

Computer Games as Social Sculptures: Toward a Reevaluation of the Social Potential of Games and Play

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INTRODUCTION

By looking at both art games and innovative game play as social sculptures, this short essay traces the overlap between computer games and the art historical background of social practice art in order to rethink the social potential of games and play through analysis of Molleindustria's art games and the innovative play in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020). It continues the discussion of how games can raise social consciousness (Frasca 2001), reveal social reality (Galloway 2004), alter social imaginary (Kirkpatrick 2013), and goes further to demonstrate how computer games can penetrate into society and be exercised for social betterment, performing as "social sculptures". In so doing, it not only opens up a new perspective to justify computer games as art, but also provides a new way to reassess the social value of games and play.

Social sculpture (*soziale Plastik*) is a term coined by German artist Joseph Beuys in the late 1960s to refer to both a set of beliefs and a nominal category of artworks (Gyorody 2017, 10). As a set of beliefs, social sculpture suggests art should be penetrated into life and exercised for social betterment. As a nominal category, social sculpture describes "artwork that takes place in the social realm, an art that requires social engagement, the participation of its audience, for its completion" (Moore 2010). One such example is Beuys' work *7000 Oaks* (1982-87) installed for *documenta 7* in Kassel, Germany. In this project, Beuys, with the help of volunteers, planted 7000 oak trees in Kassel which made the artmaking process into a collaboration with citizens and created a long-lasting social transformation outside of the museum. Beuys' social sculpture has influenced subsequent generations of artists engaged in "new genre public art," "relational aesthetics," "social practice art," "participatory art," and "collaborative art" (Gyorody 2017, 166). But at the same time, social sculpture has been criticized for its fragile political possibilities despite its radical utopian vision of potentiality (Rojas 2010). Namely, the political questions raised by social sculpture cannot be resolved in artistic practices through the rhetoric of participation. Computer games are facing similar critiques, for example, Murray (2018, 12) points out that "no real intervention is made" in computer games and they can only be seen as a "culturalization of politics" (Žižek 2008). This forms a series of potentially interesting parallels between social sculpture practices and computer games. The remainder of this text will investigate these parallels from two perspectives, one concerning art games (as used by Sharp [2015] which will be discussed later), the other concerning innovative play, in order to

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see how the discourse on social sculpture can be applied to the discussion of computer games and how it can be useful in reassessing the social potential of computer games and play.

ART GAME AS SOCIAL SCULPTURE

There have been on-going discussions on the relationship between games and art. Sharp (2015), for instance, differentiates between game art, artgames and artists' games. For him, game art refers to art's appropriation of games (i.e., Cory Arcangel's installation *Super Mario Clouds*). Artgames use innate game properties to explore aspects of human condition (i.e., *The Marriage* [Rod Humble 2007], *Passage* [Jason Rohrer 2007]). Artists' games are created by artists to explore the expressive potential of game as medium (i.e., *The McDonald's Videogame* [Molleindustria 2005]). This research challenges Sharp's top-down, designer-centric categorization of art games and posits the artistic quality of computer games in the dialogical interplay between artist and player for social discourse, and by doing so, it diversifies the current discussions of how games are qualified as art. Art games, here, are characterized by their capacity to enable dialogues and foster social discourses.

It is possible to trace a historical and methodological linkage between the neo-avant-garde art practices (notably Fluxus), Beuys's social sculpture and art games. Beuys' idea of social sculpture is influenced by George Maciunas, a founding member of Fluxus, after their encounters in the 1960s. Fluxus artists have defined their goal as social instead of aesthetic and based on this goal, they incorporate many game elements, such as chance, rules, and the participation of the viewers, into their performances in order to erase the boundary between artist as producer and viewer as consumer. Art games, too, aim to erase the rigid boundary between designer and player by facilitating an interplay between the two. This can be seen in Frasca (2001)'s "Videogames of the Oppressed" in which he gives player more agency to experiment with game rules and characters which normally belong to the field of designer. Art game as social sculpture highlights the creating of social discourse instead of personal, adding a social and collective dimension to Wilson & Sicart's (2010, 3) abusive game design which only "understands games as a personal affair" between the player and the designer. The cultivating of dialogic interchanges and social discourse can be seen in Molleindustria's art game *Democratic Socialism Simulator* (2020), a game that lets the player be the first socialist president of America. On account of the randomness and implicitness incorporated in the game design, the player is 'forced' to have a continuous dialogue with the designer about different political ideas and to formulate her own political discourse in this process. As with Beuys's social sculpture works, art games also provide a place for dialogues and social discourses.

INNOVATIVE PLAY AS SOCIAL SCULPTURE

Early scholars tend to characterize play as a free and unproductive activity that is separated from work and real life (i.e., Huizinga 1998 [1949], Caillois 2001 [1961]). However, as Möring and Leino (2016) points out, early play theories "emerged in parallel with the philosophy of liberalism". As we have moved into neoliberal society, the distinction between play and work, between play and real life, is becoming more and more obscure to the degree that play, just like work and life, is conditioned by the entanglement between neoliberal self-fashioning and Foucauldian self-construction (Zhu 2018). On a more positive note, the interpenetration of play and life can provide the condition for social sculpture to be realized through innovative play.

Aarseth (2003, 6) uses "innovative play" to refer to the situation "when players invent totally new strategies and play the game not to win, but to achieve a goal by means that are not previously recognized as such by other players". Similar observations can be seen in Leino's (2010, 126) distinction between *playing* and *playing with* and

Flanagan's (2009) theorization of critical play. An example of innovative play is the virtual protests created by Hong Kong players in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, a game famous for its cute cartoon characters and its escapist mentality. This example resembles Beuys's social sculpture practice *Sweeping Up* (1972) in which he and two students used a bright red broom to clean up the rubbish from the May Day parade in Karl-Marx-Platz in Berlin. Both are loaded with political symbols and have conveyed clear political messages in a simple yet unexpected way. This resemblance suggests the critical potential of innovative play in constructing computer games as social sculptures.

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