Playability and its Absence
– A post-ludological critique

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ABSTRACT
This essay concerns with the overlap of interactive art and computer games. In order to arrive at a critique of the feasibility of using playability's absence as a strategy in the design of 'art games', the essay contextualizes contemporary non-playable 'art games' in the discourses of both interactive art and computer games. For this purpose, a notion of 'playability' is derived from notions of freedom and responsibility. In the 'cross-exposure' of traditions, questions arise about authorship, and, the aesthetics and ethics of the relationship between the artworks and its audience.

Keywords
Playability, art, art games, interactive art, single-player computer games, new media art, post-ludology, philosophy of computer games, phenomenology, existentialism

MOTIVATION AND INTRODUCTION
For some time I have been puzzled by the trending absence of playability and the prevalence of what one might call open-ended exploration in so-called art games, wondering why game designers – the people I trust know best how to make use of techniques associated with computer games – choose to leave out, when making 'art', that which makes, from my perspective, single-player computer games into what they are. This question, concerning with the relationship between 'art' and 'playability', is timely especially since several prestigious institutions furthering the cause of art have recently embraced computer games. For example, since November 2012 computer games sit together in the MoMA collection with corkscrews, cars, can-openers and other designed objects elevated to the status of art, and, in May 2013 London's V&A Musem announced that it has appointed a game designer in residence. In many respects, the inclusion of computer games into the art-world is a *fait accompli*. This consideration allows side-stepping the legitimacy debate and getting down to the business of describing computer games as art and all it entails. To consider computer games as art is, among other things, to understand them in terms of their similarities and differences to other traditions of artistic practice. In this essay, rather than participating in the larger debate of what, if anything, makes computer games art, I hope to bring into the discussion a rather more specific perspective: I will illustrate some points of contact between the traditions of single-player computer games and interactive installation art.

'Computer games as art' did not emerge from an ahistorical void: there are parallels to be drawn and comparisons to be made. One possible way to understand the similarities and differences between computer games and related forms of artistic practice, which I will explore in this essay in order to shed light on the absence of playability, is to place computer games on trajectories of art history and see not only how computer games appear in light of these histories, but also how the histories appear from the perspective of computer games. These lines of enquiry will help us grasp what the exchanges with the art-world can bring to the tradition of computer games and how computer games can contribute to the evolution of artistic practice. While I have chosen to focus, in this essay, on the similarities and differences between computer games and interactive art, this is not intended as suggesting that interactive installation was the *only* trajectory of artistic practice in relation to which computer games could or should be described, but merely one possible avenue of analysis.

Of all fine art traditions, computer games seem to be most closely related to interactive installation. The things we call single-player computer games and interactive installation artworks[1] have a lot in common. Both employ technology and invite the user to give input, in an attempt to provide the user an experience. Consider the following thought experiment for the argument's sake: if we took a single-player computer game, called it an 'interactive installation' and set it up on a sleek podium in an electronic art exhibition, audience might not observe anything out of the ordinary. This of course depends on the computer game, and some computer games, more than others, would be easier than to disguise as interactive installations, but, in general, selling a single-player computer game as an 'interactive installation' should be much easier than calling it a 'sculpture' or 'painting' instead.[2] Wilson (2008, 96) suggests that

> (…)there is no easy way to separate video games and new media art, and that drawing sharp binary distinctions between early games and new media art is less productive than seeing differences alongside important resemblances.

Despite their similarities, single-player computer games and interactive installations remain two separate cultural traditions, each with their own distribution channels and standards of interpretation and appreciation. This separation hinders the development of critical discourse not only about playability in the context of interactive art but also about art in the context of computer games. As I will demonstrate in this essay, keeping the traditions separate leads also to reinventing the wheel when it comes to what counts as innovation or artistic value. In this essay, I will attempt a 'cross-exposure' of the two traditions. By discussing 'playability' as an ingredient in interactive art, I attempt to de-isolate "art games" from their somewhat narrow contemporary 'indie' or 'gamer' discourse and contextualize them in the broader history of participatory and interactive art. This results not only in a critique of non-playable art games but also in seeing what interactive art can learn from computer games in terms of audience participation. In this regard, my project is somewhat 'videogame-archaeological' (e.g. Wilson 2008, 95).

I begin by postulating a trajectory from participatory performance art of the 1960s to contemporary computer games, seeking to historicize the modes of audience engagement employed by contemporary interactive installations and single-player computer games. In this analysis, single-player computer games stand out from interactive art, due to making their players responsible for the freedom they enjoy, *i.e.* imposing a "gameplay condition" (Leino 2009) on their users and thus constraining interpretation. Hence, choices and actions afforded by single-player computer games can be described as less

ambiguous than those in interactive installations. This is what I suggest as a definitive feature for the 'playability' of single-player computer games.

I shall proceed to situate contemporary so-called 'open-ended' 'art games', as exemplified by *Proteus* (2013), debated in terms of their 'gameness' or the perceived lack of any thereof, in the tradition of open-ended and ambiguous software artefacts known as "non-games." While my argument could be, perhaps, extend to some other games matching the above description, for the sake of specificity I have chosen to refer solely to *Proteus*. I hope to highlight that it is not the lack of 'gameness' (e.g. goals, challenges, winning condition) in *Proteus* and the like, but the lack of gameplay condition, that makes them open-ended and ambiguous. In the analysis, the open-endedness of *Proteus*, or in other words the *absence of playability* in it, renders it strikingly similar to works in the fine art paradigm of interactive installation. This, in turn, begs the question of what can be said about the feasibility, novelty, and aesth/ethical significance of absent playability in relation to traditions of both interactive art and computer games.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO INTERACTIVITY TO PLAYABILITY
In order to facilitate highlighting some of the differences and resemblances between single-player computer games and interactive art in terms of modes of participation and interpretation, I shall postulate, following Dinkla (1996), one possible historical trajectory leading up to contemporary computer games. This trajectory begins with Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* spearheading what became known as 'participatory art' onwards to interactive art, and, finally to the present-day single-player computer games. Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* in the 1960's invited audience members to participate in the performance. Take for example *Household* (1964)*,* set to take place in a "lonesome dump out in the country" (Kaprow 1966, 8). An excerpt from the plot outlined by Kaprow is as follows:

> (…) Cars arrive, towing smoking wreck, park outside dump, people get out. (…) Men go for smoking wreck, roll it into dump, cover it with strawberry jam. (…) Women go to car and lick jam. (…) (Kaprow 1966, 9)

The artist gave the participants instructions on how to complete the plot, for example written on a piece of paper, and the participating audience members were supposed to execute the instructions, together forming the performance. Regarding the invitation extended to the audience to participate, interactive installations and computer games can be described as situating on the trajectory beginning at Kaprow's happenings: without input from the audience, there would be much less of the artwork. Rather than having to simply sit down and watch the performance, audiences of *Happenings* were able to affect the form the performance takes. Audience was, supposedly, free to implement the artist's instructions in their own preferred way. However, Dinkla (1996, 282) reminds us that despite the apparent 'freedom' implied in inviting the audience to participate especially when compared to rigidly scripted and directed theatre plays, the artist was present through the instructions, retaining the authorial responsibility.

On the trajectory from participatory performances to interactive art, Dinkla (1996, 286) cites "reactive environments" as a notable waypoint, referring to works like Rauschenberg's *Soundings* (1968). Reactive environments are best described as spatial installations affected by movements and actions of the audience. In *Soundings*, for example, as long as the exhibition space remains silent, audience sees only mirrors, but as soon as a sound is made, lights are lit, revealing images behind the mirrors. Dinkla (1996,

286) suggests that whereas *Happenings* took place in the context of a theatrical performance (albeit somewhat extended), reactive environments "assume that an unprepared visitor will move through the exhibition space with heightened attention." Dinkla (1996, 288) suggests that the advent of interactive art involved the artist delegating her responsibility as the "authorial leader" giving the instructions, at least partially, to an interactive system, a machine. In Dinkla's account (1996, 289) the introduction of "technical means of control" into the tradition of participatory art led to the "automatization" of the dialogue between the audience and the artwork, in which the instructions previously, for example in the case of *Happenings,* communicated by the artist to the participants as written on slips of paper, are given by the machine. Compared to free roaming in reactive environments, interactive artworks, as described by Dinkla, seem to provide a somewhat more rigid framework constraining audience participation.

Consider *Sono reMorphed* (2007) by Bernd Lintermann and Torsten Belschner. It is an interactive installation, which presents the user facing a 180 degrees 3D projection with an audiovisual spectacle in the form of shapes and sounds that can be manipulated through an interface that resembles a DJ mixing deck. The shapes and sounds seem to be generated algorithmically on the fly, as new formations emerge in response to new combinations of the sliders and knobs of the interface. Seeing the interface, I could not help thinking of *DJ Hero* (2009), which *Sono reMorphed* predates by two years. Interacting with *Sono reMorphed*, I was able to tweak it to display not much more than a small dark blob accompanied with a repetitive monotonic sound. We may assume that this could be described as 'abusing' the artwork: at least the artists' efforts in producing a machine that can display a seemingly endless variety of complex audiovisual spectacles was lost on me on this occasion. However: except for the other audience members waiting for their turn to interact with the installation casting odd glances to my 'abusing' of the artwork, there was no-one or nothing with the authority to tell me if this was what I was supposed to do or not.

The things we call single-player computer games are interactive, in the sense how interactive installations, too, are: what we do through an interface affects the shape the work takes. In addition to interactivity, the things we call single-player computer games implement a unique mode of audience engagement found in neither traditional, or more accurately "transmedial" games (Juul 2003, 40-2) nor in conventional interactive art. Single-player computer games are also *playable,* if in a rather peculiar sense of the word (Leino 2012): they make us responsible for the freedom we enjoy: what we do affects what it is possible for us to do (or to not do). Consider a single-player computer game like *Tetris* (1984). Like in *Sono reMorphed*, the technological artifact that is *Tetris* allows some actions while prohibiting others. In *Tetris*, I may for example try to clear only uniformly coloured lines, or, try to categorise the blocks on different sides of the screen according to their shape. However, in *Tetris,* unlike in *Sono reMorphed,* I am not puzzled as to what I am supposed to do with the freedom of interaction I have been endowed with: in addition the 'instructions' implied in the technology – for example that I should look at the screen, use arrow keys, etc – *Tetris* forces upon me a particular way of using the technology: if I fail to keep the stack of blocks reaching the top of the container, the *Tetris* tells me to start over. Interactive installations tend not to have 'game over' screens, hitpoints, depleting resources, etc, which would indicate that the user did something wrong (or right), but such things are commonplace in computer games. Unlike in interactive installations, *how* exactly we interact with single-player computer games matters: choosing 'right' may for example give more options to choose from, whereas

choosing 'wrong' may delimit the range of possible choices available, perhaps down to zero.[3]

Interestingly, it seems that thanks to being playable, single-player computer games are especially good at taking on the authorial responsibility. Compared to the role of the machine in an installation like *Sono reMorphed*, the playable machine that is *Tetris* seems to be able to take on a much more substantial authorial leadership position: it not only tells me what to do, but also judges my performance and responds accordingly. There is no need to benevolently read the use-context as 'implying' instructions, as there is no shortage of things one *must* do in order to survive accessible for a literal reading. Rather than hoping for an answer from a silent oracle like when using *Sono reMorphed,* when playing *Tetris* I can count on the machine telling me when I am doing it wrong. It is as if Kaprow was hiding behind the St. Basil's Cathedral depicted in the backdrop, directing his amateur actor. This seems to echo Gene Youngblood's (1970, 188) hopeful prediction, in his book *Expanded Cinema* dealing with video as an artform, of being able to tell the computer "I want to do something, instruct me." On the trajectory of participatory art, single-player computer games like *Tetris*, more than the ambiguous and open-ended interactive installations, seem to embody's Dinkla's idea of automatized dialogue achieved through technical means of control, making playability the contemporary terminus on the suggested trajectory from participation and interaction.

ON PLAYABLE NON-GAMES
In his GDC 2005 keynote, transcribed by IGN (Casamassina 2005), Nintendo's Satoru Iwata defined "non-games" as "a form of entertainment that really doesn't have a winner, or even a real conclusion". History of computer games knows several "non-games", a list of which might include at least the following: *Little Computer People* (1985), *SimCity 1* (1989), *El-Fish* (1993), *The Sims* (2000), *Elektroplankton* (2005), and *Proteus* (2012). A common way to group these artifacts together is to observe that they lack 'goals' or 'winning conditions', and hence are not qualified to be referred to as 'games.'

The idea of a 'non-game' is easily associated with ludology. We may roughly define ludology as a perspective that reveals the things we call computer games in relation to the idea of a 'game'. From the notion of 'game' ludology inherits a set of ideas which it uses to describe and understand its objects of study. Depending of the flavor chosen, these ideas may include rules, players, goals, challenges, winning, and losing, to name a few. For example, seeing something 'as a game' automatically implies identifying 'players', perhaps also 'rules', 'goals' and 'challenges'. For designing things intended as "games", ludology seems relatively unproblematic. However, problems emerge if one expects that these ideas were applicable also in the analysis of these things we call computer games: rules, goals, and the like do not enjoy the same ontological status in the so-called computer games as they do in traditional games (Leino 2012).

Hence, it seems precarious to expect these things we call single-player computer games to neatly fit into any model of gameness: Kirkpatrick (2007, 75), for example, has suggested that computer games are "only part game", as they are characterised by simultaneously giving structure to a play activity and stimulating the 'play' of aesthetic and cognitive faculties, not unlike artworks can be considered doing. Aarseth & Calleja (2009), consider computer games "conglomerate objects", which are made of "narrative" and "ludic" elements among others. While Kirkpatrick (2007) and Aarseth & Calleja (2009) deal with the incompatibility of the idea of a 'game' with the objects we may call computer games by suggesting that the objects of study are multifaceted and can sustain

analysis from a variety of perspectives among which is the 'ludological' perspective, some authors have demonstrated that the critique of 'gameness' can be taken to its full logical extent by completely doing away with the 'gameness' of the things we call single-player computer games. Reminiscent of Lee's (2003) observations about the rather unusual status of 'losing' in computer game play, Woods (2009), for example, maintains that single-player computer games cannot be 'won' or 'lost', since those concepts imply the involvement of a human mind, and goes on to suggests that the notion of a 'game' should be reserved for activities that result in 'winning' or 'losing' and are thus inherently social. "Automated challenges" is a term he suggests for the description of single-player computer games. Woods' (2009) 'post-ludological' account suggests that since the things we call single-player computer games are different from games anyway, it does not make a difference whether or not some of them have winning conditions and the like. The lack of a winning condition is perceived as a lack only from a 'ludological' perspective that assumes the 'gameness' in the first place. Elsewhere (Leino 2012) I have suggested that instead of talking about single-player games[4], a more appropriate term to get rid of unnecessary conceptual baggage would be "playable artefacts."

However, a closer look at *Little Computer People*, *SimCity 1*, *El-Fish*, *The Sims*, *Elektroplankton*, and *Proteus* reveals that while some of them perhaps might warrant the use of the term non-game, some contain features that root them firmly in the paradigm of single-player computer games.

Consider for example *The Sims*. Drowning one's sims in a swimming pool in *The Sims* was once a popular pastime, at least if the amount of videos on *YouTube* is considered an indicator. I would like to suggest that the significance of a death of a sim extends beyond its popularity as a theme in gameplay videos. If all family members die, the game is over. Death can occur from fire, for example. Fires start, for example, if player instructs a sim to cook, without the sim having cooking skill. To develop cooking skills, the player must get the sims a bookshelf with cookbooks or a TV to watch cooking programs on, and, to acquire these money is needed. Money can be earned from a job, and education helps getting a well-paid job. All the features mentioned – cookbooks, TVs, and jobs – become significant as they help the player avoid failure. Without the possibility of death, i.e. failure, it would be up to the player to imagine the significance of these features. This example from *The Sims* demonstrates that failure lends significance to aspects of the playable artefact, and, that the concepts of winning, goals, and challenges, are not necessary to describe how *The Sims* can be experienced as significant. In *Elektroplankton*, failure is unheard of and hence we engage in, for example, arranging the leaves of the tree to accommodate the bouncing balls and to make one of the leaves change its color only for the pleasure of doing so, not for the sake of survival. While *The Sims* might not be a game from the 'ludological' perspective, it is playable: it makes its players responsible for the freedom they enjoy. We have no reason to assume that comparing playable artefacts like *Tetris* or *The Sims* to games would always, or automatically, be theoretically productive. This is what I hope to hint at with the "post-" prefix in the subtitle of this essay.

PLAYABILITY'S ABSENCE AS AN ARTISTIC STRATEGY
In 1918, Russian painter Kazimir Malevich produced a painting called *White on White*, which consists of a white square against off-white background. In 1951, American artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose later work *Soundings* was previously mentioned as an example of what Dinkla (1996, 286) referred to as "reactive environments", created a series of monochromatic white paintings called *White Paintings*. In 1954, the French

artist Yves Klein published an artist's book titled *Yves Peintures,* containing pictures of monochromatic canvases. In 1958, Klein had an exhibition which in effect was an empty gallery. While the list could be continued[5], and absence as a theme and strategy in art, in general, would sustain theorizing in their own right, let us take these examples as suggesting that absence is an established artistic strategy.

In a text titled *Not a Manifesto*, Michael Samÿn, a member of the Tale of Tales collective behind works such as *The Endless Forest* (2005) and *Graveyard* (2009), postulates "notgames" as a "thought inspired by videogames". Samÿn observes that beautiful moments in computer games are "all too often shattered by the demands of the game" and asks "what if we don't allow the game to interfere? What if we create an experience that consists only of such beautiful moments?" Samÿn (2010) proposes "notgames" as "a design challenge", calling for "an interactive work of art that does not rely on competition, goals, rewards, winning or losing(.)" By calling for "notgames" Samÿn is tapping into a rich vein of art history once discovered by Malevich, Rauschenberg and Klein, replacing 'image', as that which is absent, with 'playability.' The question which either makes or breaks Samÿn's project concerns with the conditions under which the absence of playability becomes present.

Tamas Waliczky's interactive installation *Homes* (2013), is an intriguing example of the overlap of the traditions of computer games and interactive installation, not least since it is implemented with *Unity* engine popular among designers of games of both the "art" and the normal sort. *Homes* is a series of photorealistic 3D-modeled depictions of homes of fisherpersons in Tai O village of Hong Kong, shown on large high-definition screens. Using a combination of directional buttons and a wheel, the user is able to move the viewpoint around the spaces and zoom in and out to inspect, from a close distance, the environment modeled in meticulous level of detail. "Death" or failure are not possible. In *Homes* no objects have glowing auras to indicate they are more important than others, and no keys are to be found to unlock the closed doors with.

Proteus by Ed Key and David Kanaga, is an interactive work depicting an island illustrated in a colourful pixelated style evocative of, for example, the ZX Spectrum classic *Jet Set Willy* (1984). As the user explores the island, she finds trees, buildings, fog, and perhaps for example also a flock of chickens, a character hopping around with a pogo-stick. On the island, seasons cycle from spring to summer, fall and winter. The software plays an atmospheric soundtrack, supposedly affected by the season/time of day and the user's encounters with objects, resulting in a wholesome audiovisual experience. User of Proteus is invited to explore the island and enjoy the spectacle. *Proteus* could as well be described as an interactive installation: like in *Homes*, no objects can be picked, there are no doors to be opened, and death and failure are not possible in *Proteus*.

To someone familiar with computer games, it is the level of detail in textures and models that is well beyond industry AAA standard, combined with the *absence* of playability that creates the eerie effect characteristic to *Homes*: it is as if something supernatural had happened and the world had been frozen into a lifeless sculptural replica of itself, a replica in which standard cause-and-effect relations no longer apply: it would be in vain to wait for the fisherpersons, as they will never return home. However, it should be noted that the absence of playability and the effect it creates is there only for those who are able to conjure the absence of playability into presence. While *Homes* is an "an interactive work of art that does not rely on competition, goals, rewards, winning or losing" (Samÿn 2010), we have no reason to assume that *Homes* is a response to Samÿn's challenge.

Proteus, however, invites – by making a pastiche of the visual style of computer games of the 1980's, and, by being associated with gamer culture thanks to the ways it is distributed and marketed – its audience to interpret and appreciate it in relation to that which is absent: playability.

History of single-player computer games tells us that these artefacts work fine as self-referential, they do not have to be *about* anything else than themselves. For example, to find a 'key' to get through a 'door' is important, but it does not matter whether these 'keys' and 'doors' resemble their real-world counterparts, as long as they help the player to continue playing. Allow me to explain how playability's absence can be used as an artistic strategy. Instructions are very simple: create a game, but remove all possibility for failure. When the possibilities for failure are removed, the basis for meaning as we know it from single-player computer games disappears: nothing is 'useful' or 'harmful.' Non-playable 'art games' subvert audience's expectations of self-referentiality by revealing that they are 'full of themselves' not in order to create a coherent system to be played, but simply because the notgame artist wanted the work to be like that. Players of computer games are used to encountering resistance of the materiality of the playable artifact to their projects of playing. With possibility of failure removed, any 'resistance' is subjective and ambiguous, not unlike the challenges to our cognitive faculties posed by Kantian "aesthetic objects". Kirkpatrick suggests that:

> Aesthetic objects have the paradoxical form of a purposeless finality; they are supremely well executed, delightful things, and yet we cannot see any purpose in the perfection. They present us with a form so precise that it seems to be mathematically ordered, yet we cannot conceive a formula adequate to describe them. (Kirkpatrick 2007, 80—1)

To use playability's absence as an artistic strategy is to create, as described, an ambiguous object that can be described with formulas of neither game nor just software, and invite the user to explain away the ambiguity as the ambiguity characteristic to art. In other words, there might be keys and doors in non-playable 'art games' too, but they are there not to help the player survive, but because of no reason other than 'it is art.'

EXPERIENCING ABSENT PLAYABILITY

We may assume that the ambiguity of purposelessness itself is the very purpose in *Proteus*. Let us explore this option through another comparative analysis. Dieter Kiessling's interactive installation *Continue* (1997) presents the user a screen divided into black and white areas. On the white area is written "quit", whereas on the black area it says "continue". The user is invited to choose between the options presented. Clicking on "quit" will restart the work, whereas clicking on "continue" divides the screen further into four areas – two black/continue areas and two white/quit areas, and the same logic is applied again. Clicking continue for several times, the user finds herself in front of a grey screen in which the white and black areas are too small to be discerned individually, and is forced to select the option randomly, eventually hitting "quit" and starting over. The only threat faced by the user of *Continue* is her own choices.

In *Proteus*, the player's survival is threatened only by passing of time, after the seasons have cycled through, the perspective is changed to a flyover of the island and the screen goes black evocative of eyelids closing. There is no risk of failure in *Proteus,* but passing of time will eventually bring the visit to the island to an end. While both *Proteus* and *Continue* can be described as having "finite teleologies" (Aarseth & Elverdam 2007, 10),

Proteus ends regardless of what the player does whereas *Continue* ends as a consequence of the player's choices.[6]

If we read them in terms of "procedural rhetorics", *i.e.* we assume that they are trying to make an argument "through the authorship of rules of behavior (and) the construction of dynamic models" (Bogost 2010, 28-9), they lead us to to basic existential considerations such as 'What is this?', 'Why am I here?', 'Do my choices matter?' and 'Who am I?', or even, as Bogost (2013) suggests regarding *Proteus*: "Am I?" In other words, if we project the essence of a "simulation" on these works, *i.e.* we assume that they are modeling a system more complex than themselves by retaining some of the behavior of the more complex system (Frasca 2002), they are reflected back as simulations of purposeless existence. (These considerations seem strangely evocative of using *Second Life,* except that immediately behind *Second Life* there are potentially other people to fill in the void of meaning.)

In *Proteus* choices are meaningful only in the sense of 'navigation', and we may choose to care or to not care about the ramifications of our choices: it seems that the island would do just fine even without the player. In *Continue* choices become meaningful through each choice bringing the end closer, finally forcing the user to confront the ramifications of her actions. If the user chooses to choose neither of the two options, the work will patiently wait for user's input, and, given there will be no shortage of electricity, will ultimately outwait the human user. Hence, whereas both *Continue* and *Proteus* raise questions, only *Continue* provides an unambiguous answer: my choices matter only as speeding up my own inevitable demise. *Continue* thus succeeds in implementing 'purposelessness as a purpose' by including a closure that provides an answer to the existential considerations. Its procedurally delivered argument is: resistance is futile and the only way to survive is to not play. A player leaving the island of *Proteus,* on the other hand, is no wiser about the purpose than she was when arriving on the island.

After realizing that there is no point in *Proteus*, and, that it does not provide closure to existential reflection it may be considered as inviting, we have to explain to ourselves why we are engaging in interactions with the notgame in the absence of built-in purposes. To do so, we might, invited by the colourful visual spectacle, resort to the rhetorics of play – e.g. play as frivolity and imaginary (Sutton-Smith 2009), and thus end up considering interactions with *Proteus* as a kind of play. It is the ambiguity of the word 'play' due to which we can speak of interactions with *Proteus, Homes, Sono reMorphed* and *Elektroplankton* as play: we can play *Sono reMorphed* like we would play an instrument, bringing in the performative and social aspects, at which I was previously hinting with the anecdote of my interactions with *Sono reMorphed*.

We may also play *with* the works, like we might play with, say, hobby horses. Allow me to exemplify this with an anecdote: during a visit to a 2013 staging of Ryoji Ikeda's audiovisual performance *datamatics [ver 2.0]* consisting of a hash stroboscoping projection synchronized with a loud soundtrack and taking place in a massive industrial hall, I noticed how kids quickly re-appropriated the non-interactive performance of rather brutalist aesthetic nature into an audiovisual playground, a site of vertigous fun. By running after their own shadows cast by the ceiling-to-floor projection, the kids injected purpose into the otherwise 'purposeless' performance. In *Proteus*, a similar injection of purpose is to explore the island 'just for fun.' These forms of audience engagement are what we might call 'playful interactivity', and have been debated as a possible threat to the perceived credibility of new media art in the broader context of contemporary art, as

they are easily associated with forms of mass culture perceived as childish and/or banal. (see e.g. Palmer 2008, Leino 2011).

AESTH/ETHICS AND THE ABSENCE OF PLAYABILITY

Korakidou & Charitos (2011, 281), when talking about the relationship between the artist and the audience in interactive art, suggest that "artists usually prefer to control the parameters of the visitor's interaction, according to a narrative or design plan", while acknowledging that "the visitor is the one that completes the artwork." An interactive artwork needs its audience who care about the work enough to interact with it in order to realize the artist's vision of what the work should be when complete. If it does not, it is not an interactive work. This much the relationship between the work and its audience in interactive art resembles such relationship in playable art. A fair question to be posed is what do these works give back to the users? Interactive and playable works can be described as differing in terms of how they return the user's favor and in what kind of relationship this results between the work and the people by whose actions it exists.

In the notgame manifesto, Samÿn (2010) hopes that notgames could deliver "an experience that consists only of (...) beautiful moments" (Samÿn 2010). Let us explore this proposition. Consider having completed, as a result of several hours of intensive playing, the final mission required to open the bridges which allow access to previously unseen areas in *GTA IV* (2008), and, seeing the new landscapes for the first time, anticipating all the new quests, locations, vehicles and other possibilities that unlocking the new neighborhoods has opened up. Without the investment of time and effort, i.e. if the new neighborhood in *GTA IV* had been unlocked by using a cheat code, the experience would not be, at least, the same. Risking a hyperbole, I suggest that the playable artifact that is *GTA IV* allowed the *player* to create this particular moment as beautiful.

Sartre (2003, 505) suggests that "freedom is possible only in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning." Resistance we may consider as that with which it is possible to distinguish between wishing to do something and choosing to do something: the player encounters material resistance of the playable artifact in relation to her project of playing delineated by the artifact. In *GTA IV,* moments become 'beautiful' in relation to the resistance of the playable artifact – by investing effort to counter the resistance, the player can try to, and perhaps also succeed to, bring in her own unique preferences as to what is 'beautiful'. There is a parallel to be drawn to Sicart's (2009, 214) description of "open ethical games":

> Open ethical games are those in which the players' values can be used in developing a relation with the game world, and in which the game world accepts and encourages this player-driven ethical affordance, and on occasions reacts accordingly.

In non-playable art games like *Proteus*, moments cannot be beautiful because the player made them beautiful by using her sensomotoric skills, persistence, and intelligence, but instead they are beautiful only to those who accept the idea of 'beauty' contained in the artifact. The island in *Proteus* needs the player only to carry the camera around, not to make non-trivial decisions with aesthetic implications. In other words, non-playable art games (and interactive installations alike) force their players to conform into pre-defined

ideas of aesthetic value. This description is not unlike Sicart's (2009, 214) description of "closed ethical games":

> In a closed ethical game design, the game creates an ethical experience in which the player cannot implement her values beyond the constraints of the game. (…) the player will create her values as a player according to the game's values, without the possibility of contributing her values to the game itself.

Reading online travelogues of visitors to *Proteus*, it is evident that people enjoy sharing their own 'beautiful moments' of discoveries on the island and these stories do have diversity. Is *Proteus* not giving a voice to the visitors? Initially it might seem that if *Proteus* was of what we might approximate 'closed aesthetic design', it should not allow a range of interpretations, but rather all visitors should have had a more or less similar experiences. Let us explore this with the notion of transgression. Aarseth (2007, 132-3) suggests that the "moments of game transgression are (…) highly important to players" and "among the most important aspects of play and gaming." Aarseth (2007, 133) describes transgressive play as "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself."

While Aarseth concerns primarily with *successful* acts of transgression, it seems that the point is not that transgression needs to be successful. Transgressive attempts need not succeed in 'breaking' the work in order for us to be able to say that a work gives a voice to its audience. Neither does the player need to be able to leave her thumbprint in the work for others' to see – to give a voice to audience does not mean including a "textonic" user function (Aarseth 1997, 64) in the work. The point of this 'having a voice' is not to move towards authorship on any scale from audience to author: it does not necessarily involve aspects that would be best described as 'co-creativity' (e.g. Wirman 2012), "expressive play", or, "productivity beyond play" (Wirman 2009). For 'having a voice' by being able to (try to) transgress the artifact, it is enough that the transgressive attempts are acknowledged as such by the work. Sartre (2003, 505) suggests that "success is not important" for freedom: even a prisoner is free, to *try* to break out from jail: "whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action". This is not unlike the player of *Tetris* who is free to try to transgress the standard against which her performance is measured and by doing so learn about what her choices mean in relation to the condition against which her actions unfold.

The camera control mechanism in *Homes* allows for a 'wallhack' type of glitch, in which the camera gets stuck to the other side of a wall, where nothingness prevails. I already mentioned that *Sono reMorphed* allows, in addition to invoking complex multilayered audiovisual spectacles, generating a monochromatic blob accompanied with monotonic sound. In *Proteus*, I may put considerable effort in for example harassing the character who jumps around with a pogo-stick, chasing it around and trying to block its way. Later I may tell stories of my seemingly fanciful exploits to others. I am not punished for any of these deeds by the works on the level of their materialities. These deeds seem to exemplify what Aarseth (2007, 133) calls "illusory" transgression. In contrast to these, trying to break the law of *Tetris* and being punished accordingly is as real transgression as it can get without retreating from the position of a player. (To retain any significance in the notion of a *player*, it must be kept separate from that of for example a *hacker*.) Only if we consider audience participation in *Homes*, *Sono reMorphed* and *Proteus* as a *performance* with social norms constraining audience behaviour, we get a standard

against which transgression could be defined, but such a standard would depend on the context of the performance situation.

Non-playable interactive artworks seem to give us a freedom, an illusion of our own voice, an illusion of the possibility to regain our "sense of identity and uniqueness" (Aarseth 2007, 133). However, if there are no laws there can be no breaking of laws either, and, if anything goes but nothing matters, transgression remains illusory. Where playability is absent, resistance, too, is absent. When resistance is absent, the possibility for meaningful transgression, too, is absent. While, to appropriate Sicart's (2009) terminology, *Proteus* remains of 'aesthetically closed' design, it masks its closedness by paradoxically suggesting that it can offer an experience of "audio-visual exploration and discovery" (visitproteus.com, N.D.).

I am not suggesting that interactive artworks were unethical because they contrive their users from expressing themselves (implication of which would be to advocate 'co-authorship'). Instead – this the focal point of the cross-exposure of the traditions of interactive art and computer games – I am suggesting that from the perspective of playable art, non-playable interactive artworks are unethical because they ask the audience to enter into a relationship with the works without giving the audience the possibility to explore and question the conditions of this relationship. From the perspective of playable art, non-playable interactive artworks are unethical as they ask their users to invest effort in fulfilling the artist's vision, while at best offering the users only an illusion of an opportunity to rebel against this vision. It is ambiguous if creation of such artifacts should be considered 'authorship' or 'exploitation'.

CONCLUSIONS

Previously I noted being perplexed about the absence of playability in 'art games': as if they were ashamed of their lineage – why? Kirkpatrick (2007, 82), seems to be able to offer some clues, as, when describing what he calls "sin of semblance" in modern art, he suggests that in the current crisis of art, aesthetic objects are "meaningful only by a convoluted process in which they display both the subjective need for meaning and its objective denial within themselves." After the analysis in this essay, perhaps something similar could be described as bothering art games, too: perhaps art games could be described as refusing to submit the meanings they contain to the instrumental-rational logic subordinated to survival, a logic which first sorts everything in terms being 'useful' or 'harmful' and renders whatever remains 'meaningless.' By avoiding this reduction, 'art games' achieve being more ambiguous in terms of the interpretations they invite, and perhaps this is what makes them 'art' to some. By avoiding the reduction that comes with playability, however, 'art games' invite being appreciated not only as 'non-games' but also against the histories of interactive and participatory art.

Omission and absence have a long history in art. Leaving out components that the audience assumedly considers essential parts of a work in a certain tradition seems an effective artistic strategy, which can perhaps even lead the audience to question their presuppositions about the particular artistic tradition. The difficult part appears to be to decide what to omit. Malevich, for example, did not leave out canvases, Rauschenberg did not leave out colours, Cage omitted sounds of the orchestra but did not ask the audience to wear earplugs, and Klein chose to leave out everything except the exhibition situation at a gallery. Carefully crafted absence can reveal new presences – consider for example Thacker's (2013) description of a black painting, initially devoid of any image, by Ad Reinhardt: "after looking at the painting for some time, what appears to be black is

not black at all. Instead, subtle hues of deep mauve, purple, magenta, and grey become apparent. And the uniform black canvas reveals a grid, or a series of squares within the canvas, each of a slightly different colour." It is not hard to imagine an art school student finding a way out of an assignment by handing in a version of a monochromatic canvas. What would be the equivalent if the student was majoring in games? What could be omitted in order to allow new forms to emerge, like colours and shapes emerge in Thacker's description (2013) of the Reinhardt painting? While a thorough exploration of these possibilities is beyond the constraints of this essay, it is possible to say that if a ludological understanding of playable artifacts is the presupposition for game design, there are plenty of aspects of the 'game form' – *e.g.* rules, goals, challenges – for any experiment in omission to work with while retaining playability.

The Telegraph critic Richard Dorment (2010), in a review of a 2010 iteration of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* staged in London's Festival Hall, suggested that "in the late Fifties, for an artist to ask an audience to watch people performing pedestrian activities was a radical innovation." That *18 Happenings* had a lukewarm reception from Dorment in 2010 was perhaps because theatre-going community had already gotten use to plays which seek to invoke critical reflection on the practice and medium of theatre through the absence of drama, and as such there was no novelty value, let alone opening of new avenues for discussion, in an orange being squeezed on the stage. While *Proteus* caused quite a stir in the 'gamer' community with some voices suggesting that it pushes the limits of videogame medium by encouraging free exploration instead of goal-driven behavior, the absence of playability is present only to those within the gamer discourse. To interactive art audiences *Proteus* appears as conventionally interactive: interactive in the sense which could supposedly be exhaustively analysed with the 'navigation' paradigm of new media theory. Since navigation and exploration have for some time already been part and parcel of the tradition of interactive art, allowing navigation and exploration opens up new avenues for theoretical reflection only if computer games are considered in isolation from interactive art in general. Likewise, non-playable 'art games' appear as 'revolutionizing the medium' only if the medium (if such thing exists) and the history of computer games are considered separate from that of interactive art in general.

If playability is omitted, the resulting work remains either a conventional interactive installation, or, an in-joke for gamer circles, and as with all jokes, also this one is most fun for the first time you hear it. In the absence of purpose, non-playable art games appear as 'playful interactive art', which is best appreciated by kids. If we want there to be a tradition of creative practice which can be differentiate from all other related practices like interactive installation art, children's toys, game design, interactive narratives, film, and electronic literature, which appeals to general audiences like those attending art museums, and, to which we can refer with the colloquial term 'art games', that practice needs to produce works that are playable. Now that we have seen absent playability, we can look forward to art games that are challenging, addictive, and perhaps even fun.

ENDNOTES
[1] Rather than defining interactive installation art in advance, I hope that the examples provided in this essay imply, in an ostensive sense, a clear enough framing of the scope of the argument.

[2] Here it is relevant to mention an interesting amalgamation of painting and computer game, *For(){};* (2013) by Griffits & Watanabe, in which a playable computer game is projected on a triptych of paintings on which the static obstacles of the level are represented.

[3] In a benevolent reading, this kind of dynamic can be described in "transmedial" games, too: making the appropriate choices and actions according to the rules may lead to situation were player obeying the rules may no longer be able to continue choosing and acting, but it is important to note that whereas in "transmedial" games the players consciously enforce the correct procedure according to the rules, in the things we call single-player computer games there is no procedure requiring players to obey rules, and they can simply interact with the technology, and, perhaps, when they become experienced with a particular single-player computer game, they may begin to see "patterns" in its behavior – but calling these patterns "rules" would be quite a stretch. See Leino (2012) for a more detailed account.

[4] To describe the difference between multi-player games, whether digital or non-digital, and the so-called "single-player computer games" perhaps better referred to as playable artefacts, Ihde's post-phenomenological framework of intentionality in human/technology relations (1990) is helpful. Talking about how technologies are situated between humans and the world, Ihde distinguishes between "relations of mediation" and "relations of alterity". In the former, the technology is experienced as mediating the relationship between the human and the world: thermometers, hearing aids, telephones and eyeglasses, for example, mediate our experience of the world, help us gather information about the world and interact with it. In multi-player computer games, we read other people's actions off the screen, and respond to them through our own actions to be perceived off the screen by the other players. Multi-player computer games thus mediate interactions between people and can thus be described as appearing in "relations of mediation." In alterity relations, a technological artifact is the "terminus of experience" (Verbeek 2008, 389): it is not used to directly interact with or perceive the world beyond itself. As Ihde (1990, 107) suggests: "world (…) may remain context and background, and the technology may emerge as the foreground and focal quasi-other with which I momentarily emerge." Playable artifacts can be described as experienced in an alterity relation: I am not using the game to perceive anything about the world. One could, of course, say that playable artefacts, like all other designed artefacts, are always already means of communication between the player, the designer, and everyone else involved in the construction of these artefacts as what they are: game results are shared, games are played together, stories are told, etc. However, equating these social activities involving playable artefacts with the kind of human-technology-human relations in which we find multi-player game artefacts would be unwise, as doing so would discount the specificity of the ways in which multi-player game artefacts mediate relations between humans. Nevertheless, to complete the historical trajectory from Kaprow's happenings, which were inherently social situations, to contemporary computer games, a comparison in which both interactive installations and playable artefacts would be considered as experienced primarily in "relations of mediation" might be necessary. However, it remains an avenue for further research.

[5] John Cage's 4'33 should be also mentioned as an obvious example of the use of absence in the field of music/sound art.

[6] More specifically, in the words of Aarseth & Elverdam (2007, 11) in *Proteus* "haste" is "present" and "interval control" is "absent", while in *Continue* "haste" is "absent" and "interval control" is "present."

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