Gaming the Network Poetic: Contextualizing Networked Videogames in Art

Joshua Fishburn
University of Wisconsin - Whitewater
800 West Main Street
fishburj@uww.edu

Videogames have historically used networking either to connect players for competition or cooperation, or to provide an ephemeral connection to allow the upload, comparison, or assessment of single-player achievement data. The majority of videogames take place on a screen and on established platforms, each of which have physical, technical, and sociocultural constraints that suggest how a player might interact. Recent art games, such as those by Jason Rohrer and the Atari VCS games of Ian Bogost, highlight experiments in a more focused use of the medium from concept to interaction, both between the player and the software but also foregrounding the code (both social codes and actual software) of the games. This paper documents the development and exhibition of Gaming the Network Poetic, a series of five networked videogames developed by the author, and raises questions about the aesthetic, mechanical, and audience-related considerations of developing and installing videogames in a contemporary art gallery.

Videogames, contemporary art, new media, art and code, networks, art history, game design

Figure 1: Gaming the Network Poetic Installation, Plus Gallery, Denver, CO

1. INTRODUCTION

Gaming the Network Poetic started as a way of investigating the variability and imperfection of human relationships through networked videogames. It consists of five games, which trade objects and commands amongst themselves based on the actions of the players. A player is never directly notified of his effect on the other videogames in the network, nor is he notified of how other players are affecting him. The experience is meant to unfold through the language of time, space, and image, rendering the network poetic.

Gaming the Network Poetic was conceived of as an installation. The physical presence of the piece was as important to the idea of poetic networking as the design of the games and the software network behind them. The five screens were mounted on a pentagonal box, which blocks each player from directly seeing one’s influence on the other games. The box created an open configuration that people can surround and investigate alone and in groups.

Because Gaming the Network Poetic was presented in a contemporary art space, I created open-ended games that would continue to run whether or not anyone interacted with them. Without interaction, the games can be seen as
dynamic, networked animations, or as a system that plays itself. Chris Lanier, in his review of the piece at Rhizome.org (2009), noted: “Perhaps this was the one piece in the exhibition that, while it invited participation, didn’t really need it.” For a contemporary art space, this was appropriate — visitors for whom videogames were foreign were not required to pick up a controller and play to experience and respond to the piece. It also highlights the tension of designing for multiple audiences.

Gaming the Network Poetic is an artwork that, in order to be activated and experienced, depends on a network of games, players, and spectators. To understand how these networks play out in the contemporary gallery space, I look in this paper at histories of networks in art and computing and end with a synthesis of theories through which to view contemporary art games and networked art in exhibition spaces.

2. NETWORKS AND SYSTEMS

2.1 Sociopoetics and Systems

Craig Saper’s Networked Art (2001) covers artistic networks that developed through participatory art movements that stood outside of the high modern art movement that was dominant in the mid-twentieth century. He regularly refers to literary theorist Roland Barthes’ concept of the receivable — a work that is encountered outside of the usual context of seeing a work or text. Barthes named this category after receiving a piece of mail art — an ever-changing work created by a small group of artists who received, modified, and sent amongst themselves — for the first time. Saper (2001, pp.4) provides a summary:

As “receivable,” the works examined in this book create intense, intimate situations rather than the polite pleasantness of the “readerly” magazine or the cool detachment of the “writerly” poem. By definition, these works are not for everybody, nor do they make a claim to aesthetic quality. They are produced for, and by, usually small circles of artists, writers, and friends, and the results often arrive in the mail, as mail art.

Because the works are produced for a much smaller audience, the criteria for judgement are very different from that of high art and literature:

Guy Bleus, in an edition of Commonpress, explains that “the main question of mail art-criticism is: ‘Is it mail art or not?’ This does not imply the act of traditional judging ... but of recognizing” (Exploring 37). Although one might find fault with this narrow definition, it does sound like Barthes’s notion of the receivable in the sense that the critic suspends traditional norms of judgment.

There is a parallel here with the development of the videogame industry and criticism. David Thomas, founder of the International Game Journalists Association (IGJA), recently wrote on the consideration of videogames as art (Crispy Gamer, 2009): “The trouble is, art is about beauty and some sort of unspoken experience of the Other. Games just need to be fun.”

The mail-art networks that Saper and Barthes refer to were inspired by the Fluxus movement, an anti-art movement of the 1950s and 60s that advocated the destruction of modernist high art and the institutions that supported it. It did this partially by advocating that each member take up a useful trade during the day to earn their keep, while leaving their evenings free for Fluxus activities. These involved playful, scripted games, chance exercises, and what amounted to instructions (like musical scores) for activities that might generate a work that, in its process or result, destroyed art (either actually or in concept).

One influence of Fluxus that remains today is its reliance on a network of participants to perform each work. While mail-art kept a limited, nonpublic audience, many Fluxus artists were invested, through their explicit position against established art institutions, in direct dialog with these same institutions. This gave their work a higher profile that widened the potential network of participants and allowed this influence to propagate to later art and cultural movements. Saper suggests that Fluxus’s most important contribution was that of “making networking situations into artworks.” (2001, pp.xv)

Rather than merely situating an artwork in a particular social context, the social situation is part of the work. My interest is in using the sociopoetic to describe my work as a poetic system that requires the participation of an audience to be fully realized, which diverges from Saper’s eventual use of the term to describe specific bureaucratic interventions and physical networks of artists involved in these interventions.

2.2 Networking Technology

A look at the development of the ARPANET (the precursor to the Internet) reveals an agenda of decentralization from the outset (Leiner, et al., 2003). The decentralized aspects of the Internet are often attributed to engineers’ intentions to design a network that would be resistant to nuclear attack. This emphasis could still exist without the threat of nuclear war. It also represents economic, social, and technological interests in keeping the Internet running smoothly.
The most economical and efficient means to transmit data is also the most distributed solution. Technologies (like TCP/IP) that contain assumptions about distribution in their very code still power the Internet and the majority of networked communication between computers. The four goals of the initial TCP/IP protocol read like a manifesto on free speech. To paraphrase: the network will be open, communication will be complete, no information about the content of packets will be recorded, and there will be no global control of the network (Leiner, et al., 2003).

This openness and reliance on intermediary computers to deliver a message certainly relates to mail art, and one could argue that the concept of the receivable has a digital twin in email and certain net art works, however weakened its effect might be on the receiver due to the pervasiveness (and non-uniqueness) of Internet communication.

The histories of mail-art, Fluxus, and the development of the Internet share a structured relinquishing of control to the senders and receivers of messages. Internet protocols can be viewed as very complex scoring of “how to send a message,” while mail-art and especially Fluxus work had protocols for sending and receiving. These simultaneous developments worked together as influencers - Fluxus bolstered the reception of interactive and multimedia works and set the stage for a network of audience participants in a work, while the advent of internetworking allowed for participants in such networks to be telepresent.

2.3 The Open Work, Relational Aesthetics, and The Ludic Turn

At roughly the same time as the Fluxus movement and the early development of the Internet, we have Umberto Eco’s (2006) “The Poetics of the Open Work.” In defining an open work, Eco reminds us that the reception of any work of art is open in the sense that as many perspectives are brought to the work as there are spectators. A traditional work of art, like a painting or other object, “is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole.” The scored musical works of Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage are open in a far more tangible way — they are literally incomplete if taken as a linear script of any potential performance rather than a suggestive set of instructions.

The search for suggestiveness is another characteristic of the open work — a search that opens up the work to “the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter.” (Eco, 2006, pp.27) To be sure, this conceptual arrangement still privileges the author of the work, and Eco highlights the composers and conceptual inventors of the musical pieces he describes, never naming the performers or referring to them as collaborators. During the performance, however, the performer has the role of full interpreter of the score and the author no longer has control of the outcome. While not a participatory network on paper, creating a suggestive score creates potential for the work to be opened up to a network of performers.

These ideas point to the consideration of a work as a system dependent on many variables. The responsibility of the artist is to create a situation for many participants (in the case of the open work, performers) to interpret and perform the work using the score as a starting point. Before bringing this conversation back to videogames, I will discuss one more theoretical construct.

Relational Aesthetics refers to the concept of a relational art, defined by Nicolas Bourriaud as an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space. (2006, pp.160)

He suggests that the previously held views of art as aristocratically controlled and displayed are dissolving into an art that must be experienced, but not in traditional spaces or manners. The need for an art as direct experience results from the imposed proximity of the urban space. Art is no longer “a space we have to walk through,” like a gallery or museum, but must instead be placed firmly into the urban space as the trigger for dialogue.

For Bourriaud, the artist's role is to create works in a space that is devoted entirely to interaction. It is a space for the openness that inaugurates all dialog. These artists produce relational space-times, inter-human experiences that try to shake off the constraints of the ideology of mass communications. (2006, pp.166)

He suggests that the aesthetic considerations of modernism are not gone but are instead less steeped in dogma. What he seems to be advocating is an aesthetic value akin to modernism coupled with the understanding of society as increasingly fragmented, which requires the interventions of artists to be done in smaller, more direct pieces to communicate effectively.

We no longer try to make progress thanks to conflict and clashes, but by discovering new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and by building alliances between different partners. (2006, pp.166)
Bourriaud references this question from philosopher Felix Guattari: “How can you bring a classroom to life as though it were an artwork?” He responds with his own question: “How is aesthetics to be used, and can it possibly be injected into tissues that have been rigidified by the capitalist economy?” (2006, pp.169) Educational researcher James Paul Gee is also frustrated by the rigidity of the modern classroom, especially in the United States. He holds up videogames as example experiences that can teach through dedicated difficulty, a system of rules to be learned and tested, and through the way they encourage social interaction and problem-solving around specific topics. Furthermore, he suggests that videogames reverse many cherished beliefs about education.

They show that pleasure and emotional involvement are central to thinking and learning. They show that language has its true home in action, the world, and dialogue, not in dictionaries and texts alone...They show that collaboration and participation with others is essential to engaged thinking and learning. (2007, pp.2)

While probably not the answer Bourriaud has in mind, videogames as a medium embody the potential for interactive, aesthetic networked experiences first championed by Fluxus.

In The Ambiguity of Play, Brian Sutton-Smith suggests that at the end of the twentieth century we may be witnessing a ludic turn that begins to match the aesthetic turn at the end of the eighteenth century. Where once art was at the center of moral existence, it now seems possible that play, given all its variable meanings, given the imaginary, will have that central role. (1997, pp.143-144)

There is anecdotal evidence of this in the prominence of play and games in online social networks like Facebook, and the expansion of the videogame industry to unprecedented numbers of “casual” gamers.

Because play is inherently social, we can draw connections to the previously discussed theories of networked art, the open work, and relational aesthetics, all of which advocate a social component to artmaking and, in the case of relational aesthetics, suggest that the social component or organization actually defines the aesthetics of the work. In the end, the classroom becomes a focus of both Bourriaud and researchers into gaming literacy for the same reason: it is a primary site for the construction of meaning. Both gaming literacy and relational aesthetics theorize that effective action, whether in art or other conceptual spheres, depends on the ability to intervene and create instant communities. This requires a deep understanding of contemporary social, political, and cultural networks. In other words, this type of intervention requires a deep understanding of systems theory. Even if the concept that videogames are the new art of the twenty-first century does not satisfy the reader, the ludic turn provides another theoretical frame from which to view videogames and extrapolate their potential.

3. GAMING THE NETWORK POETIC SOFTWARE

My goal with Gaming the Network Poetic was to develop disparate videogames that communicated in some way over a network. The initial inspiration for this came from an idea to create a genealogical videogame that covered the span of the history of my family. This became especially interesting when I considered what might happen if characters could transition between the games. If my great-grandmother’s game was about maintaining a farm family, what would her role be when the player decided to move her to a new game — one in which she might be dead, much older or younger, and with the different roles that those changes would entail?

As I developed the piece, the games lost their obvious reference to familial history and took on a minimalist aesthetic. This was primarily to draw attention to the specific interactions between objects on the screen during gameplay. Sometimes communication between the games is direct, sometimes indirect, sometimes active, sometimes passive. I wanted to find a way to create a network of games that behaved in a way that a human family might, with some games acting more antagonistically than others, and some perhaps passively communicating their positive or negative emotions through the network.

I used the word “symphony” behind the scenes to describe these games, not to bring up considerations of music or sound within the games, but as a loose metaphor through which to understand the relationship of each game to the others. Within a symphony there are various motifs that can make reference to the other movements in the full symphony, and can serve to unify the movements into a whole. The motifs in Gaming the Network Poetic can be thought of as an analogous visual grammar. With that in mind, the five main visual motifs in the series are: the red arrow, the triangle, the square, the circle, and the figure.

3.1 On Mechanic as Metaphor

Emily Short, in her analysis of a presentation by game designer Jonathan Blow, points out that using game mechanics as metaphor “usually works better as a meditation on some theme than as a
means to story-telling exactly.” (2009) In other words, elements that serve as actors or devices in the gameplay also have a non-literal meaning when compared with the rest of the individual games. Although my initial motivation for creating these games was to explore a specific familial narrative, Gaming the Network Poetic eventually became an exercise in distilling metaphors, moods, and emotions into game mechanics and abstract visuals.

4. HARDWARE ARRANGEMENT

The initial designs for Gaming the Network Poetic featured monitors facing inwards in a circular arrangement, with one specific point of entry into the circle.

My eventual decision to construct a five-sided box out of wood and mount all of the monitors on it, facing outward, had to do with communicating an openness that I thought essential and lacking in the initial design. The desire for an open play area was partially due to my previous experience installing videogames in a gallery space. In installations of two of my earlier art games, I placed the games directly next to each other (as monitors on pedestals with a keyboard mounted on the front of each pedestal). I had hoped that the juxtaposition of the games would create a situation for dialog, but players tended to focus on their own games.

The pentagonal shape of Gaming the Network Poetic allows for circular movement around the piece, while still allowing for the games to occupy their own space. The pentagon allows each player to be just on the periphery of the two players next to her, creating the simultaneously communal and solitary experience that I was aiming for. The decision to hang the piece from the ceiling was also motivated by the desire for openness. Screens are usually placed on pedestals or mounted to walls, but I was interested in placing an object directly in the middle of the gallery to invite a social space around it.

5. TEXT AND CONTEXT

Even if we are on the verge of a ludic turn and art is in the process of taking a backseat to games and play as primary forms of cultural expression, the discipline of art history will continue. Let us assume that a ludic turn has already taken place and integrate videogames into the art historical discussion. What, then, would one have to consider when studying a work in the medium of videogame?

Starting in general terms, one would need to observe the text and context of a piece. In the case of videogames and Gaming the Network Poetic in particular, the text can be thought of as the private, symbolic space of the game. The context, then, describes anything outside of the metaphorical game space: the location (including specific characteristics of the local environment), the hardware and software platforms, and the interface. This chapter will elaborate on each of these concepts and wrap up with a detailed consideration of the sum of the experience of Gaming the Network Poetic.

5.1. The Symbolic Space as Text

Each game was based on an emotional dichotomy: Separation/Connection, Self-Sabotage/Self-Esteem, Absence/Presence, Anxiety/Relaxation, Depression/Joy; each also employed one or more of the five motifs discussed earlier. In the Separation/Connection game, the player is a circle planting seeds that will join two triangles together into a square. A red arrow antagonizes the player by attempting to divide the uniting triangles, and to destroy the player. In the Self-Sabotage/Self-Esteem game, the player becomes the arrow and now breaks apart uniting triangles and attacks the circle. In the Absence/Presence game, the player is a figure on a round planet, digging holes and planting boxes that grow into flowers. Ghosts pursue the player but can be buried like the boxes. In the Anxiety/Relaxation game, the player is a figure perpetually falling onto a bed of spikes, but can be saved by the appearance of boxes that form a cushion. Finally, in the Depression/Joy game, the player is a square that drops pieces of itself onto the ground, which cultivates growing flowers (if there are any).

Seen aesthetically, the mechanics of these games represent a private symbolic space within which the players can interact and from which they can form interpretations and narratives.

5.2. Context - Social

The private symbolic space of Gaming the Network Poetic is merely visual unless the spectator becomes an active participant as a player. The various visual and interactive metaphors in the games can combine with and within the social space of the participants to create or activate potential narratives. In addition, part of the social interaction in the space actually takes place through the computer network. It is framed by the game space and limited by the specific interactions available between the games, but it immediately takes on an aspect of human communication as soon as player one realizes that player two’s (or player three’s, four’s, or five’s) actions in his game space affect events in player one’s game. With a player or players, Gaming the Network Poetic becomes relational.
When Nicolas Bourriaud defines a relational art, he explicitly removes the “private symbolic space” from consideration. His definition is focused entirely on the configuration, aesthetics, and social aspects of human interaction.

The addition of interactivity to the private symbolic space, in this case a mediated human interaction through the game network, causes the private symbolic space to become public. This doesn’t invalidate Bourriaud’s theory of a relational art, but suggests a modification of the definition to include the ability of an audience to activate a private symbolic space and allow the narrative metaphors of this space to merge with the immediate social space to create a virtually-mediated relational space for human interaction. In a videogame, the symbolic space of the game is backed up by a software system that allows certain interactions to take place within the game space.

### 5.3. Context - Location

Because I was interested in creating a cohesive art object, the social space that I chose was the art gallery, with all its norms and social codes. I wanted to exploit it as a space for art while also positioning these videogames as belonging in such a space.

The gallery in which *Gaming the Network Poetic* was installed is a traditional white box gallery that stays in business based on sales of original works of art. The minimalist space influenced my creation of the game visuals as well as the decision to create a clean, white pentagonal box on which to mount the screens. My hope was to create games that were easy to interact with but which also functioned as moving paintings or animations when idle. Spectators or those not comfortable with picking up a videogame controller were able to experience the piece from a relaxed perspective.

By being the only major work in the gallery that was not for sale, *Gaming the Network Poetic* stood out. It did not represent an object out of reach to the casual visitor, nor did it represent something to acquire and hang in a living space or store as a collector’s item. The piece could also be located in other, less traditional art contexts and still function as a piece around which a group can gather and interact, both through the software and with each other.

### 6. CONCLUSION

If we are indeed entering a ludic age, then videogames will continue to exist as entertainment objects, but will prompt more study, more attempts to define a communicative vocabulary around them, and more artistic interventions and movements.

A challenge that the piece faced, and continues to face, is the gap between those willing to take the time to discover and truly play within the game space. This was not a problem for the younger people who visited *Gaming the Network Poetic*, but adults seemed to struggle to embrace the action of letting go — of time constraints, assumptions about experiences of art, assumptions of others in the space, or assumptions about interacting with games or computers — required to fully experience this piece. Perhaps there is a stigma associated with play in a serious space like an art gallery that impedes the progress of letting go. Or perhaps this stigma is generalized to adulthood, and those willing to engage it are better prepared for the ludic age that we may or may not be entering.

### 7. REFERENCES


