

Art and gaming: What elements should every game have?

By Hans Ulrich Obrist | June 28, 2023



Worldbuilding: Gaming and Art in the Digital Age © Julia Stoschek Foundation

In this feature, published in the new [S/S 2023 issue](#) of Fact's print edition, Serpentine curator Hans Ulrich Obrist asks a range of digital artists what elements every good video game should have.

In 2021, 2.8 billion people—almost a third of the world's population—played video games, making what was once a niche pastime the biggest mass phenomenon of our time. Many people spend hours every day in a parallel world and live a multitude of different lives. Video games are to the twenty-first century what movies were to the twentieth century and novels to the nineteenth century.

The aesthetics and visual language of games first entered artistic practices decades ago. Artists have appropriated, modified, and often subverted existing video games to reflect on them and to approach questions of our existence within virtual worlds and the socio-political issues involved in the rendering of new realities. Other artists present a critique of games by exposing their often discriminatory elements and stereotypical depictions. More recently, artists have also entered existing mainstream games, opening up to massive new audiences and finding fresh forms of engagement.

Traditionally, video games were created by a small and insular group of people coming from the world of engineering, who produced games with a very limited perspective. This is now changing rapidly, with many more people having access to the tools for making games. Artists are increasingly developing the technical ability to invent, design, and distribute their own games on all continents to create virtual worlds of diversity and inclusion, contributing strongly to a plurality of voices and different perspectives. As Anna Anthropy writes in her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*: "I want games to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives. I can imagine—you are invited to imagine with me—a world in which digital games are not manufactured for the same small audience but one in which games are authored by you and me for the benefit of our peers."

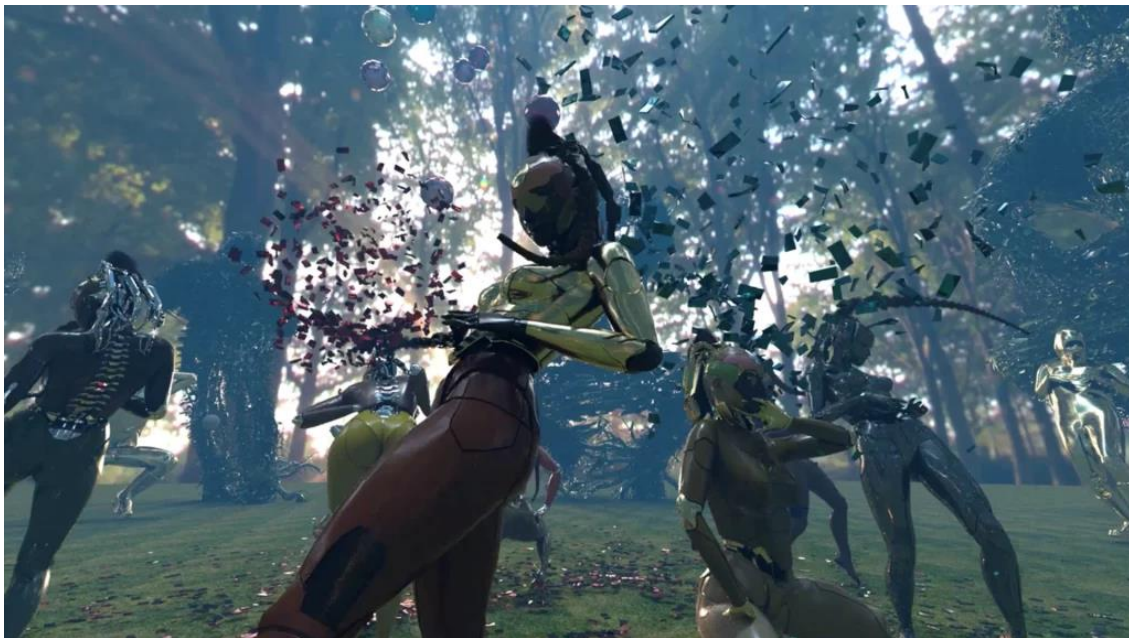
Artists can be said to present an expanded notion of games. *Worldbuilding*, an exhibition I curated at the Julia Stoschek Foundation in Düsseldorf, which will be shown at Pompidou Metz in summer 2023, highlights how the creation of games offers a unique opportunity for worldbuilding. Within games rules can be set up; surroundings, systems, and dynamics can be built and altered; and new realms can emerge. As artist Ian Cheng often told me, at the heart of his art is a desire to understand what a world is. Now more than ever, the dream is to be able to possess the agency to create new worlds, not just inherit and live within existing ones.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

C. Thi Nguyen, in his book *Games: Agency as Art*, argues that games are unique art forms that offer a temporary alternative experience of life and allow players to enjoy new and expanded forms of agency. The games presented in *Worldbuilding* often achieve this through the use of self-imposed constraints, like those employed by Oulipo—the loose gathering of writers and mathematicians founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais. The artists enable us to become immersed in a multitude of alternative realities, spanning past, present, and future, and questioning the very nature of reality. As Philip K. Dick once said, “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”

During the research for *Worldbuilding*, we embarked on dozens of studio visits—with artists all over the world, and of all age groups. It remains ever-fascinating how a field that is so rapidly developing can be understood and used in such different ways, presenting precisely the plurality of voices Anthrophy calls for. For, as she continues, “games, digital and otherwise, transmit ideas and culture. This is something they share with poems, novels, music albums, films, sculptures, and paintings. A painting conveys what it’s like to experience the subject as an image; a game conveys what it’s like to experience the subject as a system of rules. If videogames are compared unfavourably with these forms [...]—it is likely a result of how limited a perspective videogames have offered up to this point.”

In a quest to broaden this perspective and understand how games can best achieve this, we asked participating artists the question, ‘What elements should every good game have?’ Their responses vary as much as their works and provide further insight into the possibilities of video games—both existing and imagined. To highlight the diversity of the artists’ takes on ‘good games,’ their responses are presented below in full, where the reader will be taken from Peggy Ahwesh’s affection for the element of surprise, to a code written by JODI in response, and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley’s critique of the question posed. The collected viewpoints show what it is about the experience of ‘the subject as a system of rules,’ and the elements that make this experience the biggest mass phenomenon of our time.



We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other, 2020 © Jacobly Satterwhite

TRANSMODERNA

Decent parameterisation, some recognisability of interrelation to the external social system, complete absence of the laws of physics, open source, deep level of immersion, web3 functionality. Great visuals and soundscapes.

JACOLBY SATTERWHITE

Solid gameplay, viewport experience, narrative, score, attitude, and heart.

GABRIEL MASSAN

From my point of view, a good game has its own universe, which exists and expands in its own time. Narrative, characters, interface, sound, and objectives well developed help in the immersion of the player. I like to have freedom to explore and enjoy each scenario and situation.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

THEO TRIANTAFYLLIDIS

The most important element is undoubtedly fun. The medium itself has an amazing capability to create a satisfying experience and I think that mostly happens on the very granular interaction level. Play Super Mario against any other 2D platformer of the time and you can instantly understand the attention to detail that went into making the simple task of walking and jumping into a satisfying interaction.

SUZANNE TREISTER

Creative mind improving and mind expanding elements for a better future for everyone and everything.

SARAH FRIEND

The task of trying to define games, or to define a good game, is famously a losing one—and, as I've already said, I tend to be more interested in the messy edges. It's as difficult to define a good game as to define a good artwork.

RINDON JOHNSON

Every good game should induce the flow state.

PEGGY AHWESH

Surprises.

LUYANG

Core, worldview framework building.

LAWRENCE LEK

Every good game should have rules that structure the player's experience in a way that makes them feel—at least subconsciously—that they have agency and freedoms that they don't have in ordinary lived reality. That's why sandbox games are so popular—there should be a suspension of disbelief within the game world, and that reality itself is a malleable substance. Ludology, the study of games, often categorize video games into two camps. One theory goes that a game is a form of non-linear narrative, and the other says that games are fundamentally rule-based structural systems that guide a player's experience. You can think of a 'choose-your-own-adventure' text-based game versus chess, for example. I'm personally interested in hybrids, like open-world games, or taking the genre of first-person shooter games but making it about healing and regeneration instead of death and destruction.

LATURBO AVEDON

It is difficult to say what makes a good game, but from a long-term perspective I would say they require independence. If a game is not playable in a decade, or two or three, or say a century from now, the players of that time will have lost the opportunity to share that same experience. Games can be developed in a way that fortifies themselves to endure the challenges of time, to remain intact and operable long after their creators.

DAVID BLANDY

Every game should be fun. Even if that fun is that it's ridiculously frustrating. In fact, games are so diverse it's impossible to say that there is one thing that is essential. Beautiful graphics are incredible and immersive, but Tetris is still a fun game. I think that there is a certain tactility and responsiveness that can really aid a game experience. When Super Mario 64 was being made, Miyamoto made sure that just the feeling of moving Mario around in the 3D space felt fun and intuitive, even without any of the platforms or levels that create the challenge.

KIM HEECHEON

Should have something good which is very hard to explain why and that make players question it to themselves. Would be even better if it contains some clues about our general lives.

KEIKEN

Each game has to really pay close attention to the way the user is interacting with the world/game.

KAWS

They should allow you the opportunity to escape the demands of the real world.

JODI

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MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

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JAKOB KUDSK STEENSEN

There is no universal element, and I think the dogma around gaming-specific design elements is what has previously been the block towards the medium maturing and opening up. We need to break barriers around gaming design dogmas, and open them up to be free and explorative. For my own personal style, good story, poetry, music, and environmental building that I emotionally and intellectually get sucked into is key. So for example, action and one-to-one interaction design of user action is less interesting to me. Fluid, almost performative experiences are what I like. So a good game for me has this fluid, powerful psychological element. It must be able to create a rhythm between yourself and the virtual world laid out for you. A good game gets into your head and senses. It makes you feel an urge to explore, to learn, to feel and become curious of the world a game takes place in. When you're in this flow, the feeling is incredible. It reminds me of working in ecosystems too, where I get a lot of my own digital source material from.

IQECO

Every good game should have a cave for reflection and exploring your own interiority.

IAN CHENG

A coefficient of chaos. A way to stretch yourself as a player.

ED ATKINS

A decent hit. A core loop that's singularly satisfying.

DEMNA GVASALIA

The success of a game is clearly linked to the fact that they give the player a sense of freedom, it can also enable the exploration of new territories for the mind, expanding horizons. I think digital reality gives a notion of freedom that has become scarce in today's reality.

ANGELA WASHKO

My favorite games have complicated stories with multi-dimensional characters, meaningful mechanics, and a unique aesthetic that embodies its story.

BASMAH FELEMBAN

Control over the narrative, or any control of the system of the game as a player, and a good soundtrack.

CAO FEI

The origin of the game is its entertainment, and behind the game there is a lot of capital manipulation, through the game win, lose, reward logic to set up a strong stickiness to make players addicted. I first came into contact with *Second Life*, which is also called a game, but for me it is more of a virtual internet community, and I value its life and socialisation, as well as a tool for self-creation. The richer the possibilities of the game, the better.

DANIELLE BRATHWAITE-SHIRLEY

None. I don't think like this. I feel that a game doesn't have to be good to get its point across. There are plenty of bad games that make their point. I feel as though we have to get away from this idea of a 'good game' and start thinking of games as a medium of art. So maybe the question should be 'How can I experience this as art?'