

This is not a computer game: this is not interactive art

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Abstract

This article examines distinctions and similarities between computer games and interactive art. The text proposes that these two media share certain aesthetic features, but these media are primarily different because of extrinsic aesthetic features that are associated with the art world. This perspective is primarily based on George Dickie's *Institutional Theory of Art*, which proposes that the classification for something to be art is decided by the prominent institutions of the art world rather than specific intrinsic aesthetic features within the object being classified.

Since 1986 I have been creating large-scale interactive video and sound environments that I consider to be art installations or performances, and since that time I have often been asked if the creation of my work was influenced by computer games, or if I was a "gamer." Although my work contains certain characteristics that are also present in computer games, I was never consciously influenced by that medium. I played electro-mechanical pinball machines in my youth, but the primary interests that evolved during my late teens were fine art, audio equipment, and computers. The other experiences that contributed to my involvement with interactive art were my formal education in fine arts, engineering and psychology, and my five years of employment as a human interface designer for industrial telecommunications equipment. Nevertheless, these facts are not necessarily evidence that my work is not related to computer games or that it is art.

The primary goal in the field of aesthetics is to investigate aesthetic judgements, the decisions that people make when they decide "What is art?" and "What is good art?" [1] Some theories of aesthetics are prescriptive in their approach by presenting the notion that certain writers, curators, and professors truly know what is good art. The *Institutional Theory of Art*, set forth by George Dickie in 1974, proposes that the classification of something to be art is determined by the artworld--by the established network of curators, galleries, and museums that sell and exhibit professional artworks. [2] Dickie writes, "...works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, the

artworld.” [3] Although an artist may have a sincere desire to create art, Dickie’s theory states that the designation of something to be art is determined by the prominent persons of the artworld rather than the intentions of anyone who claims to be making art. This theory essentially endows the bureaucracies of the artworld with authority while ignoring the sincere motivation that drives many artists. Nevertheless, there are some well-known examples of unsuspecting objects breaking into the fortified domain of the artworld, such as *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp. It is unlikely that a urinal hanging on a wall in a washroom would be mistaken as a work of art, but when Duchamp placed one in an art gallery in 1917 and proclaimed it to be art, he secured his place as the grandmaster of 20th Century art and he also demonstrated the *Institutional Theory of Art* decades before it had been conceptualized by Dickie. Another example of a non-art object becoming art through appropriation is the *Cowboy* series by Richard Prince, which he created by photographing the cowboys in *Marlboro* cigarette advertisements and then printing them as large photographs. Obtaining a definitive definition of what is a game is as elusive as locating a concise definition of what is art, but it is an intriguing coincidence that the most expensive painting ever sold is a depiction of a game: *The Card Players* by Paul Cézanne, which was sold for \$250 million USD in 2011 to the Royal family of Qatar. [4]

An important aspect of aesthetics is the notion of aesthetic features, which refer to the particular characteristics within an art object that determine its aesthetic value. Aesthetic features are classified as intrinsic features when they are physically present and perceivable within a work, such as colour, physical size, certain shapes, or any characteristic that can be seen, heard, or physically felt by an audience. In contrast, extrinsic features are not physically present within an artwork, and they are apparent only to people who have appropriate knowledge. Extrinsic features include the symbolism within a work, the age of the artist of a work, a work’s exhibition history, and the manufacturer of a work’s technology. Some theories of aesthetics consider intrinsic features--also called formal qualities--to be the only factors capable of influencing a work’s aesthetic value. An aesthetic feature that is common within computer games and interactive artworks is the interactive technologies that enable people to engage in a responsive environment of video and sound. Because of these technologies, the non-linear experience provided to audiences of computer games and interactive artworks are similar.

An issue relevant to aesthetic judgements is the importance of extrinsic features relative to intrinsic features. It seems reasonable that the quality of an artwork is primarily determined by what is perceivable within that object—such as its subject matter or style-- but artists who have interacted with the established artworld have probably noticed that their work becomes more widely accepted after being exhibited in prestigious institutions or purchased by important collectors. These types of events become the extrinsic features of an artist’s work--its provenance--and they are essential for increasing a work’s aesthetic value and an artist’s success. Artists who have experienced this scenario are forced to acknowledge the validity of the *Institutional Theory of Art*, even though the basis of this theory may be

contrary to what these artists believe to be true. If Dickie's theory is correct, neither interactive artists nor game designers have the authority to classify their work as art. That responsibility resides only with the artworld: what is exhibited or acknowledged by the prestigious institutions of art is art and what is not is not.

References

1. Stefan Morawski. *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).
2. George Dickie. *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
3. *Ibid.*, 88.
4. Wikipedia, List of Most Expensive paintings, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_expensive_paintings