

# Is Thatgamecompany Bringing Computer Games Closer to Art with Their New Game “Flower”?

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*“It's beautiful, stirring, and it may have some rethinking their definitions of art”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Flower, coming to the PlayStation Network this Thursday, is set to become the leading argument for games as art”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Flower gives the gamer a fully emotional experience”<sup>3</sup>*

These are exclamations following Internet presentations of Thatgamecompany's new game “Flower”, released on February 12<sup>th</sup> this year. Both developers and users describe it as a game with special aesthetic qualities. Its artistry is on the one hand explained through the games' lack of explicit instructions and score systems, on the other hand through its abstract and dreamlike story. A third argument for “Flower” bringing computer games closer to art, preaches its delicate graphics and their ability to arouse the players' emotions<sup>4</sup>.

## **Less ludic, more artistic?**

There is no doubt that text instructions and score numbers can be annoying in the screen picture of a game striving for a pure visual expression. Thus letting graphics and soundtrack themselves lead you through the game, is a sophisticated and intelligent way to solve this

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<sup>1</sup> Internet presentation at GameTrailers.com: <http://www.gametrailers.com/video/review-flower/46064>, May 21<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Kuchera Ben, Internet article: <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/reviews/2009/02/ps3s-flower-is-art-extends-conversation-on-what-games-are.ars>, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Kellee Santiago, president of Thatgamecompany, during a video conference at NTNU, Trondheim, May, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

problem. But would this be possible if this game had a more complicated plot? What is sacrificed on behalf of its sophistication? The players are hardly given any challenges – you are actually invited to relax when playing this game<sup>5</sup>. Is this what a gamer really wants? And more important – does it bring computer games any closer to art, like some of its critics claim?

I interpret the arguments for *Flower*'s unique artistry as based on an outdated understanding of aesthetics, an understanding concerned with beauty and harmony within artistic expressions. Abandoning scores and replacing instructions with interactive forms and sounds is definitely an elegant move, but as an argument for artistry, it signals that a game gets more artistic the less game like it appears. And that is to undermine the core identity of computer games.

### **Games are essentially systemic**

Seeing game design as a model for literacy in the twenty-first century, Eric Zimmerman stresses that “games are (...) essentially systemic”<sup>6</sup>. A game is constituted by its rules. But while Johan Huizinga in his classic work, or should I rather say gamers bible “*Homo Ludens*”<sup>7</sup>, stresses that you have to accept the rules to play a game, Zimmerman focuses on how the play itself often challenges the rules of the game:

“(...) play is far more than just play *within* a structure. Play can *play with* structures. Players do not just play games; they mod them, engage in metaplay between games, and develop cultures around games”<sup>8</sup>.

And this is part of the gaming literacy he is talking about. He claims that “A literacy based on play is a literacy of innovation and invention”<sup>9</sup>. I will accordingly argue that the aesthetics of a computer game is constituted by the very structures and systems that provide the total experience of the gamers. We have to look for the aesthetics of a game *within* its ludic qualities, not in each single element representing other aesthetic disciplines. The aesthetic of games shows in the way each element together create a systemic universe or narrative for the players to enter and play both with and within.

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<sup>5</sup> Internet presentation at GameTrailers.com, 21.05.2009: <http://www.gametrailers.com/video/review-flower/46064>

<sup>6</sup> Zimmerman, Eric (2009): “Gaming Literacy. Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century”, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. Routledge: NY, p. 26

<sup>7</sup> Known as “the magic circle” of the game – you will have to accept the rules to enter.

<sup>8</sup> Zimmerman, Eric (2009), 27

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

I'm not saying "Flower" is a game not being game like *enough*, or that a game needs score tables and instructions to be a good game. In fact, like journalist and game theoretician Steven Poole, I hold it to be a quite traditional game. There are levels and goals to be reached, and it requires some strategies for its tasks<sup>10</sup>. Poole finds that the only thing new with this game, is its *degree* of sophistication in its labor-based structure, claiming its idea to be adapted from older games like *Okami* and *Rez*<sup>11</sup>. This is only partly true. "Flower" definitely explores an unknown market of gamers with other motives for playing than a strong desire to contest and solve puzzles. And that is both brave and innovative.

In their book *21<sup>st</sup> Century Game Design*, Chris Bateman and Richard Boon investigate the desires of video game players according to psychological models, such as the Myers-Briggs Typology.<sup>12</sup> They find that most computer game designers fail to identify the diversity of gamers' needs, in their effort to please hard core gamers, which they believe to play the role of evangelists introducing games to a broader market of "casual gamers". Hard core gamers are goal oriented and enjoy conflicts in a game situation<sup>13</sup>. Thatgamecompany is therefore brave and innovative to produce a meditative game for relaxation, like "Flower".

But my point is still that the noncompetitive basis of the game is no argument for a higher degree of artistry than in other games. And neither is its graphic elegance. And speaking about feelings – while playing this game I'd rather speak of falling into some kind of mood, than of having actual feelings aroused. I actually experience a much broader specter of feelings being triggered, playing an action oriented game like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Medal of Honor*.

### **Computer games bringing new perspectives to contemporary aesthetics**

Working on a project plan for a possible doctoral degree at NTNU (The University of Trondheim), I investigate the possibility for an understanding of computer and video games as art, facing an institutionally founded art world where the reminiscence of modernism still craves that art and artists should be conceptual, oppositional and noncommercial. Even though anti- and postmodern schools are dominating the art world, and has done so since the

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<sup>10</sup> Poole, Steven (2009): "Sonnet the Hedgehog", *The Global Game Industry Network Edge*, <http://www.edge-online.com/blogs/sonnet-the-hedgehog>, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Bateman, Chris and Richard Boon (2006): *21st Century Game Design*, Massachusetts: Charles River Media, p. 33-51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 40

1970s<sup>14</sup>, the heritage from modernism makes it difficult if not impossible to reenact a classical understanding of aesthetics. Computer game theorists concerned with aesthetic questions should therefore be careful not to exclude themselves from the debates within the art world of today. If we look for computer game aesthetics exclusively in exterior elements like music, motion and graphics, we reduce computer game art to a question of its mimic abilities, thus subordinating it to more classic aesthetic disciplines long since disparted and renounced by modern and contemporary art.

The old debate is still running, though, whether formally oriented or concept based art ought to run the future show, the conceptualists leading so far. According to the Norwegian art historian Marit Paasche, conceptual artists rest on top of the hierarchy of the “Art World”, to use Arthur Dantos term later leading to an institutionally founded definition of art. To look for aesthetic expressions outside of the institutions defining art today, galleries, exhibitions and academies, for example in a more commercial area like video games, is still considered a dubious project, much thanks to two gentlemen you might know – Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer<sup>15</sup>. Prejudicing and theoretically reducing every film director to a slave of the film industry, and underestimating the aesthetic qualities of the film medium as a whole, the two philosophers made the first move in the direction of an institutionally enclosed art, excluding every commercial attempt to create art works from the narrow sphere of *authentic* art, or should I call it fine arts.

As a member of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, I visited their annual conference held in Trondheim earlier this summer<sup>16</sup>. The conference was titled “The Future of Aesthetics”. Paradoxically, only three of more than forty lectures or workshops tangled aesthetical problems concerning digital or new medial expressions. Still struggling with Andy Warhol’s “Brillo Boxes”<sup>17</sup> and Arthur Dantos revival of Friedrich Hegel’s “End of Art”-thesis<sup>18</sup>, I realized that leading art theorists are ignoring new, aesthetical problems connected to aesthetically oriented technology.

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<sup>14</sup> Bø-Rygg, Arnfinn (1983/1995): “Modernisme, antimodernisme, postmodernisme: kritiske streiftog i samtidens kunst og kunstteori”, *Tidvise skrifter*, Vol. 14, Stavanger: University of Stavanger

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer (1947/1972): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder.

<sup>16</sup> “The Future of Aesthetics”, Annual Conference of The Nordic Society of Aesthetics in Trondheim, 11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009

<sup>17</sup> Art work from 1964, introducing the readymade arts

<sup>18</sup> A thesis first presented in an essay in 1984, and later developed in his book from 1998: *After the End of Art*. Woodstock: Princeton University Press

I see the possibility of computer and video games bringing new and adequate perspectives to contemporary aesthetics, especially through the *play aspects* of a game, or what we call *interactivity*. Both modern drama and literature aim to implement the audience's response to their art work in different ways, but their media can never reach the level of interactivity provided by computer games, especially not online multiplayer games. Computer games give the audience the possibility to participate in, and even manipulate, the story of a game. And, yes, most games *do* tell a story, from Nintendo's fairytale inspired Legend of Zelda to urban gangster games, such as the Grand Theft Auto-series from Rockstar North. Marie-Laure Ryan shows in her book "Narrative as Virtual Reality" how what she calls "the poetics of interactivity" redefine the term "story"<sup>19</sup>. A narrative is no longer necessarily a linear work, with a beginning, a middle part and an end. Like Zimmerman and Jenkins, Ryan calls for special skills to create non-linear narratives:

"(...) nonlinear writers who want to preserve narrativity face a much more difficult task than their linear colleagues, because the creation of narrative structures involves foresight and global planning"<sup>20</sup>.

Reenacting and revolutionizing the narrative, computer game design and technology are at the same time investigating their rather transparent systemic medium, both formally and semantically. In fact, the way contemporary artists use new technologies *inside of* art institutions are seldom matching the competence housed by the film or computer game industry. In the introduction of his book "Video Art" from 2003, Michael Rush quotes the famous video artist William Anastasi: "I wasn't interested in video, per se. I used whatever was at my disposal (...) to express what I was interested in"<sup>21</sup>. Rush claims that "While some (artists) may identify themselves as 'video artists', most see video as one material amongst many to be used in their art"<sup>22</sup>. So, video is just one of several media artists use to express their *ideas*, thus connecting video to the area of concept art. Further "(...) no handy 'themes' or 'schools' of artists present themselves as organizing tools", according to Rush. This is not the case in film and computer game industry, where all productions follow, experiment, or even *deliberately break* with different schools for creating narratives, or engaging a specific audience. The finest experiments and most clever formal and technological innovations are so far made on the commercial arena, suggesting that Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer

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<sup>19</sup> Ryan, Marie-Laure (2001): *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, Part III, 173-280

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 244

<sup>21</sup> Rush, Michael (2003 and 2007): *Video Art*. London: Thames & Hudson

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 9

were wrong to underestimate the authentic creative powers of mass media technology in their central work *“Dialectic of Enlightenment”*<sup>23</sup>.

### **Defining computer and video games as both ludic *and* aesthetic media**

My understanding of computer game aesthetics is closely connected to how I understand and define a computer game. Or maybe it is the opposite way around. I am in any case certain that contemporary aesthetic debates will bring themselves to a dead end without embracing the systemic, interdisciplinary expressions of computer games, and to identify gaming as an aesthetic experience. And video game producers have a lot to gain from being aware of the aesthetic qualities of their media, even to define computer and video games basically as both ludic and aesthetic expressions. Philosopher Aaron Smuts defines video games as follows:

“Video games combine elements from narrative fiction film, music and sports. They are arguably an art or sister art of the moving image, specifically, a form of digital animation. The code is like musical notation that is performed by the computer, and the games are played like sports”<sup>24</sup>

Directors and film critics have fought hard for the art status of film narratives. Now computer game designers and critics will have to fight the same fight to convince the art world that their medium has authentic aesthetic qualities. Ludologist and computer game researcher Lars Konzack claims that the challenge of game designers now is to design games that go beyond mere entertainment:

“Even if a game designer does not intentionally control and design the philosophy behind the game, one will exist anyway, just as in film. (...) In a well-designed philosophical game, the philosophy of the game is a coherent thought system or even a number of thought systems that interact in conflicting patterns.”<sup>25</sup>

Konzack advises designers to think, not in terms of “this feature would be cool to have”, but rather “this mechanical feature supports the philosophy of the game”<sup>26</sup>. I hold that several game designers already think like this, or else a complex sandbox game like GTA San

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/1972)

<sup>24</sup> Smuts, Aaron (2005): “Are Video Games Art?”, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=299>

[www.metacritics.com](http://www.metacritics.com), January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009

<sup>25</sup> Konzack, Lars (2009): “Philosophical Game Design”, *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. Routledge: NY, p. 34

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 33

Andreas would not work as well as it does. It challenges its gamers both technically and philosophically by the choices given by the brutalism of its antihero, CJ (Carl Johnsen) and the merciless and satirically USA-influenced world of gangsters. Creators like Dan Hauser, the man behind some of the GTA productions, thus prove that you can go beyond the aspect of entertainment without dismissing it.

## **Conclusion**

Then back to the question I started with – is the game “Flower” bringing computer games closer to art? I’d say, yes, to a certain degree. Not because its graphics, which I find rather dull, are more beautiful than other games’ graphics, nor because the story is kind of abstract, and definitely not because it arouses the gamers’ feelings, but because it simplifies and sophisticates the traditional game structure, thereby challenging creators to find and develop new solutions to guidelines for us gamers. Even if Flower is not my kind of game, I do admit that interacting with sounds and figures rather than reading instructions is a path worth exploring for most game designers, as long as it doesn’t reduce the flexibility of a game system. My final answer will be that “Flower” may not bring computer games closer to art in itself, but it enhances the aesthetic character of this medium in general.

## **Games**

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