

Avant-garde Videogames

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1. Abstract

We can identify and critique avant-garde videogames by drawing on the formal and political modes of the historical avant-gardes.

2. Introduction

The avant-garde challenges or leads culture; it opens up or redefines art forms and our perception of the way the world works. In *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture* [Schrank 2014] the author describes the ways that the avant-garde emerges through videogames. Just as impressionism or cubism created alternative ways of making and viewing paintings, avant-garde videogames create alternate ways of making and playing games. A mainstream game channels players into a tightly closed circuit of play; an avant-garde game opens up that circuit, revealing (and reveling in) its own nature as a game.

3. “Avant-garde” is a Conceptual Field

We can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens up the experience of games (formal art) or the experience of being in the world (political art). Different artists use different strategies to achieve an avant-garde perspective. Some fixate on form, others on politics; some take radical positions, others more complicit ones. We can examine these strategies and the artists who deploy them, looking closely at four varieties of avant-garde games: *radical formal*, which breaks up the flow of the game so players can engage with its materiality, sensuality, and conventionality; *radical political*, which plays with art and politics as well as fictions and everyday life; *complicit formal*, which treats videogames as a resource (like any other art medium) for contemporary art; and *complicit political*, which uses populist methods to blend life, art, play, and reality—as in alternate reality games, which adapt Situationist strategies for a mass audience.

4. Example of Radical Formal Avant-garde

Renaissance perspective is analogous to optimal gameplay flow. Just as perspective guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common formulas guide and control the player in traditional videogames by rewarding and regulating behavior along certain paths and goals. Reviewing the historical rise of avant-garde painting in the early 20th century will help us understand the rise of avant-garde games in recent decades. According to modern art critic Clement [Greenberg 1940], “[t]he history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to ‘hole through’ it for realistic perspectival space.” The results of opening up the formal rules of painting beyond serving as a “virtual window” into perspectival space were the movements of impressionism, cubism, and abstract expressionism.

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SIGGRAPH 2014, August 10 – 14, 2014, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
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ACM 978-1-4503-2977-4/14/08

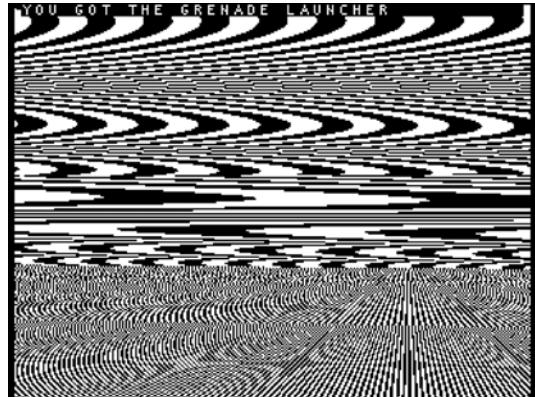


Figure 1. *ctrl-F6*, a level of *Untitled Game* by Jodi, presents gamespace in a way that radically breaks convention, wavering along on the edge of the playable. Image courtesy of Jodi.

Jodi, an art collective, refers to videogame engines as “perspective engines,” which promote a way of seeing and thinking about space as well as organizing player behavior to dominate that space, all via Euclidean mathematics. Jodi formally deconstructs the medium in *Untitled Game* (1999), a collection of avant-garde game mods using the Quake game engine (the first fully 3D engine). While the original Quake game was a first-person shooter in a dungeon maze, space is not presented in what we generally think of as 3D or even 2D in *Untitled Game*. In its level titled *ctrl-F6*, spatial representation chaotically erupts all over the screen as the player pushes the W key to walk forward. The slightest nudge sends the chunky static reeling. After a minute of playing a prickly horizon line may become detectable if the mouse is swept horizontally. A vague ground plane takes up the lower portion of the screen. Finding one’s bearings in space is a hard-fought battle. Like modernist painting, *ctrl-F6* takes conventions that have become invisible and intuitive, and makes them extraordinary and visible again. The mapping of WASD movement and “mouse looking,” which have become naturalized and ingrained in regular players, are brought into high relief. In the way that modernist art served as art for artists, *Untitled Game* is a game for gamers and more “hardcore” than any AAA shooter.

5. Conclusions

Videogames are not only an advanced product of technoculture, but are the space in which technoculture conventionalizes how we play. This makes videogames a fascinating site for the avant-garde to unwork and rethink the habituated rules of technoculture.

References

- GREENBERG, C. 1940. Towards a Newer Laocoön. *Partisan Review* vol. 7, no. 4 (July-August), 296–310.
- SCHRANK, B. 2014. *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.