtrlZ Games Collective 2021), that investigates the notion of "capitalistic hamster wheel in which most working-class people find themselves" (p. 85).

What is most important for Hanussek in Adorno's theory is the problem of truth, the aesthetic experience that exposes the subject to the social situation and reminds "the world of its lost realities: freedom and life, beauty and happiness, truth and reconciliation, hope and possibility" (p. 85). According to the author, given features manifest themselves in above-mentioned games that problematize unfairness, alienation and exploitation of capitalistic systems, and reflects on the idea of "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (p. 86). Inspired by them and intentionally deriving from Adorno's theory, *Distressed* goes even further, implementing into the gameplay unpleasant experience, which unveils the dialectic between labour and leisure.

Meanwhile, Emilie Reed in *The aesthetics of speedrunning: Performances in neo-baroque space* (pp. 99–115) examines how speedrunning, activity concerned with quick completion of a game, influences aesthetical exploration of videogames environment. Extremely different from standard playthroughs, speedruns are considered here in the categories of a performance, which affects both players' and audiences' experience, bringing pleasure and excitement of witnessing a perfect run. As an alternative to prescribed narratives and environments, speedruns aesthetic qualities connects with fragmentation, with unconventional ways of going through digital space.

Given features are analysed here through the lenses of Angela Ndalianis' work, concerning Neo-Baroque aesthetics in contemporary media, or to be more precise, focused on how features of historical Baroque (including instability, fragmentation or frame-breaking) exists in today's entertainment: in amusements parks, movies or videogames. And by adding to that list the activities of speedruns communities, Reed expands Ndalianis' propositions, describing frame-breaking, fragmentation of normative visuals, and skipping elements of gameplay, visible in the quick runs. To achieve them, speedrunners carefully examine the spaces, identifying errors and glitches that reveal hidden strategies of playing. And while for speedrunners given malfunctions help to speed up the playthrough, they also reconfigure

aesthetical experience, resembling works of *glitch art*, in which purposeful errors are used to display underlying code, to investigate the materiality of the media or replace smooth visual representations with almost tactile sensation of distortion (what is considered by Brian Schrank an avant-garde act; Schrank 2014). As Reeds concludes: "speedrunning practices that involve glitches, exploits, and sequence breaks give the player a toolbox of fragments from which to construct a new aesthetic experience, which they can then perform in real time" (p. 112). By applying the art theories to analysis of speedruns author describes its aesthetical qualities derived from the communities' activities, problematizing the idea of videogame as an aesthetic object.

In *Feeling the narrative control(ler): Casual art games as trauma therapy* Hailey J. Austin and Lydia R. Cooper (pp. 129–143) focus on another category, on *casual art games* in the context of their engagement in trauma therapy. Given games, described as "non-competitive" and "artistically-rendered" are presented here as useful practices, that can help the players to reorganize traumatizing events into the coherent, meaningful narratives. Their aesthetics elements, colour schemes or animation choices, propose reflective and immersive digital spaces, like the ones described by Klaudia Jancsovics. But here, to follow once again Janet H. Murray proposition, next to the immersion and agency, the biggest emphasis is put on the category of transformation.

While talking about trauma, the authors highlight that they do not mean the tragic or painful event itself, but rather the mark it left on one's body and mind. As a kind of imprint, it takes form of unprocessed memory, that escapes narrative organization. The goal of the trauma therapy is to processes and organize given memory, to "bring the sufferer into a place of feeling whole of once again being inside their own bodies and alive in a world that is no longer terrifying" (p. 133). Casual art games, through their agency and interactivity, have potential to become an art therapy, as they allow player to create alternate, meaningful storylines and practice the encounters with traumatic events. Calming aesthetics and feeling of control, visible in two titles interpreted in the article proposes how videogames may become powerful tool for practicing the need of letting go or developing empathy toward traumatic experiences of others.

Meanwhile, Filip Jankowski (pp. 117–128) approaches special issue theme from more methodological perspective, and in the article tilted *O gropowiastkach* (eng. *About game-satires*) proposes a new category, suitable to describe certain group of digital games, namely, games that through schematic stories try to convey moral message, similarly to the philosophical satires in literature. Based on the term *gamenovels,* proposed by Tomasz Z. Majkowski and applied to games that attempt to "create a total image of the world by employing various perspectives and worldviews" (Majkowski 2019, p. 317), Jankowski's *game-satires* describe

videogames that often escape rigid definitions of the medium and orbit on the margins of mainstream game culture. With their conventional (often humorous) stories and constraint exploration, game-satires lead player through the game, toward prescribed philosophical message.

While describing game-satires, Jankowski decides to discard the categories of *art games* and *non-games* – that had been proposed as a description of marginalized, artistic expressions in new medium – as strengthening the belief that digital games are mere entertainment and have nothing to do with art. Given consideration reminds the presentation showed by Belgian duet Tales of Tale, during the Art History of Games symposium in 2010, when Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn announced that games are not art, and they are not art in principle, because while games derives from the physical need or animal instinct, art is "born out of a desire to touch the untouchable," "to explore the unknown," that art has no rules or a goal that "evaporate as soon as it is discovered" (Harvey and Samyn 2010). And mainstream videogame industry got stuck, happy with the revenues it gets from the mere entertainment it provides, through the repetition of the same themes over again. But most importantly, videogames industry captured the technology, that with its affordances, with interactivity and possibility of generating the realities, may become a medium for social engagement, for meaningful critic, for bringing people's attention to crises at hand.

Creators from Tales of Tale proposes here "the notgames initiative," a project that focuses on the exploration of the potential of digital entertainment and art, which rejects typical game elements (including rules, goals, challenges, rewards). They consider "notgames" as a method of design that wants to broaden the spectrum, helps the medium to evolve. But as presented by the contributors of given special issue, videogames do not have to abandon their typical elements – they can intentionally use them, to implement critical theory, convey philosophical message, propose aesthetical experience or even change them into the aesthetical force, that critics mentioned stagnation and ignorance. From the perspective of art history of videogames, the medium is evolving and with present achievements, digital games can be considered as a new medium of art.

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