

This game is broken: a note on fractures, glitches and dysfunctional rule systems in ludic art

Arne Kjell Vikhagen

Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss ludic art that does not follow the rules. That is, either the rule systems in them are deliberately broken, subverted or in other ways distinctively manipulated, or the viewer's expectations—based on shared knowledge of how games work—are not met. These particular conditions are major components of the work that are discussed in the text. The aim is to discuss how these 'dysfunctional' games nevertheless are constructive as works of art, and to further the understanding of how games as a cultural form operate within the field of contemporary art.

Keywords: Game art, glitch, subversion, affordance, ludic art, rule systems, art games.

Introduction

This text is written from the *art as games* perspective. However, given the relation between media art, independent games, and game culture in general this distinction is made to limit the scope, rather than a way to define the difference between them: rather than discussing the artistic merits of games like *Proteus* (2013) and *Memories of a Broken Dimension* (2012)—which are considerable—I will focus the discussion on works that operate within the world of contemporary art.

I use a broad brush with the definition of ludic art: any component in artistic practices qualify as ludic that in one way or another relates to games, games culture, as well as play and different modes of engagement related to play.¹ For instance, Olli Tapio Leino's notion of 'playable artifacts' is fitting here: the work affords the condition of gameplay on their users, without necessarily being a game (Leino 2012).² With the risk of idealizing game design processes as ultimately striving for the bug-free, immersive and coherent gameplay experience, the playable artifact represents a different form of ludic object, as we can see particular forms of ludic art

¹I have found the definition of game art by Matteo Bittanti to be fitting for the 'games as art' perspective, with the added inclusion of non-digital games: "Game Art is any art in which digital games played a significant role in the creation, production, and/or display of the artwork. The resulting artwork can exist as a game, painting, photography, sound, animation, video, performance or gallery installation." (Bittanti and Quaranta 2006, p. 9; Vikhagen 2017, p. 12) The term ludic art is useful to distinguish it from in-game art and graphics, which is also commonly referred to as *game art*.

²As Leino argues: "Playable artifacts can be distinguished from games by the inseparability of process and materiality, and, can be identified as a subset of all technological artifacts based on their ability to evaluate the user's choices and open up or delimit freedom of choice accordingly, in other words by their ability to impose the gameplay condition on their users." (Leino 2012)

which seek to uproot and subvert the gameplay experience.³ I argue that a loose definition of ludic art is useful to shed further light on the grey zone that lies between the idealized, coherent game and the equally idealized subversive and broken work of art.

Alexander Galloway discusses art game mods extensively in the essay *Counter gaming* (Galloway 2006, pp. 107–126). The notion of counter gaming encompasses with great precision the scope of this enquiry. Galloway describes and identifies how art game mods relate to gameplay, aestheticism and player interaction. He recognises an unfulfilled potential for art game mods that are not yet reached: art games should maintain and develop gameplay on its own terms instead of using derivative strategies that do not rely on aestheticism and visual formalism. The discussion aims to expand this argument on the reasons why art game mods are counter games, and to suggest a way to look at the aestheticism as a form of interaction and ludic component, even when interaction and traditional gameplay is lacking or non-existent. Similarly, Tom Apperley positions the term *counterplay* in relation to counter gaming as “a reconfiguration of gaming from within” rather than pointing towards new avant-garde forms of games that in turn challenge traditional game design (T. Apperley 2010, p. 110). Playable artifacts, counter gaming and counterplay are all notions that in different ways attempt to pin down the particular way artists engage with games and gaming. Similarly, they are useful ways to explain and describe the way ludic art differs from games.

Rule systems

There is no lack of art historical examples from the twentieth century of art that refers to, manipulates or subverts rule systems from games. For instance, Yoko Ono’s famous white chess set *Play it by Trust* (1966), is an example from the early days of conceptual art. The main component of the piece is the symbolic relation between the chess pieces as agents of war, and the metaphor of the color white as the color of piece. The work points to the futility of conflict that is both tongue-in-cheek and sincere at the same time. As game art it subverts the point of the game of chess.⁴ Even if the rules are unchanged, they are negated and made redundant. But even still, the piece relies on the integrity of the rules and the structure of an abstract game for the negation to be constructive. Put simply, the rules need to be there in order to be broken (Leino 2012, p. 12).

An interesting twist to the legacy of *Play it by Trust*, is that it recently formed the base for another

³To give nuance to the notion that game design is always about creating coherent gameplay, the notion of abusive game design as put forward by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart is an attempt to challenge the idea of the ‘perfect’ game within the framework of game design (rather than ludic art): “Abusive game design creates these games: it aims to break the instrumentality, the isolated ‘toolness’ of games. Rather than give players what they ‘want’ or what they supposedly ‘need,’ abusive game designers give players something idiosyncratic, weird, and confrontational – something that will trigger a more conversational relation.” (Wilson and Sicart 2010, p. 7)

⁴I am aware that skilled chess players can play with a chess set that only has white pieces and white squares without much effort. However, I argue the point still stands, the intention of the metaphor in the piece is maintained even with this in mind.

work by Joseph DeLappe called *After Yoko: Chess Set for the Browning of America* (2018). Here, the pieces are brown instead of white, but it's otherwise similar to the original. While the white color in the original piece by Ono is read as a color of piece, it has been transformed by DeLappe's work into a commentary on the right-wing notion of the 'browning' of America. DeLappe is exercising critique on the basis of the metaphor of the white and brown colors, and on the use of a term that is related to right-wing movements in America. Once more, the rule system is challenged, but this time there is yet another layer—a double subversion if you will—that challenges our connotation of the color white.

Works by George Maciunas like *The Same Card Flux Deck* (1966-1977) and Öyvind Fahlström's board game *CIA Monopoly* (1971) are other examples from the Fluxus era. *The Same Card Flux Deck* (1966-1977) is similar to *Play it by Trust* as the piece itself is a modification of a commonly known ludic system, the card deck. Each piece is made out of 52 cards that are identical to each other, which effectively makes the deck useless. Again, the work negates a ludic system we already are familiar with. It is not itself playable—even less so than with *Play it by Trust*—but its subversive powers hinges on our familiarity of the games that can be played with a deck of cards.

Fahlström's work *CIA Monopoly* (1971) consists of a 'game painting' that could be described as a mod of the game Monopoly. Freedom fighters go at it against capitalists and suppressors. The currency for the liberation forces is hearts and CIA's currency is money, so it is perhaps not hard to tell which way the artist leaned. The ruleset appears to be rather sophisticated, and a considerable departure from the standard rules of Monopoly. *CIA Monopoly* was intended to be played as a game but quickly turned into a collectable, as many of Fahlström's variable paintings and other works did.⁵

CIA Monopoly is an interesting example as it also has a digital version, made as a student project at School of Art and Design, Gothenburg University in 2002 under the supervision of Mattias Nilsson. When the transition to the digital work was made—which interestingly enough would fulfil the intention of the piece as distributable, cheap and playable—the rules as laid out by Fahlström was not sufficiently clear to create a complete and coherent digital version of the game. Compromises were needed to make a playable game. It is unclear whether this was intentional or if it simply was the scrutiny of the algorithms that revealed cracks in the rule-system in the game. In either case, Fahlström's intentions to modify the rules of a game that in a way simulates basic capitalist mechanisms and turn it into a critique of the political and ideological values of capitalism.

⁵The large *CIA Monopoly* painting was sold for over 200,000 GBP at Sotheby's in 2014 (Tapper 2014). In a way this is also ironic considering his intention to make his game paintings affordable and accessible.

Glitches

Similarly to the rule systems in games, the glitch is equally a source for artistic exploitation. (Nunes 2011) Joan Leandre, Brody Condon, and Cory Arcangel are examples of artists whose work explore glitches as a significant component in their works. Arcangel modded the Super Mario cartridge to leave only side-scrolling clouds where before there was a game in *Super Mario Clouds* (2002). Condon exploited glitches in the game engine renderer in his work *Adam Killer* (1999). Leandre made a performative machinima piece, *retroYou r/c: FCK TH RED GRAVITY CODE* (2000-2001), where the car (the antagonist) is navigating a glitched and dysfunctional space. Some of these are works with hindrances or obstructions to render it impossible or very hard to take part in what the work affords.

The artist group JODI's work *Untitled Game – Arena* (2002) is a Quake 1 mod that even if the mode of engagement with the game world is unchanged from the original game, it is impossible to discern what is going on. JODI made a string of works in this series that was equally difficult or outright impossible to play. The twist here is that a player with prior knowledge to the first-person shooter genre will be able to tell that the game is still going on behind the curtain so to speak: monsters spawn, you move in a game space, you pick up items, and so on. The use of glitches in these series of work by JODI has a different nuance than the other works mentioned earlier. In a way, they are constructive—glitch-alikes, maybe—and the game inside the piece is just about to break apart, but it still doesn't. (Stefano 2019) Nevertheless, these practices show how ludic art manage to retain their inner structure, even if they barely make sense to the viewer.

Punishment and intervention

The work *Painstation* (2001–2003) is a piece that consists of a two-player arcade game derived from the classic game *Pong*. It represents yet another way in which games are used in ludic art. It was made by the artist collective *//////////fur////* art entertainment interfaces which consist of Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff. The players commit to the piece as they put their left hand on the console. Whenever a player lifts their hand, they lose the game. The twist is that the console subjects each players' left hands to three forms of physical punishment: electrical shock, heat and whipping. Depending on the setting, these can be excruciating, especially when playing for a long time, which is also the only way to win the game.

In *Painstation*, the game itself serves as an incentive, or a honey-pot if you will: the objective is not to win the game by outsmarting your opponent at *Pong*, but to see who can endure the most pain, and can suppress the need to pull the hand back when they get an electrical shock. The seemingly harmless arcade that looks like *Pong* has in reality been remixed (Fanny 2019) and transformed into one of the few works of art that takes a physical bite at you, and insists on getting through the protective membrane that we expect should be unaffected by a meeting of a work of art. There are no apparent in-game scoring systems or victory requirements besides being able to keep your hand still and endure heat, electric shock and whipping. The game

that makes up the main component is a proxy for opportunity to physically injure the players that probably would be difficult to accomplish without the distraction the game offers (T. H. Apperley 2013, p. 5).

//////////fur//// continues to make work that in similar albeit less intrusive ways challenge the body. Their work SnakePit (2015) for instance, is their take on the classic game *Snake*, most commonly known for its Nokia version released in 1998. In SnakePit, the public engages with the game snake through switches they press with their feet. As with Painstation, the beginnings are nice and easy, but it gradually becomes harder and harder to keep up, as the work reaches the limit for how fast somebody can move from switch to switch.

In the machinima piece *dead-in-iraq* (2008), Joseph DeLappe intervenes in a game of America's Army, listing the names of U.S. soldiers that were killed in the Iraq war. His character is not playing the game, but instead it takes a pacifist stance. It is getting killed repeatedly by the other players in the game. The work is reminiscent of the work *Quake/Friends* (2002-2003), a performance work by DeLappe where a script from an episode of the Friends TV show was injected into the chat of a Quake III arena game.

Chris Howlett is an artist based in Australia, and he has recently finished a practice-led PhD project that consists of a thesis called *Mapping the Techno-stice: Dissensual Territories. In-between Technology and Contemporary Art* and an exhibition called *New Statements, 2016-2019*.⁶ Most notable among the various sculptures and materials used in the exhibition is a series of machinima pieces. The whole project is centred around machinima's ability to afford criticality:

In conclusion, this project proposes a new theoretical frame and creative paradigm for understanding how contemporary art can enact political *dissensus* through Machinima. It addresses the digital work of art as a possible site for 'intervention' in the *techno-stice* using Machinima as a possible site for this to be enacted (Howlett 2019, pp. 139–140).

For instance, the work *How To Get An Education* (2016-19) concerns the war in Iraq among other things, a similar topic but a different approach compared to DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq*.⁷ The piece consists of a machinima animation that is projected on the floor. The image composition resembles a carpet in the first part, reminiscent of the style of an Afghan carpet. It later breaks into a mesh of colored squares, similar to a test image on a television screen.

How To Get An Education has a very complex narrative structure with lots of different visual elements entering and leaving the image frame. 8-bit animations from 2D side scroller games are mixed with corporation logos and other symbols from popular culture, drawn in an 8-bit style.

⁶The machinima pieces in the exhibition can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/chrishowlett>

⁷A documentation of the piece is found here: <https://vimeo.com/350386730>.

The audio is equally complex, as it consists of multiple layers of sound effects from games, dramatic jingles and other sound effects.

Around half-way into the animation, it changes into a less composited image, where memes from popular culture float along paths made from multi-colored rectangles. Memes with images of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, The Joker and evil clowns float across the screen, and the audio has changed to a more dramatic and ominous music instead of sound effects. Altogether, this piece and the other machinima pieces that make up the exhibition together with the other parts of the exhibition, makes for a complex and multi-faceted whole, even if each of the machinima pieces in themselves consists of fragments, glitches and references from politics, popular culture and gaming.

Conclusions

With the support of the examples and the literature discussed in this text, I argue that coherent rule systems, glitch-free game worlds, and affordance of play are virtues that are not necessarily applicable for ludic art. Rather, we have seen examples of ludic art that is constructed in a way that is broken, glitched or fragmented. The picking apart of the ludic in games can make for effective artistic strategies, and there is an elaborate negation scheme in the appropriation of play, gameness and rule systems from games in ludic art.

What remains is the question: *why is this a prevalent feature in ludic art?* Is it important for ludic art to negate what works in games, to prevent them from being games, or for engaging in free play for that matter, just for them to afford criticality? And as a mechanism to distinguish works of art from game cultures in general, whilst still inheriting ludic properties from it?

As a finishing remark, I have formulated a few claims that suggest reasons why ludic art are not necessarily well-functioning games, or affords free play. The claims are lacking somewhat in nuance in order to get to the main points. If for nothing else, they should serve as a starting point for further discussion and research:

Legitimacy claim: Contemporary art, in as much as current artistic practices lend, inherit, appropriate and steal from popular culture, is still subject to hierarchical mechanisms that favour and promote works that keep a healthy distance to peripheral cultural expressions such as gaming and playful leisure activities.

The world of contemporary art is diverse and it is difficult to make general assumptions based on this rather sweeping claim. However, there is support for the claim that media art, and artistic games with, still operates in the periphery of the contemporary art scene, even if there is a slow inclusion process. This process is similar also for the *games as art* discussion, and the inclusion of digital games as art (Romulado 2015). Claire Bishop aptly formulates the somewhat lukewarm reception of digital art by the contemporary art scene in this way:

My point is that mainstream contemporary art simultaneously disavows and depends on the digital revolution, even—especially—when this art declines to speak overtly about the conditions of living in and through new media. ... Faced with the infinite multiplicity of digital files, the uniqueness of the art object needs to be reasserted in the face of its infinite, uncontrollable dissemination via Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, etc (Bishop 2012).

The relations between contemporary art and popular culture are complicated, and are more carefully disseminated elsewhere. But at the very least, I argue that the very process of appropriation in contemporary art suggests that there is a required process of transformation that very well could represent friction in terms of the inclusion of ludic art that doesn't distance itself in some ways from its ludic siblings (Buchloh 2009, p. 178).

Disharmony claim: Ludic art is disruptive, glitchy and broken because the intention of the work is to convey dystopia, rupture, to exercise critique of status quo, or muster resistance against the notion of a utopia of a world where we all live in peace.

These are questions that are central to the research-led PhD project of Chris Howlett described previously. In it, he explores the potential for the use of Machinima in contemporary art practices to “promote the creative potential of political *dissensus*.” (Howlett 2019, p. 136) Rancière's notion of dissensus and Howlett's hybrid term the *techno-stice* creates a framework for how “acts of dissonance in the creation of art in the digital media sphere demarcate, link and separate artistic categories from one another.” (Howlett 2019, p. 1)

Free play is too free: Free and unrestricted play in art resists the affordance of aesthetic distance needed for criticality.

This is perhaps the most complex and disputed claim, and the discussion of the intricate workings of play is outside the scope of this text. But I would argue that this claim is supported by the work of Katja Kwastek for instance:

As a non-purposeful action, the reception of interactive art is similar to the activity of play, with which it also shares its process-based gestalt, its foundation in rule systems, and its ambivalent relationship with “reality.” However, unlike play, interactive art actively engenders disruptions and frame collisions, as well as using different forms of self-referentiality. (Kwastek 2013, p. 261)

At the very least, ludic art poses a challenge to the idea of aesthetic distance as a pre-requisite for an artistic experience. Mary Flanagan has a different take on the role of play that is more practical in terms of where play is situated and it can afford, as has David Getsy (Flanagan 2009, p. 254; Getsy 2011, p. xiii). But the notion of the distant, reflective viewer as opposed to the *playing, participating or collaborating* viewer is arguably one of the key questions for the

understanding of how contemporary art meets its public. Or, in Claire Bishop's words:

... installation art's emphasis on first-hand experience arises in the 1960s as a response to mediated consumer culture and from opposition to the work of art as commodity. But in doing so it admits a flood of conflicting appeals to the viewer's authentic experience of 'heightened consciousness' (of body, self, place, time, social group) as—paradoxically—*both* an assertion of *and* a decentring of subjectivity. This is because installation art plays on an ambiguity between two types of subject: the *literal* viewer who steps into the work, and an abstract, philosophical *model* of the subject that is postulated by the way in which the work structures this encounter. (Bishop 2005, p. 130)

My position on the matter of whether play is capable of sustaining play and decentre the subject at the same is complicated. As an artist that works with game art, I have become sceptic to the idea that free play and artistic agency are the best of friends. Instead, I can identify with the artistic practices that are described here, that take a different approach. Across time, artists have found ways to wrestle aesthetic materials in whatever form it might have, and ludic art is not an exception. Assemblage, collage, fragmentation, noise and chance are all strategies of manipulation that is inherent in contemporary art practices.

Games

CHESS, Uncredited, Board game, 1475.

MEMORY OF A BROKEN DIMENSION, Ezra Hanson-White, PC, 2012.

PONG, Atari, Console, 1972

PROTEUS, Twisted Tree Games, PC, 2013.

SNAKE, Nokia, Mobile game, 1998.

Artworks

ADAM KILLER, Brody Condon, 1999.

AFTER YOKO: CHESS SET FOR THE BROWNING OF AMERICA, Joseph DeLappe, 2018.

CIA MONOPOLY, Öyvind Fahlström, 1971.

DEAD-IN-IRAQ, Joseph DeLappe, 2008.

HOW TO GET AN EDUCATION, Chris Howlett, 2016-19.

QUAKE/FRIENDS, Joseph DeLappe, 2002-2003

PAINSTATION, //////////////fur///, 2001-2003.

PLAY IT BY TRUST, Yoko Ono, 1966.

RETROYOU R/C: FCK TH RED GRAVITY CODE, Joan Leandre, 2000-2001

THE SAME CARD FLUX DECK, George Maciunas, 1966-1977.

SNAKEPIT, //////////////fur///, 2005.

SUPER MARIO CLOUDS, Cory Arcangel, 2002.

UNTITLED GAME – ARENA, JODI, 2002.

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