

The Game vs Art

The Guardian review of February's sandpit which commented on a lack of "profound cultural experiences" at the event has started me thinking about the relation of social and pervasive gaming to art. Whilst raising the question of whether games can constitute art might seem a particularly futile activity given the nebulous nature of the term, there are practical advantages to be gained in developing a greater understanding of the topic, especially when attempting to explain ourselves to arts funding bodies such as the Arts Council. Nevertheless, I should make clear that the idea is not to provide answers at this stage, but merely to raise useful questions for discussion.

I got into game design just over a year ago via my activities as a classical composer. At the time I was writing and performing live algorithmic music with my band Halal Kebab Hut. The pieces were non-linear and rule based, so the analogue with game design was easy to spot. It's probably not surprising then that I find very little distinction if any between my work as game designer and my work as composer. Some of my games have music and some of my music has winners, so defining which is game and which is music can at times be pretty arbitrary. But even when the distinction is clearer, the design processes and underlying values of the two fields are similar. Both are concerned with formal beauty and involve exhaustive investigations into resultant relations between various properties, whether those be notes, sounds, and musicians, or on the other hand dice, cards, and game players. Both fields involve a degree of subjective or expressive input and are able to be irreverent, humorous, profound, puerile, punk, referential or abstract. I would also argue that the two fields are equally engaged in their own material dialectic though music as the far older art form is richer in this regard. Finally both fields are concerned with audience reception, engaging people as performers, and the creation of a spectacle. I often use my games as a way of turning people into unwitting performers, using the game mechanic as a particularly effective decoy to distract from the usual social anxieties associated with performance. I find the results to be more immediate and the social interactions more interesting than through working with the standard type of conceptual performance scores such as those used by the fluxus movement of the 1960's. However, whilst the music I compose, however contentious, falls under the heading of art, the games I design don't.

Of course it's hardly the case that all music equates to art. No one would claim happy birthday as an artistic work, nor for that matter the ubiquitous boy band hit single (though the case can be different if the music comes from the right period or guitars are involved). Even with the post modern abolition of high-art, low-art distinctions, vast swathes of music are nevertheless relegated to the categories of non-profound, superficial and functional. However, when one tries to discover on what grounds such categorisations are made one finds a great deal of inconsistency. For example, a contemporary composer such as me might claim innovation as a key facet without which the work is surely derivative, a pastiche. On the other hand, North Indian classical musicians regard themselves as guardians of their genre and have maintained their music in stasis for hundreds of years. Adorno, a philosopher who applied critical theory to music, and also equated jazz with fascism, claimed truth to be the ultimate

criterion. He categorised art into a progressive type, which served to expose the fragmented nature of society and a retrogressive type which reaffirmed the status-quo. Whilst it is certain that no work can be considered art without authenticity, what constitutes authenticity is highly localised and often contradictory. For example rock music frequently eschews instrumental technical facility as cheap trick often favouring a more raw, rootsy authentic delivery. Virtuoso rock musicians such as Yngve Malsteen, Eddie Van Halen, Steve Vai are often seen as a bit of a joke. In contrast, since the advent of Bebop, Jazz has used virtuosity as a shield to ward off more commercial interests that may threaten to compromise the music's authenticity.

So back to games ! Given that there is no consistent criteria by which something can be labelled art, the key question it seems is not what is artistic about game design, but how can games be perceived as art?

The theming of games is a key issue in this regard. With a little hindsight it comes as no surprise that the guardian reviewer saw those games with throw away joke themes as less profound than games with a more sombre demeanour. Nevertheless, I would contend that Mexican thumb wrestling can be just as profound a cultural experience as an interactive theatre piece in an East London warehouse. It really depends to what degree the game rests on its mechanic and the social interactions that it engenders and to what extent it relies on its theme to communicate meaning. The problem is that whilst profundity or triviality is easily recognisable in a theme, a profound game mechanic is less obvious to the uninitiated. Furthermore postmodern flippancy is interpreted differently in gaming than in other art forms. Music and visual arts are able to thrive off of the tension created by it precisely because they are known to be serious pursuits. The results are interpreted as shocking, provocative, ironic, and post modern. For games however the same attributes are merely observed as standard game antics, reinforcing the notion that games lie firmly outside the world of profundity and art. At some point social and pervasive gaming may have developed as far as to have its own reviewers, as other mediums do, who are able to appreciate such nuances, but for the time being we should perhaps be more aware of the effect our themes have.

Given this information it could be easy to manipulate people into treating our work as art. This is the tag line for my game conversation piece.

“An irreverent cocktail party game for hyperactive socialites. Do some rapid socialising in order to locate likeminded conversationalists but be careful — you wouldn't want to get stuck with a bore!”

But I could also describe the piece as “A live installation which engages the audience as performers exploring notions of hierarchy and exclusivity within contemporary society.”

The game hasn't changed, merely the presentation of it but with quite a significant effect. Nevertheless, I can't help but wonder what would be lost in return for this pretty superficial pandering to a popular idea of the profound. It strikes me that what is profound about social and pervasive games is not how

they comment on society but how they manipulate social relations. In other words how they make people strategise, deceive, form alliances etc. I don't consider this any less artistic than the former. For this reason, despite its likely effectiveness regarding an arts council application, I find the second description to be disingenuous. If we want games to be accepted as art then it should be on games' terms or else the meaning is lost.

A second but by no means lesser issue is the cult of personality which is central to art and has so far been overlooked in gaming. I noticed that the games mentioned in the Guardian review weren't credited. Such a thing would be unimaginable in the world of visual arts or music. Artistic works are created by individuals or collectives that have particular contrasting styles and aesthetics. These in turn are commented on by the publicity machinery surrounding the art form with the individuals behind the work being viewed as somehow endowed with particular talents that allow only them to produce that work thus amplifying the value of their output. Being such a young art form, social and pervasive game designers have no such publicity machinery with which to get their work reviewed. It's none the less clear to me that different aesthetics exist, so beginning some tentative steps towards building that machinery perhaps in the form of a website may now be a good idea. Of course creating a cult of personality within the field is not without its costs. One of the refreshing things about game design is that it's largely non-hierarchical. Provided they have an idea for a game, anyone can be a game designer and will most likely be able to put their game on at a sandpit or elsewhere. My fear is that the aim of creating an elite group of artist game designers is incompatible with the current anything goes vibe of social gaming.

So the questions I'd like to leave you with are:

What is it that we want to protect to about social and pervasive gaming ?

and

How can we advance it as an art form without compromising these aspects?

Simon Katan 2009