

THE NEW ART OF VIDEOGAMES

I have a horrible secret to admit: I routinely carry out acts of murder and barbarism for fun. I have beaten up old ladies, run over pedestrians while driving recklessly on the footpath, and killed a multitude of gangsters, cops, innocent civilians, and sequined jumpsuit-wearing Elvis impersonators. In acts of gross animal cruelty, I've exploded numerous lemmings. I have even committed genocide, putting entire civilizations to the sword as I ravaged continents as a brutal militaristic tyrant. Worst of all is that though I presently find myself somewhat guilty and ashamed of my actions, at the time it was all great fun. There is no doubt that I laughed hysterically throughout many of my criminal and immoral adventures. I suspect that I am not alone in this concealed shame, and that readers will have similar guilty secrets about what they do in their spare time. Videogames, of course, are to blame for all these activities. Gaming has made me an immoral monster.

A philosophical exploration of the art of videogaming is overdue. In the space of little more than forty years videogames have developed from rudimentary artifacts designed to exploit the entertainment capabilities of the newly invented computer, into a new and sophisticated form of popular art. For many people, I suspect, the image of videogames is still one of rather crude digital entertainments: pixilated space invaders moving jerkily across a screen, yellow discs munching glowing balls, and tiny men climbing ladders and jumping barrels might come to mind. But recent times have seen the technical and artistic sophistication of games grow to an amazing degree. Many videogames are now simply stunning in their graphical and auditory depictions. In a manner similar to the development of representational techniques in other art forms, digital artists and craftspeople have explored the artistic potential of the new medium and are now producing results arguably equal to the other representational arts. All of these developments have been made in the space of living memory, and watching

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this evolution of the new cultural form has been an exciting experience. On a number of occasions I have felt the thrill of seeing something entirely new, a game that seemed suddenly to expand the horizons of art.

It is worthwhile pausing here to consider some examples of what this new art has become in so short a time. I cannot hope to convey a true impression of the artistic qualities of videogames here – there is no substitute for experiencing the games first-hand – but surveying some of the artistic highpoints of recent gaming is worthwhile nevertheless. No doubt anyone reading this book would benefit from playing the games mentioned and discussed in the text in conjunction with the reading. I suspect that most readers will be able to supplement these examples with their own anyway.

The 2006 fantasy game *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, places the player, in the guise of a character that they have designed and named, into a massive and beautiful fictional province called Cyrodiil. *Oblivion* is a *sandbox* game, in that it represents an open fictional environment in which the player has a great deal of choice over exactly what they do: they can engage in one of the several narratives that span the world, take up the robes of a wizard and battle the evil influence of the necromancers in Cyrodiil, fight various foes as a warrior for hire, or merely explore the wilderness, ruins, and dungeons of the area. This is all run of the mill fantasy fare, but what makes *Oblivion* so engrossing is that the fantasy world is presented in an extraordinarily beautiful way and with such a complete freedom that exploring Cyrodiil is an engaging, emotional, and aesthetically rewarding experience.

The very beginning of the game bears out the beauty and freedom of the game. *Oblivion* begins with a short dungeon adventure in which the player constructs their character, including their name, race, appearance, and class, learns the controls and basic gameplay of the game, and also learns something of the narrative that forms the background to their involvement in Cyrodiil. This initial dungeon adventure is very much a *tutorial* for the playing of the game. Dungeon exploring has been a staple of role-playing adventure games since near the beginning of videogaming, and it is typically *linear* in that it forces the player down a certain path in which monsters must be confronted and defeated, and puzzles solved, before the player can proceed. Dungeon jaunts can also be aesthetically dismal, with the predominant textures being darkly rendered stone and rock passageways and tunnels. On exiting the dungeon, *Oblivion* sets both of these features – the linearity of the dungeon adventure, and the dismal appearance of the dungeon itself – in an abrupt juxtaposition with an open, unconstrained, and strikingly beautiful environment. Suddenly the player is in the open air, confronted with a wonderfully rendered pastoral scene including misty green hills, rippling water, and an enticing ancient ruin on a nearby shore.

Furthermore, where their progress through the dungeon was previously strictly guided, the player now finds that they are free to wander the environment as they wish, with only the briefest of prompts that there is a quest that they might take up. When I first emerged into the open environment, the freedom and expanse of the environment was a little bewildering: what should I do? Exactly what *could* I do? Was the game environment really as big as it looked? (It was.) Only over time – the game has literally hundreds of hours of gameplay – did I answer these questions through exploring the world and its potential for adventure. Cyrodiil also became a familiar place, populated by people I would get to know, and even favorite places that I would return to repeatedly to experience their beauty. This seems to be something new in art: the representation of the player, their agency, and their aesthetic experiences, *within* a fictional world – videogames seem to provide an active exploratory aesthetics.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas stands for many gamers and gaming critics as a significant achievement of modern videogaming. Like *Oblivion*, *San Andreas* is a sandbox game, though here rather than exploring dungeons and going on quests, players spend their time in various criminal activities such as carjacking, robbery, and, to put it plainly, murder. Set in a fictional version of the West Coast of the United States, and spread over a huge digital environment encompassing several islands and three distinctive cities and their outlying rural areas, the game involves the player – in the guise of urban gangster Carl “CJ” Johnson – in a fiction that is filled with remarkable characters and events. From the first frames the impressive style of the game is evident. The tone is set by the stylish introductory graphics: where other games rely on a flashy animated set piece for an introduction, *San Andreas* employs a graphically minimalist strategy of introducing the places in the game in pictures rendered in the style now distinctive to the franchise. The production quality of the game is striking, and though the polish on the graphics is inferior when compared to games in other genres, the depth and vivacity of the world of *San Andreas* both explains this, and makes up for it.

The game’s narrative is at once archetypal and also agreeable in its arc and detail: CJ, the prodigal son, returns home to find his neighborhood now wracked by internal conflict and external threats. The game sets out his slow rise through the criminal ranks from petty crook to gangster kingpin, his reconciliation with his brother, and the eventual defeat of his enemies. Along the way CJ encounters Los Angeles style gang wars and riots, corrupt cops, drug dealers and pimps trying to muscle in on his territory, shadowy FBI operatives and paranoid conspiracy theorists, a secret military base in the middle of the desert complete with top secret technology, and the high life in a city of bright lights, gambling, and the aforementioned sequined

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jumpsuit-wearing Elvis impersonators. The characters are especially vivid: Officer Tenpenny is a corrupt city cop with a disposition for violence; Catalina is Carl's psychotic man-hating girlfriend; The Truth is an aging gnostic hippy with paranoid delusions and a large plantation of dope; OG Loc is a wannabe gangster and rapper working in a burger joint while dreaming of hitting it big. The gameplay that is set against this narrative, as infuriating as it can be, is also intensely satisfying, and often, giggle inducing. The sheer amount of gameplay – the main storyline, hidden mini-games, the many incidental tasks that must be completed – is immense. To do everything in the game can take weeks of fairly regular play.

Finally, elevating the game above many of its more mundane contemporaries is the sense of intelligent and subversive humor that pervades it. *San Andreas* picks up on the clichés of its setting – both those of the actual time and those funneled through the popular cinema and gangster rap of early 1990s California – to present a compelling and hilarious take on that period in history. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is frequently misunderstood by casual observers who see only the fictional violence of carjacking and murders, but miss the many signs that the games are black comedies in which the player takes the central role, exploring a fictional world, and through it, the human potential to be violent and immoral. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is undoubtedly fictionally violent, but it also seems a significant artistic achievement, despite this violence – or perhaps indeed because of it.

As a quite different example, the recent videogame *Portal* gives a tantalizing glimpse of how 3D space might be manipulated to produce mind-bending puzzles. *Portal* situates the player in a set of austere futuristic environments or *test chambers* built by the fictional military contractor Aperture Science within the extended *Half-Life* universe. The object of the game is to progress through the test chambers and reach the exit. The spatial puzzles presented by the game derive from the *portal gun* the player is equipped with. Firing the portal gun at a wall, floor, or ceiling, the player can open a portal to another spatial location in the environment through which they can step to access the new location. The player can open up to two portals at most – an orange and a blue portal – and entering one portal leads to the location of the other. So, for example, if the player wants to access a high ledge that they cannot climb, the solution is to open a portal on the ceiling above the ledge, and another portal on the floor in front of them, and simply step through to land on the ledge.

As the player moves through a spatial portal, from their new orientation they can often briefly see themselves disappearing into the portal they just entered, and this proves to be a very disorientating and disconcerting feeling, giving the game a very surreal character. Furthermore, travel through a portal preserves the momentum of the player-character so that if the player

jumps into a portal they exit the second portal with their previous vector, though with the new spatial orientation: or as the game puts it, “speedy thing goes in, speedy thing comes out.” The player can exploit this preservation of momentum to *fling* themselves around the environments: by placing one portal on the floor in front of a ledge, and another at the bottom of a pit, the player can jump into the second portal, emerge from the first now traveling upwards, and land on top of the ledge. The game exploits this potential for movement to present challenges that become increasingly complex and confounding. *Portal* is the game you would get if M. C. Escher took on videogame design.

As well as its excellent and innovative gameplay, *Portal* presents an engaging narrative. The player-character, almost entirely anonymous apart from her name, Chell, and her appearance that can be glimpsed through the portals, is guided through the test chambers by an artificial intelligence named GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System). In the best of science fiction traditions it quickly becomes clear that GLaDOS is insincere, malfunctioning, and probably insane. GLaDOS makes promises of cake as a reward for passing the tests, and the player soon finds that they are not the first to be subjected to the challenges, with the discovery of broken and dilapidated areas of the test chambers where previous test subjects have taken refuge and scrawled their disturbed ramblings on the walls – including the recurring line “the cake is a lie.” The player encounters deadly but apologetic gun turrets that when destroyed assure the player they don’t hold a grudge, and a *weighted companion cube* the player must take with them through one level and then incinerate in a sentimental and particularly funny sequence. The game ends unexpectedly with a song sung by GLaDOS, where she recounts the events of the game in the deadpan dialogue characteristic of the game: when I played the game, the song had me in hysterics, but also gave me an overwhelming sense of artistic completion. The idiosyncrasies of the game were perfectly summed up by the unexpected and odd little song.

From just these three examples it is clear that videogames share many of their artistic qualities with other cultural forms – particularly in their graphical and narrative qualities – but they are also artistically significant in their own terms. *Gameplay*, which is comprised of the interactive challenges presented by games, has become an object of complexity and subtlety, calling in many cases for an artistic evaluation. The examples introduced above give some idea of the variety there is in gameplay: *Oblivion* sets the player on exploratory quests, battling monsters and gathering treasure. One might read about a quest in Tolkien’s novels, but in a gameplay setting the player performs the quest. *San Andreas* asks its players to perform missions, some of them very much like the action set pieces of blockbuster movies, others

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involving collecting photos of landmarks or spraying graffiti to stake out gang turf. *Portal* engages the player with odd spatial puzzles. Puzzles have been around for a very long time, but in *Portal* the player encounters the puzzles within a fictional world that also involves a narrative providing their fictional motivation for interacting with the puzzles. This fictional first-hand experience of gameplay seems to give it an aesthetic edge, and indeed, when criticizing games, players and critics often turn first to the interactive and expressive qualities of the gameplay. Does it flow? Does it engage or immerse the player? Is it varied? How does it *feel*? Despite its interactive and gaming nature, gameplay seems to engage players in ways similar to other arts and that calls on a similar kind of interpretive and evaluative engagement.

Each of these games, though not entirely unprecedented, and not without flaws, struck me as a notable artistic achievement. Though in each case there are earlier games with similar gameplay and themes, all of these examples display a polish and depth that signifies their artistic worth and that extends upon previous achievements. In this they are symptomatic of a general trend toward the increased artistic and technical sophistication of videogaming. Some gamers and games critics argue that gameplay has shown little development in the past twenty years. But to say that videogames have not made significant strides across the full range of their artistic qualities is an untenable position. Even the claim that gameplay has shown little development seems dubious when one considers that *The Elder Scrolls* and *Portal* replicate earlier gameplay types only when they are characterized in the *grossest* terms as, respectively, a fantasy role-playing game and a puzzle game. It is the striking way in which the role-playing and puzzles of these games are presented that is a noteworthy development. The openness of sandbox games also seems to be a significant and mostly unprecedented recent formal development in the artistic qualities of gameplay.

Why are videogames displaying this trend toward artistic sophistication? A large part of this artistic growth has been driven by technology: the present is an age of next generation consoles and powerful personal computers – gaming devices that are able to create sophisticated, responsive, and increasingly beautiful fictional worlds into which players step in order to play games. The most recent batch of consoles – the X Box 360, Nintendo Wii, and Playstation 3 – are each technological marvels that bring real-time digital animation into the home where less than twenty years ago such animation was the exclusive domain of big budget film makers. This technology is a prerequisite for most modern gaming, and though other artworks such as popular film have felt the influence of the recent technological developments, none is so closely tied to digital technology as videogames. Games are now commonly played on the high definition digital televisions and monitors and through Dolby 5.1 home theatre sound systems, and these, in conjunction

with platform developments of consoles and PC gaming, have had a significant impact on how modern games look and sound.

The Internet has also proved to be a significant technological impetus to gaming, both in allowing people to come together to play online, and in bringing gamers together to discuss games and to criticize them on the many gaming forums scattered around the net. These discussion boards have led to a level of gaming criticism and connoisseurship not previously seen. The Internet has led to the development of videogames with simply huge fictional worlds. *World of Warcraft*, for example, is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) that brings players from around the real world together to interact in a fantasy world, engaging in all the typical fantasy role-playing game fare of exploring dungeons, fighting monsters, performing quests, and some much more unexpected behavior to be discussed later (chapter 3). As of 2007, according to a press release from the game's developer Blizzard, the game had 9 million subscribers (Blizzard, 2007). Millions of players interacting in a virtual fantasy world is a stunning fact of both technological and artistic significance.

This last example is also evidence that videogames are now incredibly widespread, and are generating an evermore general appeal. The games industry is now by some estimates bigger than the movie industry, widely reported to be worth US\$30 billion a year. Sales of the next generation of consoles number in the millions, and top gaming titles can sell tens of millions of copies: often with numbers in excess of the sales of music titles. *Halo 3*, released on the X-Box 360 in late 2007, took US\$170 million domestically on its first day and US\$300 million worldwide in its first week of sales: the latter amounting to 5 million units sold (Microsoft, 2007). *Grand Theft Auto IV* made an even more impressive US\$500 million in its first week of sales in May 2008. These numbers dwarf revenues for recent releases from popular music, and all but the biggest blockbusters in film. This, arguably, is part of a trend that sees videogaming eclipsing film and pop music, the predominant popular art forms of the twentieth century. This commercial growth underpins the technological advances in providing an economic rationale for the research and development necessary for the gaming technology, and hence has a direct bearing on the current artistic sophistication of gaming.

Also relevant is the recent change in gaming demographics. Recent industry research carried out by the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia finds that the audience for games is maturing and widening, showing the inaccuracy of the popular image of gamers as adolescent boys: the average age of gamers in Australia is 28, 41 percent of gamers are females, and 8 percent are seniors (Brand, 2007). Gaming seems to be growing up in a literal sense as its players get older. Arguably, the new and maturing

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audiences of gaming are demanding more variety and are also paying increasing critical attention to games, explaining something of the recent artistic developments. Admittedly, games still have a lot of growing up to do.

Gaming is not always seen as an entirely positive development: my mock shame in the opening paragraph of this chapter dices with a genuine moral difficulty. No doubt many have a response of immediate distaste to videogames, associating them with violence and aggression, and worrying about their effects on children and society. Videogames generate a host of moral worries that, like the artistic qualities discussed above, seem to be becoming more pronounced in recent times. The two issues seem related: because recent games are more artistically sophisticated, particularly in terms of their graphical qualities, the immoral content of games seems all the more lifelike and hence worrying. A game like the post-apocalyptic role-playing shooter *Fallout 3*, because of its graphical brilliance, can depict violence in a very visceral way, thereby making the images it presents all the more shocking: the game is filled with slow-motion shots of dismemberment and exploding body parts.

San Andreas is especially notorious for its immoral content. The game is filled with violent content and sexual themes, and in it the player controls a character that is quite obviously morally vicious. CJ, by any standard, is not a nice guy. In 2005 the game generated a considerable controversy when it was discovered that it could be modified by hacking its code to unlock a mini sex game that had not been included in the official release. CJ, it turns out, is able to partake in fairly explicit sexual acts with a number of girlfriends he has scattered throughout San Andreas. But even the official release of the game allows players to pick up prostitutes for sex, and then murder them. Though *San Andreas* does not give the player points for such actions – as sources in the popular media have suggested – the game could be conceived as rewarding the player for these acts, as after the murder players can take any money the prostitute had. Any particular game of *San Andreas* is likely to involve hundreds, if not thousands, of killings – the number of which is kept track of in the *achievements* menu. It is undeniable then, that the game involves its players in fictionally immoral activities. For many, this is a reason to think *Grand Theft Auto* and similar games to be morally suspect.

As well as involving its players in immoral fictions, some think *Grand Theft Auto* and other games like it are genuinely psychologically and behaviorally injurious to their players. Psychologist Craig Anderson begins one of his influential papers on the consequences of videogames for aggressive behavior by setting out the now familiar story of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the perpetrators of the Columbine school massacre who were frequent players of the first-person shooter videogame *Doom* (Anderson and Dill, 2000). Retired army lieutenant colonel Dave Grossman thinks that videogames are

“training” children to be killers (Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999). *Grand Theft Auto* has even been blamed for actual crimes. American anti-gaming attorney Jack Thompson has repeatedly appeared in the news media arguing videogames to be responsible for school shootings in Kentucky, Columbine, and Virginia Tech.

Beyond these specific claims, videogames have always had something of an image problem. Among the common charges are that videogames are a pointless waste of time, are offensive, misogynistic, immature, addictive, encourage sedentary behavior and hence obesity, cause seizures, dumb children down, hype children up, keep them up late at nights, cause occupational overuse syndrome, destroy the culture of reading, involve players with the occult, lead to suicide pacts, and attack the moral fiber of our society.

And yet, videogames are also increasingly morally aware. Having often been the subject of ethical criticism, gaming is now showing signs of taking itself seriously as an art form with moral implications. *BioShock* – a recent first-person shooter set, amusingly, in a world derived from Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* – puts the player in a position where they cannot help but ponder the morality of their actions. *BioShock* draws on the past, depicting its dystopia through the architectural and pop-cultural tropes of 1930s and 1940s America. Decaying art deco facades, faded Hollywood socialites, and echoes of Howard Hughes and *Citizen Kane* are combined with period music and philosophical and literary references to produce a coherent aesthetic statement that is all the more engaging because of the player’s moral role within that world. The familiar task of harvesting resources from the game world is given a moral twist in that the resources are stored inside *Little Sisters*: cute little girls who have been genetically modified for the task of extracting the stem cells the player needs to complete the game.

Oblivion also offers the opportunity to pursue an irredeemably evil lifestyle – but one that is not without consequences, and indeed, occasional moral guilt on the part of the player. As a part of the assassin storyline, the player must kill a number of people who, unlike the cannon fodder in most other videogames, are given a back-story and characterization that shows them to be innocents caught up in the machinations of some evil individual – more often than not the player! Fictions have often been thought to provide opportunities for moral reflection or learning, and there is a large literature devoted to how (or indeed if) they can do this. But because of the interactive nature of videogame fictions – the player takes a part in the moral situations presented there, and whether or not the evil occurs is often up to them – the potential of games for the exploration of moral issues seems somehow more vivid: and perhaps more dangerous, where the game does not provide opportunities to put the content in a thoughtful or realistic context.

There is then, plenty of motivation for the theory of videogames, and a number of theorists have already taken up this concern. The growing academic literature on games and gaming – often referred to as *games studies* – has made some initial strides in the last decade. Games studies is an interdisciplinary field drawing mostly from the humanities, social sciences, psychology, and computer science, and which deals with a wide variety of issues ranging from technical inquiries into design principles, to theoretical examinations of the social significance of gaming. The field, though still in its early stages, has already led to a number of valuable new perspectives on videogaming.

My disciplinary orientation is rather different to that found in games studies, however. In this book I will situate videogames in the framework of the philosophy of the arts, a field that has almost altogether ignored gaming. Philosophical aesthetics, I hope to show, is ideally suited to providing an informative theoretical prototype for the study of videogames. Hence, I see this book not as one situated within games studies, but as a philosophical and humanistic work on the topic of videogames. This makes a practical difference in that the gaming examples I focus on, and the issues that I explore through them, will often not be orientated around the issues prominent in current games studies, but instead those to be found within the philosophy of the arts.

Gaming replicates many of the issues that have been the traditional focus of philosophical aesthetics. Theories that exist within the philosophy of the arts, designed to explain things beside videogames, often find a natural application in the case of videogames. Among the topics dealt with in the recent philosophy of the arts are the definition of art, the ontology of artworks, the expressive nature of artworks and our experience of their expressive qualities, the nature of narrative and interpretation, and recently, issues in cognitive science particular to the perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes involved in the appreciation of art. A number of these concerns have their corollaries in videogaming.

Among the questions that will interest philosophers when they come to look at videogames are the following:

- Can videogames be defined?
- How do videogames sit in respect to earlier forms of art?
- How does the digital medium of videogames have an effect on their employment of narratives, fictions, and visual art?
- How does the player stand in relation the fictional worlds of videogames?
- How do videogames appeal to the player's emotions?
- What is the moral significance of videogaming?

- Can gamers be genuinely morally blamed for what they do in a fictional world?
- What is the locus of artistic interest in games, and how does this differ from other traditional forms of art?
- Finally, are videogames genuinely art, as I have unquestioningly and perhaps rashly claimed in this introductory chapter?

This book, split into nine chapters, is an attempt to address these and other questions concerning videogames and their relationship to art. In the next chapter I address the first issue on the list, arguing that we must turn our attention to the formal features of definition if we are to construct a definition responsive to the varied nature of videogaming. Chapter 3 discusses the fictional nature of videogames, drawing on the philosophical theory of fiction to establish that videogames are indeed *interactive fictions*. Along the way the concepts of virtuality and immersion are considered and explained in the context of the theory of fiction: videogames, I argue, are *virtual fictions*. Chapter 4 is comprised of a survey of the representational means of these virtual fictions, including the crucial role of the player-character as the player's *fictive proxy* in a game world. Chapter 5 looks at how these virtual fictions are ideal for situating games. Games, I will argue, are best seen as formal systems set in a framework of behavioral norms, and on both of these issues the theory of interactive fiction has something to contribute to the understanding of gaming. Chapter 6 discusses the nature of narrative in gaming, again arguing that the nature of videogames as virtual or interactive fictions has a significant impact on this issue. Chapter 7 presents a theory of how the emotions are involved in gaming, explaining what it is we become emotional about, and the role that emotions play in *connecting* us with game worlds. Chapter 8 looks into the obvious moral significance of videogaming. Many people are of the opinion that the violent content in videogames is genuinely worrying from a moral point of view; I assess whether these basic intuitions really are warranted, offering a partial defense of the disturbing content found in games. Chapter 9 turns its attention to whether videogames really are a form of art. Drawing on the discussion of the previous chapters, and philosophical theory about the nature of art, I hope the reader will come to agree with me that videogames are not only properly regarded as art, but as an art form filled with a potential for creativity, richness, and subtlety.

I suspect, for a number of reasons, that there might be some resistance to this last claim about the potential of videogames as art. Fans of high-art, in particular, may balk at comparing *Fallout 3* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* to *War and Peace*, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and the other pinnacle achievements of human culture to be found in the arts. Admittedly, videogames

do not yet reach the heights of these great artworks. Though the ultimate justification of my application of philosophical aesthetics to videogames will be what success I have in my aims in this book, I will say a couple of things here. First, videogames are in their infancy, and have developed to their current level of sophistication in a very short time. The last fifteen years in particular have seen rapid maturation of the form, and I see signs in that growth that games are beginning to broach the concerns usually associated with serious art. Second, looking on games with a sympathetic eye already turns up impressive riches. In many respects videogames are a hard sell to culturally literate people: they have a bad image for any number of reasons. But pushing beyond this often unfair image, videogames do have much to offer in the way of aesthetic pleasures, and as such they are of intrinsic interest to philosophical aesthetics.

But besides allowing us to understand videogames themselves, a philosophical study of gaming also has the potential to shed new light on a number of the traditional issues within the philosophy of the arts. As a new form of art, a careful study of videogaming can allow us knowledge not only of videogames, but of the larger classes – popular art, fiction, visual art, narrative – of which modern gaming is an instance. Permit me to extend an analogy. For biologists, the discovery of a new species is exciting not only in the interest of the new species itself, but of the potential the discovery has to tell them about the rest of the biological world. The discovery of the platypus, for example, made a great many surprising facts known to eighteenth-century scientists, forcing them to revise many of the ideas they accepted about the world (Eco, 2000: 241–248). Some mammals, it turned out, not only lacked nipples, but also laid eggs, and so nipple-bearing and egg-laying could no longer be thought to be features that distinguished between reptiles and birds (sauropsids) and mammals. More significantly, the platypus served to make clear the aetiological links between mammals and the egg-laying creatures from which they were ultimately derived: platypuses seem from the previous perspective to be an uncomfortable middle point between reptiles and mammals, providing an important illustration of the continuities of nature (Dawkins, 2004: 238–242). Through the discovery and explanation of the platypus we learn something about the more familiar classes of which it is a member, and also of the basic nature of the biological world.

Videogames have the potential to be a *cultural platypus*. The general theme of this book is that videogames are a new form of representational art that employ the technology of the computer for the purposes of entertainment. They involve their audiences through structural forms – including visual representations, games, interactive fictions, and narratives – that have cultural precedents in other artworks and non-artworks. When represented through the digital medium of videogames, however, these forms are productive of

new possibilities in artistic creation, some of them described above in the examples of *Oblivion*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Portal*, and others to be met through the course of this book. Equally, videogames also engage us in ways that are precedented in previous forms of culture and art: they inspire us to judgments of perceptual beauty, they involve us in interpretation, and they arouse our emotions. But they also modify this participation by representing the player and their agency within a fictional world. It may turn out that what we thought we knew about art, fiction, narrative, games, and the psychology of the arts, was really an artifact of what was already known to exist in those classes of things.

I am a gamer as well as a philosopher, and a lot of my discussion here will be informed and propelled by my own gaming experiences. This book is filled with anecdotes of my many adventures in game worlds. A number of the academic works about videogames give the unmistakable impression of really being about something else: many are merely surveys of the author's academic and theoretical preoccupations, with videogames employed as a subject matter to tease out the issues they find to be of real interest. When I began this work, I wanted to write a book squarely about videogames, because I think they are of intrinsic and not merely instrumental interest. I have sympathy for videogames, and if I achieve anything here, I hope it is to show how a sensitive look into gaming can uncover the genuine artistic richness of the new cultural form, perhaps even tempting some of the non-gamers who read this book to pick up a controller and play.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Videogames are a growing phenomenon and influence in the modern world, and are displaying new levels of artistic sophistication. As such they seem to engage many of the same issues as do the traditional arts, raising questions about aesthetics, representation, narrative, emotional engagement, and morality, that have been the focus of the philosophy of the arts. Philosophical aesthetics promises to provide a unique window of understanding into videogames.

NEXT CHAPTER

Can videogames be defined? Exactly how do they relate to previous forms of art and entertainment? Videogames, I argue, are not characterized by any single distinctive trait, but instead are made up of a variable set of such conditions. Specifically, they employ new digital media toward the ends of

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entertainment, achieving that function through the representation of the traditional cultural forms of gaming, narrative, and fiction. Videogames differ to previous forms of art, mostly in their technologically dependent digital media, but also share profound continuities with earlier forms of art and entertainment in how they engage their audiences.