Reframing Art and Games as Historical Twins: *art bit*'s Curatorial Practices in Japan

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ABSTRACT

In aesthetic and philosophical studies that discuss videogames as art, they have been often regarded as a unique form of art that incorporates gamehood, and positioned as something that expands on traditional concepts of art. On the other hand, the *art bit* exhibitions, which introduced contemporary art and indie games in Kyoto, has, through their four iterations, fundamentally questioned the "artistry of indie games" and the "gamehood of contemporary art" as historical twins. At the root of this is the perspective that "contemporary art" and "contemporary games" were born in the same era and have developed in parallel throughout the 20th century. Based on this understanding, I would like to critically examine how the works and exhibition concepts of the previous *art bit* exhibitions shed light on the history of contemporary art, and clarify the aesthetic significance and philosophical implications behind this practice.

Keywords

History of Videogames, Contemporary Art, Indie Games, Aesthetics of Videogames

INTRODUCTION

Derived from philosophical and aesthetic debates on the nature of video games, game studies in the English-speaking world has long pursued the question, "Are video games art? If so, what are their distinctive artistic characteristics?"

A scholarly milestone in this discussion was Aaron Smuts's 2005 essay, which analyzed early-2000s titles such as *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment Oyj 2001) through the lens of major art theories. Smuts argued that although many video games should not be considered artworks, certain advanced titles do meet the criteria for artistic recognition (Smuts 2005).

Grant Tavinor, sharing a similar perspective on this issue, responded to the debate over the definition of art by examining previous art theories. In his book *Art of Videogames*, he builds upon Smuts' argument by demonstrating how video games can be considered artistic (Tavinor 2009). Here, Tavinor adopts a position based on Berys Gaut's cluster theory, which proposes a flexible define the concept of art by a set of conditions. Specifically, a work has a greater chance of being recognized as art when

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it fulfills multiple of the following conditions in a disjunctive manner, with the understanding that these conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient and may evolve depending on the ad hoc conditions: (1) possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being an artifact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (Gaut 2000) .

As reasons for its adoption, Tavinor cites three advantages. First, this approach provides flexibility that even if an object lacks one or a few of the characteristic features of art, it may still be art if it has enough of the other typical features. Second, it can be free from the normativity of conventional art theory, such as the institutional theory of the art world as argued by George Dickie (Dickie 1974) or the historical theory as argued by Jerrold Levinson (Levinson 1979) , which determine artistic status through theoretical frameworks. Third, the definition by cluster theory is naturalistic in the sense advocated by Denis Dutton (Dutton 2006, 2009), and art is considered to be an activity based on universal human nature and cross-culturalal principles (Tavinor ibid.).

Following Dutton's argument, previous art theories have positioned avant-garde works, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, as foundational to "contemporary art" and accorded them far outweighs their real significance. In contrast, the cluster theory explanation has the advantage of allowing for a better understanding of art in general as it highlights the regularities across human culture, and in general allows for a neutral discussion of the uniqueness of video games in comparison to previous art forms.

From this perspective, Tavinor argues that while the expressive form of video games does match many of the aesthetic qualities Gaut lists in his cluster approach to art, the element of gameplay that arouses the pleasure of interactive kinesthetic sensation is a quality that differs from that of former art in general (Tavinor ibid.). Therefore, in his book from 2009, he argues that early videogames, dominated by simple gameplay elements, may not necessarily qualify as art. He further contends that, since the 1990s, advancements in computing power have enabled titles like *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), *and Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007) to achieve rich audiovisual expressions and complex fictional world-building, thereby making their artistic significance more readily recognizable[1].

Thus, at this point, according to Jesper Juul’s classical classification (Juul 2005), the artistic quality of videogames was primarily attributed to their fictional aspects, while their rule-based gameplay was considered an endeavor to be understood, for the time being, within a framework distinct from the concept of art.

In response, Zach Jurgensen takes up Tavinor et al.'s argument and raises the issue that the conventional debate over the artistic nature of video games has failed to fully discuss the aesthetic attitude that video game “gamehood” has on the player, because

it confuses “what makes an object art” and “how that object should be appreciated as art” (Jurgensen 2018). In addition, he discusses the mechanics that create gameplay, and how they bring about a unique video game experience, referring to Bernard Suits' framework for defining games in general, which places an emphasis on the player's lusory attitude (Suits 1978), and Juul's discussion in *The Art of Failure* (Juul 2013), which emphasizes the repeated failures of players in achieving their goals when playing video games.

Thus, aesthetic and philosophical debates on the artistry of video game works have proceeded according to a rationale for how to situate gameplay as an act of appreciation, based on a framework about existing art. In parallel with the accumulation of such research, not a few art game works that pursue avant-garde artistry while utilizing the art form of video games as a comprehensive art form, and game art works that use video games as a medium to create avant-garde works of art, have been produced, especially in the Western world (Stalker 2005, et al.).

In contrast, while Japan has historically played a pivotal role in the video game industry's development alongside the U.S., there appears to be limited evidence of a movement that has actively pursued the development of the boundary between games and art, at least in the same category consciousness as in the Western world. Individually, creators have emerged who have demonstrated their own artistic qualities through media art approaches, such as Toshio Iwai, who was involved in the development of *Otocky* (ASCII 1987) during the Famicom era, and Kazutoshi Iida, who has created a series of works beginning with *Aquanaut's Holiday* (Artdink 1995) during the PlayStation era, and Tetsuya Mizuguchi, who has created works based on the concept of synesthesia, such as *Rez* (Sega 2001). However, these creators, who demonstrate unique authorship through an artistic approach, have emerged only with in the scope of diversity permitted by entertainment-focused commercial videogames (Nakagawa 2016, et al.). These trends may be due to the characteristics of the video game market in Japan, where the PC game market has long been in decline due to the success of Nintendo and Sony game consoles in the 1980s and 2000s, compared to the West. And, because the authority of fine art has been historically weak in the first place, the blurring of the boundaries between pure art and mass art. These conditions have been considered as a consequence of the characteristics of post-World War II (or more traditional) Japanese society and culture (Sawaragi 1998, et al.).

Despite these historical differences, the spread of general-purpose game engines and PC-based online distribution platforms such as Steam since the 2010s has led to an increase in the number of Japanese video game players who are interested in the global indie game scene. In recent years, interest in avant-garde art house games as a sub-genre and game art that is premised on a shared contemporary video game experience has been growing[2]. *In a Gamescape: Landscape, Reality, Storytelling and Identity in Video Games*, an exhibition co-curated by Nobuaki Doi and Akihiko Taniguchi and held at the NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC) in Tokyo from December 2018 to March 2019[3], which was the catalyst for these interests. The exhibition focuses on international game art/art game works created from the late 1990s to the 2010s, including the pioneering machinima works of Miltos Manetas and the indie game works of David OReilly. It served as a landmark event, drawing diverse audiences including core game fans, media art enthusiasts, and researchers in Japan[4].

As described above, after the aesthetic and philosophical debates in the West regarding video games and art, the development of art games/game art, and their

reception to Japan in the wake of the revitalization of the indie game scene, currently in the 2020s Japan, an exhibition series have started with new approach that rethinks the relationship between video games and art. The exhibition, *art bit -Contemporary Art and Indie game Culture-*, that is being held in the entrance lobby of the Hotel Anteroom Kyoto, a lodging facility in Kyoto, is a group show that co-exhibits works of contemporary art that have a connection with video games and works of indie games that in some sense have an artistic concept. As an offshoot of *BitSummit*, Japan's largest international indie game trade show held every summer in Kyoto, the exhibition has been held four times from 2021 to 2024[5].

The exhibition is mainly planned and curated by Yasutaka Toyokawa, manager of the Hotel Anteroom Kyoto (Mournian 2023). Following his request, I authored a critical essay outlining the concept of this exhibition to the flyer distributed at the second exhibition in 2022 at his request and have participated in the co-curation of the exhibitions in 2023 and 2024. In this article, I will decipher the exhibited works and concepts of the past four exhibitions from my position as a critic and co-curator who has observed the selection of exhibiting artists and works for the *art bit* exhibition. Furthermore, the aesthetic and philosophical significance underlying the practice of this exhibition will be clarified through specific exhibition design, critiques of the works, and theoretical considerations about the cultural history of contemporary art and video games.

The curatorial concept of the *art bit* exhibition: Reinterpreting Marcel Duchamp as a chess player

What distinguishes *art bit* from other video game-related exhibitions is its distinct curatorial approach. While previous exhibitions that have displayed art game or game art works that blur the boundary between games and art at the level of the work, it deliberately exhibits art works using conventional mediums such as painting and three-dimensional installations, pairing with indie game works that have the concepts in common, while being conscious of the historicity of authentic (that is, in the sense of the concept of art in Dickey or Levinson) “contemporary art”.

For example, in the first year's *art bit #1* exhibition[6], contemporary art works and indie game works were contrasted according to four themes: “Minimal and Regularity Art,” “Idea of Digital Art,” “Tourism and Regional Art,” and “Original Experience.” In the first of these themes, “Minimal and Patterned Art,” Yoshihiro Takeuchi, who creates paintings such as the *Chain Series*, which is based on the idea of video games, exhibited *Lies or Truth* (2021) from the contemporary art side, and from the indie game side, Efe-ko's *Mathmare* (2019), which uses mathematical geometrical figures to create a bullet barrage in a shooting game, is juxtaposed.

Figure 1: Installation view of *art bit #1*. Efe-ko's *Mathmare* demo screen juxtaposed with Yoshihiro Takeuchi's painting *Lie or Truth* under the theme "Minimalism and Patterned Art".

This curatorial approach illuminates the potential for integrating "art" and "games," which have been regarded as different conceptual categories in the context of aesthetic and philosophical studies of video games in the Western world as described in the Introduction.

Takuya Nakao, an art critic, explains this method of contrast by noting that Marcel Duchamp, while known as an artist who greatly influenced later generations, was also a chess player representing France.

> Whether a game is a painting, or a painting is a game, the visible screen conceals an invisible system that reflects human thought. Appreciation and play. Both of them may be an attempt to capture 'possible motion.' Therefore, in the space where the two artists' 'game/painting' is exhibited, we can feel the interaction (inter-play) that occurs on the boundary between appreciation and play. (Nakao 2021)

Notably, Duchamp's activities, which are regarded as the starting point of what is called "contemporary art" in the 20th century, there is already an interplay between chess game playing and the act of viewing existing visual arts such as paintings and sculptures. The matching of Takeuchi's paintings and *Mathmare* as a set of works that allow viewers to experience the essence of these two activities in a contemporary way. The concept of the *art bit* exhibition is based on the twinning of contemporary art and video games since their inception, and the attempt to retrace their historical development.

Similarly, in the other three themes, works by artists working within the framework of contemporary art in the broad sense of the term are paired with one or two indie

games that resonate with them to form a variety of works. The cornerstone of the first year's *art bit #1* was the establishment of a style as a genre-crossover group exhibition.

It can be said that that is a movement of modernism that has thoroughly developed the struggle to renew the various isms of what constitutes the “beauty” that humans create, while the development of technology related to expression since the industrial revolution, such as photography and video technology, or the flood of industrial products, threatens the very existence of traditional artistic expression such as painting and sculpture. In this context, the conventional focus on the “retinal” pleasure of pleasing the eye, which had been a given condition of beauty, was relativized, and the question was how much the conventional concepts surrounding beauty had been shaken up through a “cerebral” appreciation experience that was highly cognitively taxing and even caused discomfort and confusion (Hirayoshi 2018). This avant-garde approach became fundamental to artistic valuation, shaping the subsequent development of the art scene.

This development marks the emergence of the "game of context" in which artists and audiences as individual “players” “challenge” themselves to create and read artworks with a sense of active participation, based on the existence of loose “rules” in the context of art history and the conventions of the distribution market, and are influenced by the evaluation and influence of collectors, gallerists, and critics in the context of the art world. The “game” aspect of modern art, in which artists and audiences “compete” to win recognition and influence in the context of the art world, has become especially acute after Duchamp 's provocation. In particular, as the United States became the center of development after World War II, the formation of the circulating value of art became linked to the quantitative evaluation system of global financial capitalism, and the game became enormous until the present day, which is the essence of contemporary art when reinterpreted as a value creation game.

On the other hand, if the state of video games today is positioned as a mirror of contemporary art, in what sense? If we trace back to their roots, we cannot help but recall the invention of *El Ajedrecista*, an automatic machine that could play chess endgames against a human opponent, which is considered to be the first pioneering example of a computer game, in 1912. This was also the same year that Duchamp created the painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, which fixed the imaginary of human movement on canvas based on the impact he received from the serial photographs of nude women. This also corresponds beautifully to the fact that he spent his life working on artistic production that pursues the “totality of the phases that were not actually played, which expand in invisible directions that are being thought about during play” (Nakao 2017) that is common to the characteristics of chess.

The endeavor to mathematically simulate "the totality of unplayed games" drove the development of computer technology and game theory during World War II. As a testbed application for verifying the performance of such logic machines, mutually turn-based logic games such as Nim and Tic-Tac-Toe were introduced to computers, and the prototype of interactive video games using display devices as board displays was born.

The establishment and parallel development of contemporary art and contemporary games

As discussed above, the mathematical concepts that laid the foundation for computer technology and game theory—precursors to the emergence of video games—developed in parallel with the stylistic evolution of Marcel Duchamp's artistic practice in Europe during the 1910s and 1920s. Remarkably, these developments also coincided with Duchamp's increasing engagement with chess throughout the 1920s and 1930s. If we take this contemporaneity into account, we might also consider that a domain called "Contemporary Games"—encompassing video games and computer games—had emerged in a way comparable to "Contemporary Art" within the discourse of authentic art theory. This is because both fields blossomed in the post–World War II United States and can be seen as having developed in parallel, like twins.

Let us begin by examining more closely the historical characteristics of "Contemporary Art." In Arthur C. Danto's Hegelian view of art history, Western art—particularly painting—unfolds across three narrative epochs: the "era of imitation" from the Renaissance onward, the "era of ideology" initiated by the post-Impressionist movements of the late 19th century, and the "post-historical era" that emerges with the advent of Pop Art in the 1960s (Danto 1997). In other words, postwar contemporary art was nothing less than a movement that reached the climax of a meta-artistic turn—one that critiqued representational views of art based on the imitation of external reality and instead pursued the conditions under which art can be said to be art. This manifested in two major currents that developed like the two wheels of a cart: on one hand, the formalist approach of Clement Greenberg, the ideologue of Abstract Expressionism, which sought to rigorously purify the medium-specificity of each art form; and on the other hand, the provocative questioning of the boundary between art and non-art, exemplified by Duchamp's readymades and the rise of Pop Art.

In contrast to this, I envision the scope of the term "Contemporary Games" in a relatively broad sense, referring to a category of games whose product- and work-like qualities are clearly defined as creations of companies or designers—emerging under the influence of late 19th- to 20th-century notions of commodity economy and intellectual property. This distinguishes them from traditional or classical games such as chess, backgammon, and playing cards, as well as from modern sports competitions. Included in this category are not only computer and video games, but also earlier board games like *The Game of Life* (Milton Bradley Company 1860), *Monopoly* (Parker Brothers 1935), and *Tactics* (Avalon Hill 1952), as well as tabletop RPGs and trading card games that appeared around the same time as video games. A key characteristic that runs through these games is their tendency to pursue, through the design of game pieces and boards as representational tools, or through the construction of rule systems themselves, a fictional imitation or dynamic simulation of real-world phenomena—such as career development, real estate transactions, or modern warfare. This marks a clear departure from the evolution of traditional games or modern sports in the West, which generally sought to strip away ethnic specificity and figurative elements in favor of cultural neutrality and the formal purity of rule systems as international competitions. In other words, whereas contemporary art sought to establish its identity by moving beyond the "era of imitation"—in reaction to the rise of reproductive technologies such as photography, film, and print—contemporary games, by actively incorporating those very technologies as their own media, can be seen as quietly opening up a new domain of mimetic art.

The same historical period also saw the formalization of mathematical logic by thinkers such as Frege, Russell, and Gödel, which in turn laid the groundwork for computer science and game theory as developed by Alan Turing and John von Neumann after World War II (Koyama 2021). Within this intellectual context, the structural conditions that define a “game” were abstracted and reduced to their logical minima. These developments enabled the engineering of early computer games that implemented minimalist, turn-based mechanics, such as *Nimatoron* (Westinghouse Electric Corporation 1940) and *Tic-Tac-Toe* (University of Cambridge 1952), which may be understood as prototypical “game-theoretic games” (Nakagawa ibid.).

In other words, while the postwar American contemporary art scene, which marked the climax of the “era of ideology” pursued a shift toward Duchamp-like “cerebral” art and Greenberg-like purification and minimalization of the medium as an ideological goal, the emergence of computer games in contemporary games of the same era signified that engineering was instead an engineering prerequisite and an inevitable starting point. Furthermore, as the computational power of computers developed and became linked to the ability to render two-dimensional images, early video games such as *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham 1958) and *Spacewar!* (Russell et al. 1962) emerged, significantly enhancing the imitative representational capabilities of subsequent contemporary games.

Summarizing the above discussion, the parallel characteristics between contemporary art and contemporary games can be understood through the following three phases.

First, from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, both emerged as categories in response to the impact of photography and film technology, with traditional/modern art and games/play offering contrasting responses (the transition from Danto's “era of imitation” to the “era of ideology”).

Second, in the latter half of the 20th century, the former was motivated to pursue pure art in the sense of fundamentally exploring the artistic potential of human activity within the medium of film technology, as a counter to its erosion. The latter, on the other hand, began to pursue a new form of comprehensive art that fuses with visual technology to imitate and remediate all existing forms of artistic expression, based on the fundamental analysis of games revealed by mathematical logic. In this sense, the two developed in opposite historical directions (the heyday of the “era of ideology”).

Third, from the end of the 20th century to the 21st century, the Greenberg-like program of artistic purification came to an end with the emergence of pop art and media art, which confronted and assimilated the structures of consumer society and information society, and a situation of “anything goes,” liberated from the constraints of representational content and media forms, has long since arrived. In contrast, the latter has seen the video game industry, as a pioneer of information technology, achieve remarkable growth. In particular, with the standardization of CG that progressed from 2D to 3D, works that are literally comprehensive artistic creations capable of imitating any real-world phenomenon are being produced daily. In this sense, both Contemporary art and Contemporary games have reached a point where they have already brought to an end their respective self-realizing developmental histories (contemporary art's purification from imitation to principle, and

contemporary games' synthesis from principle to imitation), having run their courses in opposite directions (“the post-historical era”).

The exhibition and concept of *art bit #4*: Exploring the aesthetic connections between video games and painting

Given the historical perspective outlined above, we can better understand the rationale behind the symmetrical juxtaposition of “the gamic nature of contemporary art” and “the artistic potential of indie games” in the art bit exhibition, which began in 2021. Contemporary art and contemporary games—categories that emerged concurrently in the early 20th century—have each reached a similar phase in their respective trajectories, having exhausted their ideological programs of development. We now find ourselves in an era in which artists and creators are free to recombine these historical repertoires through acts of bricolage, enabling a proliferation of diverse works.

In particular, since the 2010s, the rise of the internet and the widespread availability of low-cost game engines have democratized the tools of production—much like the advent of the paint tube once did for modernist painters. As a result, individual artists and developers are now empowered to translate their ideas into realized works with relative ease. These two conditions together have created the foundation for a curatorial context in which art and games—regardless of medium—can cross over under a unified exhibition concept.

Indeed, from 2021 to 2023, the first three art bit exhibitions showcased works by Japanese contemporary artists who drew on video games in both form and method, while simultaneously paying homage to the trajectory of postwar art history—from the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, to Fluxus performance, to Nam June Paik’s media art. These artworks were exhibited alongside notable titles from the global indie game scene.

In order to reflect critically on this cultural moment, I participated as a co-curator in the 2024 edition, *art bit #4*, where we adopted the thematic title “2D or not 2D” [7]. This theme was intended as an opportunity to reexamine “painting,” arguably the most classical and fundamental of two-dimensional media. The choice was grounded in the conviction that painting allows us to clearly perceive the historical inversion described in the previous section—namely, that while contemporary art evolved from imitation toward principle, contemporary games moved in the opposite direction, from principle toward imitation.

Moreover, the “death” and “rebirth” of painting have repeatedly been triggered by technological innovations such as photography and film. In the present moment—where high-definition 3D computer graphics have become ubiquitous in visual media and video games, and generative AI enables the instant output of virtually any 2D image imaginable—the question of what it means for human beings to paint is once again posed with renewed urgency. *art bit #4* sought to bring such historical and contemporary tensions into critical visibility.

As noted in the previous section, the development of computer technology and contemporary games has proceeded in parallel with the evolution of postwar contemporary art since Duchamp. In the domain of painting especially, the rise of photography and film led modernist artists in the mid-20th century to reject

representational fidelity and instead pursue the internal logic that makes painting painting—a movement embodied in abstract expressionism and minimalism.

By contrast, Hiroshi Yoshida has observed that video games, as a two-dimensional expressive form, differ fundamentally from photography or live-action cinema. Rather than presenting a projection of preexisting space, video games generate space dynamically, in real time, via computational procedures. Points, lines, surfaces, and colors emerge sequentially on a blank screen through code, and spatial form is constructed stage by stage. In this respect, Yoshida argues, the spatial logic of video games is closer to that of classical painting than to photographic representation (Yoshida 2023).

In early computing environments with extremely limited processing speeds and memory, players encountered this spatial construction directly. Early vector-scan systems rendered single-color lines by firing an electron beam across a fluorescent CRT screen, while later raster-scan systems scanned the screen line by line, using RGB coordinate data to compose bitmap images at finite resolutions. Through this transition, video games became a frontline medium for physically experiencing the evolving affordances of computer graphics—serving as a new kind of "brush" for visual creation.

In other words, the visual process in early video games began with the implementation of abstract computational principles, and only gradually—through improvements in processors and memory—became capable of rendering mimetic, representational content. This represents an evolutionary trajectory inverted from that of mid-century modernist painting.

Extending this line of thought, one might interpret the act of early video games—where players manipulate symbols within a flat space rendered in simple 2D graphics, interactively generating a unique screen state moment by moment through gameplay—as something akin to a form of action painting.

Yoshihiro Takeuchi, a recurring artist, attempts the most direct and honest approach to the fundamental requirements of both painting and video games in his new two-piece painting *Re:*. While painting the entire canvas with acrylic paint to create an undercoat of contingencies of abstract expressionist unconscious flow, he lays star-shaped dots output from a 3D printer on top of the paint to simulate the 'paddle and ball' style pseudo-physical laws of the video game industry from its origins in pinball to *Pong*. The process of coloring along 108 geometric reflection trajectories was replayed twice, as if to simulate the "paddle and ball" style of the origins of the video game industry, and the traces of this process are nothing short of pioneering a style of drawing that could be called gameplay painting.

Figure 2: Installation view of *art bit #4* gallery. Yoshihiro Takeuchi, *Re:*.

In contrast to this, the walls of the exhibition space are covered with two oil paintings, *Y's* and two other works by Okada Shun, who considers the glitch screen caused by the faulty insertion of ROM cassette-type game consoles, which every Famicom/Super Famicom generation has experienced, as his motif, as a pictorial avant-garde in which figurative and abstract are accidentally blended together. Shunte's indie game *BearRunner Any% RTA*, which utilizes a NES-type controller, was juxtaposed as a device for visitors to pseudo-experience the world of "Game Freaks Play with Bugs" (Nakazawa 2015).

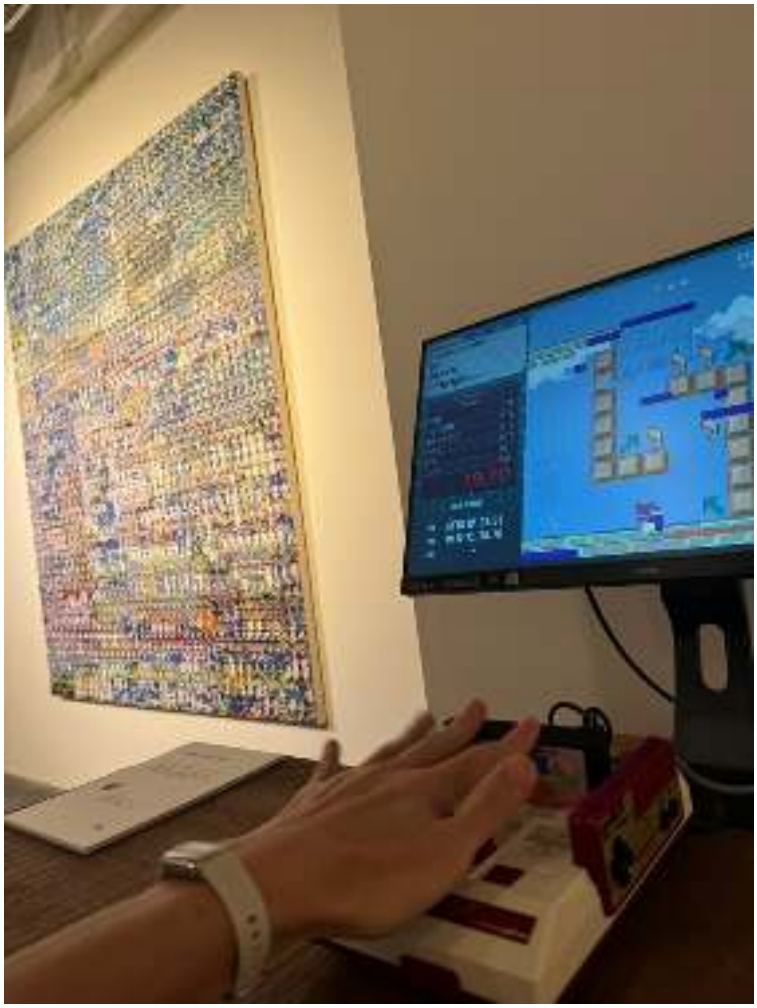

Figure 3: Installation view of *art bit #4* gallery. Shunte *BearRunner Any% RTA* and Shun Okada's painting

The representation of three-dimensional spatiality on a two-dimensional screen remains one of the most important issues common to painting and games, parallel to the figuration/abstraction conflict.

In other words, just as modern painting since the Renaissance has constructed spatial continuity akin to reality through linear perspective based on vanishing points, contemporary video games, with advancements in CG technology, have developed virtual three-dimensional spaces. Particularly in North America, mainstream genres include FPS (First Person Shooter) games, which immerse players in a subjective first-person perspective, and open-world games, which place a camera behind the controlled character to depict expansive 3D environments in realistic detail.

In contrast to this strong Western normative consciousness of three-dimensional realism, the impact of non-Western art culture, which was built on different spatial principles and color sensibilities that condensed the imaginary world image onto a flat plane rather than on a precise perspective, through Japanism centered on ukiyo-e and inspiration from African folk art, has been a source of inspiration for the birth of contemporary art in the 20th century and its occasional transformations. In particular, during the period of the establishment of the games industry from the 1980s onwards, Japan's cultural landscape, which had accumulated a repertoire of various character

representations, especially in the fields of manga and anime, proved to be a strength. It is well known that, starting with Pac-Man and Mario, a variety of game characters were created one after another and gained worldwide popularity through ingenious deformation using the limited size of pixels to combine visibility as an interface with appealing “Kawaii (cuteness)” as an icon. This strategic awareness of Japanese “Nijigen (two-dimensional)” culture as an alternative to Western art has resulted in concepts such as Takashi Murakami's “Superflat” and teamLab's “Ultra Subjective Space” in the realm of 21st century contemporary art.

Following this Japanese deconstruction of Western perspective, Kazuki Takakura's *nehan pot* and *Kakitsubata pot A and B*, originally based on the principles of spatial representation in traditional Japanese/Oriental painting, which is Ultra Subjective Spatial and mandala-like, have been psychedelically transformed into a worldview of the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss on canvas. The exhibition's concept of “2D” to “not 2D” is carried out in the form of a digital-analogue psychedelic transformation, and the recombination of flat patterns into vase-like sculptures using Lego blocks as the medium.

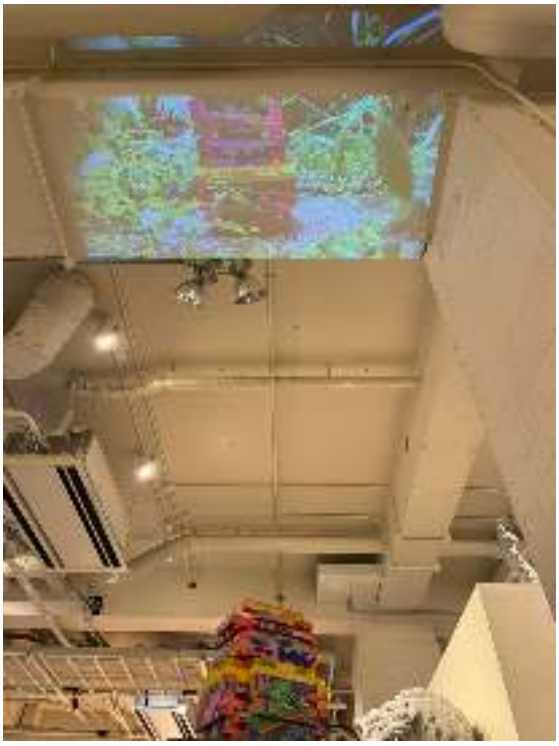

Figure 4: Installation view of *art bit #4* gallery.
Kazuki Takakura’s *pot* work made by Lego blocks.

Art game pioneer Kazutoshi Iida's collaborative work THE HOLE 2024 integrates stereoscopic VR images into the eye sockets of an Arita porcelain skull. This allows viewers to immerse themselves in the painting world of Shin Koyama, who has created numerous illustrations since the boom of Showa Genroku Culture and Neo-Expressionism (New Painting) in the 1970s and 80s, particularly depicting basara-style scenes of hell. The spectacle-like devices, reminiscent of a return to the earliest kinetoscopes or Marcel Duchamp's Final Work, precipitate further problematique concerning 2D and 3D, East and West, and the life and death of painting.

Figure 5: Installation view of *art bit #4* gallery. Kazutoshi Iida + Shin Koyama *THE HOLE 2024*

The third axis of conflict is formed by Jérémy Cortial's *Game Play Airlines*, a paper airplane project of imagination that combines the graffiti-like pleasure of 'drawing' with the power of AI in a 1980s retro-pop game creation, and, on the contrary, Nohemon/Kenji Okuda's indie game *Chalk Mutiny*, which, on the contrary, uses a blackboard eraser cleaner to counteract the uncontrolled runaway of chalk.

Engaging with these three axes, Maki Ohkojima's video/painting/sculpture set *not<I>, not not<I>,* also uses AI as a mediator, creating a multispecies worldview that melts the boundary between humans and other species. The 43 minutes and 39 seconds video, which is deliberately framed in a painterly manner, visualizes the process of melting the boundary between human beings and images derived from plants and animals using GAN (Generative Adversarial Networks), which has become the starting point of the current Generative AI boom. Through this process, the artist visualizes how something that is not "I" becomes a phenomenon when it interacts with something that was not "I," along with a text of awareness by Yosuke Tsuji. This work minimally summarizes the essential nature of painting and sculpture, which is the act of selecting a certain moment from "play" as a dynamic equilibrium of multidimensional or dimensionless pseudo-nature, and fixing it as a two-dimensional or three-dimensional form through the collaboration of the eyes and hands.

Similarly, a series of paintings including *Rock / Box / Bird / Radio Waves / Mail Box* and *You are walking in the park* by Zennyan, who is active in various fields as one of the standard-bearers of the pixel art movement. These six framed prints juxtapose bitmap images resembling simple objects in the screen layout of classical adventure games with Zen-like dialogue choices. Positioned along the path where hotel guests move towards temporary private spaces, these prints attempt to puncture a hole into the viewer's living space, aiming to access the potential worlds uncovered by digital

gaming experiences, relying on memories of these encounters. This is nothing short of an imaginative “play” that resonates with the "Game Poem" movement emerging among analog game creators, aiming to blur the boundaries between game rule descriptions and poetry. By merging game and art, it seeks to cast a “positive curse” that intrudes into the viewer's everyday life.

In terms of indie games that act as a mirror for the group of art works that delve into the origins of art by extracting the game-like elements at the heart of these paintings, we have attempted to pick out the following two groups. The first group includes *ArtFormer: Ancient Stories (Buffa Software, 2021)*, *Chants of Sennaar* (Rundisc 2023), *Please, Touch The Artwork* (Thomas Waterzooi 2021), Loretta (Yakov Butuzov 2023) , *TENSEI* (Project Pegasus / NEURON・AGE CO.,LTD. 2024), and *Behind the Frame* (Silver Lining Studio 2021), and attempts to make the history of human painting and the essence of “drawing pictures” since the emergence of mythical thought in cave paintings and other forms of art more tangible.

The second group chronicles the 21st-century renaissance of pixel art, an aesthetic bridging abstraction and figuration while paying homage to Japanese video games of the 1980s and 1990s. This collection features *YUMENIKKI -DREAM DIARY-* (Kikiyama 2004), *Passage* (Jason Rohrer 2007), *Hyper Light Drifter* (Heart Machine 2016), *Unreal Life* (hako life, 2020), *NEEDY GIRL OVERDOSE* (WSS playground, 2022) and *SPACE INVADIAN* (Daisuke Nishijima, 2024).

Painting, the foremost of humanity's most fundamental art forms, and games that formalize the essential nature of play that has existed since before art was established as art. The attempt of *art bit #4* was to show some of the possibilities brought about by the struggle against the imperfection of vision, which forces us to represent multidimensional reality as a two-dimensional image through the retina.

CONCLUSION

The four iterations of *art bit* in Kyoto have systematically reexamined the history of so-called contemporary art through the lens of the concept of contemporary games, including videogames. This is an attempt to complement, from the opposite approach, the research that has been conducted to aesthetically and philosophically grasp the artistry of video games as a unique interactive art form with gamehood while expanding the old concept of art, from Smuts to Tavinor and Jurgensen. It can be said to be an attempt to complement research that tries to grasp the artistry of video games aesthetically and philosophically as a peculiar interactive art that has gamehood while extending the concept of old art.

From their very inception, contemporary games and contemporary art share a common impulse: both emerged in response to the overwhelming impact of 20th-century media technologies, as movements that challenged the boundaries of what humans could do and express beyond the capacities of machines. In this regard, they reflect a shared pursuit. If we return to Johan Huizinga’s thesis in Homo Ludens—that “play is older than culture” (Huizinga 1949)—then art itself can be seen as a cultural institution that arose from the human instinct to play. That is to say: when the act of play results in the externalization of imagination as a surplus object—as in the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux—what emerges is what we call “art.” Conversely, when that play manifests as a chain of actions, codified through causally structured, interactive physical behavior—such as running or tag—it becomes what we call

"game." By reexamining these distinctions in terms of key conceptual frameworks—representation, form, and norms/rules—I believe it is possible to construct a more general aesthetic and philosophical theory that encompasses both art and games. The elaboration of such a theory, however, must be left for future work.

Thus the historical narrative emerging from the *art bit* exhibition will also bring a new comprehensive perspective to aesthetic and philosophical research on games and art itself.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Later, in order to be more precise in defining the aesthetics of video games in general, Tavinor also introduced a number of other approaches, mainly based on the concept of 'mass art', such as the plurality of instances proposed by Noel Carrol (Tavinor 2011).

[2] One notable example is the August 2020 issue of *Bijutsu Techo*, one of the most prominent art magazines, which featured "games x art". https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/news/headline/22280

[3] *In a Gamescape: Landscape, Reality, Storytelling and Identity in Video Games*. Official website. https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/exhibitions/2018/in-a-gamescape/

[4] In addition to curators Doi and Taniguchi, there were only four domestic exhibitors, Jun Wada and Shota Yamauchi, and the remaining 14 exhibitors were all overseas artists and studios.

[5] Recent exhibition *art bit - Contemporary Art & Indie Game Culture* - press release. UDS Hotels. May 23, 2024
https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000032.000070731.html

[6] The first year's exhibition *art bit - Contemporary Art & Indie Game Culture* - (July 9 - September 4, 2021). HOTEL ANTEROOM KYOTO Official Website, June 29, 2021
https://www.uds-hotels.com/anteroom/kyoto/news/10348/s

[7] The theme title "2D or not 2D" is derived from a track of the same name on *P-MODEL* (1992), an album by the distinctive Japanese techno-pop unit P-MODEL. The song title is a pun on Shakespeare's iconic phrase from *Hamlet*, "to be or not to be." In the music video—created using an Amiga computer—references to Botticelli's The *Birth of Venus* and the "Utah Teapot," an early 3D model popular in the formative years of computer graphics, are layered throughout. The video critically explores the liberation of visual tools that generate "not 2D" (i.e., three-dimensional) imagery within the confines of a 2D screen.