THE ART OF VIDEOGAMES

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VIDEOGAMES AS ART

ARE VIDEOGAMES ART?

In a book titled *The Art of Videogames* the reader is safe to expect some argument that videogames are indeed a form of art. I have left my discussion of this issue to last so that I can best reflect on what the rest of the book has shown about the nature of videogames, and how this nature sits in relation to the arts. I also hope that the reader is now sympathetic to the case to be made here, having seen something of the potential for artistic sophistication in gaming. Drawing on the material of the previous chapters, and on recent definitions of art, I will query whether videogames do sit naturally within the category of art. I judge that though they have their own non-artistic historical and conceptual precedents, videogames sit in an appropriate conceptual relationship to uncontested artworks and count as art. In particular, videogames count as art when viewed under a number of recent *cluster* theories of art in virtue of their display of a core of characteristic properties. At the same time, videogames have their own distinctive features, meaning that as a form of art they should be treated on their own terms and not simply seen as derivative forms of pre-existing types.

There are a number of preliminary issues and clarifications to cover here. First, we can distinguish the various arts to be found practised within the making of videogames, and the idea that games are art in themselves. *Art direction* is a common aspect of games, and a great number of the people involved in designing games are described as artists. Those people involved in the artistic and aesthetic design of worlds, cultures, creatures, levels, characters, and items found within videogames practise a craft similar to those involved in producing such aspects in film and other works of art. Furthermore, we can also refer to what these people produce as being the art of a given videogame. Nic Kelman (2005) has collected an impressive

range of the art design featured in videogames. A book produced for the limited edition release of *Grand Theft Auto IV* includes a discussion and various illustrations of the aspects of art and design to be found in the game. The involved art is quite impressive, ranging from the architecture of the city, the commercial design of shops, advertisements, and goods, and character design, to technical aspects such as lighting effects. The latter are extraordinary, especially in the way the light changes during the course of the day from the watery green light of early morning, to the late afternoon, burgundy glow of a setting sun. Sometimes I start up *Grand Theft Auto* just so that I can fly around Downtown Algonquin to see how the light changes the city scene.

The question here, though, is whether the objects that these people ultimately play a hand in producing are artworks. It seems the case that the production of some non-artworks also involves such art and design aspects. A television talk show or cooking show might have an art department, in which someone with training in the arts and design is vested with designing sets, wardrobe, make-up, props, on-screen graphics, and coordinating these into a coherent art direction, but we would not necessarily say that the television show produced was subsequently art. This is just to say that there can be an art of producing some object or event without that thing necessarily becoming an artwork for that fact.

I also need to distinguish the question of whether videogames are art from the issue of *videogame art*. A genre of art has recently adopted the visual lexicon and often the technological means of videogaming for artistic purposes. Such artworks are not games, principally because they are not played, having few of the formal and situational features described in this book, but rather engaging audiences in the appreciative and interpretive behaviors associated with the traditional visual arts. Similarly, *machinima*, the genre of film where existing game engines or virtual worlds are used to produce filmic narratives, is a case of an artifact clearly related to videogames, and one that may be considered art in its own terms; but these things are not really games, but rather traditional narratives produced using the technology originally developed for producing games. This is something quite different to what is at stake here. I am not concerned with whether the traditional arts can assimilate or adopt the visual and thematic concerns of videogames, or whether the technological means of videogames can be used to produce artworks – on both scores it seems clear enough that they can – but whether videogames themselves are art. Is *BioShock* art?

Next, there is clearly an honorific use of the classification *art*, where the designation exists as little more than a term of praise, or perhaps a spurious comparison. The usage of the term *art* over recent times has clearly expanded in its apparent extension, with almost anything enfranchised as an

art, or any profession described as that of an artist – mostly, one suspects, to flatter those involved. It remains possibile that videogames are art only in this honorific sense of the term – that *Grand Theft Auto* is a "work of art" in the same way as a particularly good Beef Wellington might be so. Such a claim might not have any real bearing on whether videogames really should be classified alongside uncontested artworks. The worry with this blasé commendatory use of the term *art* is, of course, that if everything is art, then nothing is. Surely the question of whether something really is art does make sense and that more hinges on it than a thing merely being an exemplary instance of its kind. The question that is of principal interest to me is whether videogames are art in something like the way that the exemplars of a more traditional conception of art – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*, Joyce's *Ulysses* – are art.

Superficially, videogames are like the uncontested artworks just mentioned. Videogames are representational artifacts in the way that many other forms of art are, and though differing to traditional artworks in certain respects, they do have perceptual and formal structures that are the object of an aesthetic and interpretive engagement in much the same way as other artworks. Games are created by talented individuals and groups who can garner a reputation for their creative exploits, and who we are in many cases tempted to call artists. Videogames are also the target of critical activities, somewhat like those that attend the traditional arts. There is a growing amount of connoisseurship within the gaming community, with people displaying an interest in a level of detail that many casual gamers – not to mention non-gamers – would be unaware of. Games also display a concern with style, with many games being particularly notable for their pervasive sense of aesthetic continuity and coherence. In each of these ways, games share traits somewhat indicative of artworks generally.

However, games are also importantly different to the arts. Arguably, *gameplay* is the participative focus of games; it is certainly predominant in the criticism of games, where representational beauty is often seen as of secondary importance to gameplay. That games are active pursuits and gamers have an interest in their outcome – one can win or lose a game, and be in competition with other players – might seem in tension with a nature as art. Games have not typically been a major part of the Western conception of the arts. Does this act as a barrier to including their gaming nature within a discussion of the aesthetics of videogames as I have proceeded here? Does it exclude videogames from being art?

I also suspect that there will be a lot of resistance to the idea that videogames are art, not on the basis of their being games, but rather because they are *popular entertainment*. Some will believe that on the comparison of videogames with the uncontested artworks just mentioned, videogames

come off very poorly indeed. Art involves something more than *mere entertainment or amusement*, and some might think that it is that extra something that videogames lack. It may also be argued that videogames are immature, derivative, mass produced, distasteful, and do not afford the sorts of perceptual and cognitive pleasures that proper artworks do. Of course, in the past such arguments have been leveled at other forms of popular art, such as film, fiction, and music. In his defense of popular art against these kinds of charges, Carroll (1998a) argues that we have no principled reason to deny some of the products of popular culture the appellation *art*. Carroll deals with arguments that were prevalent throughout the twentieth century against the mass or popular arts, including the arguments of Collingwood, Horkheimer, and Adorno, claiming that the majority of such arguments fail to hit their targets. The criticisms that have been leveled against popular artworks – that they are crude, formulaic, appeal to prurient interests, encourage passivity, are mass produced, and so on – both fail to apply to all popular artworks, and to apply only to popular artworks.

My case is made a great deal easier by ceding to some of these criticisms, however, and admitting that not all games are art, and furthermore, even when they are so, the standard is not always high when compared to traditional art forms. I argued in chapter 1 that the artistic sophistication of games is increasing. I stand by this claim, and I think that it is the case that almost all of the serious candidates for being art among videogames are the recent games that have been the focus of this book. My argument will have to show, then, that even though videogames started out as something quite different – for the most part, simple games played on a computer – they have subsequently developed into a form capable of producing at least some instances of genuine art.

A CLUSTER THEORY OF ART

How are we to answer the question of whether the videogames I have sought to explain in this book really are a form of art? What can be said beyond the similarities just noted? One of the few other philosophers of the arts to seriously consider videogames as a topic of study is Aaron Smuts. Indeed, Smuts (2005a) claims that the primary question that the philosophy of the arts should ask when concerning itself with videogames is whether or not they are art. He concludes that the best way to solve the problem is to consider videogames in relation to previous definitions of art, arguing that the comparison is ultimately favorable and that "by any major definition of art many modern videogames should be considered art." Smuts' working out of this thesis is occasionally problematic; for example, he does not distinguish

between videogames and videogame art such as machinima, thinking that establishing the latter as art is sufficient to show that the former are also art. Some of his conceptual connections between videogames and art are also rather loose: just because "self-defense, protection of others, dread of the 'undead,' fighting against overwhelming odds" are themes shared by videogames and traditional art says very little, given that the themes may also be shared with non-art such as role-playing and board games, diaries, folk stories, or traditional histories. In general, I think Smuts could have done more to show exactly how videogames fit within the criteria proposed by previous definitions of art. His observations are merely suggestive rather than logically compelling.

Despite these quibbles with the details of the argument, my response here will follow on from Smuts: I will compare videogames to extant theories of art, asking if and how they fit the criteria proposed there. Videogames will count as art if they fit within an appropriate theoretical understanding of art. This raises the inevitable question of just which theory or definition of art is the best bet. Remembering the discussion of the technical difficulties with the nature of definition (chapter 2), the reader may be unsurprised that the definition of art debate is far from settled. In fact, there are a number of theories still in play, ranging from definitions that seek to secure art status in the institutions involved in the *Artworld* (Dickie, 1974), to those that specify the aesthetic function of art as its defining component (Zangwill, 2001). Drawing from twentieth-century skepticism about the definitional project (Weitz, 1956), some philosophers still doubt that art can be given a satisfactory definition (Gaut, 2000). Needless to say, I cannot settle this issue here, and even rehearsing the state of the debate would take this book far from its intended topic. But I do need to propose a suitable theoretical prototype of art, and to give the reader some idea why I think it is appropriate.

I take as my specific chosen model the *cluster* theory of art. This is because I find such theories quite plausible concerning art itself, and because I think that they can be used to make a very strong case for the art status of videogames. Cluster theories of art derive from the claim that many concepts function, not by specifying sets of necessary and sufficient conditions that any item sitting under the concept must have, but by specifying a potentially fuzzy set of criteria or "family resemblances" that an object might meet in any number of ways (Wittgenstein, 1968). The concept of *cup*, for example, may work not by specifying definitive conditions of all and only things that are cups, but by picking out a collection of properties inhering in a range of typical cups. Identifying a cup is a matter of judgment about how closely the object in question aligns with the cluster conception of typical cups. There are well-known difficulties with this theory of concepts,

especially concerning its dependence on the problematic notion of *similarity* (Goodman, 1972), and the fit with how children actually acquire concepts (Keil, 1981). I cannot pursue these difficulties in the limited space I have here.

Cluster theories of art claim that art can be characterized by a set of conditions which an object might meet in any number of ways. Furthermore, different types of art might include differing typical collections of the characteristic conditions. E. J. Bond (1975), Berys Gaut (2000), and Julius Moravcsik (1993) have all advocated forms of cluster theory. Some philosophers think that a cluster theory of art, suitably formalized as a disjunctive definition of the type discussed in chapter 2, can also provide a definition of art (Davies, 2004; Dutton, 2006). Gaut stops short of thinking that art can be defined as such, aligning his view with anti-essentialism about art. Of his form of cluster theory, Gaut claims that the following are

> properties the presence of which ordinary judgment counts toward something's being a work of art, and the absence of which counts against its being art: (1) possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (Gaut, 2000: 28)

These, for Gaut, are *the kind of conditions* that will eventually make up the successful cluster account of art, given that he is rather more interested in arguing for the cluster form itself. As such, Gaut thinks that the list might be revised to account for new or recalcitrant artworks.

Dutton's (2006) list of characteristic features shows a substantial overlap with Gaut's, by including direct pleasure, the display of skill or virtuosity, style novelty and creativity, criticism, representation, "special" focus, expressive individuality, emotional saturation, intellectual challenge, traditions and institutions, and imaginative experience. Though some artworks may lack one or more of these conditions, we could not imagine an artwork lacking a significant number of them. Furthermore, that a newly discovered object has the majority of these criteria would tempt us to see the object as an artwork. Dutton also takes a distinctly naturalized spin on the cluster theory of art, claiming that the conditions stem from the evolved psychological, behavioral, and social dispositions of our species, and hence are universal

among all human cultures. This is the case *even if* the culture in question fails to have a cognate of the Western concept art in its native language (Dutton, 2000). That is, Dutton has a theory about just *why* this cluster exists: art is a part of our evolved and universal human nature (Dutton, 2009).

Why am I adopting this cluster approach? First, in its disjunctive form, I think this theory has potential in solving the definitional disputes about art. There may simply be more than one way for something to be art, and so if an object lacks one of the characteristic features of art, it may nevertheless be art if it has a sufficient number of the other typical features. My own definition of videogames employed this same virtue of disjunctive definition, and I see no reason why the same tactic might not be appropriate in the case of art.

Second, a cluster theory of art allows us to recognize people in dislocated cultures – artists and patrons in a New York City art gallery, Maori carvers in New Zealand, and even Paleolithic cave painters – as engaged in the same kinds of practices, and producing and appreciating the same kinds of objects. This is especially important when many of these examples of diverse cultural activities seem problematic in terms of popular institutional (Dickie, 1974) or historical theories of art (Levinson, 1979). George Dickie has famously argued that it is the approval of the *Artworld* that confers the status of artworks, allowing us to see how some very atypical objects – readymades such as the urinal that comprises Duchamp's *Fountain* – are properly art. But even though there is no evidence that Paleolithic cave painters had anything like the cultural institutions that surround Western art – indeed, the idea verges on the silly – it is extraordinarily tempting to see these people as creating art somewhat of the kind seen in the Western tradition. Historical theories of art claim that it is in virtue of historical links between various artworks, and their modes of production and appreciation, that art status is defined. However, the historical connections between dislocated peoples such as modern New Yorkers and pre-colonization Maori seem too insubstantial to explain the depth of similarity in the items they produce and appreciate – and the fact that Maori artifacts so easily make their way into the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art *as art*. In essence, a cluster theory may be less *chauvinistic* than previous theories that credit art with arising out of an actual culture, institution, or history, allowing us to see the cultural products of other societies as art, often on a par with that of our own tradition.

Third, especially in the form of Dutton's (2006, 2009) naturalist definition of art, cluster theory also allows a role for naturalism in art theory, connecting art to the idea of universal human traits (Brown, 1991; Dutton, 2001). Dutton argues that art theory has for too long been orientated around the art of the *avant-garde*, with examples like Duchamp's notorious

Fountain taking a role in the debate that far outweighs their real significance. The definition of art debate is *anomaly fixated*, and to the detriment of the theories it has produced (the institutional theory of art, in particular, seems couched in a way to account for the art status of avant-garde works like *Fountain*). A cluster theory, based on naturalist and cross-cultural principles – thus focused on the regularities across human cultures, rather than idiosyncratic objects found within one culture – may allow us a better understanding of art in general.

In an oblique way, the question of whether videogames are art *is* a cross-cultural issue. Modern culture seems increasingly splintered and compartmentalized. Though this is largely a result of the sheer number of people who are now able to take part in culture due to increasing levels of affluence, it is surely also because of the technological globalization of culture and the increasing ease with which cultural niches are able to communicate and connect their interests through modern means. The Internet, to take the most prominent reason for cultural compartmentalization, allows geographically dislocated groups to sustain their cultural interests in rich ways unavailable to previous ages, when information flow was rather more restricted and localized. Fan fiction, alt-rock, fantasy role-playing, conspiracy theories, and cosplay all seem to be the effect of this specialization of cultural diversity; largely invisible in the "real world," each has a rich subterranean existence. Equally, videogames feel the effects of this specialization. Though videogames are also obvious in the mainstream media, for many, games are very much a mysterious world because gaming culture is most lively in less prominent cultural spaces such as Internet review sites and forums. Once one actually discovers these cultural spaces, the amount of subject-specific information, shared understandings, language, and numerous shibboleths can make gaming culture almost impenetrable to the outsider.

Comparing games to previous forms of art really is a cross-cultural endeavor, but the comparison is not with the culture of a newly discovered geographically isolated way of life, but with an *interstitial culture* to which many people are oblivious. There are intersections between cultural worlds – of course, videogames are informed by mainstream film – but much of what happens in games and gaming is generated by their own distinctive and semi-isolated cultural history. This is an important reason why we should approach videogames on their own terms, and not always judge them by more familiar forms of culture that philosophers of the arts and other theorists have typically dealt with.

Thus, a subsequent strength of this disjunctive "cross-cultural" approach is that it may allow us to abstract away from the superficial differences that videogames have to Western-paradigm art, and especially *high art*, and that may generate skepticism that videogames are indeed art. Potentially, a

lot of the resistance to the idea that games are art will derive from unfairly treating games as an art form they are not. If we look to videogames for sophisticated meaning or moral seriousness of the kind associated with great literature, we will more often than not be disappointed, but because of this focus, we may also miss the genuine art that exists in their dynamic and interactive representations of a fictional world. This mistake has also been difficult for me to avoid, given my own philosophical and artistic inclinations. I think games designers commit the same error when they ape the conventions of other artworks to the detriment of the real nature of their artistic medium. In order to come to a fair evaluation of whether videogames are art, we need to appreciate the lessons of the previous chapters about their real nature.

THE ART IN VIDEOGAMES

It is worthwhile to fit videogames into this cluster approach, aware that there are likely to be both surface differences and deeper continuities. I will do so clause by clause, using those conditions picked out by Dutton and Gaut in their analyses.

Dutton and Gaut both pick our direct pleasure in aesthetic qualities as being characteristic of art. Aesthetic properties and pleasures are much discussed in the philosophy of art. In a classic paper, Frank Sibley (1959) argues for a strong distinction between aesthetic properties such as beauty or grace and non-aesthetic ones such as brightness or angularity. I do not mean to take a position on the distinctive existence of aesthetic properties or the putative faculty of taste, but I think it is clear enough that we do have an aesthetic *vocabulary* that is employed when describing the properties and experiences afforded both by artworks and natural scenes. Gamers also employ much of the same aesthetic vocabulary, and games do seem to afford a great deal of pleasure through their capacity for beauty. The glistening and verdant jungles in *Drake's Fortune*, the rich cityscapes in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, the graceful movements of the characters in *Heavenly Sword* – all seem to engage our aesthetic sensibilities. These things are not only accurate and technically excellent representations, but *beautiful*. Thus, gamers do seem to have aesthetic interests somewhat comparable with those of traditional art appreciators. That gamers are particularly concerned with the aesthetic qualities of the graphics and sound of games is shown by the expense to which many go in setting up their gaming hardware with pricey visual and audio displays, and state of the art consoles or graphics cards. The reader will be in the best position to judge for themselves, of course, by experiencing first-hand the aesthetic qualities of the games that have been

discussed here, but the inclusion of aesthetic pleasures is surely one of the key reasons why we are tempted to situate videogames within the category of art.

Though it is clear that many games do have aesthetic qualities comparable with those of other artworks, in other respects there are differences in the aesthetic qualities experienced in videogames to those found in traditional artworks. Some of the aesthetic terms applied to games seem to refer to their interactive qualities, and many of the pleasures provided by games are *kinesthetic pleasures* in that they involve the qualities of the physical interaction with the gaming device and the physical world it depicts. A significant proportion of the aesthetic qualities gamers and critics refer to in games have this kinesthetic quality – gameplay might be described as *flowing*, *fluid*, *jerky*, and so forth – and these terms refer to the interactive, moreover *physically* interactive, structure of one's involvement in a game world. As such, *frantic*, when applied to a game, refers to the character of the gameplay, particularly that the challenges it offers are presented in a hurried succession and that the player is always at the risk of being overwhelmed or becoming panicked by the difficulties. Though this might sound strange to a non-gamer, the cars in *Grand Theft Auto IV* have a satisfying physical *heft* and there is much pleasure to be taken in simply driving around Liberty City for this reason. To be applied to videogames, aesthetic theory would seem to need to adapt itself to the interactive and kinesthetic form of those games to explain exactly what generates the direct pleasure in games, perhaps drawing from the theory of kinesthetic arts such as dance.

The existence of aesthetic features in videogames leads to an interesting question: when did games first take on this aesthetic dimension? I do not think that videogames have always been art. The games spanning the earlier years of gaming, indeed up to the early 1990s, strike me as much less artful than recent games. This is because the aesthetic qualities that characterize recent games are mostly missing in earlier games, which were far more orientated around gameplay. *Pac-Man* has a distinctive look and design, but I think it would be a stretch to say that one might take pleasure in its visual design. Poole claims of *Spacewar* that it is "serene, austere, a thing of alien beauty" (2000: 30), but I am unconvinced. Poole's claim seems to me a rather subjective judgment that would not have made any sense to the designers of the game: to me, there is no evidence that *Spacewar* was designed as anything other than a game, and what minimal aspects of design it does have are wedded to this intention and the basic fiction it depicts. If *Spacewar* is beautiful – which I personally do not see in the object – it is accidentally so and not as a function of its being art.

Beside the focus on producing games, I think that the graphical limitations on early games restricted their aesthetic and artistic potential. The basic

bitmapping used to represent early games did not allow early designers much aesthetic scope. Only with increased computing power did aesthetic considerations begin to loom larger in game design. *Myst*, released in 1993, seems to be an important development in the aesthetic qualities of gaming. *Myst* is an explorative adventure game quite unlike contemporary games of the early 1990s in that aesthetics are at the forefront – and potentially to the detriment of the gameplay, as noted earlier. *Myst* presents the player with an opportunity to explore a mysterious fictional world. *Myst* is not a 3D game, however, and the world is mostly static, rendered through a sequence of computer-generated stills depicting different locations. As such, structurally *Myst* is very similar to earlier text-based adventure games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Hunt the Wumpus*, differing in the graphically rich depiction of the fictional world and its greater scope. All of this makes the game a little inert, and means that the actual gameplay in *Myst* is limited to a small number of decisions about which areas to explore and the actions to perform in those areas: in Juul's terms, it is a classic game of "progression" (2005: 67–75). But what *Myst* did do is make obvious the aesthetic potential of exploring a fictional world.

It is also obvious that games involve the element of *representation* that Dutton and many others – including Plato's disparaging remarks in the *Republic* and Aristotle's rather more positive assessment in his *Poetics* – have claimed to be an important condition of the arts. The development of the representational abilities of videogames, which was the focus of chapter 4, is another of the most artistically significant things about the cultural form. The ability of videogames to construct visual representations of a fictional world that can be appreciated as a character within that world is another principal reason why videogames should be seen as art. When the kind of aesthetic experience seen in *Myst* was wedded with the contemporary representational developments in 3D game worlds being made by Id Software in their archetypal first-person shooters *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, a new form of game arose that would quickly come to dominate videogaming. If one looks at more recent game releases, a large proportion of them, and typically the ones that are most commercially and aesthetically successful, are in part world-exploring games. *Oblivion*, *Portal*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *BioShock*, *Crysis*, *Call of Duty 4*, *Halo 3*, *Assassin's Creed*, *World of Warcraft*, *Prince of Persia*, *LittleBigPlanet*, *Fallout 3*, and even racing games like *Gran Turismo* and *Grid: Race Driver* all involve the aesthetic exploration of an environment, though the gameplay may ultimately involve shooting zombies, casting spells, jumping pits filled with snapping alligators, or racing cars. Indeed, it is just these games that have been my main focus here, and have made this book on the art of videogaming a plausible endeavor. Videogames have developed the ability to represent interactive fictional worlds with such a depth

and vivacity that the player really can become *immersed* in these worlds – and in all of the senses identified earlier: an obsessive, absorbed, fictional player-character.

Liberty City, the setting of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, is a high-water mark of aesthetic representation in gaming. Here is a city, rich with detail and character, with living inhabitants, that changes to reflect the time of day and the changing weather, is simmering with economic and ethnic politics, has great architecture, and is everywhere making comments on our real world, so that through the lens of Liberty City we are able to see the absurdities and contradictions of contemporary city life. There are certain developments in art that open up new realms of representational and artistic possibility: in Ancient Greece, the discovery of lost-wax bronze casting allowed sculptors to create dynamic self-supported figures, so that soon the lifelike masterpieces *Discobolos* and *Doryphoros* were produced. The discovery of the three-dimensional surface of paintings by Cézanne led to the fracturing of representational form seen in Cubism. The development of the stream of consciousness technique by literary Modernists such as Joyce led to the new psychological depth of their depiction of human life, so that we could witness the equanimity, humor, and intelligence of Leopold Bloom and the complexities of his daily life. How could the real-time depiction of a virtual city, with the appreciator placed within that city in an epistemic and behavioral role, not be a stunning development in the *possibilities* of art?

Equally obvious from these observations and from the theory developed in this book, is that the imaginative experience Dutton thinks to be a criterion of art is also present in videogames. A great many artworks seek to prompt their audiences into flights of imagination, guided and enriched by a prop that the artist has themselves invested with detail through the employment of their own imaginative talents (see chapter 3). This is among the clearest of connections between videogames and the arts. I have argued throughout this book that a principal feature of recent videogames, particularly those that do strike us as art-like, is that they seek to deliver us into an imaginative world with all sorts of engrossing particularities. I think that it has long been an unanalyzed assumption that videogames (and other popular electronic media) are distinctly lacking in imagination, and that the viewer is simply enthralled by the game, and hence cognitively passive. There may be a half-truth in this bias: if we restrict the imagination to the ability to *visualize* rich fictional scenes, then visually rich recent videogames do demand less of the imagination than less representationally robust written forms of fiction. But once we move beyond this limited conception of the imagination, and realize that the fictional nature of videogames calls on the ability to imagine what is not real, both on the part of producer and consumer, we will come to a more realistic conclusion about the central

role of the imagination in gaming. One aspect of immersion, I argued in chapter 3, is the ability to submerse oneself, through make-believe, in a fictional world. Furthermore, though I have not spent any great time discussing it here, it is clear that videogames also involve their players *elaborating* on imaginative scenarios, reasoning their hidden structures, so as to formulate effective means of meeting the demands of gameplay (Greenfield, 1984). By this measure, videogames are extraordinarily imaginative.

Both Dutton and Gaut also see skill and virtuosity as being a criterion of art. Art often displays a high degree of skill on the part of its creators and performers: *artist*, of course is often used as a term of praise, picking out those individuals capable of employing a skill to an excellent degree. Much skill and virtuosity can be seen within game design, especially within their graphical design. In large part such artistry is enabled by the technological advances in computer graphics, but games are valued as an aggregation of skilled *performances* from designers, artists, and writers working within the technological medium of gaming. For many people, recent art in traditional forms such as painting and sculpture has lost its connection with skill and virtuosity: putting a dead shark in a box of formaldehyde is not an act that takes any *artistic* skill at all, it would seem. What is important in much recent art is not the expertise that went into constructing the artwork, but the ideas that it supposedly expresses, which can often really only be discerned when one acknowledges the title of a given work. It is subsequently almost proverbial to hear in response to a new work of modern art the refrain: "I/a child/a monkey could have done that." There are reasons for these developments, of course, a popular one being that mechanical forms of representation such as photography have displaced the visual arts from their traditional depictive roles. But in videogaming the artistry is plain to see, perhaps because the technological form of 3D graphics has reinvigorated the role of the artist in the process of rendering realistic but stylistically distinctive visual representations. The technology that has developed so quickly over the past twenty years has made possible new kinds of virtuoso artistic achievements.

Thus, leading into the next criteria of the cluster theories under discussion here, videogames certainly involve the style, novelty, and creativity critical to Dutton's definition, and also the related creative originality referred to in Gaut's theory. Though it is common for gaming critics or theorists (Smuts, 2005a) to attribute "photo-realism" to recent games – indeed, as I have here – it is really a falsehood that the graphical depictions of videogames are *principally* concerned with photo-realism. Instead, almost all games seem to attempt to *enhance* the graphical appearance of their fictional worlds, usually presenting them with a distinctive or novel style. Arguably, a realistic car racing game like *Grid: Race Driver*, compared to reality,

provides a *superior* graphical depiction of car racing in that the designers are able to more carefully control the aesthetic qualities of the racing experience. Such games do not look realistic at all: they look *super-realistic*. Equally, *Team Fortress 2* depicts its team-based first-person shooter – a genre often approached with a sense of seriousness, as in its forebear, *Counterstrike* – with a very stylish comic sensibility. The game is essentially a large cartoon, and this fits quite naturally with the over-the-top gameplay. Whatever else might be said of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, it is an incredibly stylish game: sometimes to the extent that its style overwhelms its gaming aspects. *Portal*, too, adopts a creative style. Here the environments are unexpectedly stripped down: there is not an attempt to present a richly dynamic environment so as best to show off the graphical capabilities of the game engine – as so often games are guilty of doing – but a spare graphical style that fits with the test chamber narrative and simple puzzle-directed gameplay. The dry and ironic dialogue of *Portal*, the many incidental oddities and jokes, and the final unexpected and eccentric song, also provide a compelling sense of style. The very length of the game – it can be completed in four or five hours, where many recent games stretch to ten times that length – is also a stylistic decision that I personally wish more games would follow. The length allows the game to present a more concise vision, rather than the bloated Behemoth that so many recent games have become, where one leaves the world not with a sense of artistic completion, but with frustration, confusion, or boredom.

Of course, in gaming there is a very large amount of less than creative work: very many games are merely *cookie cutter* or formulaic games. But the severe criticism that these games often receive only strengthens the claim that in gaming novelty, style, and creativity are genuinely valued. This is a repetition of the claim I made earlier in this chapter. Perhaps not all game types really are art, or that a great many games are simply bad art, with only a few aspiring to real artistic significance. But this is equally true when we look at the great majority of art forms. *The Da Vinci Code* rather than *Ulysses* is the norm in written fiction; most films do not take their cue from *Citizen Kane*, but rather from *Star Wars*.

Gaming also increasingly involves criticism, another criterion of Dutton's definition. The principal outlets for gaming criticism are games magazines, criticism in the print media, and online games review sites. Often, however, games criticism is merely a part of marketing: the main consoles have official magazines and the gaming reviews one finds in these are often little more than advertisements. Online sources are potentially more impartial, but they face another difficulty: much of the criticism is just not very good. One reason for this is that much criticism is written by *fanboys*. These are people with an overbearing emotional investment in the videogames or consoles

they write about – consumers who have bought in to the ever-present hype surrounding modern media entertainment and technology.

Another problem such reviewers have is a lack of art literacy, and the subsequent difficulty of linking games to other art forms. A failure to understand what is possible in film or graphical art can undermine the judgments that are made in videogaming criticism. This lack of perspective has had a disastrous result for much gaming criticism. I am always suspicious to hear that a game has a compelling narrative, because I know, partly because of the problems discussed in this book, that the narratives presented by games are currently a poor shadow of their cousins in filmed and written fiction. The *Metal Gear Solid* series of games, created by the game auteur Hideo Kojima, are frequently praised in games writing for having engrossing narratives. As I noted earlier, for me, these games are an exercise in frustration. The tone of the games is wildly erratic, with vulgar jokes placed alongside very stylish sequences intended to convey seriousness. The level of human drama in the *Metal Gear* series is soporific and frequently juvenile. Most disastrously, the balance between narrative and gameplay in these games is terrible, as the game involves *very long* stretches of non-interactive cut-scenes and scripted dialogue between portions of gameplay. Encouraging the player to watch twenty minutes (or in many cases, much more) of asinine narrative seems to me to be a gross misunderstanding of the art form. And though the player can *click through* the cut-scenes this only serves to emphasize their basic redundancy. One of the important themes in Poole's book on videogames, and one that is effectively argued, is that films and videogames have differing artistic or aesthetic functions, and that when videogames imitate films they are inevitably bad games (2000: 78–124). For many games, I have to agree. That the gameplay in *Metal Gear Solid* is frequently brilliant and deep has no doubt distracted many critics and players from its flaws – or provided a means of excusing them – but one suspects that many critics are either so completely sold on the game before they play it, perhaps having an emotional attachment caused by their enjoyment of earlier games in the series, or unaware or uninterested in the real potential of narrative, that they are not in a position to come to a fair judgment of the artistic qualities of the game.

The biggest development needed in gaming criticism is for the form to move beyond the *game review* and into a level of discussion that is capable of situating videogames within a wider understanding of culture and the arts. A theoretical understanding of the place of games within the arts seems to be necessary here. Indeed, while not wanting to sound too self-important, I hope the present book can make a contribution in this regard. A philosophical work on the art-theoretical significance of videogames could itself be a critical signal that videogames are taking a confirmed place within the arts.

Is there evidence of what Dutton calls "special focus" in videogaming culture? In itself this condition strikes me as a little intangible. What is it that is special? How special? What kind of focus? Dutton characterizes this *specialness* in terms of art being "bracketed off from ordinary life, made a separate and dramatic focus of experience" (2006: 371). If special focus is thusly taken to pick out the various *situational* features of art – that it is separate from ordinary life or unproductive – then this aligns with what I said in chapter 5 about the situational nature of gaming. Whether we use the ideas of the *magic circle*, *separateness and non-productiveness*, or *immersion* to refer to this quality, it is of little consequence: videogames do seem set aside from everyday life, though this frequently leads to videogames being labeled as *pointless* because of a lack of sympathy and understanding of gaming, and just why gamers take it as seriously as they often do.

Furthermore, if we take special focus to refer to the cultural significance of an artifact, the esteem and seriousness with which it is regarded by its community of appreciators, then there is reason to think that this kind of thing does attend videogames. The release of *Grand Theft Auto IV* in 2008 was treated as an incredibly special event in the gaming community. There was a great deal of anticipation for the game – more cynically, *hype* – and from my own personal experience, picking up and playing the game was a memorable event. Many people pre-ordered the game, not that there was really anything tangible to be gained in doing so, but because of the importance they invested in the game. And even though I was sitting alone in a darkened room, exploring the fictional world by myself, I felt connected to other players. Discussion forums on the Internet were fixated on the game, and many of the more articulate players blogged on and critiqued the game in huge depth. I had long and involved discussions with friends both about what I had done in Liberty City – retelling my personal narrative in the game world – but also about the game's significance, how it would impact on the rest of gaming, and indeed on the rest of culture.

Both Dutton's and Gaut's theories also take art to characteristically involve expressive individuality. In much art, the author, painter, sculptor, or composer becomes a focal point of the art experience, and their works are seen as an expression of their distinctive personality and individual point of view on the world. *Ulysses*, for example, is a clear work of expressive individuality: it is the work of a genius attempting to frame his vision of the world and of the art form that he is using to do so. Joyce is justly a celebrity for his achievement. Compared to the previous cluster criteria of art, I am less convinced that this aspect of art really is present in gaming, or, if it is, that it is involved in anything more than an incipient and debatable form. The videogame *auteur* is somewhat evident in gaming – Hideo Kojima (*Metal Gear*), Will Wright (*Simcity*, *The Sims*, *Spore*), the brothers Sam and Dan

Houser (*Grand Theft Auto*), Kazunori Yamauchi (*Gran Turismo*), Shigeru Miyamoto (*The Legend of Zelda*), Ken Levine (*System Shock 2*, *BioShock*), and Sid Meier (*Civilization*) all to some extent are seen as auteurs particularly associated with the genre or game they helped to create. However, like film, videogames are now productions of sometimes vast teams of people. Though a principal producer, writer, or designer might have a significant say, what we eventually get is a collaborative effort, and not the expression of a single individual. Nevertheless, given the diverse functions of videogames as games, narratives, and graphical worlds, and the divestment of their design into specialized groups responsible for each aspect, some amount of creative control at the head of the chain can be exerted in terms of *selection*, even if a great deal of the actual design is aggregated from a large number of artists.

Even if the auteur theory is unrealistically applied to videogame production, videogames have something of the studio set up that characterized the golden era of Hollywood, with certain studios being identified – rightly or wrongly – as creators of premium content. Thus, if it is unrealistic to say that a videogame is an expressive effort of an individual person, we might say this individuality is so of a studio. Even if gamers do not know who Sam and Dan Houser are, they are almost certainly aware of Rockstar as a creative force. Rockstar have traded on an image of creating fairly edgy, subversive, and adult games. Still, studios are fairly intangible things, with actual artists and designers migrating here and there. *BioShock* was billed as a "spiritual successor" to the widely praised *System Shock* series, not merely because it came from the same studio as *System Shock 2*, but because a number of key personnel, including Ken Levine, were shared between the games, and *BioShock* took up the rather rich role-playing content of its progenitors. Blizzard, the studio responsible for the *Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, and *Diablo* series of games, also generates widespread recognition, expectation, and loyalty on the part of players.

Art and its experience seem characteristically emotional, and this criterion is expressed in both Dutton's and Gaut's version of the cluster theory. I think this is among the clearest of the connections of gaming to uncontested art. I spent all of chapter 7 explaining just how the playing of videogames can be an emotionally concentrated experience, even though the emotions experienced may be somewhat different to other art forms, in that they are not the second-hand relational emotions typical of narrative fictions, but first-hand emotions derived from one's role in a game world. *System Shock 2* – the game that really convinced me of the ability of videogames to be emotionally compelling – made me incredibly anxious and fearful, so much so that I look back very fondly on playing that game. Furthermore, not only do games arouse these emotions, but the games themselves are expressive

of the emotions. Ultimately, *BioShock* – depending on the ending you get – is enormously uplifting or unremittingly bleak; but the emotional palette of the game ranges from surreal wonder, crushing peril, and moral angst, to tenderness.

Again, both Dutton and Gaut pick out intellectual challenge as characteristic of art. Dutton thinks that "works of art tend to be designed to utilize a combined variety of human perceptual and intellectual capacities to a full extent; indeed, the best works stretch them beyond their ordinary limits" (2006: 372). Do videogames involve such intellectual challenge? If this book prompts any non-gamer readers to attempt playing games, then one thing they will very quickly discover is how hard games can be. The difficulty is not just with physical control of the gamepad – even though I expect this to be a severe impediment for many potential gamers – it is also intellectual. If the reader has played the puzzle game *Lemmings*, they will surely be aware of the potential of gaming for intellectual challenge, but also, like the emotions involved in gaming, the type of intellectual challenge involved in gaming may be quite different to that involved in other uncontested forms of art. The intellectual challenge is often not to an issue outside of gaming – a challenge to "received views and modes of thought" as Gaut puts it (2000: 29) – but a direct challenge to the intellectual capacity of the player to solve problems.

Portal is a good example of the intellectual potential of videogames. One key source of the challenge of games is interpreting their game structure, which is partly encoded in the structure of their fictional world, and hence calls on the player to hypothesize and reason about the nature of the game world and what must be done to surmount its problems. The initial impression of many games can be one of total bewilderment. In *Portal* the player is introduced into the first level *in medias res*. Unaware of the nature of their environment, and immediately prodded by a spatial discontinuity that seems utterly mind-bending, the player can see their character from two points of view, one from the perspective of their fictional proxy, and one through a spatial portal in front of them. To proceed in the game, the player must move through spatial areas employing the portals, and along the way they are *nudged* by the game into learning behaviors that are crucial to clearing the levels. A level might be initially perplexing, but by applying what the player has learned about the physical nature of the world they are in through the previous levels, and their affordances for actions within it, they are eventually able to puzzle out the conclusion, often feeling a *eureka!* moment as the level clicks into organization or as they successfully string together the actions needed to solve the puzzle. *Portal* is essentially a learning experience, and I think that its intellectual challenges are not so different from those in traditional arts. Many narrative fictions also involve

puzzles. In a film like Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, the plot is incredibly complicated, and it is not initially clear just how the many characters or events stand in relation to each other. Interpreting *Magnolia* is – in a way similar to *Portal* – a matter of understanding the nature of its world, and placing the various parts of the world into a coherent scheme so that the individual parts make sense. Indeed, *Magnolia* has such a surfeit of content that the audience can watch the movie repeatedly and continue to make new and informative connections. This kind of intellectual puzzling activity exists in fictions ranging from the television show *Lost* to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. The difference between these fictions and videogames is that in gaming the player is in a position to act on their understanding because of their interactive involvement in the game world.

Dutton's disjunctive theory of art takes institutions and tradition to be crucial to art. As noted, institutional theories of art such as that proposed by George Dickie (1974) are a significant theoretical model, allowing us to account for the art status of some works that seem extraordinarily atypical, especially those of the avant-garde. The institutionalization of art, particularly in terms of art shows, museums, and art theory – the Artworld – allows artists to produce quite unprecedented works, and to move in directions only understood in terms of those institutional factors. Do videogames have this institutional aspect? Smuts (2005a) thinks that there is "clearly a burgeoning art world for videogames." As evidence for this, he notes that there are awards shows for games, that games are increasingly reviewed in mainstream publications, and that some games have even made their way into art museums. All of this is certainly true. However, I am not convinced that it is all that significant in terms of whether the institutionalization of gaming can be used to establish its art status. The claim about museums is particularly weak. Given the recent non-art uses that modern museums have taken on, I think that videogames have made their way into museums not as art, but as popular culture, and furthermore that this is an act of *appropriation* on the part of museums, rather than something that has arisen naturally out of gaming culture. (In my opinion, the last thing that videogames need, given their present vitality and creativity, is academic entombment in a museum.) Videogames clearly have growing institutional respect in the form of a growing literature, the institutional study of games, games awards, and so on. It is just not clear to me that there is any reason to call this an *Artworld* rather than a *Gameworld*; indeed, settling on the former seems to me to merely beg the question. Given the ubiquity of institutions and traditions throughout human culture, I am not convinced how much can be made of the existence of institutions and traditions in the case of videogames *vis-à-vis* art.

NEW ART FROM OLD BOTTLES

I claimed that videogames would be art if they fitted comfortably within an appropriate theory of art. How do videogames stand in relation to the criteria set out above? Both Dutton and Gaut think that if an artifact has a certain proportion of these characteristics then it is sufficient to make it art, though exactly just how many conditions are needed, and which collections of conditions are sufficient for art status, is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, I think that the argument of the previous section makes a pretty compelling case that videogames are art. As a category of artifacts, videogames exhibit, in some form, nearly all of the conditions picked out by this cluster conception of art, even though in some cases just how they meet the criteria is distinctive in the case of videogames.

What is equally obvious, however, is that when we approach games *individually*, we will often *not* find this collection of features. Given that videogames have only recently begun to display some of these criteria – in particular, direct pleasure and aesthetic qualities, emotional saturation or expression, skill and virtuosity, style – it may be that not all videogames really are artworks. Previously, videogames may have sat more squarely in the category of games, and only as their representational, aesthetic, and social aspects evolved have they grown into a form capable of producing instances of art. *Pong*, for example, lacks direct pleasure in aesthetic qualities, skill and virtuosity, style, the potential for critical evaluation, expressive individuality, emotional saturation, and intellectual (rather than sensory-motor) challenge, in anything other than a near-vacuous sense of these criteria. Other, more recent, games have a greater proportion of these characteristics, but still lack some of them. A number of very recent games may have nearly all of the criteria. So where *Grand Theft Auto IV* may well count as art under this theory, it is not clear some classic games will. I suspect that some gamers might not like this judgment, especially those with a strong interest in *retro* gaming. But it is not intended as a critical judgment – earlier videogames such as *Frogger*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Pac-Man* are surely engrossing and fantastic *as games*. But that these earlier games are art seems to me a more difficult proposition. I simply do not think that they display enough of the core of art-making properties discussed above to really count as art in anything other than the honorific sense distinguished earlier.

There is an important complication here that might temper the above conclusion. Videogames also seem to involve conditions that sit squarely *outside* of this conception of the arts – most importantly, the formal and situational features of gaming, such as rules, objectives, and competition.

The disjunctive theories considered here claim only that a certain proportion of conditions are sufficient for something to be art. What they do not specify is whether there are any conditions that might count *against* an artifact being within the category of art. *Competition* might be just such a quality: competitive activities, even those with aesthetic qualities, are more often characterized as *games* or *sports*. Smuts (2005a) notes that some instances of uncontested artworks such as Greek tragedy do involve competition. But in this case the competition seems to be an external fact about the artworks, rather than a fact about their intrinsic nature or how they are appreciated. Greek tragedies were a product of a competition, whereas videogames are far more like sport in that competition is a part of the thing produced and how it is interacted with. One could be oblivious to the fact that Greek tragedies were produced for competitions, but still understand and be moved by the work, whereas if one was oblivious to the fact that multiplayer *Call of Duty* involved competition, one would not even be able to play the game. To head off this complaint, Smuts notes that in fictions such as *National Velvet* or *The Karate Kid*, we might "root for one side of a competition" and hence the appreciation of narrative fictions might involve intrinsic competition of a kind. But this is unconvincing: having sympathy for a person involved in a competition is not sufficient to be a part of that competition itself. Surely being in a competition implies that one must be able to act in a way so as to influence the outcome of the competition and so to compete.

For this reason, I think some might be tempted to conclude that, though there is a substantial overlap between videogaming and art, videogames are also somewhat distinctive in having qualities not traditionally seen as crucial to art. Videogames are not alone in this *partial overlap*. Gaut and Dutton both note that a number of other behavioral types map onto much of the same conceptual territory of art, but also have clear differences. Gaut states "what makes something an artwork is a matter of its possessing a range of properties that are shared with other human domains" (2000: 41). Dutton observes that sport involves expressive individuality, traditions and institutions, criticism, special focus, and the display of skill or virtuosity in at least some sense of these terms (2006: 376). Craft also maps onto much of the same territory as art, differing, perhaps, in its lack of individual expression and style. The question will now be, is this overlap between videogames and art significant enough to consider extending the concept of art to the case of videogames?

Is there really a way to choose between situating videogames in the familiar category, or leaving them out, perhaps locating them in their own distinctive category that though related to art in having an overlap of shared characteristics, is not quite identical? This problem may really owe to the cluster account itself, in that it must contend with the difficulty of specifying

just which clusters are sufficient to make something art. In the case that the category was closed and we had enumerated all the categorical instances, we could potentially definitively settle the art-relevant clusters. In open-ended categories, however, the features that we choose to include in our cluster analysis will be included so as to meet our intuitions about the cases we have thus far encountered and counterfactual intuitions based on these. It may be that when something new comes along, we have the opportunity to revise these conceptual intuitions, perhaps discovering a new art form. Videogames may be art, but at the very least they are *distinctive art*, in particular with their own distinctive modes of appreciation, including competition.

Gaut's cluster account in particular gives this plastic appearance. Confronted with an artifact that bears a substantial categorial overlap with the category art, but which includes atypical features, one suspects that Gaut might have to say this event counts as a *discovery* that there is yet another way for something to be art. Videogames may count as the discovery that competitive games can sometimes be art. But this discovery may itself serve to *shift* our intuitions about art so that in the future we may be tempted to include works that from a previous standpoint would seem quite alien to the category. As such, some readers may suspect that the cluster account is cheating us, and that really it threatens to provide us with a theory of art that is protean and expanding, perhaps indefinitely so.

But how else could it be? In the case of videogames, the artistic potential of the form is contingent on unpredictable technological developments that make possible robustly represented virtual fictions that can depict not only richly aesthetic worlds, but also worlds that can situate social interactions such as gaming. Like the revolution that occurred in Classical Greek sculpture with the advent of lost-wax casting, the revolution of digital interactive fictions has led to the ability of artists to explore and develop new and largely unprecedented areas of artistic possibility, in this case, *artistically rich games*. These problems with pinning down art echo the inductive problems that the gathering of knowledge about the world always contends with. Videogames are a cultural platypus, connecting categories – art and gaming – once thought discrete. Like non-metaphorical platypuses, their discovery should prompt the subtle revision of our classificatory schemes.

This is not the first time such revision has been appropriate, of course. We can profitably compare videogames to the early days of cinema. The artistic form of films – narratives comprised of moving pictures – is clearly related to earlier forms of art such as theatre, sharing many of their representational techniques, but differing in its technologically derived medium. Looking back on the early days of film from our perspective over a hundred years later, early movies are apt to strike us as crude and naïve. Georges Méliès' films,

such as *A Trip to the Moon* – important works no doubt – are nevertheless comprised of quite rudimentary combinations of scenes that only roughly depict a narrative. One suspects that in these early films it is the basic novelty of the medium that is valued; and so in *A Trip to the Moon* we find the medium used to make simple visual jokes. But the technological medium of film, even if initially used for novelty purposes, quickly attracted people with altogether different aims. Only over a considerable period of experiment, and as they explored the unique nature of the medium, would film makers develop the representational and artistic techniques we are now familiar with and in which we see the artistic virtues of film. Inevitably, there was a great deal of skepticism that films were a genuine form of art, or that they had the potential to be any good as art, and many culture theorists saw film, as a mass produced thing, as a debasement of art (Carroll, 1998a). But no one should any longer doubt that film has the potential for producing art, even though many films do not achieve any great level of artistic merit, rather remaining simple entertainments. In fact, film has developed into a medium capable of sophisticated and moving art, and has produced its own masterpieces. As a result, our usage of the term *art* has expanded to encompass a medium with quite different artistic means and aims to those seen in earlier forms to which the term originally referred.

The parallels with videogames are clear. Games originally started out as novelties, and many certainly remain so, but it is also clear that artists have now engaged with the medium. In the last fifteen years, especially, where the rapid improvements in digital technology have made possible the realistic and aesthetically rich game worlds seen in *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Fallout 3*, games designers have been exploring the potential of the medium – and its problems – and have slowly developed a representational and artistic tool kit that allows them to make works that exploit the unique aesthetic potential of the medium. We have met a number of these developments in this book: texture-mapped polygonal models, the virtual camera, rendering techniques, player-characters as an epistemic and behavioral proxy, narratives of discovery and disclosure, and emotionally provocative game choices, are all developments that have further explored and refined the artistic potential of videogames. We are still at a stage where there is much doubt about the art status of videogames; even gamers themselves often voice these doubts. But increasingly, I think, the games that are being produced should make us more confident about the art status of games. Perhaps in the future, as in the case with film, no one will seriously doubt the potential for the medium of videogaming to produce sophisticated and moving art, and our use of the term *art* will have once again expanded to encompass a new type.

The lesson here is that we must use our *judgment* rather than a set of clear logical conditions to decide whether and indeed when videogames are

art. Furthermore, that judgment should be informed by our understanding of art, and it is for this purpose that I have chosen cluster theory, particularly of a naturalized form. Because of this theoretical prototype – which is driven by the truly general features of human art, rather than those displayed in the rather more narrow field of Western high art, and still less by the avant-garde strand of that art – perhaps a stronger conclusion is warranted here. In some ways, videogames seem to align better with the arts widely conceived than do many of the examples that most concern many philosophers and art theorists. Videogames seem to share more of the cluster of properties characterizing artworks – such as representations, aesthetic properties, expression of emotion, and stylistic and obvious virtuosic achievements – than do some instances of modern avant-garde art that seem bereft of such qualities. When we compare videogames to earlier forms of art – which were often popular works, or called for a practical engagement, as with religious music and literature, and were valued for their obvious representational beauty – or to art in different cultures, then videogames might sit more naturally within the category of art than do many recent efforts of Western high art.

As noted, many videogames are still in the realm of novelty and entertainment, and despite the rapid growth in sophistication of videogames, even the best seem to retain something of their unrefined past. I have argued that recent games engage the moral sensibilities of their players, but the level of moral drama is still rather blunt. Will videogames ever be a serious art form, approaching the sorts of issues that a literary novel can? This is not a work of futurology, and I cannot predict whether gaming will develop into serious art; this is of course contingent on many unpredictable factors. But even so, I think I have done enough to show here that games are, in their best instances, beginning to share the concerns and forms of the traditional arts. I'm optimistic about the artistic future of games. Watching the development of videogames over the past twenty years, I have constantly been surprised by what artists have achieved in the medium. This new realm of artistic activity calls for an understanding of how the topics of traditional interest to philosophers of the arts – fiction, graphical representation, narrative, emotion, morality, and so on – play out in this new media setting. Videogames, as I hope to have shown in this book, are fascinating in this regard, and deserve further thought.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Videogames – at least, some of them – show considerable overlap with the conditions that are taken by cluster theories of the arts to identify or define

artworks. In their new digital setting, videogames achieve many of the goals and functions we associate with art, historically and cross-culturally, such as aesthetic pleasure, stylistic richness, emotional saturation, imaginative involvement, criticism, virtuosity, representation, and even special focus and institutional aspects. Yet, in each of these cases, the way that videogames meet the given criteria bears significant differences to previous forms of art. As well as continuities with art, videogames bear connections with the largely independent cultural form of gaming. Because of this, videogames have a property that is frequently not associated with art: competitive gameplay. Thus we may need to temper our conclusion about the art status of videogames and say that though they significantly align with art, videogames may count as a new and distinctive kind of art.