

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Video Games as Art: One Interpretation Using *The Legend of Zelda* as a Case Study

by

Lucas Stebbins Cuddy

Master of Arts in Philosophy

San Diego State University, 2008

I address the question *Can video games be art?* and provide one possible answer. In addressing this broad question, I narrow the focus to a specific video game franchise: *The Legend of Zelda*. From this specific analysis, I see what can be generalized to apply to the broad issue of the role playing video game (RPVG), for *Zelda* is an RPVG. And from here I generalize further to the yet larger issue of video games as art.

My method of answering these questions is philosophical. It's true that video games are often included in the category "interactive art." But this is not by the choice of philosophers, nor is the inclusion one that entails philosophical rigor. Aaron Smuts, a lecturer at Temple University, notes the failure of the philosophy of art and aesthetics to deal with video games. Thus, my investigation into this matter will have its foundation in the philosophy of art and aesthetics.

In the first three chapters, I lay the foundation for the aesthetic framework which is developed in Chapter 4. This includes a discussion of art, games and play. I also discuss characteristics of *Zelda* games and RPVGs in general.

In Chapter 4, I begin with the idea of the aesthetic experience. Erwin Panofsky argues that even if the aesthetic experience is subjective, there are objective qualities in art objects that demand to be experienced aesthetically. There are three such objective properties, I claim. The first comes from Kendall Walton's theory of art; it is the ability of an art object to be looked at in a certain way. The second comes from Léon Rosenstein's theory of art, and it is called "translucence." The third is my own addition called "freeplay." If an object possesses these three qualities, then it can be experienced aesthetically and is therefore art. I argue that *Zelda* has all three qualities. That is, if this framework for art provides a reason for thinking that, say, a painting by da Vinci can be art, then it equally provides a reason for thinking, at least, the games of the *Zelda* franchise can be art.

In Chapter 5, I briefly discuss an RPVG that is not art by the above framework: *Adventure*. I also briefly discuss a video game that can be categorized not as an RPVG but as a side-scroller: *Super Mario Brothers 2*. It turns out that, by the above framework, *Super Mario Brothers 2* can also be art. These brief discussions point to the conclusion that some video games can be art and some cannot, just as some paintings can be art and some cannot. I also deal with objections to my claims in this thesis as well as discuss further implications of some elements of my analysis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	x
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Thesis Problem.....	1
Methodology	2
Outline of Thesis.....	2
2 ART, PLAY, AND THE EVOLUTION OF VIDEO GAMES	5
3 INTRODUCTION TO <i>THE LEGEND OF ZELDA</i>	17
Playing <i>The Legend of Zelda</i>	18
Attempting to Define “Video Game”	22
4 <i>ZELDA</i> : A ROLE PLAYING VIDEO GAME	24
Primary Characteristics of a Role Playing Video Game.....	29
5 <i>ZELDA</i> AND ART.....	32
Erwin Panofsky: The Aesthetic Experience and Objective Properties	33
Kendall Walton’s Theory of Play	34
Walton’s Theory Applied to <i>Zelda</i>	36
Léon Rosenstein’s Theory of Translucence.....	40
Rosenstein’s Theory Applied to <i>Zelda</i>	41
Freeplay as an Objective Property	42
What Is it About <i>Zelda</i> Games That Makes Them Translucent?.....	44
Summarizing Main Points: A New Framework of Art for <i>Zelda</i>	48
6 BEYOND <i>ZELDA</i>	50
<i>Zelda</i> Is Art: Are Role Playing Video Games Art?	50
Role Playing Video Games Are Art: Are Video Games Art?	53
Dealing with Objections	57

Further Implications.....60
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....63