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Opinion: Video games have been around for more than 50 years. It's time we consider them works of art

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*The complexity and depth of JETT: The Far Shore help make the case that it's time for video games to be considered as works of art alongside the novels of Virginia Woolf and the films of David Lynch.*Superbrothers A/V Inc/Handout

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JETT.

Ten years ago, something happened that shocked me. I played a video game that struck me as a work of art. The game was called *Sword & Sworcery EP*; it's an indie game that achieved a tremendous amount of critical acclaim and made some best-of lists at the end of 2011. For those who haven't had the joy of playing it – it has sold more than 1.5 million copies – it might be best described as a retro point-and-click adventure game that makes ingenious use of time and has an unforgettable soundtrack by Canadian musician Jim Guthrie.

But looking back on that moment in 2011, I still wonder at my shock. Video games have existed for more than 50 years, are one of the most popular media of our era, and generate more revenue than movies and music combined. Why should it be surprising that one would feel like a work of art?

The first point to make is that the category of "art" is hopelessly vague. There are no absolute qualities that determine whether something qualifies. So the more interesting question is how anything comes to be *recognized* as "art." As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put it, "The production of discourse about a work of art is part of the production of a work of art." In other words, artists aren't just people who make beautiful things or tell uncomfortable truths. They're also people who struggle to get their work accepted as art – who try to bend and twist the definition of art so that it fits the stuff they make, which in turns allows them to get the things they seek: grants, shows, recognition, prestige.

Although there have been endless debates about whether video games are art, or what boxes they would need to tick before they

became art (Steven Spielberg famously said they would have to make us cry) the fact is that video games still don't fit comfortably into the category. For all their successes in crafting memorable experiences and pushing billions of dollars' worth of product, the makers of video games haven't yet managed to reshape our notions of "art" in a such a way as to encompass their productions.

My experience in 2011 was probably quite typical for "arty" people. At that time, I was deeply committed to "art." I had just finished a PhD in English literature, I was obsessed with post-punk music, and I was going through an intense David Lynch phase. All these interests fit together: watching *Blue Velvet* drew me closer to X-Ray Spex and Virginia Woolf. Video games, on the other hand, felt like they existed in a different universe. At that time – I had just turned 30 – I thought of them as something that belonged to my childhood, something I'd had to outgrow to establish myself as a connoisseur of the arts.

And when I occasionally checked in with the world of video games, I could see that there were good reasons for this. Even the titles that generated some artsy buzz – for a while, the Objectivist first-person shooter *BioShock* was the one everyone gave as an example – seemed overly reliant on violence. Where books and films could be propelled by love, or alienation, or sex, or loneliness, the only thing that seemed to move games along was killing.

Also, games took so much time and attention. You could read a novel over a few weeks as you nodded off in bed, or put a record on as you did the dishes, or watch a film as you decompressed at the end of a long day. But to make it through a game, you needed to be acutely present, synapses firing and heart rate elevated, for

30, 40, 50 hours. Without a clear payoff, it was hard to justify the investment.

And, speaking of investments, you needed an expensive console to play the latest games. All you needed for the other arts were a TV or laptop, some headphones – it didn't matter how out of date they were – and your five senses. For *BioShock* and its brethren, you needed a dedicated device, or a beefy gaming-specific PC, and these always seemed to be coming and going, subject to crushing cycles of planned obsolescence.

But with *Sworcery*, something seemed to have changed. It was an iPhone game, so no special equipment was required. It did not demand too much of your time – it was constantly telling you to take a break and chill out. And the gameplay was almost totally nonviolent: you advanced not by killing legions of enemies but by strumming waterfalls like guitar strings.

And, unlike any game I had ever played before, it seemed to get along with my other interests. The pixel art was weird and stylish. The characters said surprising things that made me stop and think. The music was catchy and odd. It felt more like *Twin Peaks* than *BioShock*. It seemed to bring all my favourite arts together and make them interactive.

It was awesome. So awesome that I became obsessed with video games – especially with the genre that I learned *Sworcery* was part of: indie games.

Around that same time, the Winnipeg filmmakers James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot released the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*, which made a case for indie video games as a vehicle for "art." Their argument went as follows. From the inception of the

video game industry in the 1960s, games had been expensive and difficult to produce, requiring huge teams of technically skilled workers. This led studios to be conservative in their artistic choices, preferring to stick to the well-established genres in which their massive investments were most likely to be recouped. But sometime after 2000 – with the rise of easy-to-use game-making software and accessible digital distribution – it became increasingly easy for small teams to make games on small budgets. Since the stakes were smaller, creators of "indie games" – so called because they worked independently, outside the mainstream commercial video game industry – were able to take risks.

It was an entirely practical way of looking at artistic creation, and I found it convincing. Just as DIY production had allowed Woolf to discover her voice (she ran her own printing press), or the punk band Bikini Kill to spread their radical message (they released their records on tiny labels and photocopied their own zines), or David Lynch to reveal the terror that lurks in the everyday (he made his early films on little more than craft and guile), it was now allowing creators to push the conventional boundaries of the video game, to discover all that the form was capable of.

I wanted to know more. Above all, I wanted to see how it worked. I had missed my chance to witness the birth of modernist literature, or of punk rock, or of independent cinema. But the story of indie games was being told in the present tense. If you knew where to look, you could watch the genesis of a new art form.

So I reached out to one of *Sworcery*'s developers, Craig D. Adams, a.k.a. Superbrothers, and asked if I could follow the production of his next work of art.

That was in 2013. In the eight years that it took Mr. Adams to make *JETT: The Far Shore*, I had ample time to discover that things weren't as simple as they seemed in *Indie Game: The Movie.* In 2021, video games are closer to fitting under the umbrella of "art" – but they still make an awkward fit, still require a bit of a push to make it through. The story of *JETT*'s creation shows why.

In its method of production, *JETT* was initially about as independent as possible. Mr. Adams took his earnings from *Sworcery* to buy a home in rural Quebec and finance the development of his next project, which he undertook with Patrick McAlister, a programmer based in Tokyo who was also living on his savings. When I began following the project, it was just the two of them: no investors, no publishers, no outside pressure.

The ambition of the project also fit the indie game narrative. Theirs was a passion project, driven by personal commitments rather than the desire for profits. *JETT* is a sci-fi story about a humanoid civilization that has destroyed its planet through rapid industrialization and seeks a new home in the stars, beckoned to a distant planet by a mysterious signal. One of its goals was, as Mr. Adams explained to me, to "move the needle" on ecological consciousness here on planet Earth.

But, because it was so ambitious, *JETT* was hard to make – much harder than Mr. Adams had predicted. Awesome as it was, Mr. Adam's first game, *Sworcery,* was small in scale. It was a demo tape or a short film –something modest in scope that showed how much its creators were capable of. *JETT* was an attempt to realize all this promise. It was the novel, the concept album, the epic film.

Production moved ahead at a glacial pace. Initially, *JETT* (and my book about *JETT*) was supposed to come out in 2015. But by that point, two years in, they only had a threadbare build – a sketch of something that might be great but was of little interest in and of itself.

Two years later, in 2017, they were in pretty much the same place, and Mr. Adams explained the complexity of making an ambitious video game with a team of two: It's a bit like two playwrights getting together and writing a bunch of scenes for a *Pirates of the Caribbean*-like roller coaster ride. And they have to be there during the construction of the animatronic robots. And then they actually have to *build* the animatronic robots – actually become roboticists. They have to ensure the safety of the roller coaster, make sure that the loop-de-loops are exciting enough. And then, at the end, if the dialogue is wooden in one of the scenes, that's still on them.

Ultimately, they needed to abandon some of the purity of the indie model to finally finish their game. In 2019, six years into development, they secured large investments from Sony and Epic Games, which they used to assemble a mid-sized team of artists, designers, programmers, producers and playtesters. In its finished form, *JETT* retains much of its original spirit and vision – but to call it "indie" is a stretch and requires an asterisk.

Is it "art," though?

In some sense, if you even need to ask the question, the answer is "no" – evidence that the space hasn't yet been created for *JETT* to slip frictionless into that slot.

But, having spent the past decade obsessing over indie games, it's the now the friction that interests me most.

In an essay she wrote in 1924, Woolf said that periods of intense experimentation are never likely to produce masterpieces. When artists are developing new forms, "so much strength is spent finding a way of telling the truth" that "the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition." In such periods, she says, "We must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments."

Today is obviously such a moment for video games. Artists are actively struggling to find ways of telling the kinds of stories they want to tell and creating the kinds of experiences they want to create. The steps are not known; the paths haven't been cleared. When Mr. Adams set out to make *JETT* in 2013, he didn't entirely know he was getting himself into. And, inevitably, so much effort was spent clearing a path that some of the original vision – some of Woolf's "truth" – inevitably got obscured.

But that's also why video games are the most fascinating art form to observe today. Woolf said something else about the novel in the early 20th century. At a time when "all the older forms of literature were hardened and set in place," it "alone was young enough to be soft in her hands." When you're working in truly new forms, artistic creation can be awkward, difficult and frustrating, as it certainly was at times for Mr. Adams with *JETT*. On the other hand, you stand a chance of actually making something new.

In the end, the story that *JETT* tells mirrors the story of its own creation. Explorers leave their home, searching for a new one – but when they land on the planet they seek, they find that it's ambivalent to their presence and are forced to confront the ethical tangle of colonization. The game doesn't try to resolve this ambivalence. It exposes the murky space between certainties,

leaves it there for the player to work through.

Which might be the clearest evidence that it belongs alongside Woolf and Lynch – that it really is something we might call art.

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