




VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY
OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 12 CLASS 1

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Exploring Game Aesthetics

by

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Games = Art

- Sommerseth recognizes that **games are not generally accepted as art.**
- Contends that computer games are objects of **expression, storytelling and imagery.**
- Adheres to Bourdieu's notion of art -- as **social and cultural category and construction**; therefore, games are art.
- Asserts that the **aesthetics of computer games** should be informed by the world of *entertainment media* and *digital art*.

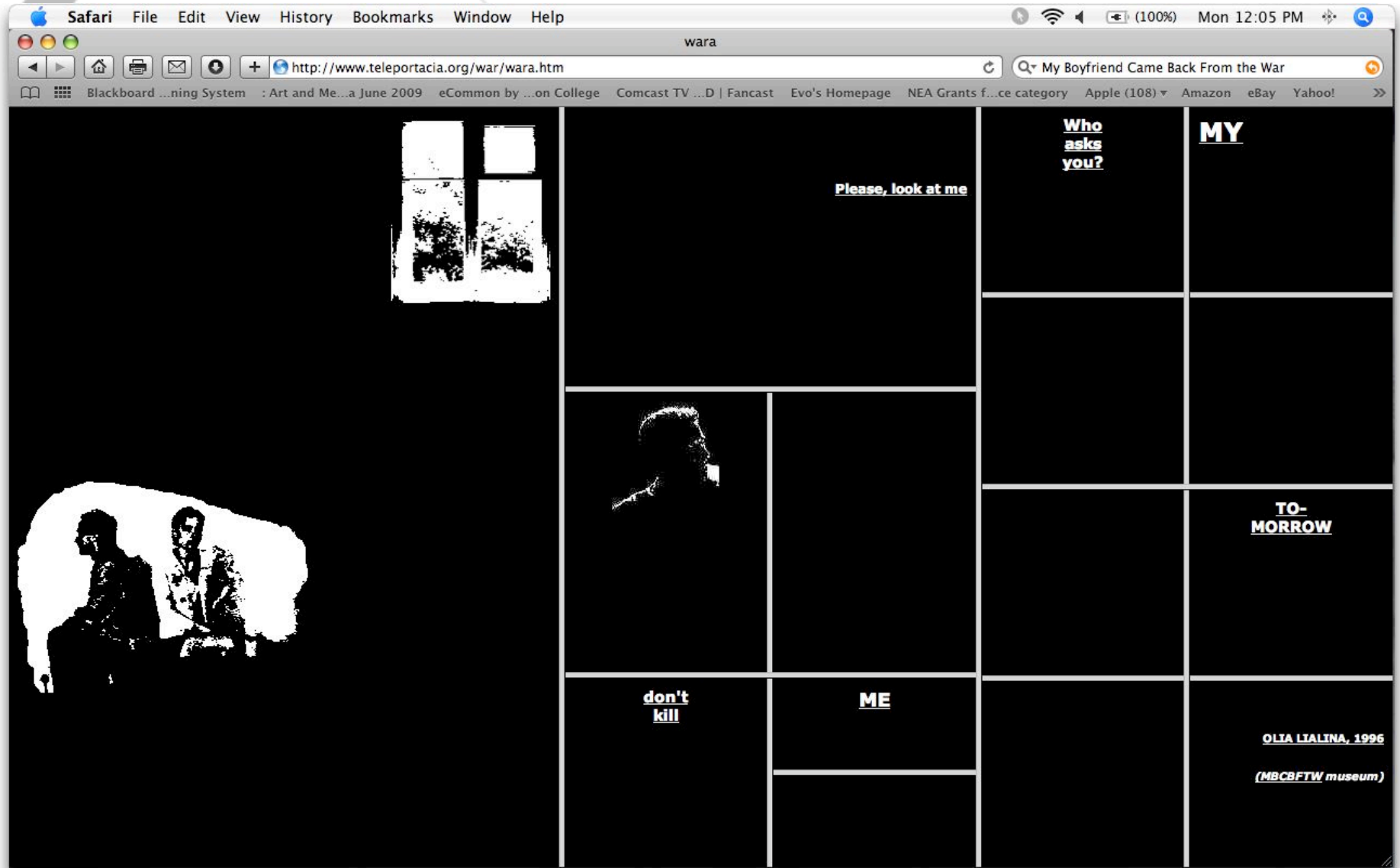
Games = Art

- The focus when the notion of **art** is used is always on the **visual** (graphics).
- Nic Kelman's book *Video Game Art* is typical; it **considers the visual, representational art** of computer games, *placing it within the context of other historical representational art forms.*
- **But are games essentially visual media?**
- Rather, they should be regarded as **software, digital electronic objects**, and for their intrinsic **interactivity**.

net.art

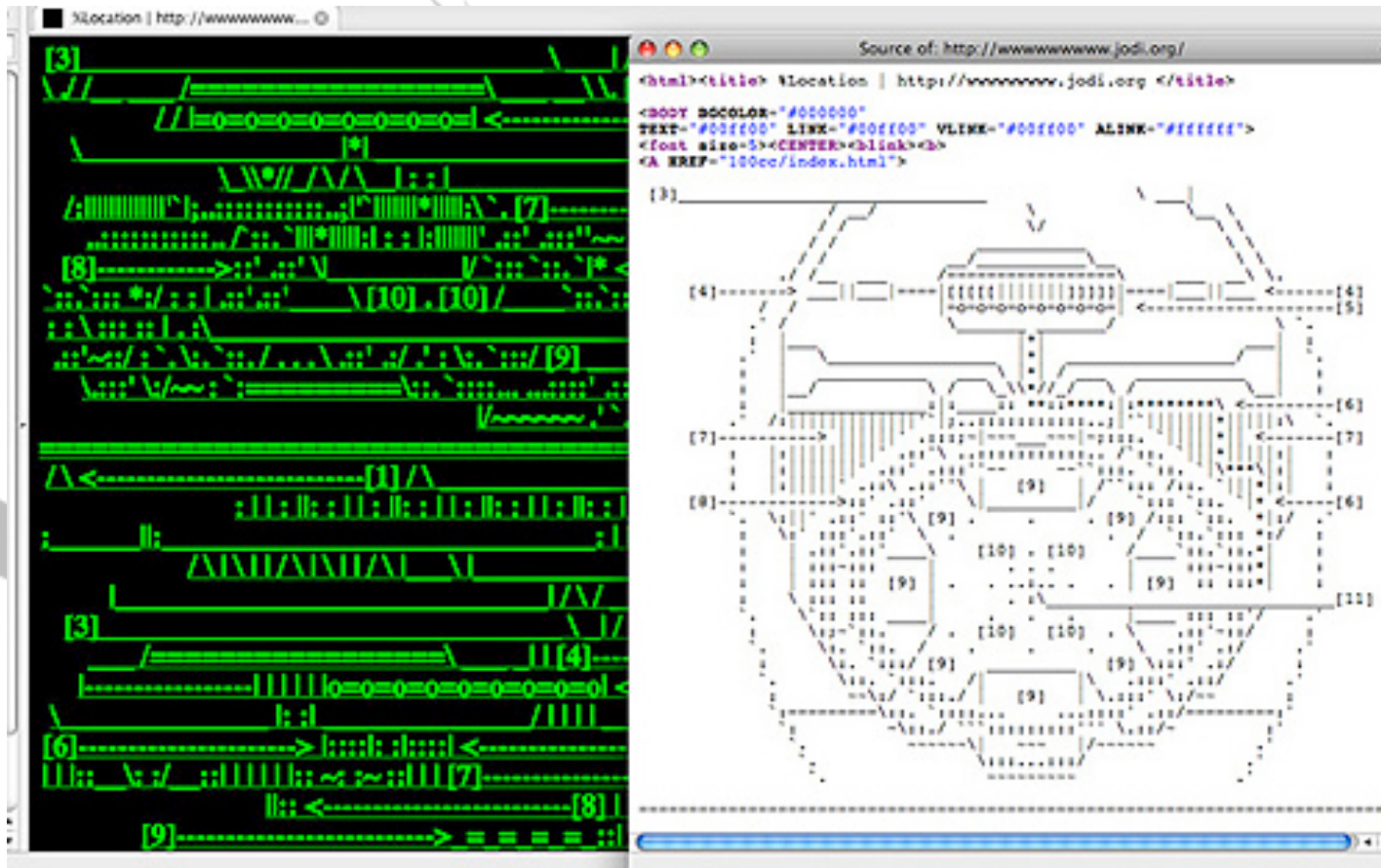
- Scholars have compared net.art to games aesthetics.*
- net.art explicitly used the technologies and languages of new media to provide **a commentary on its own mode of existence**; experiments with **software, code, protocols, operating systems** and **collaboration**.
- <http://www.jodi.org> comments on the layers that exist beyond the visible interface of the computer screen, **questioning where the actual core text is located**.
- net.art and computer games have merged in various forms through **hacking, modding** and **machinima**.

My Boyfriend Came Back From the War



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Jodi.org



1993 home page experiments with source code and HTML aesthetics; displayed a nonsensical green code; “View Source” revealed an embedded ASCII diagram of a hydrogen bomb.

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Historic Parallels

- Similarities between the art movements of the early and late 20th century:
 - Both appear at a time of **rapid social and technological change and embrace the new technologies.**
 - Characterized by an **interest in the medium itself**; its **formal** features and established **conventions**, and the **desire to playfully subvert them.**
 - Desire to extend art beyond the established system with the goal of being **more democratic.**

Interactivity

- Is intrinsic to the computer gameplay experience.
- Notion of **choice**, **control** and **effort** = centered around a presumption that the **computer game is a form of text**:
 - “whereas the reader of a standard print text constructs personalized interpretations out of an invariant semiotic base, **the reader of an interactive text ... participates in the construction of the text** as a visible display of signs.” -- Marie Laure Ryan
 - Espen Aarseth's 'ergodic literature', meaning **text which requires effort on the part of the reader in order to traverse**, also invokes the notion of interactivity.

Avant-Garde Games (not)

- In *Gaming, Essays in Algorithmic Culture*, Alex Galloway asserts that computer games are **actions** (video games are **to be played** not texts to be read).
- net.artists such as Jodi (*modernist nostalgia*) **removed the player's ability to interact** (reduced her to a viewer, consuming a piece of visual art in a traditional, passive manner); essentially **denying the reality of play itself**.
- **Worthy/Serious** games are experimental, subversive, 'deconstructable' (**art**) vs **Fun/Unserious** games = successful, great to play but not deserving of critical acclaim (**not art**).

Interactivity, Agency and Post-Modernism

- To call games “Art”, we would invoke the death of the high/low culture divide (postmodernism).
- The past three decades have seen a number of new forms *triumphantly presented as the 'ultimate challenge to modernism'*, such as **hypertext literature** in which **choice is given to the reader** in determining the direction of the narrative:
- Hypertexts are “*read when they are written and written as they are read.*” - Michael Joyce
- **Can we really call the act of clicking on links ‘writing’?** (the text is *fixed*; the reader is merely *interpreting*).

Interactivity and Immersion

- However, if we look at postmodernism as denoting a shift of emphasis from **epistemology** (knowledge) to **ontology** (experience), the computer game is uniquely placed as both a conceptual tool for exploring new notions of aesthetics as well as a timely object embodying this implied shift.
- Sommerseth shifts to the concept of **immersion**, its relationship with interactive technologies and its implications in the aesthetic experience of computer game play.

Edwina Bartlem on Immersion & Art

- *Immersion* implies that one is drawn into an **intimate and embodied relationship** with a **virtual** and **physical** architecture, whether this immersive affect is generated by a VR system, the cinema, a panorama or another medium.
- It suggests that one is **enclosed** and **embraced** by the audio-visual space of the work, and **transported** into **another realm or state of perception**. One cannot be immersed without being affected by the environment on **perceptual, sensory, psychological** and **emotional** levels.
- Indicates a human **desire to fuse** with the **representational space or technology** -- a desire to become *posthuman* or *transhuman*.

Edwina Bartlem on Immersion & Art

- Immersive artworks often generate **self-conscious** and **self-reflexive** forms of perception and interaction as participant-viewers engage with the work.
- Considering this, Immersive art presents a challenge to traditional aesthetic philosophies -- specifically those descended from *Immanuel Kant* -- that seek to assert the need for **perceptual distance** during the experience and assessment of art.
- **Critical distance** has remained a dominant discourse in art history and theory.

Edwina Bartlem on Immersion & Art

- Modern aesthetic philosophy has often struggled to account for **sensory-aesthetics in the body** of the spectator, tending to privilege **rational thought** over **sensory perception** and a body that **simultaneously thinks and feels**. (Lyotard)
- Modern aesthetic theory that asserts the need for critical distance tends to **perpetuate a mind/body dualism** where **the mind** of the spectator is seen as the **primary site** of interpretation.
- Critical Distance vs Critical Reflection.

Immersion/Interactivity Dichotomy

- Immersion/Interactivity **takes the body as its starting point**, as opposed to the text.
- Immersion/Interactivity are often seen as dichotomous concepts; **Interactivity** denotes **gaining control**; the **aesthetics of computer games is necessarily an 'aesthetics of control'** (Julian Kücklich); **Immersion** denotes a **loss of control**, a giving in to the world one is surrounded by and simply taking it all in.
- It is in the **relationship between immersion and interactivity** that **the aesthetic experience** of computer game play can be understood.

Virtual Reality

- First appeared in Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), where he coined the expression 'la réalité virtuelle', and was used sporadically over the next five decades.
- The 1990s saw a research boom in VR techniques, spurred on by the publications of books such as Howard Rheingold's *Virtual Reality* (1991), as well as influential fictional works such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992).
- In academic theory, VR has been used as a conceptual tool for reengaging in **philosophical debates concerning the nature of reality and our understanding of it.**

Virtual Reality as Sensory Experience

- Although new techniques are being developed continuously, VR remains a **mainly visual** experience (though it often engages the whole body).
- Technologies attempt to project a believable **sense of presence** in a simulated environment onto the user, by **acting upon the users body and senses**.
- J.J. Gibson argues, “there are two different meanings of the verb **to sense**, first, **to detect something** (active), and second, **to have a sensation** (passive)”; **perception** through the sensory system is **a form of information detection that operates interactively** with the brain and with the other perceptual systems.

Active vs Passive Sensing

- Gibson distinguishes between perception and proprioception:
 - **Perception** is concerned with the **environment and external stimuli**
 - **Proprioception** is concerned with the **body and internal movement.**
- Gibson distinguishes between imposed and obtained stimulation:
 - **Imposed Stimulation** is impacted on a passive receiver;
 - **Obtained Stimulation** is achieved through action.

Fictional Worlds

- Video games draw upon centuries-long traditions of competition, drama, gambling, storytelling, myth and chance; present us with a **fictional world to explore**.
- Marie-Laure Ryan notes in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) that a pervading theme in literature and film throughout the last century has been the notion of **dwelling in fiction**.
- When we describe the feeling of immersion we claim to get 'lost in a book', or 'carried away' by a film, forgetting our immediate surroundings and becoming absorbed in another, fictional, world, experienced as spatially and temporally separate from the one we are physically confined to.*

High vs Low (Mind vs Body)

- One reason why immersive fiction has been relegated to the *lower end of the cultural hierarchy* in recent decades may be that **the immediacy of an immersive experience is related to the embodied and sensory experience of 'being there'**, as opposed to the more 'cerebral' ideal of the contemplative, alienated subject in modern art and fiction (i.e. rational thought, critical distance).
- The popularity of immersive fiction thus speaks to the continued interest in 'there', in being able to actually experience other worlds, or other realities.
- **Immersion** is coupled with **addiction**.

Embodied vs Cognitive Immersion

- “In contemporary culture, **moving pictures are the most immersive of all media**,” (Ryan) due to their ability to **combine spatial and temporal representation** with the full detail of **photographic pictures and natural language**.
- Immersion in text-based and audiovisual media are two substantially different experiences:
 - **Text-based** is dependent on the **cognitive shaping of mental images**;
 - **Audiovisual** is dependent on the **interpretation and understanding of already-created images** presented to the viewer on a screen.
- Thus, one can argue that the experience of immersion in **audiovisual media** is closely **dependent on both embodied and cognitive understanding**.

Video Games vs Cinema

- In a cinema environment, everything is done to make the viewer 'forget' her active body. She is sat in complete darkness and silence, in order to make the reception of audiovisual input optimal. The cinema experience engages two of her senses; eyes and ears. (*This is not to say that the experience of viewing a film is one of disembodiment; but **she must perform a cognitive construction of an experience, based on previous experiences, memories and prompts from the images presented on the screen.***)
- Games designers, on the other hand, give the player something interesting to engage with as **activity, as opposed to a mere spectacle.**

Still Thethered

- The VR/video game* experience may appear liberating when compared to the dark- stillness of the cinema theatre.
- VR imprisons the body in a profound, albeit different, manner. Although the body is not immobilized, it is nevertheless tied intrinsically to technology.
- But, by focusing on the role of the senses in relation to technologies of immersion, we can begin to develop an understanding of the aesthetic traits specific to video games.

Conclusion

- Immersion in video games, and in VR, comes from technology acting upon the body and sensorial input.
- The “presence” of the body makes it more difficult to separate reality from fiction; but we are still capable of doing so.
- This physical experience -- immersion and interactivity -- provides a basis for understanding the aesthetics of gameplay, and the unique features of video games as entertainment media.
- See my notes below.