

# ***If you have something to say, please make games***

## ***Ossian Borén***

Hello!

My name is Ossian Borén and I am an artist and game designer. I make art using game design as my preferred medium. I am writing this to inspire you to do the same.

What is art? To me art is about expressing yourself through a medium with ‘artistic’ intent. I believe anything can be art, as long as you intend it to be. A lot of people mistake art to be inherently good, that art has a certain subliminal quality just because it’s art, but this is not true — art can lack this quality, art can be bad art, and art can be good at other things. It’s more relevant to look at the things you can do in the art space. You can push aesthetic boundaries, you can make a political statement, you can deconstruct the world around you, experiment with the meaning of things, all sorts of things really, as long as its intended purpose is to be art. For me though, what makes a piece of work into a piece of ‘art’ work is that its creator has to communicate that it is art. This is not something that people take for granted. This is why you can have a community like the game community, where you see ‘gamers’ like me failing to get their preferred medium recognised as an art form, because most game developers never even try. And those creators who do try to have their game recognised as art, fail in communicating their ambition. Our society has created a set of pointers that tell us something is art. When we put a thing in an art space like a gallery or a museum, we ‘get’ that it is supposed to be art because this is communicated to us through these pointers. For me as an artist, the notion that something has to fit into a certain context in order to be art is rather ridiculous and troublesome. However, knowing that this sort of framework exists and how it works is the first step to experimenting with other contexts, such as games.

So what is a game? I'd like to be inclusive in my view of games. I don't distinguish between traditional video games, board games or sports. I think they're all types of the same thing. Here I will try to introduce a game definition of my own (although not entirely original):

- Games – rule-based machines that provide multiple possible outcomes, usually through interaction with a human. These machines have their rules powered by either a processor, a brain or a hybrid combination of both.

Games are machines. You put something in one end, and out comes something else. They're machines with rules and if-statements and cause and effect. There exists a 'tree' of different outcomes, called **the possibility space**, and this space can be explored through interaction. The interaction usually is, but doesn't have to be, with a human. This is important, because I believe that a game such as *Game of Life* (Conway 1970), where there is zero human interaction, is still a game; it still features dynamic interaction and multiple outcomes. This is also why many games are exciting to watch even when you're not playing. The exploration of the possibility space can even be more rewarding than seeing who wins or loses.

Let's talk about rules a little bit. Rules are what make any machine tick, really. They describe what a machine should do with whatever it encounters. For me, what makes a rule a **game** rule is when it's layered upon the already existing and always present ruleset of everyday life. For example, there's a (mostly unwritten) rule that you should throw your litter in the bin. A lot of people find this activity boring, but what if we change the rule? For example: you should put litter in the bin from atop a chair on the other side of the room, and you get a 'point' if you do it. This generally boring activity now becomes a game, because of a simple rule change.

There are many types of games; I would like to introduce the idea of dividing them into two main categories: games with processor-powered and/or brain-powered rules. For a machine to work, it has to have a ruleset. Unlike mechanical machines, what keeps us from breaking the rules of a game machine is either digital game code, powered by a computer processor, or, in the case of most board games, a brain. These categories roughly translate to what we usually call digital and analog games. The old categories start to crumble when you consider something like a pack of cards played with on a phone. It's much easier to analyse games when the categories instead point to where the rules are upheld. In addition, my definition allows the categories to broaden a bit. For example, the game of watching raindrops race down a window pane is not really an analog game in the traditional sense; it is most definitely a brain-powered game. There are probably as many exceptions to my definition as there are games. But as a tool to write about how to make a game, I think the definition works.

Now I will consider art and games together. Back when I started making art games, I realised that creating artwork is a lot like game design. These days you see a lot of contemporary artists working with rules, participation and machines as part of their practice. I think this trend is part of an ongoing backlash against the modernist art era, where artists were geniuses and art was produced for an exclusive, intellectual middle/upper class.

Going back to the notion of art being communication, when we make an artwork that has any of these elements (participation, interaction or machines), we can communicate that there is a system surrounding the work. If you encounter something interactive in an art space, you think about the rules of consuming art: 'Can I touch it?' 'How do I approach it?' When making a game as an artwork, the artist can show the consumer how the artwork is made, like peeking behind the curtain. The system can be fully exposed. From there you can redefine the framework surrounding art. I want to change how art is perceived by the public; I want people to take ownership of the art framework. It's not just for intellectuals or 'geniuses' – it's for anyone who can consume culture.

There's a common misconception that art has to be serious, especially when it comes to the 'are games art' debate. There is a lot of art about non-serious subjects, especially if you go down the route of making art about art. Let's just put the following in all-caps: ART IS NOT A SERIOUS MATTER. Art is communication. Art is culture (and a very important part of it). Art is a vessel which can contain serious matter, but it is not in itself serious. Additionally, a thing does not have to be beautiful to be art either. It's not beauty that makes a thing art, it's the successful attempt to communicate art that it is. A good way to communicate that you're making art is to make it aesthetically pleasing or original, but this is not necessary.

I think a good way to think about art games is that they are a bit like art films. They can be big or low budget. They can be made by any number of people. They can be about anything and can be serious or funny or boring or whatever. A game can be artistic and entertaining at the same time (actually I prefer it to be both). However, sometimes, when designing an art game, you have to make choices that land on either the artistic or entertainment side of the fence. It is really important to make the right choices for a game to 'work'. I see a lot of games that try to approach interesting subjects but fall short because a design decision was made that favours playability over subject matter. Now, this is ok if you want to make entertainment, but not so much if you want to make art. Every aspect of the game has to be made with the artistic intent in mind: game mechanics, aesthetics, control, game feel, framing, distribution model, pricing and so on. Here's the thing. Your game can be art, entertainment or both, but it's still the context you put it in and how it's perceived that makes it art or not, and even if you go through the checklist of pointers to make it perceived as art, your art piece won't necessarily be interesting art.

One way to go about making an art game is to look at procedural rhetorics, a term coined by game designer and writer Ian Bogost in his essay *The Rhetoric of Video Games* (2008). Procedural rhetoric is the idea that, like regular rhetoric, you can make arguments about the world not just with what you say, but with how you say it. Procedural rhetoric does this with rules. While a text is read and an image is looked at, a rule is experienced as a process. When you make a rule, you express something through the process that the rule creates. Here's a bad example: if I make a rule that says 'you can only take one banana' then I might actually be implying that there aren't enough bananas for everyone to take two.

I'll give you a better example. In the game *Depression Quest* (2013), a browser-based text adventure by Zoe Quinn, you go through the story, playing as a person with depression. Sometimes you have to make choices about what to say or do. These choices cover a range of different ways to handle the given

situation. However, some choices are crossed out, depending on the state of your depression. You still see the multiple choices but the 'good ones' aren't clickable. This is the procedural rhetoric. While the game isn't saying this out loud, it is clearly demonstrated by the game rules that as a depressed person you might know exactly what you should or want to do in a given situation, but because of your illness you simply can't do the thing you desperately want. The procedural rhetoric is: the more depressed you are, the fewer choices you have. But is it an art game? Since it's not presented as one, it really isn't. Again, just because it's serious doesn't mean it's art.

Continuing on the theme of procedural rhetorics, if we go way back in time we find that games have always been based on real-world things. Even in a fairly abstract game such as chess, the pieces represent different classes of people in a medieval war scenario. This is expressed not just through their names and aesthetics, but in how they move and what their values are (a pawn is worth less than a king). Yoko Ono works with instruction-based interactive art (among other things), so it is not hard to see her as one of the first artists to use games as an art practice. Her *White Chess Set* from 1966 remains one of the best works I've seen. It's a chess variant where both sides play with white pieces instead of white versus black. It is a complete and playable game, but it was produced as art foremost, not just because it was exhibited as such, but because of a game design decision that prioritised artistic quality over entertaining playability. The game becomes not only an interesting social interaction where you have to remember which pieces are yours, but the altered ruleset poses interesting questions about war, race and politics that the original game doesn't. I also made a chess variant a few years ago called *Chess with Love* (2013-2015). In it, in every turn two pieces move towards each other because they are 'in love'. Whether or not the players want to, they have to negotiate around this unstoppable force (love) that the ruleset represents. Should the warmongering players give in to it and accept peace? Should they try to play around it, or even use it as a tactical advantage? I made *Chess with Love* to point out that chess is not an abstract game, but a game about war. I wanted to give the pieces a bit of agency and humanity.

Miranda July also uses a lot of rules and instructions in her work. In 2014, she released an art project in the form of a messaging app called *Somebody*. In it, you can send a message to another person, but instead of it going directly to that person, it is sent to somebody nearby. Then that somebody has to deliver the message in person instead. For July, it's an art project. For me, this is an art game. It has a ruleset that is upheld not just within the phone's processor, but also in the brain of the player/user, because that somebody is framed as a player that roleplays the sender as if they were actually there. A player that wouldn't play by this rule couldn't really partake in *Somebody*. I think roleplaying is an interesting way to combine game design with the performative and the social.

Now I would like to bring up the art game I made for the exhibition at Skövde Konsthall. *Show your emoji* is a short card game for two players. A deck of cards all have yellow emojis (smileys) on them, roughly based on the ones found on a smartphone. One player draws a card from the deck without showing their opponent, and then tries to copy that expression using their face. The other player looks at their opponent's face, and, based on that, they draw an emoji on a sticky note. Once finished, the game asks the players to compare their emojis. Are they the same? What's different? What does an

emotion look like? This game tries to deconstruct facial expression, emotion and the concept of emojis through this simple and fun game mechanic. This game is actually supposed to be both an entertaining game and a serious art piece. My idea was to give players (be they strangers, friends or relatives) an excuse to really look at each other's faces in a rather intimate way. Maybe you see something that you haven't really thought about? What most people did at the exhibition, though, was play and have fun. They'd try hard to make the faces and then giggle or look embarrassed and their true emotions would take over. Oh how I missed this sort of thing in an art context!

I hope that you now see how important game design is for me. Games aren't just about having fun or bringing people together; there are important things to say and stories to tell, and there are people, like me, who want to express these things through game design. By knowing how to make interesting games and how to communicate them as art, we can skew the art world to be more inclusive, warmer and friendlier. I really hope this text has inspired you to set foot in this largely unexplored cultural realm of art and games.

I'll see you there,

Ossian

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