



# How have art movements developed within videogames throughout the 21st century?

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## Introduction

The medium of games has long been preoccupied by its relationship to the world of art. The debate over the legitimacy of videogames as an artform took a long time to settle - from the first proclamations of developers, players and museums in the 1980s that the games they made, played and loved were artistically interesting and

valid, to the famous proclamation by Roger Ebert that “videogames can never be art” (Ebert, 2012), the question of their artistic merit has long been contentious (Prokopek, 2023, pp.8-11).

Despite this debate being now seen by many as hackneyed and resolved - Niedenthal (2009, p.1) asserts that it is the common understanding amongst game studies that games “exist in the realm of art and aesthetic experience” - there remains much to be discussed about the artistic nature of games. One crucial question is: *how* did games come to be legitimised as art?

Gaudreault and Marion (2009, pp.12-13) describe how mediums are born twice - first, as a proto-medium that cannot stand on its own, instead merely a technology through which other mediums express themselves - then secondly, through their legitimisation, their acceptance as a valid form of art through the coincidence of their understanding of their own artistic identity and their acceptance into pre-existing artistic institutions. This acceptance comes as a result of the actions of art movements - “styles in art with particular philosophy, goal, or purpose, followed by a generation of artists during a period of time” (Olive-Thomas and Harmeling, 2020, p1). As people discover the artistic value of new technology and its unique capabilities, they push for that technology to be incorporated into the artworld. People question accepted aspects of art - its form, its function, its representation of the world - then band together under a shared artistic drive that challenges one or more of these aspects, in order to change the face of art itself (Dawtrety et al., 1996, pp.19-28).

Art movements are not only involved in legitimising a medium, but also in shaping and transforming that medium as it continues to grow into maturity and beyond.

Videogames have grown significantly in their ~60 years of existence, but the majority of the debate over their artistic value - and thus the key moments in their struggle for legitimisation - only truly began in the 21st century. Thus, this dissertation shall investigate the art movements of the 21st century videogame landscape, in order to understand how they have shaped the artworld of videogames - how they contributed to its legitimisation, how they affected the games that can be made and who can make them, and how they challenged the contemporary structures of the videogame world.

There are a number of criteria that can be used to identify an art movement. In addition to the above definition - that of a specific group of artists using a shared style to express a coherent philosophy - Danto (2013, pp.17-18) explains that an art movement often - but not always - has a manifesto detailing its exact political, social and stylistic philosophy. However, Brettell (1996, p.13-18) notes that movements are not always so coherently defined - often, a manifesto that people group around is an artistic work, not an essay, one that most strongly exhibits the styles and themes of a set of artists working along similar lines, often in contact but not necessarily in agreement. Additionally, whilst many movements are self-defined by the prominent artists behind them, others are retroactively or contemporarily identified as such by the art world (Danto, 2013, p.18).

Based on these criteria - that of a coherent group, either self-identified or labelled as such by critics, producing works with a set of stylistic, thematic and philosophical

traits that aim to challenge our understanding of art along a certain axis - I will analyse three specific case studies that have been identified as an art movement unique to videogames. These form a mostly linear timeline throughout the 21st century, albeit with much overlap and connection. I shall discuss the indie games movement of the late 2000s, the queer avant-garde of the 2010s, and the cosy games movement of the late 2010s - early 2020s. These movements have been selected due to their interconnectivity, which shall allow me to focus on the change they cause and display throughout the medium, as well as the useful range of stylistic, philosophical and technical aspects that make them coherently identifiable as movements.

I analyse each movement alongside and in the context of each other in order to form an understanding of how art movements operate in the videogame artworld. This dissertation is structured as an analysis of the three major aspects of an art movement - the philosophy that drives them, the aesthetics they employ, and the institutions that they create.

I shall use textual analysis of the prominent works that make up each movement, analysis of secondary sources such as manifestos and comments made by driving creatives in said movements, as well as contextual analysis of the critics and academics that comment on the movement. I shall discuss how they fall under the art movement criteria, who defines them as a movement, which artists and works form the primary front of the movement, and how they have changed the artworld of videogames.

## Literature Review

In this literature review, I draw upon art history and theory to define the art movement and the art world, before using that to discuss the relationship between games, art, and aesthetics. I propose the necessary existence of art movements unique to videogames, and identify the key case studies used in this dissertation.

To understand art movements, it is important to first understand what *art* even is.

Adajian (2007) details four major schools of theory as to the definition of art.

Traditional definitions position art as being entirely defined by its functions - primarily, aesthetics. They posit that art becomes art upon being intentionally given aesthetic properties in order to provoke judgements of beauty from the audience.

Institutionalism defines art as something recognised by the institutions it is made by, consumed by, and informed by - an artwork or an artist is “conferred the status of candidate for appreciation” by someone acting as part of those institutions. On the other hand, historical definitions define art not as a part of present-day contextual relationships, but rather by historical genealogies - an artwork is art because it resembles a pre-existing artwork. Finally, hybrid definitions draw upon aspects of multiple of the above.

Institutional and historical theories of art both draw upon ideas of the art world - “a tradition that includes a historically ordered set of works, established styles, genres, schools, and categories of work kinds as well as conventions, practices, and/or institutions concerning the production, presentation, and reception of works and also historical, biographical, theoretical, and critical commentaries concerning aspects of the tradition” (Davies, 2015, p.377). The art world is the sum total of all works of art,

all theories on art, all discourse on art, and it is an ever-growing and ever-changing thing. When new forms of art - styles, ideologies, mediums - emerge, the art world revises itself to accommodate them (Danto, 1964, pp.572-574).

Becker (1982, pp.300-310) further details several ways by which the art world changes, one of which being “revolutionary innovations” that drive “deliberate change” - new technologies, styles, techniques and ideologies that “attack the standard activities of that art world”, declaring their changes to the accepted standard through the form of manifestos. However, these innovations alone only lead to mavericks, individuals whose ideas are treated as novelties but not brought into the art world proper. For proper change to be brought about, these revolutions must build up their own institutions - working groups, galleries, conventions, museums, distribution platforms, funding networks - that support them in continually challenging this status quo. This process of building up an innovation into a network of artists and institutions is what I believe to be the core of a movement, physically and ideologically moving the art world - both the broad, global one that covers all artistic activity, as well as localised ones that cover specific media or genres - into a new configuration.

Becker (1982, pp.339) describes further how new innovations can grow into their own branch of co-operators, forming a new style with established techniques, terminology, history etc, but must still convince the greater art world that what it is doing is art. To be validated as such, they must “display a developed aesthetic apparatus”, “dissociate themselves from related commercial enterprises” and “tie their work to already accepted arts”. This process is a struggle, and many artforms

must struggle for a long time until they are fully validated. Videogames have spent much of their lifetime under this struggle - since awakening from their “first birth” and attaining self-awareness (Gaudreault and Marion, 2009, pp.1-6), they have connected themselves to accepted arts through their status as *gesamtkunstwerks*, attaining recognition for their visuals, music and cinematography, whilst game design itself has lacked legitimacy.

Games are a relatively new medium, and as Bourgonjon et al. (2017, pp.2-3) note, until recently, there has been a strong debate amongst academics, critics and curators as to whether games even count as an art. Many authors argue that while games have the *potential* to be sufficiently artistic, and many execute that in part or in full, the medium as a whole does not live up to it - Clarke & Mitchell (2006, p.10) say about commercial games “that there are very few of these games which can be regarded, in their entirety, as art”. Other authors have questioned whether the unique elements of games as a form mean they stand outside of traditional categories of art. Tavinor (2009, pp.191-192) questions whether the presence of rules, objectives and competition in videogames - aspects that have historically been tied to games and sports - render them unable to be counted as art.

However, understanding the artistic nature of games through the angle of aesthetic theory gives a different viewpoint. Kirkpatrick (2011, pp.22-28) discusses the Kantian understanding of aesthetics, describing the correlation between aesthetic pleasure and play - art works present us with details and structures that immediately stimulate our senses, yet obfuscate their meaning and purpose. By playing with the work in our mind, the “form” of the artwork is revealed - the patterns that grant us

understanding and make the aesthetic experience pleasurable. In videogames, however, that process is extended, by extruding the playful response into a dynamic relationship between player and non-static object. Kirkpatrick (2011, pp.36-37) describes how videogames create a new type of play, and therefore a new type of form, by uniting the atemporal mind-play on the game's visual representations with the continuous body-play of physical actions.

Is this presence of play and form within videogames sufficient to make them an artwork, or does it make them something else entirely? Tavinor (2009, pp.174-191) discusses that whilst games have historically been excluded from the "art" category due to perception among academics and the public of them being low-brow and unsophisticated, this is insufficient to remove them from a theoretical definition of art. They argue for a cluster theory understanding of art, in which an artifact is art if it meets a majority of the criteria identified to be important among other artworks. Games evoke traditional aesthetic pleasures such as beauty, intellectual challenge and imaginative stimulation. They are created by expressive individuals with unique styles, and are positioned in an artworld of institutions. They represent worlds, evoke and express emotion, and draw players away from regular life through the magic circle. These are the primary criteria held by traditional artworks, and games meet all of them - thus, by the definitions of aesthetic theory, count as art.

Tavinor (2009, pp.181-182) further details that in addition to the classic aesthetic pleasures, videogames exhibit pleasures unique to them - kinaesthetic pleasures of physical interaction and movement, immersive pleasures of character identification, and representational pleasures of life in a virtual world. Swink (2008, pp.2-32)

describes these pleasures as “game feel” - unique aesthetics of control, skill, embodiment and physicality that stem from the ability of games to represent highly reactive virtual worlds that can be controlled in real-time. Game feel has the potential of inducing the “flow state”, which is “characterized by a loss of self-consciousness, a distorted perception of time and a host of pleasurable sensations” - a combination of Kirkpatrick’s idea of play-form and Tavinor’s metrics of how games evoke emotion through participation in the magic circle.

As well as representing new and traditional aesthetics forms, games have a long history of engagement with the broader artworld. Clarke & Mitchell (2006, pp.6-7) note that games draw visually and functionally on aspects of individual art movements like pop art, dadaism, surrealism and situationalism. Prokopek (2023, p.7) describes the opposite, detailing how games were involved in other art movements dating back to before the advent of videogames, with Surrealists inventing playful art-games like surreal corpse, and Fluxus artists experimenting with board games. Art movements are more than capable of transcending mediums like this, such as De Stijl, which Nixon (2007, p.1) notes was started and practiced by a mix of both traditional artists and architects. However, they are also often unique to (and a defining feature of) a given medium. One such example of this is ‘pure cinema’, a film-specific art movement prominent in Paris in the 1920s, one that rejected narrative ideas of linearity, spatiotemporal conventions and physical representation in favour of the aesthetic value of shape, colour and movement (Isaacs, 2020, pp.16-18).

Videogames, as their own localised artworld, must have their own art movements through which they are shaped. Niedenthal (2009, p.5) notes that designers and scholars must understand videogame aesthetics in order to craft new experiences, and Tavinor (2009, pp.193-195) posits that in order for videogames to grow, become more sophisticated and therefore more recognised as a struggling artworld, they cannot rely on pre-existing notions of art to do so - they must explore and harness the unique representational and aesthetic traits of the medium to discover and revise their artform and art as a whole.

Many have already done so, and the videogame artworld has changed significantly over the past 60 years. Academics have analysed particular moments in which the medium has changed, with artists identifying material conditions within the artworld that have caused a stunt in the medium's growth, and struggling to change them. Juul (2019) - alongside many others - describes the indie games movement, and how it fought to resist the dominance of the AAA industry and open the gates for independent creators. Ruberg (2020) describes the queer avant-garde, which reacted to the lack of minority groups in videogame spaces, seeking to create art which would allow the queer experience to be properly heard. Boudreau et al. (2025) identify the recent cosy games movement, which is deconstructing audience and creator issues around the hegemony of violence, fear and pressure in games, moving towards various design principles inspired by "cosy vibes".

Despite this, there is no existing writing that broadly analyses the range of art movements unique to games. I believe this is necessary, to construct a timeline of how artistic struggle has impacted the games artworld. This dissertation studies the

ways in which videogame art movements form, grow and fall out of relevance, comparing them to each other and to non-game movements to understand what legacy they leave on the artworld. I use the three previously identified art movements as my core case studies, analysing the works, creators, discourses and institutions vital to each movement, ultimately aiming to understand how each movement functioned and how it changed the overall videogame landscape.

## Chapter 1 - The philosophy of videogame art movements

Art movements emerge as an attack on existing aspects of a given artworld, through a shared need to promote a given ideology as well as a desire to introduce new artistic concepts and technologies. In this chapter, I properly introduce my three case studies - the indie games movement, the queer avant-garde, and the recent cosy games trend. Each of them identify and attack different issues within the games artworld, rallying behind coherent ideologies and creating art with shared themes, forms and methods of production. They form a loose timeline from the mid-00s to the present day, and each movement builds off and reacts to the preceding ones, so I analyse their beginnings in chronological order in order to understand the core drive behind each. I look at the material conditions that provoked each movement - the dominant ideologies and methods of production within the artworld they took issue with, the artistic and economic gaps in the market that they aimed to fill, and the broader societal conditions that set the stage for them.

The first art movement I shall study is that of indie games - a collection of small games made by individual designers or small teams. Whilst games that can be described as 'independent' in one way or another - whether that is financially or

creatively - have existed throughout the history of games, 'indie' does not refer to this broad category of games, but rather a more specific phenomenon that began in America in the mid-2000s (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016, pp.6-12). Throughout the 20th century, many games were made by small teams with no financial backing from larger companies, alongside games that pushed the boundaries of what games could look like - however, these games did not stand against a mainstream understanding of how games could be made and structured, rather just contributing to a newly-developing field (Juul, 2019, pp.57-59).

However, by the mid-2000s, "an identifiable mainstream industry" had emerged, and contributions to the field were no longer seen as equal - a certain type of gaming was dominant, causing all others to become marginal (Parker, 2013b, pp.3-4). Juul (2019, pp.71-79) notes that during the early period of AAA-focused gaming - 1998 to 2004 - developers began to conceptualise themselves as independent, but whilst this was represented financially, with many smaller studios appearing and forming institutions such as the Independent Games Festival, it did not yet affect the games they made - they mostly simply aped AAA style and genre on a lower budget. Developers were unable to take creative risks in the games they could make, as they were still reliant on publishers to fund and market their games, due to a lack of profitable distribution channels.

Parker (2013a, p.41) notes that the term 'indie' emerged in popular use over the mid-2000s, settling into a stable idea around 2007. Digital distribution channels began to appear en-mass around this time - Steam (2003) began distributing third-party titles on PC in late 2005, whilst Xbox Live Arcade (2004) started offering

games by independent developers on the Xbox360 at a similar time. Armor Games (2005) was launched in this era, becoming a notable entry in websites allowing users to host games made in Macromedia Flash (1996), which could be accessed for free in-browser. Together, these allowed a growing wave of developers to make smaller, more experimental games that could be accessed by a wide audience.

Prominent among this wave was a group of developers driven by a shared goal and philosophy - that of rejecting the mainstream authority of the AAA industry, with its aesthetic focus on cinematic realism and its corporate culture of crunch and abuse (Lipkin, 2013, pp.10-14). Whilst still making games for-profit, they rejected the greedy design and monetisation practices - high costs, carved-out DLC, exploitation of patents and intellectual property. In doing so, they positioned their own games and business practices as morally superior - in part able to do so due to the more authentic-feeling works they put out. Indie games were short and graphically simple compared to long, bloated, technically impressive AAA games. They presented stories that were anywhere between silly to intensely serious, themed around topics from the gross to the beautiful - an attempt to show that games could be more than the stories of AAA games, masculine warfare and revenge played entirely straight every time (Juul, 2019, pp.9-10).

Whilst there is no one designated 'indie manifesto' that these developers rallied around, there exist several works that fulfil this role. The Scratchware Manifesto (Costikyan, 2000), whilst being written five years before the movement emerged - and not identifying itself as indie - shows a desire for many of the same tenets that would later be crucial to indie games. It calls for "an independent games revolution"

that “rejects big budgets and big teams” in favour of small, innovative, artistic games made by solo developers or small teams. It calls out the abusive behaviour and stagnation of the AAA industry, calling for stronger rights for artists in the digital sphere. Indie game developers such as Jason Rohrer have stated that the Scratchware Manifesto influenced their work (Juul, 2019, p.82). This is also seen with *Cave Story* (Studio Pixel, 2004), which whilst not an explicit manifesto, was among the first to contain many of the traits that would come to be associated with indie games - pixel art, 80s design principles, a solo developer - and went on to inspire many people among the indie movement to create their own games (Juul, 2019, pp.88-90).

Despite the solo development revolution that the indie movement brought, the people who were involved in hegemonic game-making practices had not meaningfully changed - the industry was still dominated by heterosexual masculinity, simply now independently rather than solely in corporations. My second movement case study is what Ruberg (2020) labels the “queer games avant-garde” - a loosely connected movement of queer developers interested in continuing the idea of small games made in unconventional artstyles by creators who exist outside of the norm, but now ideologically deconstructing who makes games, how, and for what audience. They work in a multitude of styles, with a shared goal of queering games not through simplistic identity representation, but rather by using gamefeel, emotional responses and phenomenal experiences to convey an aspect of queer existence, and in doing so fight back against the heteropatriarchy that pervades the games industry.

Anthropy (2012, pp.2-6) describes the conditions that led to the contemporary rise of the movement - the “immature” games industry was composed of cisgender heterosexual men interested in making games by and for cisgender heterosexual men. Despite them dominating games spaces, the indie movement had led to tools for independent game development growing more powerful and accessible, allowing for games to more easily be made by minority developers - who had been present making games all along, but now could make their art quicker, easier, and in greater numbers.

This diversity of game creators is well-represented by the label “queer” - a term that originated around the beginning of the 1990s, born out of lesbian and gay studies but encompassing all acts and theories that “dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.” (Jagose, 1996, pp.1-3). Queerness is a radical theory that problematises heterosexual and patriarchal frameworks, challenging their power structures by calling attention to the myriad existences that lie outside of them. This label suits those who have been rejected from both mainstream game culture and creation, and thus seek to reject, destabilise and create alternatives to it.

Queerness is reflected not only in the identities of people involved in the movement, but in its practices and aesthetics. The queer avant-garde is political and intersectional, representing myriad voices and challenging the culture that would silence them. It problematises identity and categories, abstracting the struggles and wonders of queerness into experiences that are sometimes open to all, sometimes harshly only for those who understand. Importantly, queerness is reflected

aesthetically through the medium of games - the queer avant-garde are “interested in how games feel”, “exploring affect, embodiment, experience, and intimacy” to wrestle with queerness structurally, mechanically, emotionally and physically (Ruberg, 2020, pp.18-23).

Ruberg (2020, pp.3-12) identifies the beginning of the movement as roughly around 2012,

continuing on throughout the rest of the decade. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (Anthropy, 2012) was seen as a pseudo-manifesto for many creators - a call to action for people, not necessarily queer ones, to make outsider art with games as the medium, using the myriad user-friendly solo game development tools to make small, weird games. Arguably the most important of these tools was *Twine* (2009), an application for making interactive hypertext fiction. Harvey (2014, pp.96-102) describes the “Twine Revolution” - a community of creators using Twine to make “personal games”, ones that queer the structure of games both by experimenting with form, design and content, as well as by operating as outsiders to the games industry. Notable among these is Porpentine, a designer making critically acclaimed interactive fiction such as *Howling Dogs* (2012) and *With Those We Love Alive* (2014). Whilst Twine games were initially commonly shared within Twine-only circles such as TwineHub (2013), a platform soon became available for creators of small games to distribute and make money off of small artgames - [itch.io](https://itch.io) (2013), which released as a reaction to Steam’s restrictive Greenlight service, growing throughout the 2010s to function as a portfolio and store for numerous game artists.

Despite their status as outsiders, many of these creators - often multiply marginalised ones, primarily transgender women, some lesbians, some people of colour - quickly became highly recognised for their work. Sites like The Guardian (Ellison, 2013) and Polygon (Keogh, 2013) interviewed and praised artists including Anthropy, Merrit Kopas, Mattie Brice and Porpentine, acknowledging the rise of a queer games scene and the new avenues of personal storytelling it was opening for games. When being interviewed, each of them was interested in using their time to convey a message to their audience - reaching out to “people who are cut off from traditional game design” - through finances, education and/or oppression - and convincing them that they can and should make games.

Whilst the 2010s brought a great diversity in the games that were made and the people that were making them, there were still many underlying assumptions in popular discourse about what games - and importantly, what players - could lay claim to the category of authenticity and legitimacy. Regardless of who made a game and what it was about, the only games seen as “real” by the mainstream were long enough to be worth an investment, challenging enough to prove skill, and complex enough to launch a community (Consalvo and Paul, 2019, pp.81-102). The only players seen as “real” were those who could shell out the money to play on expensive PC hardware, commit the time and effort to meet the challenges asked of them, and be interested in staying up-to-date with mainstream game discourse.

This culture of hostile elitism mirrored and combined with several notable events that occurred throughout the decade to create an atmosphere of tension felt by players worldwide. Reacting to the increased presence of minorities in games, a reactionary

group of people - mostly men - who were strongly attached to the label of 'gamer' began an online harassment campaign against prominent women and queer figures involved in game creation and criticism (Mortensen, 2018, pp.789-792, 798-799). Labelling itself "gamergate", it began in 2014 and continued throughout the next two years, making life for its targets or critics hell through harassment, threats, doxxing and concern trolling. The campaign eventually lost steam, but its effects continued to be felt in online spaces, emboldening hateful voices and making minorities feel continually unsafe. From 2016 onwards, this culture was mirrored offline, through rising reactionary sentiment in Europe and the US, notably the elections of right-wing parties and associated rallies of their supporters (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, pp.228-231). Furthermore, feelings of anxiety and stress were elevated worldwide during 2020s' COVID19 pandemic, which left a lot of people stuck at home with few methods of entertainment and communication other than the internet (Bódi, 2024, pp.52).

My third movement, cosy games, reacted to this state of affairs in two ways. Firstly, it provided a form of escapism from the myriad hostilities of the world and gaming culture (Bódi, 2024, pp.51-53). Secondly, it sought to legitimise the numerous games and players that existed outside of the gaming hegemony, and provoked a design revolution that challenged expectations around combat, challenge and masculinity in games.

Similarly to queer games, cosy games interrogate concepts of what a game can be mechanically, socially and aesthetically, though from a different direction. Short et al. (2017, pp.1-7) describe cosy games as yet another reaction to the state of

mainstream games, though this time focused on content and audience moreso than production and representation. Cosy games reject the violent, stressful and risky activities commonly associated with games, replacing them with comforting, familiar worlds full of kind characters and relatable struggles. At their core, cosy games are “safe, abundant and soft” - characterised by a lack of risk and danger, a focus on intrinsic rewards such as mastery and fulfilment, and aesthetics that are gentle, comforting and intimate.

Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020, p.226) describe how cosy games have emerged out of a multitude of smaller genres, ones that provide the building blocks for this sort of emotionally-attuned, low-stakes experience - “ambient games”, “wholesome games”, “friendship games”, “personal games”, “small games” and “empathy games” are all present in some form in what is called “cosy” as an umbrella term. Most notably, the groundwork for appealing, low-stakes mass-market gameplay loops that can be experienced in small bites was what Juul (2009, pp.25-50) describes as “casual games” - games that are accessible, pleasant, quick, rewarding and unpunishing. They are marketed towards an audience that doesn’t play “hardcore” games - whether that is due to the barrier to entry of PCs and consoles, excessive game knowledge required to start playing, or a gaming culture that looks down upon people who don’t fit the image of the ‘real’ gamer.

Despite taking elements from all of these genres, cosy games themselves are their own thing, having distinctly emerged in the back half of the 2010s. Whilst most casual games are mobile-based and often designed-for-profit, cosy games are far more associated with the independent development scene (Wholesome Games,

2020). A designers' report entitled '*Coziness in games: An exploration of safety, softness, and satisfied needs*' (Short et al, 2017) was the first notable example of cosiness as a coherent design goal. Whilst not explicitly an artist's manifesto - instead being incredibly focused towards industry designers, with points about increasing player retention through studying player psychology - it is a call to action combined with a thorough exploration of the design elements and philosophy of cosiness, one that brought a lot of attention to the concept of cosiness over the following years.

Similarly to the relationship between indie games and *Cave Story*, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) is cited by many cosy developers as a sort of artefactual proto-manifesto that inspired many of the key traits of their work. Being set in a small village with no ties to nature, with a narrative that supports small businesses whilst rejecting the grind-focused work culture of modern day life, and down-to-earth characters to befriend and help through their struggles, it provided the tropes that many later works would weave into their settings. Mechanically, it bears many of the hallmarks of cosiness - no core mechanical stressors other than time, a focus on crafting and curating ones own land, and a strong focus on retreading ground and coming to know the landscape intimately. However, it doesn't match entirely - whilst being technically optional, combat is one of the five key skills of the game, introducing a level of stress that would be typically avoided by most cosy games.

Videogame art movements are very heavily tied to the structure of the videogame art world. In such a commercialised landscape, the key things they challenge are production and consumption, arguing for who is legitimately allowed to consider

themselves a game creator or player. In doing so, they struggle over what works themselves are allowed to be made, redefining what is possible within the medium of games. The works that are made and the ideology of the people who make them recursively come to define each other - the power relations of artists and other agents defines the possibility space of art, which defines the works that are made, which define the social and cultural capital afforded to relative artistic positions (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.30-33). Thus, I next consider the aesthetics of my case study movements, in order to understand how they expand the possibility space of artistic expression.

## Chapter 2 - The aesthetics of videogame art movements

Art movements function to change both what is legitimate within their art world, as well as to encourage experimentation to discover new aesthetic possibilities within their medium's capacity for expression. In this chapter I discuss the aesthetics of my three movements, covering their visual style, structural experimentation and emotional affect. I analyse works that are commonly cited as among the most famous or influential examples of their movement. Each game uniquely communicates ideology through its aesthetic, and I discuss how each movement as a whole is constructed through the diversity of its works.

As with their philosophy, much of the style of indie games revolved around rejecting the artistic conventions and practices of AAA games. Juul (2019, pp.80-91) describes how between 2005 and 2007, a specific style began to emerge within the sphere of independent games - what he calls Independent Style. This is an aesthetic focus on "honesty in materials" that rejects the "alleged realism of bigger-budget

video games” in favour of “using contemporary technology to emulate styles from earlier times” - proudly displaying their low budget on their sleeve, and using it to signal authenticity by “emphasizing the small, personal, and simplistic” (Juul, 2019, p.31-34). This often manifests as nostalgia for the 8-bit era of gaming’s youth, with use of pixel art and chiptune music (Lipkin, 2013, pp.10-15), but also often creates a sense of authenticity through alternative digital styles that reject realism, or through representations of physical media (Juul, 2019, p.39).

Garda and Grabarczyk (2016, pp.14-19) further detail key properties shared by games commonly considered to be ‘indie’, factors that are invoked by the developers or gestured to by players when describing an “indie feel”. These include economic factors (reliance on digital distribution, a small budget, a low cost), aesthetic factors (a nostalgic retro style, experimental gameplay and structure), and cultural factors (embodying an indie mindset and associating with a broader indie scene). This super-aesthetic feel reflects the values and development practices of the artists through their work, with the hybrid nostalgic-experimental style of indie games serving to symbolically signal their creators’ “DIY mentality” (Lipkin, 2013, pp.14-15).

Notable examples of games that use independent style or invoke several of the ‘indie feel’ properties include *Braid* (Number None, 2008), *Spelunky* (Mossmouth, 2008) and *Passage* (Rohrer, 2007). Whilst each has radically different visual styles, gameplay mechanics and structures, they are tied together by their shared usage of visual styles that reject contemporary graphical realism in favour of styles that were contemporarily considered retro or otherwise unusual for usage in games. As well,

their love of experimentation with classic gameplay mechanics and genres engenders the indie feeling of retrofitted nostalgia.

*Braid* invokes the sense of 'honesty in materials' through its hand-painted watercolour art that is applied to the level editor of a puzzle-platformer in order to create a world that feels like a messy collage. This nonsensical setting combines with its out-of-place main character, creating an intentional sense of friction and awkwardness which is extended through the level design - a series of complex puzzles that revolve around different uses of time-reversal and obscure puzzles - as well as the game's narrative - a metaphorical, cynical inversion of the classic Mario 'rescue the princess' plot. Such an abrasive yet mysterious, difficult yet whimsical game perfectly reflects the values of its creator - who, like many other indie designers, was fed up with the lack of artistic intent or value amongst the AAA games space, feeling that the games industry saw itself more as making toys to play with than as making artworks with meaning to interpret (Clark, 2012).

*Spelunky*, on the other hand, embodies independent style through a love of the sheer fun and difficulty of gamps. With simplistic, cartoonish visuals, a focus on procedural generation and emergent design, and lethal yet amusing slapstick gameplay, each run progresses differently yet ends similarly quickly. Every element of the design serves to contrast the others - the exaggeratedly cute enemies and landscapes are full of lethal tricks and traps that combine and overlap to make the game feel frustrating and at times unfair, pulling the gameplay into the 'one more run' gameplay loop that would come to define the modern-day roguelike. This contrast, however, serves to highlight its experimentality, each run providing a personalised

gameplay experience that is nothing like the linear design of contemporary AAA shooter levels. The high lethality and sheer amount of secrets hidden in the levels embody the indie focus on retro design, hearkening back to the many dungeon-crawling games of the 80s. Furthermore, it displays the 'indie mindset' of its creator, as its source code is available online for noncommercial distribution and modification (Yu, 2009) - rejecting the tight, greedy reigns many AAA companies hold over their games' modification and distribution.

*Passage* embodies what Parker (2013a, pp.41-42) refers to as "artgames" - a genre of indie games that aims to communicate a single author's poetic message through the mechanics of a small gameplay experience. Through *Passage*'s five-minute dialogueless runtime, an entire life is squashed into simply moving from left to right across a scrolling, highly pixellated world, accompanied or not by a partner you can marry and watch die, your choice abstracted into points that measure the quality of your life. The game is short, visually simple and packed full of rhetorical meaning - reinforcing the indie belief that anyone can make a game, whilst emphasising the persuasive power that game mechanics can hold. The bitesized free game displays the diversity of structure that indie design encompassed - neither full of handcrafted challenge like *Braid* nor focused on repeatable gameplay like *Spelunky*. *Passage* invokes the indie feel through its confidence in its self-worth as a piece of art - a rejection of AAA focus on profit and length in favour of a work that is consumed quickly but thought about for much longer.

The queer avant-garde share this belief in the communicative power of games, rallying around games that reflect the real-world experiences that their artists face.

Because of the vast multiplicity of queerness, there is no one way to make queer games. There is not necessarily a shared form or technique that queer games employ, outside of their small size and highly personal nature. Instead, each artist involved is interested in tackling the broad philosophy of “queering games” from a different angle, investigating how games can communicate through their very structure, working across many different modes of gameplay. Among several of the games most commonly discussed around the start of the queer games movement - *Lim* (Kopas, 2012), *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) and *Mainichi* (Brice, 2012) - are a number of diverse methods used to queer traditional assumptions of gameplay and narrative.

*Lim* is a simple browser game in which the player takes control of a square that flashes rapidly between colours. They must navigate a maze full of squares of other colours, which will attack the player-square and prevent them from progressing. To avoid this, the player can hold down Z, causing the player-square to mirror the colour of nearby squares and negate their aggression. However, holding Z for too long causes the screen to zoom in and shake, making the game difficult to play and painful to look at. The metaphor that *Lim* operates through is a straightforwardly simple one - as someone alienated from hegemonic society, masking to fit in is an exhausting and miserable procedure, albeit one with no alternative. However, the methods by which it operates are a powerful display of structural queerness - playing with affect by invoking pain and discomfort directly in the player. Ruberg (2015, pp.113-115) describes the potent relationship between queerness and “no-fun games” - queer models of gaming often reject typical neoliberal values of success

and progress, in favour of a masochistic embrace of failure as an integral part of the joy and interest of games.

*Dys4ia*, made in Adobe Flash, is often used as the model example of queer games created to engender empathy and understanding for queer lives. The player is guided through a series of simple minigames created to mimic the day-to-day challenges of passing as a transgender woman, whilst commentary from Anthropy describes her lived experience. Similarly to *Lim*, it rejects ideas of challenge and failure - each microgame being exceedingly simple to complete, but instead using physical inputs and gameplay scenarios to create affect. Mashing keys to put on ill-fitting clothing, maneuvering blocks that don't fit through intended paths, and holding forwards to move past a barrage of misgendering all effectively impact simple but potent metaphors for the struggles of transitioning. This sort of mechanical affect is a potent rhetorical tool, emblematic of Bogost's (2007, pp.2-5) concept of "prodecural rhetoric" - the idea that videogames are well suited to represent and analyse real-world systems, through mimicking and dissecting them into mechanical and ludic systems. This works especially well for making obvious the systems of oppression that would otherwise naturalise themselves and blend into the background of society. Queer games use rhetoric and appeals to empathy to convey the lived reality of those who are shunned both by the games industry and society as a whole.

Like *Dys4ia*, *Mainichi* - an RPGmaker game - reflects an autobiographical transfeminine experience through an empathetic lens. However, *Mainichi* challenges the idea of games conveying rhetoric in a straightforwardly mechanical manner. It is

a short game that plays out in a manner similar to walking simulators - the only player input being a small number of binary choices, otherwise simply navigating through three scenes. First, the avatar wakes up and gets ready for a date with her friend, the player choosing the level of effort to put into her gender presentation. Then, the player navigates her along a road to a cafe, with the path she takes and the time she put into passing deciding whether or she is approached by people catcalling, misgendering or otherwise harassing her. Finally, she arrives in the cafe, and makes dialogue decisions that allow her to flirt with the bartender or tell her friend how she is feeling. *Mainichi* queers gameplay by abstracting mechanics into simple choices in dialogue and movement, in order to display the ways in which minor decisions have major impacts on the freedom and safety of transgender women in public life. Once the game is completed, it loops back to the start to display the “next day”, reinforcing how weary these minor tasks can get when done every day, and emphasising the heavy socially necessary requirements that are placed on women, trans or otherwise.

Whilst queer games investigated the power that affect had in communicating thematic meaning to the player, cosy games expand the ways in which affect is used to structure the mood of the player. Boudreau (2024, p.92-102) discusses how cosiness frames itself in opposition to mainstream understandings of the creation of gameplay flow. In many games, the core gameplay loop and the flow state it engenders “typically emerges through a balance of skill and challenge, and boredom and anxiety” - designers reliant on the aforementioned masculine-focused drives of “real games” hone their design towards maximising the ebb and flow of difficulty and arousal, often focusing on gameplay mechanics that demand high levels of cognitive

and physical effort from the player, as well as stressors that cause high emotional demand. Cosy games, however, seek to minimise these demands, creating an environment where the player is not asked much directly, but rather has the freedom to seek out emotional, social and cognitive tasks to engage with at will. The emotional depth of these tasks is often enhanced by the game's slow pace and the player's freedom to back out, allowing designers to represent and induce a variety of emotions - from repetitive meditative gameplay loops to narratives that tackle complicated topics of mental health (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, p.229).

Cosy games are also known for an audiovisual style that incorporates classically cute and comfy elements - soft, warm colours and lighting, intimate spaces made of natural materials, with gentle, ambient sound (Short et al., 2017, pp.11-14). Games such as *Slime Rancher* (Monomi Park, 2017), *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) and *Unpacking* (Humble Bundle, 2021) play with the cuteness and emotional affect of cosiness in varying ways that together display the potential of relaxing, pleasant gameplay loops that focus on higher-level needs.

The core gameplay loop of *Slime Rancher* combines a common cosy archetype - management simulation, in which you run a ranch of cute and friendly animals - with a less typically cosy avenue of exploration and platforming, which it still applies the aesthetics of cosiness to. The game's open world - full of fantastical environments depicted in pastel colours - is explored by the player nonlinearly at their own drive, in order to bring home new slimes, foodstuffs and resources. The player uses these to expand their slime collection, feed them to earn money to upgrade their buildings, and craft toys and decorations for their slimes to play with. Whilst the earning of

money provides an extrinsic reward to the gameplay loop, the true focus is on the intrinsic joy of building your ranch and caring for the slimes, which have a variety of joyful emotions and interactions with the player and each other. There are some uncanny aspects to the design - the player can fall into the ocean or be attacked by rabid slimes, though this comes at no loss other than returning to home and abandoning the items they had collected in that excursion. As well, slimes must be fed everyday in order to prevent them from becoming irritable - introducing a stressful sensation to the otherwise cosy ecosystem - but this sense of authenticity to slimecaring enhances the depth of their relationship with the player, creating meaningful emotional bonds (Short et al., 2017, p.18).

*Unpacking* is a “zen puzzle game” - puzzles being heavily tied to the history of cosy games, an important part of the casual revolution due to their simple controls and stress-free experimentation (Juul, 2009, pp.65-78) - that fully exemplifies the cosy focus on intrinsically satisfying, player-driven, meditative gameplay. The player is tasked with unpacking boxes as they move house again and again, fitting all the items into the layout of their new home. There’s no correct way to do anything, letting the player customise each room to their will. A lack of metrics quantifying your progress removes all stress and pressure, keeping the focus on simple and satisfying decoration. The environments themselves emphasise cosiness - homely rooms full of trinkets from throughout the main character’s life, keeping in touch with both the whimsy of her childhood and the mundanity of adult life. Through many details in the items you unpack, it allows the player to explore the emotional depth of the main character at their own place, forming an authentic understanding of the ups and downs of her life.

*Spiritfarer* similarly focuses on connections with deep yet friendly characters, tackling somber stories in ways that keep with cosy gameplay - progressed at the player's pace, as a backdrop to ritual tasks of gathering, crafting and management (Boudreau, Consalvo and Phelps, 2025, p.2649). Risk-free exploration and a combatless take on 2D platforming provide a new take on a familiar 'metroidvania' world structure, whilst the bright colours and natural environments keep the world welcoming and calm. These structure the core management gameplay loop, which itself functions as a backdrop to the stories of the spirits that you guide across the land. The repetitive ritual activities serve to calm the player and provide the intrinsic reward of decoration, management and upkeep. The player is free to seek out the higher-needs of emotional engagement at their own pace, and the game's stories, whilst not always bright and cheerful, never contradict the low-stakes mood of the rest of the game.

In pushing the boundaries of videogame aesthetic, creating new visual styles, gameplay flows and even entire game structures, videogame art movements redefine what games can be. However, changes in the aesthetic qualities of art require and create changes in the institutions and discourses that produce and react to artworks. In the next chapter, I consider the structures of the videogame art world, investigating how my movements attacked, changed and created the institutions that make up the videogame landscape.

## Chapter 3 - The institutions of videogame art movements

Art movements develop by attracting more people to their cause, creating institutions to support, curate, publish and legitimise their work, and attracting the attention of academics and critics who create discourse around them. As this happens, they are brought further into the attention of their art world's mainstream, and are able to showcase their work to much larger audiences. This chapter discusses each case study movement during their prime, looking at the institutions that were crucial to their success. As well, I interrogate the relationship that each movement had to the mainstream, and the reception it had across audience, critical and academic discourse.

As indie games grew in number and popularity, numerous institutions grew up to support the evolving movement. Game jams, events where participants form teams and make games within a strict time limit, first appeared in 2002 and began to grow in size and number from 2006 (Fowler et al., 2013, pp.1-2). In 2013, the Global Games Jam (2009) “saw 16,705 participants from 319 jam sites in 63 countries produce 3248 games”, proving that game jams help in making independent game development increasingly accessible across more and more of the world. Festivals like the Independent Games Festival, IndieCade and A MAZE (Juul, 2019, pp.71-73,91-92, 110-111) similarly helped to bring indie developers together, allowing for collaborations, talks on design theory and judging of indie games on various merits. Art collectives like *Kokoromi* and *The Experimental Gameplay Project* encourage the creation of diverse games from a multitude of creators, whilst online review sites such as *The Independent Gaming Source* and *Indie Games Plus* help

bring attention to projects that would be drowned out by mainstream gaming news (Parker, 2013a, p.46).

This isn't to say that indie games as a whole were ignored by larger reviewers. Many more prominent examples were picked up quickly by well-known outlets, with critics such as Yahtzee Croshaw reviewing games like *Braid* and *Limbo* alongside the usual AAA fare (The Escapist, 2011a, 2011b). Indie games similarly were picked up into the critical acclaim of the mainstream - albeit temporarily - with *Journey* (Annapurna Interactive, 2012) winning Game of the Year 2012 at the Game Developers' Choice Awards (2026) (only to be followed by AAA megahits for the next few years).

The narrative of indie games - of self-found success against difficult odds - itself was highly popular, with *Indie Game: The Movie* (2011) releasing to coverage and acclaim from news channels within the games sphere and beyond (Juul, 2019, pp.100-102). Covering the stories of Team Meat - creators of *Super Meat Boy* (2010) - Jonathan Blow - *Braid* (Number None, 2008) - and Phil Fish - *Fez* (Trapdoor, 2012) - the documentary displayed the trials and tribulations of indie developers to audiences that were otherwise unaware of the reality of game development. However, its rags-to-riches story that focused exclusively on "straight white guys" was criticised by many for painting a picture that didn't represent the actual reality for the majority of game developers, especially those who were not so easily accepted by the mainstream (Juul, 2019, pp.102). This idea of what indie was was reflected in institutions that aimed to teach and support indie game development - even when they targeted themselves towards minorities, they ended up making the assumption

that only white men were already participating in game scenes, with everyone else on the outside looking in (Fischer and Harvey, 2013, pp.35-36).

Challenging these assumptions materially requires building institutions that are self-driven by the minorities that are oppressed within game development - recognising both that many have always been present, and that many have long wished to join but face oppression (Fischer and Harvey, 2013, pp.37). The queer avant-garde developed events and institutions such as Different Games, GaymerX, and the Queerness and Games Conference, each created and ran by queer individuals and dedicated to uplifting rather than speaking over queer voices (Ruberg and Philips, 2018). As well, a growing amount of queer academics have built out the field of queer game studies, building on and rallying around the work of the queer avant-garde in order to change the institutions of games academia.

Whereas indie games brought themselves full-force into the mainstream games industry, finding purchase amongst customers and critics alike, queer games have not seen as much visible representation. Despite this, they have still had significant impacts, often operating behind-the-scenes, with queer people forming initiatives inside major companies such as Xbox (Ruberg, 2020, pp.215-222). This corporate involvement has allowed for queer events to be held in places such as the Game Developer's Conference, forming a bridge between queer and non-queer artists in AAA spaces. Despite this, there is still a sense that some identities and their struggles are not familiar or relatable enough to large audiences to bring into mainstream gaming - for example, transfeminine autobiographies like *Mainichi* and

*Dys4ia* may be critically beloved, but a love story between gay cisgender men is likely to be far more profitable for AAA publishers.

Whilst the works of the queer avant-garde strongly opposed the stylisation of the AAA industry, and many AAA works still see queer identities to be unprofitable to this day - especially since the backlash against any form of queerness during and since gamergate - the movement still paved the way for queer institutions that transcend the indie/AAA split. External queer organisations like GLAAD have come to see games as important grounds for queer media representations, consulting on AAA companies to ensure their games authentically represent queer identities (GLAAD, 2026a), as well as launching initiatives that support up-and-coming queer developers (GLAAD, 2026b).

Cosy games, as a relatively recent movement that is still finding its place within the videogame artworld, have had the least time to develop institutions and work their way into the mainstream. Nevertheless, there are still some groups dedicated to supporting cosy game developers and their works. Wholesome Games (2026) publish and advertise the works of myriad cosy game creators, primarily through their annual Wholesome Direct (2020) - which started during the beginning of the pandemic, bringing 167000 views to the twenty-five initial games they showcased. This was responsible for a lot of attention the movement gained during lockdown, and the number of cosy games released increased massively over the following years (Carpenter, 2025).

The ever-increasing popularity of social media - especially the recent shift towards shortform video content - has served to help the cosy movement by creating communities and marketing opportunities, as well as extending the aesthetics of cosiness out of games and into the physical world (Boudrea, Consalvo and Phelps, 2025). TikTok creators form large audiences that they recommend games to, often furthering these recommendations by suggesting treats to enjoy with them, cultivating cosy environments that extend the intimate spaces of the game, or sharing their cosy rituals with their audiences, taking the cosy mechanics of self-care to another level.

Due to their immense popularity among audiences not traditionally captured by mainstream gaming, cosy games have begun to exert influence over the AAA sphere (The Escapist, 2022). The Nintendo Switch (and its successor) are exceptionally popular among cosy game developers, with each Indie World Showcase (Nintendo UK, 2026) advertising several ports, sequels or brand-new cosy game releases. The platform is a natural fit for cosy games - whilst part of an existing franchise, and not explicitly developed within the cosy movement, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) both exemplifies the cosy principles laid out by Short et al. (2017), and is also cited by many as an inspiration for both the development of cosy games as well as their popularity amongst audiences (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, p.226) (Boudreau, 2024, p.93).

## Conclusion

Bourdieu (1993, pp.40-43) describes how a given field of cultural production is in a constant state of struggle to decide what artists are legitimate, and how they get to

impose that legitimacy onto the field. Art movements serve to change the dominant forces of a field, and the boundary around who can and cannot make art. This causes art movements to be impermanent things - once they have imparted their change, they no longer need to exist with such drive, and are replaced by new struggles at the field's border, as new groups of people feel left out by the new state of things, and the opportunity space changes to allow for different movements to begin to form. Nevertheless, the changes they make to the artworld linger long after the movements themselves do.

By 2013, people had started looking to move beyond the 'indie' label. Juul (2019, pp.106-119) notes that the experimentation of Independent Style had become normalized, leading the avant-garde to shift towards questions of thematic and structural experimentation within games instead of mere exploration of style. This coincided with many developers belonging to marginalised groups feeling pushed out of an indie scene that heavily focused on the efforts of white men, going on to demand a more expressly political wave of games - one that would become the queer avant-garde. There was an understanding that indie had been co-opted into the money hungry industry, both in style and in many developers giving up their previously stated ideology for money (Liz, 2013).

Despite this, the post-indie videogame landscape looks drastically different to before. New types of games can be made. Developers and their games can be financially, aesthetically and culturally independent in ways they couldn't before. (Juul, 2019, pp.254-255) The cultural and economic contexts in which game developers make and work have been "in/formalised", and whilst AAA companies still hold power over

the mainstream, the landscape of game production has becoming increasingly multifaceted and diverse (Keogh, 2023, pp.36-37).

This possibility space combined with the agitation over representation in the demographics of the gaming landscape to create the opportunity for the queer avant-garde to challenge who could make games, and what those games could look like. They built on the work of artgames to structure bitesized games in myriad ways that represented and communicated queerness. Over the rest of the decade, these initial works paved the way for even further experimentation - queer designers made games that explored queer identities and cultures (Ruberg, 2020, pp.31-32), ludicised queer intimacy (Ruberg, 2020, pp.91-92), and often even rejected and queered accepted game concepts altogether (Ruberg, 2020, pp.61-62). Perhaps because they never truly integrated into the mainstream, queer games have continued - and will continue to innovate, diversify and multiply (Ruberg, 2020, pp.234-243), bringing hope to those queer people who make, discuss and play games (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017, p).

Both indie games and queer games challenged and gradually broke down ideas of what counts as 'real games', merging concepts of 'artgame' and 'casual game' to reject the challenge-focused hegemonic masculinity of gaming culture. This led to the rise of cosy games, which proved that there was a mass audience for games that rejected violent, stressful gameplay in favour of alternate gameplay loops that drew upon aesthetics traditionally associated with femininity and queerness. Having successfully incorporated themselves into the mainstream, the wave of cosy games is ongoing - though, not without issue. Reflecting and comforting anxieties of a liberal

world (Bódi, 2024, pp.55-57) can cause many cosy games to uncritically slide into a reactionary ideology that worships fantasies of petit-bourgoise land ownership, and rejects any form of resistance against the status quo (Scully-Blaker, 2024, pp.140-143).

Nevertheless, it is the nature of artworlds to change, as people outside of the dominant sphere take umbrage with the status quo, and fight to change things and have their ideology incorporated into the mainstream. There are almost definitely new videogame art movements brewing right now, drawing together artists and preparing to construct institutions to propel their ideas. They will inevitably build upon and react to existing videogame art movements; the ones I have detailed here or others. In a landscape of shifting technologies such as the integration of AI into games, the possibility space of the artworld is constantly changing, with new opportunities opening for artists to create things that revolutionise what we understand as videogames. Further research on videogame art movements could use the genealogy I have outlaid here to analyse the struggle at the edges of the videogame artworld, in order to understand the ideologies and aesthetics that will shape the future.

Total Word Count: 10135

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