Discussion Note

A Reply to Rough

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This discussion note is a response to Brock Rough’s “The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks”. (Rough, 2017) http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jpg.2736

Rough’s central argument is, as I understand it, that artworks are meant to be appreciated, and, because artworks are meant to be appreciated and games are not, this makes art incompatible with games. This turns out to be a relatively narrow claim, ultimately focused more specifically on the nature of an artwork than on the nature of art. However, even in its narrow form, the argument has broad implications. I will take issue with it.

I do not think it is quite as settled as Rough would have it that artworks are meant to be appreciated — or, related, that art is most essentially a container for “meaning.” Nor do I think, even if it were settled in this way, that this would necessarily exclude certain essential characteristics of a game -- particularly its game play -- from, at least upon occasion, being a work of art. And, I certainly think that if Rough would like to make a compelling argument about art and games, he must take some stance regarding whether it is the game designer or the game player who should be more rightfully considered the artist of the game. As regards this latter, Rough takes no explicit stance; I can only assume here, as I believe it is implied in the essay, that Rough’s position is that it is the game designer (alone) who is the potential artist.

Before I take on the issues above, let me first deal with some other aspects of Rough’s essay about which I am less concerned and more in agreement.

Insofar as what Rough purports game play to be is roughly what Suits purports game play to be, I am largely satisfied and find little cause to object. It is difficult not to recognize and acknowledge the widespread influence of the Suits definition, and, in that recognition and acknowledgement, concede its appeal, which is, as Rough allows, better than most and as good as any.

Rough also spends some time on the matter of video games and games as to what is what and which is which. However, in concert with Suits, I do not believe it is incum-
bent on the game theorist to account for all possible uses of the term “game” or the term “video game.” It is enough to note that some of these uses may be in error. If the theorist should develop a classification scheme which would, when properly applied, reduce such errors, all the better. But Rough doesn’t seem in the mood to do this in any great detail, and I don’t think it would have much impact on his primary argument (i.e., that a game is not an artwork) if he did.

Now, perhaps Rough does try to do this a bit. While I am a little uncertain about this, I am willing to give Rough the benefit of the doubt that he does not make a serious attempt, since, if he were trying to develop a useful classification scheme to distinguish games and video games — i.e., within his extended comparison of chess and This War of Mine (11 bit studios, 2014) — this scheme seems inadequate.

For instance, Rough seems to make the interlocking claims that 1) if players “properly” engage with something that is called a video game (i.e. This War of Mine), then it might actually be an artwork rather than a game; and 2) a player cannot similarly “properly” engage with a bona fide (non-video-game) game such as chess. But these claims fail to address the following: chess can be implemented as a video game, chess players frequently advocate for the play of their game as art, play with This War of Mine might include both “proper” and other sorts of engagement (including the evocation of a lusory attitude that would undermine all spurious propernesses entirely), it may well be that an artwork is less (rather than “more”) than a game, and so forth.

These latter objections, by the way, are very similar to ones I might direct toward the occasional claim that in order for a game to be a narrative that that game must be somehow “properly” engaged as a narrative. Here again, I suspect that the game player’s lusory attitude would necessarily intervene and maintain a sort of “fructile chaos” (as suggested by Victor Turner) during game play that would be intolerant of what is and what is not “proper” — including any properness of narrative.

And, also by the way (as an even further aside to the main thrust of the essay): Should Rough wish to extend and clarify his comments regarding the difference between games and video games, then there would need to be much further consideration of how and why translating a game from one medium to another would have such a powerful effect as to potentially transform a game into something else. This is a radical transformation, to be sure, but there is at least one argument already made that would extrapolate Rough’s implications of media transforming games to include media transforming art. Manovich (2001), for instance, has made this sort of grandiose argument: that it is the media platform makers who reign as “artists” of digital media, not those who subsequently configure and manipulate those platforms to their own idiosyncratic ends, playful or otherwise.
...computer scientists who invented these technologies – J.C. Licklider, Douglas Engelbart, Ivan Sutherland, Ted Nelson, Seymour Papert, Tim Berners-Lee, and others – are the important artists of our time – maybe the only artists who are truly important and who will be remembered from this historical period. (Manovich 2001, 6)

But all this aside.

In lieu of the specifics of Rough’s discussion of games and video games, it would be less problematic to claim more directly and simply that artworks cannot be played as games, and that games cannot be “properly” engaged as artworks. This more generic claim could then avoid being immediately burdened with distinguishing between what on occasion might be called a video game (e.g., This War of Mine) from what upon occasion might not be called a video game (e.g., This War of Mine).

The chief matter of the essay does not concern games and video games but games and artworks. Rough bluntly says this about that:

Whatever an artwork is, whatever its meaning, and whatever the intentions of the artist, artworks are meant to be appreciated. (p. 8)

I find it confusing that artworks are “meant to be appreciated” despite “whatever the intentions of the artist” might be. Who other than the artist is capable of “meaning” the artwork to be appreciated? And if only the artist is capable of this, then doesn’t this constrain that artist’s intentions to some degree?

Despite my confusion, I assume from Rough’s claim that he is championing artist intentionality as a characteristic distinguishing what is an artwork and what is not. This is a claim frequently made and a reasonable one in that it is often used to distinguish between what is produced by nature (sunsets, waterfalls: not artworks) and what is produced by artists (artworks). Yet also, when such a claim is made concerning artist intentionality, there is commonly a parallel claim made concerning artist expressiveness: this too is a characteristic distinguishing what is an artwork and what is not. Rough wholly ignores artist expressiveness because, I surmise, he wishes to account for art solely on the basis of its effect on an audience (i.e., its appreciation) rather than its origin with an artist (i.e., its expressiveness). This predisposes his argument to proceed in such a way that I believe is biased against a favorable consideration of games and game play as art. I will try to make this clearer below.

I take Rough’s central claim regarding the incompatibility of game and artwork to be thematically similar to Best’s (1980) argument regarding the incompatibility of sports and art. Best’s argument clarifies this distinction as that between the intentionality of “purposive” and “aesthetic” sports. I cannot discern why Rough omits reference to Best, but here are Best’s words to compare:
The great majority of sports are what I call "purposive," and in these aesthetic considerations are normally incidental....The distinguishing characteristic of each of these sports is that its purpose can be specified independently of the manner of achieving it, as long as it conforms to the rules or norms... My point is rather that the aesthetic, or the manner of achieving the purpose, is not intrinsic to the sport.

On the other hand, there is a category of sports, which I call "aesthetic," in which the aim cannot intelligibly be specified independently of the manner of achieving it. (p. 70)

In my comparison, I prefer Best’s version of this distinction between what might be art and what is incapable of being art to Rough’s version. Best’s version, in my reading, is more pointedly aimed at a difference between manners of achieving a purpose (either a manner is independent of a purpose, or it is not) while Rough’s version emphasizes — and I would argue, ultimately prioritizes — differences between what purposes are (either a purpose is “to be appreciated,” or it is not).

Now, while artworks may well be appreciated and while this may be an outcome with which an artist is entirely agreeable, I must immediately stand and say that I am not at all sure that this is either an uncontroversial or a generally accepted or an essential characteristic of an artwork. Rather than taking an aesthetician head count to prove my point, as Rough does, let me take note again of the basic claims upon which Rough’s incompatibility argument must turn.

Ultimately, according to Rough’s argument, it is vital that we believe that artworks are meant to be appreciated and, simultaneously, that games are not meant to be appreciated. If either games are meant to be appreciated — or if artworks are not meant to be appreciated — then Rough’s argument, as he presents it, falls away and he needs another.

Further (as Rough must acknowledge in citing Lamarque’s Conditions of Reception), to claim that artworks are meant to be appreciated is to prioritize “how an audience receives” an artwork. Let me call this a communicative model of art: it conceives the artwork as a message that passes from point A (the artist) to point B (the audience), and art — communication — does not take place if nothing shows up at Point B.

This, then, is a primary reason I find Best’s conceptualization of the difference between aesthetic and purposive sports a more serious threat to the compatibility of game and artwork than Rough’s conceptualization of artwork as something meant to be appreciated. I can simply reject the communicative model of art upon which Rough’s conceptualization is based — and pfft! Games and art are back in business.

But how might we possibly (and at least somewhat reasonably) replace Rough’s “uncontroversial and generally accepted” model of art? Rough implies that we would immediately be philosophical outcasts should we choose to do so. Nevertheless, despite
all social pressures to the contrary, there are some (apparently) rogue-ish analysis that has done this already.

We could, for instance, re-evaluate what really happens at Point B in the communicative model. Rather than appreciation, we might substitute function or impact or social consequence. Plato does something like this in characterizing art as dangerous. More recent constructivist models of art do this sort of thing as well. Or, alternatively, we might de-prioritize Point B and maintain that the truly essential characteristics of art are primarily if not entirely located at Point A. Expressive models of art can offer templates for this approach -- Dewey and Langer come to mind.

The effect of these alternative models on Rough’s argument is likely fatal. For instance, suppose we were to take Rough’s communicative-model claim that “the prelusory goal of Artwork-Game X [is] trying to understand it” (p. 15), and we substitute a more expressive model’s claim that “the prelusory goal of Artwork-Game X [is] trying to experience it.” This substitution would then reverberate throughout Rough’s argument in ways like this:

The goal of art (including art appreciation), Rough believes, is necessarily accomplished efficiently, while the goal of games, he believes, buttressed with reference to Suits, is necessarily not. But it is, of course, the goal of the game that Suits insists requires inefficient means to accomplish, not the experience of game play itself. Indeed, games seem to create just the right sort of context (I might call this context the game object), that most efficiently evokes and sustains the lusory attitude necessary to play a game. Thus, one plank in Rough’s platform can be collapsed: game and art may be considered equally efficient in accomplishing experiential goals; and both then equally qualify, in Rough’s and Suits’ sense, as “technical activities.”

From this perspective, it is much easier to claim that the game object is meant to be appreciated — that is, played — to the same degree that the art object is meant to be appreciated. Yes, it is a very peculiar quality of game play that it seems meant to be appreciated if and only if, in some profound sense, it is not meant to be appreciated. But, as it turns out, this is a quality of game play that applies widely: Game play is paradoxical. Game play is efficient if and only if it is inefficient; game play is competitive if and only if it is cooperative; game play is serious if and only if it is not serious. The list goes on and on. (We might even speculate that game play may be art if and only if it may not be art -- as I have recently done in Myers (2017)).

In any case, without building a detailed argument for or against a communicative model per se, I do not find it particularly appealing or compelling that Rough’s argument stands so precariously on a principle that is “uncontroversial and generally accepted.” This is just the sort of principle -- and just the sort of defense -- that invites cyni-
cism. And, in this particular case, it is a principle that, in comparison to its alternatives, is quite unfavorable in determining the compatibility of games and art.

One last point. I feel I may have played unfairly here. For instance, I find no reason to object to Rough’s claim that “the ontologically complex things that are games and those that are artworks cannot be identical with each other” (p. 2). I simply find this too self-evident to be interesting. If we are to insist that how we conventionally understand art must also be how we understand game — which is Rough’s argument viewed from above — then clearly game and artwork are incompatible. On the other hand, if we wish to give thoughtful consideration to the claims of those who play games (including chess players are who also artists and art critics — Marcel Duchamp and William Wimsatt among them), those who claim that players of their game are artists, then we must more willingly consider whether how we conventionally understand art is flawed.

So, rather than conceding Rough the benefits of his generally accepted assumptions and examining his argument thereafter, I have made the claim that Rough’s assumptions are flawed insofar as they are mounted to his argument in a predictable and not particularly encouraging way, much like a hiker might pick her way across a rushing stream, leaping from one rock to the next, more intent on keeping her boots dry than actually crossing the stream. In my defense, I would point to the many qualifications Rough throws about, his (strange, to me) omission of artist expressiveness, his silence on the respective roles of game designer and game player, and his redirection of the Suits’ definition from game play to game; I take these as indications that, while Rough’s scheme may have successfully picked its way down the stream, it has not yet gotten us to a better place.

Games


References