THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF INDEPENDENT VIDEO GAMES

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**The Contrary of Independent Video Games**

Although some mainstream video games are viewed as nihilistic distractions, it is crucial that the medium of video games as a whole should not be disregarded. Ruberg and Phillips assert that independent “game makers, and game scholars … have used play to question dominant structures of power. Given the history surrounding games and games studies … it is particularly crucial to bring to the surface this undercurrent of resistance.”[[1]](#footnote-0) What Ruberg and Phillips term as “resistance” is the movement of independent game makers towards unconventional styles of narrative, player interaction, and design that overturn the traditional methods used in mainstream games.

I argue that because they subvert commonly held expectations of mainstream video games while remaining incredibly accessible to minority groups and public players, independent video games possess incredible artistic and revolutionary potential.

While mainstream video games remain fairly accessible to a wide audience, many still require expensive consoles and individual game purchases to play. On the contrary, many independent games are made even more accessible by remaining on the internet for anyone to play — all that is required is an internet connection. The majority of these games are available for free. From the beginning of their creation, they are designed to play online rather than on consoles. Throughout their design, they are crafted without an investment in profit.

Independent video game artists use the same basic concepts of mainstream video games and manipulate them for entirely different purposes. For example, many independent games control systems of tasks and rewards so that it is impossible for the player to ‘win’ the game. This tactic is used to place players in compromising, frustrating positions — positions that are often occupied by minority groups in society that the traditional mainstream game community has overlooked. Independent games work to challenge existing hierarchical structures and they should not be ignored by revolutionary art communities or art critics.

**Applying Guy Debord’s Theory of The Dérive to Independent Games**

The revolutionary potential of independent video games can be better understood when examined through the lens of what French writer and revolutionary Guy Debord calls the “dérive,” or “drift.” In essence, the “dérive” describes the reframing of surroundings for revolutionary purposes. In the words of the researcher and architect Maria Flores, the “dérive” involves “playful and constructive behaviors and an awareness of psychogeographical effects.”[[2]](#footnote-1) Debord applies this to the context of modern urban spaces of the early 20th century, claiming that these cities had specific psychogeographical articulations. These spaces were designed to exert psychological control over their inhabitants — they are difficult to navigate naturally from within, instead controlled by dominant classes from above.

The avant-garde revolutionary group the Situationist International aimed to manipulate the same basic structure of these spaces and therefore reincorporate art into everyday life. These social revolutionaries tried to create an extensive critique of 20th century capitalism by incorporating politically subversive art into these urban spaces. The group manipulated existing structures for radically different purposes, therefore criticizing the bourgeoisie and their dictatorship of goods.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Independent video game artists can also be viewed as avant-garde revolutionaries. Similar to the Situationist International, independent game artists have manipulated the same basic tenets of video games — interactivity, systems of tasks and rewards, narrative and simulation — for radically different purposes than mainstream video games. Independent game artists subvert an audience’s expectations of these systems and codes to propagate revolutionary ideals.

The work of transgender activist and independent game artist Anna Anthropy provides an example of this base code manipulation. In her game *Queers in Love at the End of the World,* she begins by presenting the player with a choice: “In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together. You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do: **kiss** her, **hold** her, **take** her hand, **tell** her.” The player has ten seconds to make this choice, as indicated by a timer on the left-hand side of the screen (Appendix B). Depending on the choice the player makes, they are presented with another choice. For example, “You kiss her: **softly, slowly, fiercely, hungrily.**”However, the timer is not reset, so the player has less time to make this choice. After clicking, the process repeats with another question, but with even less time to choose. Eventually, the player has so little time that they are unable to click an option before the timer runs out. The player is presented with a screen that displays the text “Everything is wiped away (Appendix C).”

No matter how many times a player replays this game, and no matter how fast they click through the pages, this result is inevitable. The game is impossible for a player to ‘win,’ according to the word’s traditional understanding. The game artist manipulates the player's understanding that if they make proper choices at proper times, then their successes will be rewarded. This expectation is shattered, therefore placing the player in a position of confusion and frustration.

In the game, the player takes the position of a discriminated queer individual who is rejected by and unable to be with the person they love in a simulated apocalypse. When coupled with the effect of frustration that comes along with the time constraints in the game, the player begins to identify even further with the queer individual’s position. The effect promotes awareness in the player of the frustrations that queer individuals may face in everyday life. A shared understanding of LGBTQ+ issues is fostered by imposing the pressure of time and choice on the player, two pressures that queer individuals often relate to greatly.

Anna Anthropy furthers her exploration of player exploration in her deeply personal narrative game *Dys4ia.* The game takes a narrative form, recounting Anna’s experiences of gender dysmorphia and hormone replacement therapy. It documents a six-month treatment period through a series of mini-games. These smaller vignettes range over a wide variety of topics, including being misgendered by strangers, using a women’s restroom, being weighed at a clinic and the effects of white privilege on hormone medical treatments (Appendix J).

Anna explains her manipulation of the game’s rules “as a story about frustration — in what other form do people complain as much about being frustrated? A video game lets you set up goals for the player and make her fail to achieve them. A reader can’t fail a book. It’s an entirely different level of empathy.”[[4]](#footnote-3) This frustration manifests itself through technical, mechanical restrictions. For example, the second mini-game is dictated by these rules: “Player can move in any (cardinal) direction. Player moves at a set velocity. Player can only move on the orange tiles (cannot move on or through non-playable characters (NPCs), objects or walls). Player cannot interact with anything in the room. End state is triggered by the timer running out.”[[5]](#footnote-4) In one mini-game, the player is asked to navigate their way through a women’s bathroom while only being able to move themselves one tile at a time. Some levels are repeated chronologically throughout the game, before and after the character has received their hormone treatments. In the first iteration of these levels, the player is often permitted limited mobility. However, in the second iteration of the levels after the character has transitioned, the character can actively affect the situation by moving more freely. This expresses the mental and physical freedom and comfort that a transgender individual may feel after receiving validating hormone therapy. However, Anna is clear to express that psychological and societal discomforts exist before, during and after the transition process. In one of the mini-games, the player is given absolutely no agency at all. They are asked to fit through a slot in the wall, but they are unable — this creates not only a sense of frustration, but suffocation and physical embarrassment.

*Dys4ia* has been highly celebrated in the independent game community for making such a painful, intimate experience so universally relatable. The frustration and discomfort evoked within the player through the game vignettes not only makes them aware of transgender issues, but makes them empathize. The effect created is not only mental but also physical due to the specific manipulation of the player's mechanical limitations. Game writer Ben Kuchera states that “*Dys4ia* uses the vocabulary of video games in order to share emotions that may not have been as easily described in words.” He explains how the moment in which the player attempts to fit their character through a slot in the wall is particularly effective. There is no physical reason that the character should not fit through the opening. There is no reasonable, mechanical explanation to explain this impossibility. Instead, it just seems to the player as if “it clearly wasn’t designed for you…the structure isn’t wrong, *you* are wrong.” This experience communicates discomfort in a way that words may be difficult to understand or empathize with. It is an elegant method to convey the feeling of being extremely displeased and unwelcome within one’s own body.[[6]](#footnote-5)

*Dys4ia* brings the “dérive” into a digital space. The Situationist Internationalworked to free the oppressive physical structures in urban environments. On the other hand, Anthropy subverts a player's expectations so that the digital landscapes of a doctor's office, bathroom or a simple slot in the wall exert psychological and physical control over the player. Although this is an opposing force of motion, it is incredibly effective in creating awareness and empathy towards a group of marginalized people which may not exist in the gaming community otherwise.

**Independent Video Games as an example of Rancière’s *Emancipated Spectator***

The revolutionary potential of independent video games can also be realized in a different direction under French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s theory of the “emancipated spectator.” In his book *The Emancipated Spectator,* Rancière argues that modern audiences are aesthetically and politically passive. The philosopher believes that revolutionary power in art is undermined by the assumption that disturbing viewers with shock value will inspire them to change oppressive societal constructions. He believes that showing “a shock image that shows grotesque abuse,” as may be seen in many mainstream violent video games, inspires responses of passivity and disgust in a viewer. Rancière proposes that in order to transform the spectator into an active agent, art must invite the spectator to contemplate and provoke conversation. He argues that emancipation of a viewer is only true emancipation if it is brought about by the thought and conversation of the viewer themselves — not by art that is created with the intent to shock. Powerful revolutionary art should invite viewers to witness the experience of another and form a conversation about this in an artistic community. Rancière elaborates: “This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between they who look and they who act, they who are individuals and they who are members of a collective body.”[[7]](#footnote-6)

Rancière illustrates his theory of the emancipated spectator using the example of Alfredo Jaar’s *Real Pictures* (Appendix E). Jaar’s installation reflected his experience traveling to Rwanda, a nation ravaged by war and genocide. It contained many different materials, including photographs and testimonials from people who witnessed the death and destruction first hand. His installation consisted of lined rows of portfolio boxes, each of which contained memorials from witnesses of the Rwandan genocide. Importantly, there were no blatant photographs of the violence, only the testimonials and eyes of the witnesses. The viewer was invited to imagine the image of death. The effect and power of this exhibition was only strengthened by the linear repetition of the black-linen boxes throughout the installation space.[[8]](#footnote-7)

Rancière stipulates that *Real Pictures* is a prime example of politically effective art. This piece prefers the virtue of testimony over photographic proof. This allows the viewer to overcome their passivity and alienation, for they are not forced into an immediate aesthetic reaction. Instead, they are invited to construct the significance of a mental image through the speech, narrative, and labor of the true witness. The viewer's political and mental construction of the image allows for the formation of an “aesthetic community,” one that is brought together to witness and deliberate. The viewer is now an active agent of this community and no longer a passive, apathetic observer.

Although Rancière defines this idea in the context of visual art and film, it is incredibly applicable to modern video games. Independent video game artists are especially apt at creating works that emancipate spectators (players) and transform them into active agents. They are able to do this by limiting or expanding the point of view of a player. This can invite the player to understand the experience of another in a way that they may not be able to explore through other artistic mediums.

The game *After Hours* was created by a group of students at the University of the Witwatersrand, and was awarded the Best Student Game Award at the 2019 Independent Game Awards. The game is centered around a woman named Lilith Gray, who suffered molestation and borderline personality disorder as a result. As the player begins to click through the game’s pages, they are slowly given access to the voices inside of Lilith’s head. The player spends a night with Lilith in her bedroom. Slowly, they begin to piece together Lilith’s experience, and understand why she acts and responds the way she does (Appendix D).

Instead of applying shock material of the subject’s abuse or relaying horrifying first-hand accounts, this game effectively utilizes the interactivity of the video game medium to invite the player to witness Lilith’s experience. The player clicks around their screen to explore Lilith’s surroundings — reading her bedroom posters, journals, and even her Facebook wall. By piecing together these external details of the subject’s environment, the player obtains a fuller and richer understanding of Lilith’s life and disorder than if they had just been relayed a gruesome account of her abuse.

*After Hours* has been praised for being a tactile way to grapple with and understand the struggles of people battling with mental illnesses, specifically borderline personality disorder. While the player may have no personal experience with this illness, they are able to witness how it affects Lilith’s construction and interpretation of her surrounding environment. The player takes the role of both Lilith’s friend and confidant, as well as her internal mind. This game provokes conversation of shared experiences among players and creators, which led to its eventual praise and the discussion of the game at the 2019 Independent Video Game Awards. The game invites the player to contemplate the issues that arise, ideally transforming the spectator or player from merely a passive viewer to an active agent of their community.

**Rhythm and Control**

Independent video game artists further revolutionary ideals and qualify as great artists themselves through their effective manipulation of rhythm and time. Surrealist novelists of the 20th century were applauded for this exact mastery over narrative rhythm. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea* is one of his most acclaimed works and went on to become a pivotal text of the Surrealist movement. The novel is a free-association exploration of minute details which center the text. At times, Sartre falls into scenes pivoting around one small detail, which he expands upon for many pages. He departs from a traditional narrative style by freezing these moments in time, lengthening them so that they suspend for hours rather than minutes.

Simultaneously, Sartre juxtaposes these expanded scenes with other telegraphic, rapid sentences. Through this contrast, the novel is given its rhythm and tempo — through this, the text effectively captures the nature of true human existence. Humans experience the world not on a traditional linear narrative timeline, but through a rapidly changing tempo of attention to moments. The inner psychic times of a human subject is always changing pace; it is not the time of physics or science.

In this way, Sartre effectively deconstructs reality in his text. The inconsistent series of disruptive moments create the titular “nausea,” a physical symptom that occurs when the spectator has been frozen in a moment and is suddenly snapped back to the present. Zooming in and out with inconsistent rhythm disorients the reader while drawing attention to their methods of thinking in everyday life.

The reader becomes aware that their focus is constantly shifting, that the only thing truly present is their body itself. This phenomenon can be both psychologically and physically frustrating. This corporeal awareness leads a viewer to be acutely present in the world in a way that they were not previously. Consequently, this manipulation of rhythm can be effectively implemented as both an artistic and revolutionary tool.

Independent video game artists have successfully utilized this nonlinear experience in their work to draw attention to the experience of marginalized communities. For example, artist Robert Yang created his game, *The Tearoom,* in 2017 to highlight the oppressive constructions within the mainstream gaming community. One of Yang’s previous LGBTQ+ themed games had been banned from the popular mainstream game streaming platform Twitch due to its “overt sexuality.” In protest, Yang created *The Tearoom.* In his artist statement, Yang teasingly but pointedly states: “To appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex, I have swapped out any pesky penises in my game for *the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban --* guns. Now, there's nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys' guns, right?”[[9]](#footnote-8)

*The Tearoom* is based around historical events which took place in 1962 in Mansfield, Ohio. Local police “setup a hidden surveillance camera behind a two-way mirror, and secretly filmed dudes having sex with dudes in a public bathroom. The police used the film footage to imprison them for a year or more under Ohio's sodomy laws.”[[10]](#footnote-9)

*The Tearoom* is a virtual simulator which takes place inside one of these 1960’s Ohio bathrooms. The player occupies the point of view of a man inside the graffitied bathroom. They see an icon that instructs the player: “If you see cops, then leave the game (Appendix F).” Other men eventually enter the simulated bathroom and use the urinal that the player stands next to. Then, the player can choose when to perform oral sex on the men’s guns. This is not a euphemism; the player can opt to lick the other men's weapons that they hold on their person (Appendix G). This lasts for an indeterminate amount of time, until the player is busted by the police (Appendix H).

The game places the viewer in the helpless position of a minority in 1962 while cleverly relating this to discrimination towards LGBTQ+ game artists in 2017, using the substitute of a gun for a male phallus. *The Tearoom* is especially effective because it does not operate on a linear timeline that is forced on the player. Instead, the viewer basically creates the timeline himself, in relation to the obstacle of the approaching police force. This creates a nauseating rhythm that is only amplified by the threat of discovery and ostracization.

*The Tearoom* should be praised as an example of a socially effective revolutionary game. The artist, through his masterful manipulation of time and environmental control, places the viewer in a position that they may not occupy in their everyday lives. By forcing them into this nauseating rhythm under the threat of a police discovery, Yang encourages the player to consider the position of queer minorities not only in the 1960s but in modern day gaming communities that the player likely occupies. *The Tearoom* not only advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, but also brings awareness to the double-standards of censorship within the mainstream gaming community. The experience of this game encourages education of queer history and action against the anti-queer policies of modern day police, and the policing of mainstream online groups as well.

**Player Accessibility**

Writer and philosopher Herbert Read boldly states in his essay “What is Revolutionary Art?” that “REVOLUTIONARY ART IS CONSTRUCTIVE. REVOLUTIONARY ART IS INTERNATIONAL.”[[11]](#footnote-10)I would like to bring focus on this important word: international. Read proposed that one important feature of revolutionary art is that it reaches a wide variety of people, not only geographically but societally. Revolutionary art does not only reach the traditional white bourgeoisie that encounters art exhibitions regularly.

I would go one step further than Read and claim that revolutionary art should be inherently accessible. While the word “accessibility” is thrown about frequently in a number of modern discourses, in this context, I use “accessible” to mean visible, usable, and understandable to anyone regardless of disability, race, identification, or social standing.

The biggest obstacle in front of revolutionary visual artists is the method of distributing their works to the masses. Yes, many of these works may hang in museums, but who gets to go into these museums? If the museum ticket costs money, a large part of the public is eliminated. Furthermore, people need free time to visit museums, which is unlikely if they are working multiple jobs or have a family to care for. People need to be provided with the educational tools to interpret the revolutionary messages and calls to action that are present in many modern artworks. It is this compilation of barriers that make the “art world” and the environment of art museums feel pretentious, condescending and overall inaccessible to a large number of citizens.

These barriers, however, are removed when you shift to the realm of digital art, and specifically video games. These works don’t require money or travel like museums, but are accessible from the home — and none are more accessible than independent video games.

Although mainstream video games are also accessed in the home, they still require a fairly large amount of expendable income to enjoy. Players need a gaming system, which cost hundreds of dollars, and the games themselves typically cost $60 a piece. On the other hand, independent video games do not require this type of monetary flexibility. Many independent video games are entirely free and accessible online on public streaming platforms or the artists’ personal websites. Every single independent game example cited so far in this analysis is entirely free to watch or download on the Internet. All one needs to access these works of art is a computer, which can be utilized in many public facilities, and an internet connection.

**Reproducibility**

Another important characteristic of independent video games is their inherent reproducibility. At their core, these games are lines of code that can be recreated on any computer at any time in any location.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin’s views on reproducibility provide an interesting lens through which to view the ubiquity of independent video games. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin states that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”[[12]](#footnote-11) He emphasizes the importance of the context of creation to the spirit and value of an artwork. Benjamin believes that the uniqueness of a work of art is largely shaped by the history and developments that it is exposed to during its existence. He says that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”[[13]](#footnote-12) However, digital art and the modern medium of video games complicate Benjamin’s views on reproducibility. Obviously these technologies did not exist in Benjamin’s time, and it is not reasonable to transfer these standards from photography and film to video games.

On the contrary, more than any other medium, independent video games have a unique presence in time and space. What makes their existence so singular is that the character and authenticity of independent games are molded not only by the creator but by the player of the game as well. Because video games are partly shaped by the player, they can have a number of unique outcomes and interpretations. This phenomenon further complicates Benjamin’s assertions on reproducibility. While each of these video games may be infinitely reproducible lines of computer code, the experiences of the games cannot be copied. Because video games exist over time, and the player’s active role affects how each game unfolds, these video games are not endlessly recreatable.

The reproducibility of independent games not only makes them accessible to a wider number of people, but also bestows power back into the viewer’s hands. This transfer of responsibility confirms the player as an active agent, therefore solidifying an independent game’s potential to spur revolutionary action from the player.

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