

# **The Video Game as an Artistic Medium According to Kantian Aesthetic Theory**

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## **I. Abstract**

This paper investigates potential consideration of the video game as a form of fine art, given Immanuel Kant's theory on aesthetics. Kant's aesthetic theory is one of history's most respected works and is directly applicable to the evaluation of video games as a medium. Kant's theory is compared to contemporary theories from the field of Communication studies to demonstrate the longevity of Kant's influence on our notions of beauty and the applicability of his work to modern media. The history of the video game industry is examined in light of the development of aesthetic forms. Finally, the video game medium is evaluated according to Kant's criteria on fine art, beauty, and sublimity. As an example, one highly respected and successful video game is critiqued according to Kantian aesthetics in order demonstrate the artistic successes of the medium. This critique strongly suggests that the creation of a successful video game is an art, and that video games can and have achieved artistic beauty and sublimity.

## II. Introduction

The video game industry has been steadily growing at an impressive rate. In 2002, the video game industry surpassed the movie industry's revenues with its \$6.9 billion profits. This profit gap has been increasing ever since. Over 60% of Americans ages six and older regularly play video games. Perhaps surprisingly, about 43% of these players are female, showing that the video game medium is being engaged by a widespread and diverse audience (Park 259). There can be little doubt that video games have become a mainstream form of expression.

In the 2002 court case, *American Amusement vs. Kendrick*, Richard Posner argued that video games deserve full first amendment protection because they share the same narrative themes as historical literature and attempt to evoke the same emotional responses from their audiences (Smuts 1). At the time, the court did not support the argument, refusing to grant video games artistic protection. Journal articles have come down on both sides of this issue, yet there has been relatively little scholarly study of these games in relation to philosophical aesthetics (Wolf 1).

Despite the court's rulings, numerous MFA programs exist to train artists in the technology used in game development. Likewise, major universities, such as Carnegie Mellon, MIT, and NYU, offer classes studying video games (Smuts 1). Georgia Tech has gone as far as to create a Ph.D. program in interactive media (Smuts 2). Additionally, many major newspapers, including the New York Times, have begun publishing video game reviews. In December 2002, MTV networks announced that they would be creating a video game awards show (Smuts 9). The

web site [www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com) offers reviews for what they call “three popular art forms: movies, video games, and music” (Smuts 9). In July 2001, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted “ArtCade: Exploring the Relationship Between Video Games and Art” where game inspired books and movies were displayed along with their interactive counterparts (Smuts 10).

When discussing aesthetics, it is nearly impossible not to mention the work of Immanuel Kant. His Critique on the Power of Judgment stands as one of the most important historical contributions to the field of aesthetics (Wenzel X). While Kant does a comprehensive and inspired job of explaining those things which make up fine art, beauty, and sublimity, his theory tends to be difficult to understand without a long and critical examination of the work (Wenzel X). Nevertheless, Kant’s putting play as one of the central features of a beautiful work makes his famous aesthetic theory a likely choice to apply to video games (Smuts 3).

Some of the most respected mediums, such as the cinema and jazz music, were once trivialized. In order to give video games the analysis that they have earned, the qualities of an aesthetic work must be examined. Similarly, the credentials of a beautiful or sublime work must be distinguished. Kantian aesthetics, as one of the most famous and historical aesthetic theories, will be used to find the criteria which define fine art, beauty, and sublimity. Following that, an explanation of the historical depth behind today’s video game industry is needed in order to understand the growth and development of the field. Theories within the field of Communication have emerged in order to comprehend the power of interactive media. Showing that modern Communication theory parallels the work

of Immanuel Kant will support the validity of applying Kant's theories to today's video games. Finally, the current state of the video game form can be assessed according to Kant's criteria. In order to validate the theory's application, a single, famous, video game will be critiqued according to Kantian aesthetics to see if a video game can be beautiful according to these criteria.

### III. On Kant's Aesthetic Theory

In his Critique on the Power of Judgment, Immanuel Kant proposes that a priori principle exists that explains human taste. A priori principles are universal rules which are based upon reason alone and are independent of all subjective sensory experience. Such a priori judgments contrast with a posteriori judgments which are based on individual experience and are both limited and uncertain in their application ([www.philosophypages.com](http://www.philosophypages.com) 1). According to his definition, the a priori judgment acts as a mediator between understanding and reason by supplying universal concepts by which a thing can be judged.

Kant distinguished between two types of judgments: determinate and reflective ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 6). In determinate judgments, which Kant deals with primarily in his Critique of Pure Reason, decisions are based off of an established concept which is applied to particular instances. Reflective judgments, however, pose the great philosophical problem, as they are judgments that take place without a prior concept and must sometimes be used to form entirely new concepts ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 6). Kant bases his Critique on the Power of Judgment around aesthetic judgments as he considers them one of the most interesting and important forms of reflective judgments.

In judging an object's beauty, one claims universal validity (Kant 76). In other words, we are saying that we expect others to agree with what we see as beautiful. For this claim to be valid there must be a common ground in which to base beauty on. Kant searches through a series of categories in which we base our

logical judgments of beauty on in order to find a common principle. The priori principle behind our taste towards aesthetics he titles 'common sense'. His account of common sense links reasoning to understanding in a "mutually reinforcing harmony" (www.iep.utm.edu 10). By defining common sense in this way, Kant allows himself to apply ordinary cognitive functions to aesthetic judgments, thus making aesthetic judgments as valid and universal as any other act of human cognition.

Kant explains the four moments which must occur for an aesthetic judgment on the beautiful to take place. First, an aesthetic judgment must be *disinterested*. He defines interest as the link to a real desire or action and the determining connection to the actual existence of an object (www.iep.utm.edu 7). In the case of an aesthetic judgment, however, the actual existence of the beautiful object is entirely irrelevant. A judgment is made on something that does not need to be in use or in your possession, but still brings about pleasure. In any other case, pleasure, or the lack thereof, is the starting point that leads a person to judge. With this in mind, Kant claims that aesthetic judgments are solely concerned with issues of form, such as shape, arrangement, and rhythm, as opposed to more sensory based content, such as color or tone (www.iep.utm.edu 7). Sensory content is more closely linked to the agreeable and personal interest, which, Kant makes clear, runs contrary to the idea of disinterestedness in aesthetic judgments. One who is invested in a judgment because of their personal emotions cannot possibly be disinterested.

To further clarify this first moment, he explains three types of satisfaction: the satisfactions of the agreeable, the beautiful, and the good. The agreeable is entirely

subjective, the beautiful is subjective with a claim for universality, and the good is entirely objective and grounded in established rules. As can be seen, only satisfaction from the beautiful is simultaneously free from rigid guidelines and disinterested (Wenzel 142).

The second criterion for an aesthetic judgment is that it must be *universal* in that it relies on the expectation of the agreement of others. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy by James Feiser Ph.D. and Bradley Dowden Ph.D. explains this concept as follows;

If I judge a certain landscape to be beautiful then, although I may be perfectly aware that all kinds of other factors might enter in to make particular people in fact disagree with me, never-the-less I at least implicitly demand universality in the name of *taste* (www.iep.utm.edu 8).

Although this universality is not merely subjective or objective, Kant argues that we see beauty as an inherent characteristic of the object, not “in the eye of the beholder”. The universal aspect of all judgments cannot be found in the object, however, and must be found in us and our relation to that object (Wenzel 143).

To establish the process by which a judgment takes place, Kant distinguishes the act of judging from a judgment. The act of judging logically precedes a judgment and is a reflection on the universal grounds we use in order to judge. During this process of judging, Kant explains a “free play” which occurs among our faculties. This is a harmonious and pleasurable state where imagination and understanding complement one another, ultimately strengthening our capacity for cognition (Wenzel 62). After this process, a resulting judgment can be made.

Kant's third moment initially seems paradoxical as he claims that judgments on the beautiful must be *purposive without any definite purpose*. Purposiveness is defined as the property of appearing manufactured or designed. The object of beauty will be purposive to our cognition, imagination, and understanding, but will not be based on a determinate rule for why we feel a particular way about certain works. (Wenzel 143). This "purposiveness without a purpose" is the priori principle that Kant uses to tie together his aesthetic theory. There are two types of purposes, internal and external. Internal purposes are something that a created object was meant to resemble, while external purposes are goals that the manufactured things were meant to accomplish. While the external judgment's end is utility, an internal judgment's end is perfection in recreating the intended object.

Beauty is pleasurable, according to Kant, and pleasure is defined as "the feeling that arises from the achievement of a purpose (www.iep.utm.edu 8)." As such, an aesthetic judgment on beauty must recognize some purpose being accomplished; however, Kant says that this purpose cannot be ascertained by our normal cognitions. The purpose of a work of art must go deeper than the simple internal or external motives that the artist had before creating the work. Thus we cannot know the purpose of the beauty in the beautiful, but can know that the feeling of pleasure that the beautiful gives us is proof that there is purpose in the work.

Kant's final moment in a judgment on the beautiful is *necessity*. Kant says that the act of judging the beautiful is pre-conditioned in all of us. The judgment does not come because a logical progression has led our minds to it, nor will it lead

to the discovery of a generally applicable rule. The judgment of beauty exhausts itself simply by being an aesthetic judgment and unavoidable by anyone (Wenzel 145). This refers back to what Kant called “common sense.” Common sense does not find a definite concept, but relies on all of the faculties of normal cognition to simply judge beauty. It seems that Kant uses the term “common” in this instance, to mean “universal”. His use of the word “sense” stand for the natural and automatic ability in all humans to engage in a free play of their cognitive functions in order to better imagine and understand a work of art (Wenzel 62). Common sense is our natural inclination to the free play of our faculties in response to experiencing a beautiful work of art and to the existence of the three previous moments of beauty (Wenzel 146). With these conditions met, common sense, which all humans possess, cannot help but to judge the beautiful.

In Kant’s theory, the second type of aesthetic experience is that of the sublime. Feelings of the sublime come from overwhelming or intimidating experiences that we cannot fully grasp in our minds. Traditionally and in Kantian theory, these experiences are classified into two categories. The first category is referred to as the mathematically sublime. Viewing a massive building may instill a feeling of the mathematically sublime because of its sheer greatness in size or number. The second category is the dynamically sublime. A powerful act of nature that directly competes against our human will or strength is an example of the dynamically sublime ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 12).

Kant struggles with traditional definitions because they do not explain how the sublime could be a pleasurable experience. It would seem to Kant that if the

traditional definitions were true, both instances of the sublime would be met with fear and discomfort. Kant explains that acts of nature or the mathematically great objects are not the source of the sublime, rather it is the ideas of reason that these instances evoke in us. These great experiences often put men in a reflective state about the freedom or magnitude of the environment in which they live. Kant explains that the sublime feeling is, instead, a “rapid alteration between the fear of the overwhelming and the peculiar pleasure of seeing that overwhelming overwhelmed (www.iep.utm.edu 12).” By taking the individual into account in a sublime experience, Kant edits the definition of the mathematically sublime to be something which is “absolutely large” or is “large beyond all comparison” (Kant 129). Likewise, he shifts the definition of the dynamically sublime to mean something which has “a magnitude in force in relation to us (Kant 129).” In shifting the definitions, Kant makes the experience of the sublime a relative, yet universally purposive experience where man actually begins to comprehend the meaning of an initially overwhelming experience.

With beauty and sublimity proven to operate on our ordinary cognitive functions, Kant shifts his focus to the creation of fine art itself. Art is distinguished from nature in that art is produced through the freedom of choice. Kant uses the example of calling a bee’s honeycombs a work of art. He concludes that this would be folly as a bee constructs honeycombs as a product of instinct; therefore it is classified under acts of nature. Acts and products of nature can still be judged according to Kant’s four moments of beauty, even though they are not classified as fine art. Art must be conceived as an end before it begins to take form (Kant 182). A

work of art must be planned and worked out before the artist can begin creating the work. Nature runs on instinct, something is created as time progresses, but there is no future plan for what will happen, things just come to be (Kant 182). Additionally, art does not need to be created; it is created because the artist prefers to take the time to create the work. In nature there are no decisions, something is made out of necessity or instinct, rather than out of luxury or the pursuit of beauty (Kant 182).

Art must also be distinguished from science. In science, if one has full knowledge of a process, they can perform all necessary actions to successfully complete that process. Creating a beautiful work of art is quite different. Even if the artist is fully aware of proper painting or writing techniques, they can still fail at creating beauty (Kant 183). Art is also different from handicraft. Art can only be successful if it provokes play within the viewer. The success of handicraft is based solely on the effects that it brings about. Kant admits that certain crafts, watch-making for example, may be an art form, but the proportion of the talent within the field and their individual motives makes that particular discussion overly confusing.

Even though art was previously distinguished from nature, Kant asserts that beautiful art is based on the accurate recreation of nature. He says, "Art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature (Kant 306)." Here nature can mean either that nature of something (i.e. man's nature) or that which is not made by human hands (a tree, a bird, etc.)([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 15). Secondly, a beautiful work also approaches a representation of nature in that it seems as free from arbitrary rules and restraints as nature is. According to Kant, if,

after viewing a work of art, one notices the rules which the creator abode by to make the piece, it has become too academic (Wenzel 96).

For judging the beautiful, taste is required; but for creating the beautiful, genius is required (Kant 189). The genius must choose a medium and design in order to allow their audience to both understand the work conceptually and comprehend the goals that the genius had during the creation of the work. According to Kant, genius "is an inborn disposition of the mind through which nature gives rules to art." The genius cannot fully explain what he or she has produced because they do not abide by or create any specific rules for art. If they were to do so, they would be creating a set of criteria that could be used to judge the work and would be in discord with nature's lack of rules (Wenzel 99). Without a specific code to follow, the genius must engage in a constant free play of their faculties through the duration of creating their work. When they find their mind out of harmony, they must go back and make changes (Wenzel 100). Decision making in this state is entirely pre-cognitive and any judgments which the genius makes must be made with the same disinterestedness that is evoked in judging beautiful art work.

Genius is a talent, a natural endowment, given by nature to the artist. The genius' culture, history, and education have nothing to do with their ability to create beautiful art ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 17). Therefore, fine art is not produced through a group of people building on one another's thoughts and work (as science is developed), but can only be created by a single individual. The genius' natural abilities add some rules to the otherwise indefinite production of the aesthetic.

These rules, supplied by the genius, uncover what they are to produce, but not the methods and techniques they must use to create the work. These rules aren't created as the genius creates the work, however. The rules that the genius creates can only be applied after he or she has created their work and it has been accepted as an exemplary work of art (Wenzel 144). Taste, training, and technique are what determine the level of effectiveness that the work attains. As such, originality is one of the chief characteristics of the genius. Fine art, being created by geniuses, never imitates, but may, if rarely, be influenced by previous works (www.iep.utm.edu 20).

Kant isn't sharply re-defining genius as he recognizes that it takes more than the capacity for taste and knowledge of technique to be a genius. Kant explains that a genius is unique in their ability to apply 'aesthetic ideas' into their work. These aesthetic ideas are the only rules in the creation of fine art. An aesthetic idea is defined as "a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible." A work of art is more than just a collection of words or shapes, but creates an impression that transcends simple descriptions. A writer's attempt to portray an evil character serves as an example of this. Since the concept of moral impotence transcends ordinary cognitive functions, the portrayal of the character will always fall short of the original idea for the character in the author's mind (www.iep.utm.edu 18). An aesthetic idea works off of "supplementary representations" which are empirical objects presented to our senses in certain ways in order to provoke particular

rational ideas (Wenzel 102). These vivid ideas that help to support the otherwise abstract work are called “aesthetic ideas.”

Kant gives this example: “Jupiter’s eagle, with the lightning in its claws, is an attribute of the powerful king of heaven (Kant 315).” The abstract idea in this sentence is the “powerful king of heaven” or God, since it is an idea that lies outside of the realm of full human comprehension. The lightning is the supplementary representation as it is an object with which we are familiar and can use to connect to our abstract image of God. Characteristics of the eagle also connect to imagining the “powerful king of heaven.” The idea of the eagle is a “related representation” because an individual’s opinions of an eagle can be applied in different ways to a final image of God (Wenzel 103).

The further a concept moves away from reality, the more difficult it is to represent. As such, the concepts of God, free will, and morality are listed as some of the most difficult to represent. Aesthetic ideas are the genius’ most important tools in attempting to approach a representation of these complex ideas. While these ideas may never be adequately understood, they make us reflect on these concepts, perhaps coming to our own conclusions. These complex concepts, such as morality or the afterlife, Kant calls the “supersensible.” The supersensible surpasses common perception and normal cognitive functions. For example, we can think about God or morality as much as we would like, but we will never fully grasp either concept. With this in mind, Kant explains that aesthetic ideas are the counterparts to ideas of reason ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 16). Standing alone, neither can attain full knowledge of the universe, and yet each can be compensated by what the other offers.

As was argued, true art represents nature. In order to remain subjective and to affect the free play of our faculties, our relation to nature must not be depicted as merely physical, but must contain a moral element. Therefore, any beautiful artwork deals, in some way, with our morality. Likewise, our faculty of judgment uses the same functions when determining beauty and morality, reinforcing the relationship between the two (Wenzel 105).

In his review of fine art, Kant includes a comparative study of the various arts. The art of sculpture or painting would be an example of an art of the visual form. Music is an art involving a play of sensible tones. The third category of art is the arts of speech. The arts of speech include poetry, which Kant ranks the highest art form ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 17). As technology progresses, Kant's theories and standards can be applied to new forms of expression in order to determine whether they are fine art, can be beautiful or sublime, and which of his three categories of art they can be classified under.

#### IV. The History of Video Games

If the history of video games were a twenty-four-hour day, Pong would arise at 6:37 A.M. The Atari 2600 bursts into existence late in the morning at 10:17, and the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) rolls onto American shores at 4:27 in the afternoon. Sega Genesis and Nintendo's Game Boy show up for happy hour at 6:30. And the most advanced home video game system to date, the Nintendo 64, clicks in at twenty minutes to midnight (Herz 13).

The video game industry has existed for over forty years, yet it struggles to command respect as an artistic medium. It would seem that the video game industry is bound to fight the same battles that both the television and film industries have in order to attain respect as an aesthetic form (Wolf 13).

A definition explaining that which constitutes a video game must be determined in order to trace the history of the "video game" industry. The term 'game' comes with certain implicit meanings. Games are expected to consist of a conflict, rules, player ability, and some kind of valued outcome (Wolf 14). The 'video' component of the definition strictly means that an analog image is displayed on a Cathode Ray Tube (Wolf 14). This image that is displayed on the screen is no more than a dissected image, recreated in the form of tiny blocks, otherwise known as; pixels. The last, and perhaps most necessary, component of the definition of video games is that video games must be interactive. This separates video games from movies where the action is not controlled by the player and then reflected on the screen.

Coin operated (Coin-op) video games are the most 'classic' perception of the video game. In truth, however, the history of video games reaches a bit before the arcade-era. By the 1960's, television was widely diffused and was becoming increasingly easier to use around the house. This was a welcome change as the first televisions were about the size of a dresser. By 1960, computers had been in development for almost two decades and were becoming much more attainable by civilians.

With these components in place, MIT's engineering department got their hands on one such machine, the PDP-1 from Digital Equipment Corporation. In 1961 Steve Russell, the patriarch of the video game industry, wrote history's first video game. The game was titled *Spacewar* and was no more than a simple two-player game where spaceships would fire guns at each other. Steve Russell described the PDP-1 by saying;

It was the size of three refrigerators, and it had an old-fashioned computer console with a whole bunch of switches and lights, and it had a cathode ray tube, and it had a typewriter. I thought this was a great thing, and I was itching to get my fingers on it and try it (Herz 6).

Russell had assumed that no one would pay for the impractical game he created, so he shared the source code with all who asked. In a few years, just about every person interested in the technology had a full copy of *Spacewar* in their possession (Herz 7). As it turns out, this seemingly silly game with two ships shooting at each other, "electronic dodge ball J.C. Herz calls it, was the catalyst to

many people getting hooked on computer programming and eventually becoming wealthy software moguls.

Video games, in their common arcade form, did not actually become viable until nearly a decade later. In 1971, Nolan Bushnell, perhaps the most influential figure in the development of the video game industry turned Russell's *Spacewar* into his *Computer Space* by compacting the monstrous PDP-1 machine into a unit nearly identical to the arcade machines that one can find in movie theatres and mall arcades today. Additionally, he added the coin slot to the video game machine, an addition that would lead to the commercial viability of video games (Wolf 29).

With the profits he made from *Computer Space* and his coin slot, he produced *PONG*, perhaps the most recognizable early video game. *PONG* was no more than two paddles on opposite sides of a screen, hitting a dot back and forth at each other. The game came with two instructions, "deposit quarter" and "avoid missing ball for high score" (Herz 14). Somehow this game became one of the most famous artifacts of its time. Some explain this phenomenon by claiming that video games have imitated other forms of the period's art. Mark J. P. Wolf supported this view when he wrote;

The minimal, often abstract graphics of early video games fit in rather well with trends in the art world during the 1960's . . . Influenced by these and other abstract movements, minimalist art developed in the mid-to-late 1960's. Artists such as Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, Tony Smith, and others worked with squares, cubes, stripes, geometric shapes and other minimal forms to create abstractions. Early video game graphics, with their points, lines, and blocks of color, often on a black background, coincided with minimalist, abstract styles of art (30).

Whatever the exact reason for his success, Nolan Bushnell used his profits from *PONG* to found Atari and bring the game that was the first arcade hit into homes throughout the nation. He sold 150,000 of these home machines in 1974, topping the original home video game system, the Magnavox Odyssey's sales by 50,000.

Two years later, however, the AY38500 circuit was released, making video game production cheap and easy. Video game systems instantly began selling for a mere \$60 at any local Toys R' Us and were being manufactured by over 70 video game companies nation-wide (Herz 34). With this boom in demand for system parts, manufacturers of the new circuit, a five-dollar piece of silicon, were overwhelmed with orders. Naturally, Atari and Magnavox had no problem getting their parts, as they had been stable companies with orders in place years in advance. However, the parts never came to the other 70 odd companies that needed parts to fulfill their shipments to stores across the United States (Herz 35). The parts never came. Retailers lost interest in the potential video game business, as did potential video gamers who couldn't try the apparent new craze. The repercussions were harsh as all but one of the many video game manufacturers fled the business. Nolan Bushnell's Atari would be all that remained (Herz 36).

Atari would persevere, introducing a new system, the VCS, to the public in 1978. Magnavox would re-enter the business that same year and compete against Atari with their Odyssey2 game system. The birth of Activision would pull the video game industry out of what came to be known as the "hardware plague". Activision was the first videogame software house. It made games exclusively for

the Atari VCS, establishing a mutually-beneficial relationship between the two companies. They began by releasing *Space Invaders*, a game which asked the player to man a spaceship and fire at forty-eight aliens while dodging incoming attacks. This began a trend where software releases doubled by the year, from a few dozen releases to about five hundred releases in 1983 (Herz 16). Among the classic games released in this software boom were; *Asteroids*, *Battlezone*, *Defender*, *Missile Command*, *Pac-Man*, *Tempest*, *Centipede*, *Donkey Kong* (Imported from Nintendo from Japan), *Dig Dug*, *Tron*, *Pole Position*, *Punch Out*, *Space Invades*, and *Frogger*.

This relative Golden Age of video games would not last. The bounty of software was a blessing at first, but began to overwhelm consumers. Instead of searching for quality software, buyers, being awash in options, began to purchase the cheapest games available. Even the highest quality game distributors had to lower their prices in order to turn a profit. As J.C. Herz says;

We conveniently forget this much as classic rock listeners forget that music really wasn't like that in the sixties. Classic rock stations do not play what radio stations played twenty-five years ago, because most of that music was awful. Thousands and thousands of songs came out every year, and most of them faded deservedly into oblivion after two months (Herz 73).

This movement does not discredit the video game industry, but is merely a product of capital economics. With so many competitors, prices needed to drop to cut out some of the competition. The "Software Plague" hit in 1983, driving many software houses out of the business. Mattel would sell off its electronics division, and even Atari would be broken up. By 1985, the U.S. home video game industry was virtually non-existent.

It would take a monumental event, a near miracle, to save the video game industry from destruction this time. That event came when the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was released in America in 1986. The Sega Genesis followed just three years after it. In a year, the video game industry was back on its feet, and would be stronger than ever. By 1991, 33 million homes had a Nintendo Entertainment System in it. The stars from Nintendo's hit game *Mario Bros.*, two Italian plumbers, one clad in red, one in green, ran, jumped, and paved the way for an industry that would grow stronger than all of the studios in Hollywood.

But what did Nintendo possibly do to create this kind of hype? In essence, they were no more than another company releasing technology that would allow players to interact with images on their TV screen. The difference came in Nintendo's understanding that video games could be bigger than their fundamental technology. They saw that while *Asteroids*, *PONG*, and *Space Invaders* were hit games, Pac-Man was a super-star. In no time at all, the little face that didn't even talk became the star of lunch boxes, back packs, Hallmark cards, and so forth (Herz 132). It came down to licensing. Nintendo took Disney's business model and began to license their characters, assuming that their technology would sell afterwards.

Peter Main, Nintendo's vice president of marketing said, "Well, Disney has a lot more experience at this, and that's why I unabashedly say we don't care where we borrow out smarts from. Disney's been through it (Herz 133)." It's been paralleled to Hollywood, from Mario to newer, hipper icons, like Yoshi or Samus. There are appearances by people dressed as these characters, each appearance costing thousands of dollars. There is merchandising; lunchboxes, T-shirts, hats, and

beyond. More recently, animation, including that produced by Disney, are entirely computer generated. As J. C. Herz puts it, "It was almost as if Mickey were tipping his hat to Mario (Herz 137)."

Similar to Activision's relationship to Atari, Acclaim began in 1987 as the software house in a symbiotic relationship exclusively with Nintendo. In 1990, Nintendo would release Super Mario Brothers 3, which would become the highest grossing game of all time, making \$500 million (Herz 21). At this time, a famous survey studying character recognition, reported that more American children recognized Mario than Mickey Mouse (Wolf 46).

While Sega released its system, Genesis, in 1989, it took until 1991 to really shake the industry. In 1991, Sega unveiled a new celebrity in the digital Hollywood star system. He was a blue rodent, spiny-backed, and speedy. His name was Sonic, the star of the game *Sonic the Hedgehog*. At nearly the same time, Nintendo brought their "Super NES" (SNES) to the states. While the Super Nintendo was wildly successful, the Sega Genesis surprisingly matched it in every sales statistic. According to many, Sega had proven to be the "cooler" of the two video game systems. In one study by Sony, it was discovered that many children were actually embarrassed to admit that they played games on the SNES as opposed to the Sega Genesis (Wolf 47).

The release of *Mortal Kombat* illustrates the differences between the two consoles. *Mortal Kombat* is a "violent" video game, containing scenes where one character burns another alive, impales him or her on a pit of spikes, or simply rips their head (and spine) off of their body. Nintendo objected to this kind of graphic

violence, demanding that Acclaim censor the brutal fighting game (Wolf 47). Sega did not protest and released the bloodier version of the game. Sega's version outsold Nintendo's three-to-one (Wolf 47). This was a major moment in the video game industry as *Mortal Kombat* had begun demanding attention from Congress. Sen. Joseph Lieberman and Sen. Herbert Kohl began investigating video game violence, eventually forcing *Mortal Kombat II*, which was released a year later, to carry a strict warning label (Wolf 47).

The impact of *Mortal Kombat* was far surpassed by another game. In late 1993, a free shareware version of one of the most highly anticipated games of all time began to be passed around. Thousands of people sat on internet chat channels waiting for the release of the download. "It was as though a thousand people in line for Nine Inch Nails tickets had formed a human wall, blocking out the one guy who could open the ticket booth (Herz 84)." Upon its delayed release, over 15 million copies of the game were downloaded, revolutionizing the way games could be distributed. Upon its full version release, it was recognized as an instant best seller, selling over 150,000 copies. This game, riddled with violence, has been hailed as the "3D Game of All Time", changed the way games are distributed world wide, altered the way video gamers play and interact with one another, and even made appearances on *ER*, *The Single Guy*, and *Friends* (Herz 86). The game, titled *Doom*, changed video gaming forever.

*Doom* began a movement that has continued into today through its attempt to create an environment within a game. The player was a marine trapped alone on Mars where demons from hell have invaded. The hardened "hero" has to use his

aim, wits, and an arsenal of weaponry to find a way through the hordes of enemies. The game does not leave room for interpretation, as the game manual states, "They have no pity, no mercy, take no quarter, and crave none. They are the perfect enemy (Herz 87)." The enemies, from zombies to a pink, fire-breathing eyeball and cyber-spiders equipped with lasers, made decision making very easy for the player; kill or be killed. Yet, few games (save for Resident Evil for the Playstation) seem to have been able to create the kind of morbid fear in the hearts of the playing audience. J. C. Herz explains;

For hundreds of thousands of people, *Doom* has invoked the kind of horror that you only experience as a small child when the lights are out and the monsters in the closet and under the bed come to life. Ultimately, you know you're safe - you can always race for the door. You can always turn off the computer. But for a moment, you're exquisitely frightened. It's the kind of fear that turns us on and makes us feel alive and sends us on sky-diving expeditions and roller coaster rides. *Doom* gave you a way to get that same thrill from your very own dorm room (88).

Of course, sequels and pretenders followed. There was *Doom II*, *Heretic*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, and many others; yet, no follow up would have the same impact as the original *Doom*.

Again, the industry began to decline in profits in 1994. Nintendo and Sega, seeing the natural curve of their profitable industry, began to devise new ways of pushing technology in order to increase revenue. Sega released the Sega CD, which replaced cartridge games with the use of digital discs (something that would be relied on heavily, until this day). Later, Sega released the 32x, a system pushing graphics a step farther than the Genesis and Sega CD had. Nintendo released

*Donkey Kong Country*, a game that began the use of computer-modeled graphics, and sold a record breaking 7 million copies world-wide (Wolf 47).

By 1995, a new player would enter the video game market. Sony released the Playstation, a 32-bit system which sold for much cheaper than Sega's 32x. Around the same time, Nintendo 64 was released by Nintendo and the Saturn, Sega's final system, was released. The Playstation would become the highest selling video game system and feature some of the most ground-breaking video games of all time. *Resident Evil* brought the horror genre to video games. *Final Fantasy VII* brought role-playing games, among other things, to America. Every year the industry was pushed further until the eventual release of what are now considered the "current-generation" consoles.

In the grand video game timeline, the current generation (current-gen) and next generation (next-gen) consoles are a small moment in a long history. Sony released its Playstation 2 worldwide in 2001 to record sales, selling 15 million consoles by 2001 (Poole 11). Shortly after, Microsoft, the computer giant, entered the now-lucrative video game industry with their XBOX. Nintendo had released its Gamecube console, a minor afterthought in comparison to the success XBOX and the Playstation 2.

The Playstation 2 introduced internet gaming to the public and the XBOX was the first console with a built in hard drive, both revolutionizing advancements to the gaming industry (Poole 11). These advancements lead to the "next generation consoles", the Playstation 3, the XBOX 360, and the Nintendo Wii. These consoles are leagues ahead of past consoles in terms of graphics and the game complexity.

For example, *The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion* for the XBOX 360 displays detailed, ever-changing environments that not only surpass anything seen in past video games, but rivals the detail in any of history's great paintings. While each console breaks new ground, Nintendo's Wii seems to have shaken up the industry the most. Many considered Nintendo the loser in the current-gen console wars, with Sony in the lead and Microsoft picking up its scraps. Nintendo's next-gen console, the Wii introduced the public to motion sensing video games. If one were playing as Link, a legendary adventurer from Nintendo's acclaimed *Legend of Zelda* series, and moved their arm in a wide arc, Link would mimic the move with his sword on screen. This technological leap has led to the current state of the industry; with Nintendo back as a contender in the console race.

Over the years, video games have developed dramatically. Consoles now offer many functions ranging from music downloading to DVD playing capabilities. Graphics have become drastically more realistic, increasing the effort required for and effectiveness of game design. Through all of this, the video game industry has become a multi-billion dollar monster. In 2003 the video game industry earned over \$17 billion (Poole 12) and has recently surpassed the cinema in annual revenues. It is apparent that, through all of its struggles, the video game industry has proven that it is here to stay. As such, it is due time to give video games honest consideration as a legitimate artistic medium.

## V. On the Presence and Narrative Immersion Theories

The Presence and the Narrative theories from the field of Communication studies offer a contemporary look at the affects of video games and their potential impact as an art form.

From *Doom* to the recently released *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, game designers have made a concerted effort to give the player a sense of belonging to the environment that the video game places them in. *Doom* placed the player on a Mars based space station and surrounded him or her with hundreds of monsters from hell. *Oblivion* put the character in a fantasy world full of thieves, trolls, dragons, and other mythical creatures. While the two games' release dates were over a decade apart, both were created with the common goal to immerse the player in a game environment.

Ron Tamborini and Paul Skalski write that, "Realistic graphics and sounds, haptic feedback, first-person point of view, and control devices that map natural body actions all increase the vividness and interactivity in games making them highly conducive to the sense of presence. Presence seems central in shaping the experience of electronic games (225)." The conceptualization of presence began to be studied after the invention of "virtual reality." While the goggles and gloves of virtual reality gaming never quite caught on, the idea of having more senses immersed in a game attracted attention from media scholars.

Presence eventually came to be defined as "a psychological state in which the person's subjective experience is created by some form of media technology with

little awareness of the manner in which technology shapes this perception (Tamborini 226).” Although the presence theory is fairly new, most of the literature on the subject mentions three categories of presence; spatial presence, social presence, and self-presence.

Spatial presence, as the name might suggest, is the feeling of existing in the location of a video game. Tamborini (2000) argued that the strength of an electronic game’s influence is determined by the level of involvement and immersion that game evokes in the player (Tamborini 227). Additionally, he argued that game designer’s attempts at applying technology to heighten vividness of the interactivity of a game world are simply further aimed at enhancing spatial presence.

Tamborini’s arguments seem to be backed up by real-world evidence. Some of the gaming industry’s top-selling games are boasted about because of the environments they create. Game Pro and Gamefaqs.com’s lists of the “top ten video games ever” both contain *Final Fantasy VII*, *Halo*, *Resident Evil*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and others which are touted mainly because of their ability to make the player feel as if they are actually part of the world in which the game takes place ([http://www.filibustercartoons.com /games.htm](http://www.filibustercartoons.com/games.htm) 2).

Vividness is defined as the “ability to produce a rich sensory environment, and is defined by the manner in which information is presented to the senses (Tamborini 227).” Many attributes of a video game are tied to its success at immersing the player. For example, if a player were to be damaged in an action-genre video game, they would hear the noise that the threat made, see their character physically injured, and even feel the rumble off of the controller that they

were playing with. These sensations may draw the player in enough so that he or she lose touch with their reality and allow their minds to become more involved in the constructed game world. The more vivid these sensations, the more immersed the player becomes.

Interactivity, the second enhancing element to spatial presence, is the user's ability to influence the environment around them (Tamborini 228). An effectively interactive game can make the player feel involved in the game world. *Fable*, a game released exclusively on Microsoft's XBOX, a great example of interactivity. The characters in the game are part of a world where their actions are deemed good or evil, and townsfolk react accordingly. *Mortal Kombat*, the highly criticized fighting game, shows the progression of interactivity over time. While the first installment of the game consisted of two characters reacting primarily with each other on an otherwise unmoving background (except for the occasional pit of spikes), the latest edition of the game allows characters to destroy many aspects of the environment, and to even use certain aspects (such as objects and terrain) as weapons against their opponent.

A video games' success in creating special presence is heavily dependent on allowing the users to apply models and narratives from which are already familiar to the game world. In this respect, characters which are portrayed in much the same way as famous literary or movie characters will be more immersive to the player. Likewise, traditional story structures tend to be the most successful in the video game industry (Tamborini 229).

Social Presence, the second category of presence theory, is the feeling of being engaged in a group of conscious, interactive beings within a game. Social presence does not merely exist or not, but comes in varying degrees based on the individual's perception of social engagement within the game. "Ultimately, it involves the use of media for social purposes (Tamborini 231)."

Games such as *World of Warcraft* and *The Sims Online* have placed players in online worlds where they actually interact with live players from all over the world. While these games explicitly establish social presence, some games can effectively create the feeling of social presence through the use of writing and technology, not the actual interaction with other live people. *Fable*, again for the XBOX, allowed players to interact with townspeople who would change their scripts according to the player's actions. Many games have followed in this customization, allowing for a substantial increase in the sense of social presence found in current video games.

Three elements make up social presence. Co presence, the first element, is the mutual awareness of other social beings in the environment (Tamborini 231). This works hand-in-hand with spatial presence in the creation of an effective environment. Tamborini gives the example of how *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, a game where players customize their own amusement park, shows park visitors engaged in various activities throughout the park.

Psychological involvement is the second aspect of social presence. This relates to any discussions of a game's artificial intelligence. The game *F.E.A.R.*, for example, has been acclaimed for its enemy's artificial intelligence. The game pits the player against a sort of elite S.W.A.T. team. The enemies are "intelligent" enough to

flank the player, hide, and apply teamwork tactics in order to make the game more challenging. Because of these enemies, the player naturally feels more engaged in the gaming experience, as if they were playing against actual thinking beings.

The final aspect is behavioral engagement, where players engage in social behaviors within the video game. While these options are abundant in massively multiplayer online games (MMO's), some games offer these options in single-player modes. *Neverwinter Nights*, for example, offers the player the ability to gesture towards others or to speak out loud, simply to create a more engaging atmosphere within the game.

The last form of presence, self-presence, has garnered the least amount of attention of the three types. Tamborini defines self-presence by explaining:

Biocca's (1997) definition of self-presence identifies three "bodies" present in a virtual world: the actual body, the virtual body, and the body schema, or the user's mental model of self. He argued that when we see a graphic representation of ourselves within a virtual environment, the representation evokes mental models of our body as well as our identity (Tamborini 233).

The first-person point-of-view introduced by *Doom* in 1993 is an example of the application of this theory. By allowing the player to see the world as the main character would see it, the player can better project themselves into the video game. Likewise, the freedom that games such as *Fallout 2*, an open-ended role-playing game set in a post-apocalyptic United States, offers, allows the player to approach in-game decisions with personal twists. *Fallout 2* allows the player to determine whether their character will be strong or weak, smart or dumb, fast or slow. It even

allows the player to select hobbies such as gambling, hunting, and others. The game takes yet another step, allowing the player to decide on their sex appeal, potential to get addicted to drugs, and more. The entire game is based on these decisions, with the player deciding what groups to join and whether to be envied by the public or regarded as a notorious thugs. This allows the player to project themselves into the game and play it according to their personality.

The impact of presence on the success of video games is summed up by Tamborini in his chapter in the book by Vorderer, Playing Video Games, when he writes;

The connection of presence with enjoyment is hard to overlook." To some, the types of emotional experience we label as joy or delight are nothing more than pleasurable forms of what they call absorption of presence (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). Yet even if you do not define enjoyment as a form of presence, enjoyment is perhaps the primary outcome sought and experienced from electronic games and profitable presence-inducing technologies (Tamborini 235).

"Electronic games are poised to become the *ultimate* presence inducing medium (Tamborini 238)" claims Tamborini. With technology constantly advancing efforts to increase presence within games, the study of presence will undoubtedly become more prevalent in media studies. Now, we can see the importance of creating presence to the success of a video game and the numerous elements that make presence exist.

The second emerging theory on video games involves the relationship between classic narratives and elements of interactivity in the game world. All

forms of entertainment are based on delivering a narrative to the audience. Novels, plays, poetry, music, and other mature art forms have developed their own unique styles of delivering these narratives. Traditional art forms have a consistently linear relationship in conveying this narrative; from creator to audience. The creator gets an idea which he attempts to convey to his audience through his selected medium. The interactivity of video games changes this dynamic by offering the audience control of this narrative.

Early arcade games such as *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* did not rely on a narrative to sell their product. While basic narratives such as defending earth or killing evil ghosts were involved with the games, it was often the musical jingles or potential of attaining the high score that drove the continued playing of the game. In the next-gen era of video gaming, video game narratives are becoming more complex than major motion pictures. Games such as *Resident Evil* for the Playstation can take over 30 hours to complete as the player is driven to continue by their captivation in the narrative's twists and turns. These recent games show a greater similarity to traditional art works, while primitive games show a clear difference.

Even recent games, however, deliver a different sort of narrative than those of traditional media. The story telling process from creator to audience is blurred through the interactivity of these games. The narratives are becoming more non-linear, allowing the player to choose which path of the story to follow. For example, players who play *Tomb Raider*, an early action game for the Playstation game console, will experience very different narratives depending on the course of action that they choose.

The relationship between interactivity and the narrative is critical in this theory. Interactivity began by being defined as technology-oriented, process-oriented, or user-oriented. The user oriented definition tended to be the most universal as it explains interactivity as, “the degree to which participants in a communication process can exchange roles and have control over their mutual discourse (Lee 261).” However, technology based definitions were the most popular as they placed the concept of interactivity as a characteristic of new technology.

The technological definitions lacked in their attempt to generalize the degree of interactivity across users. An advanced game player, for example, often feels more interactivity within a world than a novice would. An advanced gamer can access all available options to interact with the world and the character that they are controlling (Lee 261). Tamborini tried to take this into account when he formulated a new definition for interactivity which reads as follows;

Interactivity is a perceived degree that a person in a communication process with at least one more intelligent being can bring a reciprocal effect to other participants of the communication process by turn-taking, feedback, and choice behaviors (Tamborini 263).

According to this definition, the unit of analysis remains the individual, yet it applies across many media fields.

A definition of a narrative needed to be arrived at in order to attempt to connect it with the established concept of interactivity. Mallon and Webb (2000) say that “narrative is one of the oldest constructs humans use for understanding and giving meanings to the world” (p. 270) (Lee 264). Every culture is based on its narratives and its stories. Narratives can be cross-cultural and have existed

throughout all of man's history. Aristotle had defined narrative as a "story that has a beginning, middle, and an end (Lee 264)." This developed into the most recent accepted definition of narrative offered by Abbot (2002) when he said, "Narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events (Lee 265)."

Once again, Tamborini offers an alternative definition of narrative in order to overcome the previous definition's shortcomings. In order to apply the idea of a narrative to developing interactive media, Tamborini defines narratives as;

A representation of events that provides a cognitive structure whereby media users can tie causes to effects, convert the complexity of events to a story that makes sense, and thus satisfy their primitive urges to understand the physical and social worlds (Lee 265).

With these two definitions in place, the relationship between narrative and interactivity can be examined. There are two opposing views on this relationship. The first view suggests that interactivity and narrative cannot co-exist. Proponents of this view claim that interactivity actually hinders the proper flow of a narrative and that building an interactive narrative is useless as users will skip the narrative for instant gratification.

The second opinion suggests that interactive media proves that narratives and interactivity can co-exist and can bolster one another. Plowman (1996) claimed that interactive media with good narratives actually increase comprehension and enjoyment of the media (Lee 267). Wolf (2001) also suggested that interactivity can help the narrative by making the portrayal of multiple lines of narratives a possibility within one form of media (Lee 267).

The second view on the relationship between narrative and interactivity is further supported by trends in the video game industry, as the narrative is increasingly becoming a critical component in current and next generation games. Character-driven games, story-based games, and movie-sequel games are some of the most profitable on the market and all are based on their narratives. This view is further supported by the success of games based on movie narratives. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, for example, is a game that found the top of the ratings charts and was based on a movie plot. Many game developers believe that basing a game on a movie helps players become engaged in the narrative and understand the game world more quickly (Lee 267).

Conversely, video games which have been turned into movies have seen significantly less economic success. Movies such as *Super Mario Brothers* or *Mortal Kombat* have been major disappointments to their audiences. Players who see the movie may be disappointed to find that the narratives that their play-style created are not the narratives that the director of the movies decided to depict. It stands to reason that a movie which has a limited and linear path of progression would seem to be less captivating than a gaming experience with multiple lines of narrative (Lee 268). It may be possible that this shows the dominance of the video game as a form of expression as narratives, when moved to the video game format, seem to excel, while narratives moved away from video game formats suffer.

The four types of narratives present in interactive media represent a wider spectrum of narratives than are possible in traditional entertainment media. Jenkins (2004) categorizes these narratives into four categories – evoked narratives, enacted

narratives, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives (Lee 268). Evoked narratives are those from games like the previously mentioned *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* where the player is already aware of the basic game narrative but is able to fill in missing details through their actions. Enacted narratives give players a list of goals to accomplish and allow them to choose from a number of narrative lines in order to accomplish these goals. Completing missions in any Tom Clancy game (*Ghost Recon*, *Rainbow Six*, and *Splinter Cell*) are an example of this. A player can siege a target area by force, through stealth, or through various other strategies.

Embedded narratives are games such as *Resident Evil* where a player discovers a game's narratives through interaction with the game environment. In *Resident Evil* a player must solve puzzles and defeat enemies in a mysterious and frightening world in order to continue to progress the narrative. The final form of interactive narrative is the emergent narrative. By providing many possible narrative paths, the emergent narrative allows the player the most flexibility in the creation of their story. Games such as *Fallout 2* are an example of this as they allow the player to create their own story with very little linear progression to follow.

The presence of one of these types of narratives is a critical component in a successful video game because of man's natural preference for narratives. Narratives within video games began in role-playing games. These games, with their foundations in the Dungeons and Dragons tabletop game, were based around a main character that the player developed and crafted according to their desires (Wolf 35). Role-playing games continue to be the most popular form of video games

in Japan, yet they have been making a consistent move to the United States, particularly for the dramatic narratives that they convey.

The enjoyment of narratives may even have survival advantages, leading some scientists to believe that evolution favors those humans who are inclined to the enjoyment of narratives. A person who transfers themselves into a narrative world is provided with a chance to learn lessons without the risk of failure. It is much safer for a person to learn to avoid a dangerous beast through a story rather than through personally encountering the animal. Although people have not actually experienced what they have read in narratives, they can apply these lessons to real life survival, thus making the enjoyment of narratives an evolutionary advantage (Lee 270).

Another reason for narrative's importance in video games is their ability to reduce cognitive loads on the player who is trying to understand a complex virtual world (Lee 270). These narratives help a person to more quickly understand the world that they are put in. Typical narratives of good versus evil, or the escape from danger allow the player to understand the game and apply their own creativity to the experience. Furthermore, the player can focus on the basic task at hand; probably defeating their enemies. Without narratives, players can get lost amidst the rules and disorder of a new and unfamiliar game world.

Narratives also provide the audience with incentive to play a game from beginning to end. The player feels an extra sense of responsibility as they actually control the main character of the narrative and face the repercussions of their own actions (Lee 270). The motivation to do well because of their mental connection to the game is often reason enough for a player to struggle to finish a game.

Narrative theory actually connects to presence theories as it has been suggested that narratives increase the player's feelings of presence while playing games (Lee 271). Tamborini gives the example of a reader feeling presence when reading a good novel. The stronger the narrative that is presented, the more the reader will feel involved in the story. Studies by Lee, Jin, Park, and Kang in 2004 have posited that the use of narratives in computer games lead to a stronger feeling of presence than in traditional forms of media, thus linking the two theories (Lee 271).

While both theories are young, they are clearly linked and integral in the creation of next-gen video games. The importance of presence, particularly in the game environment, cannot be under scored. Successfully inducing presence, alone, can make a great video game. Likewise, a game built around a strong narrative will also find success. For example, the video game *The Matrix*, which was based off of the blockbuster movies, is a sub-par game by most reviewers' standards, but when placed inside the trilogy's superior narrative, it was wildly successful. The most successful games are those which combine a good narrative with successful presence inducing techniques. Such games not only turn substantial profits, but may eventually be considered "classics" by traditional artistic standards.

## VI. Kantian Connections to Communication Theories and Video Game History

The parallels between Kant's works and contemporary Communication theories on presence and narratives support his theory's application to modern expressions, particularly video games. With this said, the current video game medium can be evaluated according to Kant's criteria.

Christian Helmut Wenzel describes Kant's process of enjoying an aesthetic experience by saying,

We have to engage in a free play of imagination and understanding to see whether contemplating the object is pleasurable or not. We cannot predict whether such harmonious free play will happen. Nobody can. You have to try it out for yourself. There is an important element of autonomy and openness here. You have to be creative. You do not follow rules. It is almost as if you create new ones. (When we discuss fine art, we will see that geniuses in a certain sense create new rules)(Wenzel 34).

This description of the Kantian aesthetic process shows many similarities to the presence inducing process described in recent Communication studies.

Kant's making play one of the central features of the aesthetic experience requires immersion in an aesthetic environment (Smuts 4). This parallels thoughts on vividness within a spatial presence inducing game. In such a game, the player actually feels "there" in a game world (Tamborini 227). It has been demonstrated that presence works in direct proportion to the success and appeal of a game, much like Kant's idea that increased immersion in a work will make it more pleasurable to experience (Tamborini 238).

Furthermore, a medium will be boosted in its vividness by an increased use of sensory channels. Tamborini uses the example of a stereo being more audibly immersive than a telephone. Similarly, a television will be more immersive than a stereo because it affects our senses of sight and sound. Kant stresses that the “free play of faculties” exists within the capacities of our ordinary cognitive and sensory experience (Kant 102). Perhaps this is why he titles this ability “common sense”, because we, in judging, are using senses which are common to all of us. The more senses a work evokes in us, the more present we become, and the more we appreciate a work in a Kantian sense. Even though judgments operate on ordinary senses, the effective combination of our senses can give us the feeling of leaving reality and entering the work that we are engaged in.

Virtual reality began the study of presence in video games because of its ability to make the player lose touch with their reality. When one plays a virtual reality game, they are forced to use their entire body to interact with the game world. Similarly, when many people play race car games, they will tilt their bodies in the direction that they would like their car to move (Tamborini 226). Gruesome kills in fighting games or particularly violent hits in sports games often create some sort of verbal reaction from the player. The excitation transfer theory of media even suggests that our bodies will react physically to the media stimuli to which we are exposed (Tamborini 226). It wasn't until the recently released Nintendo Wii that the player actually needed to apply these physical movements to achieve success in the game world. This progression connects with the Kantian idea that we cannot know or predict if something will induce free play within us. If an art is immersive

enough to cause a free play of our faculties, we will physically react accordingly. Kantian “free play” is a sort of result of the contemporary idea of presence. If presence is created, a natural free play of the faculties will occur, allowing understanding and imagination to build off of one another to create an ever more heightened sense of presence in the game environment.

The feeling of presence is an unconscious one. As Tamborini says, in citing the work of Lombard and Ditton;

The essence of presence is often described as the perception of nonmediation. In this sense, presence can be understood as a psychological state in which the person’s subjective experience is created by some form of media technology with little awareness of the manner in which technology shapes this perception (Tamborini 226).

Kant’s definition also describes autonomy and openness in the process of judging works of art. This allows the judgment to remain in a realm of subjectivity while still making a claim for universality (Kant 27). Similarly, presence inducing media is not required to give a player particular rules for being present in the game world. It sets up a certain environment through pre-planned sights and sounds and allows lets the player to take actions to further involve themselves in the world. Every little detail in a video game environment may add to this feeling of presence, but they do not do so in a universal sense. Like any painting or poem, an image or word can be interpreted many ways, it is the proper organization of these words or images that can hopefully create presence in a wide range of audience members (Tamborini 228). Every aspect of presence theory, spatial, social, and self, all act to enhance a free play of ordinary cognition in an unconscious way to create greater appreciation of the work. The result of presence is nearly parallel to the result of a

free play of faculties, as both simply increase the amount of pleasure the viewer gets from the work (Tamborini 235).

The narrative theory in Communication studies greatly parallels Kant's ideas on the genius and aesthetic ideas. An aesthetic idea is the use of symbols or stories in order to allow a viewer to contemplate ideas which are outside of total human comprehension. The genius is the only thing that can give rules to art. It is an inborn disposition that allows an artist to apply aesthetic ideas into a work. The rules that this genius creates comes later, after the work of art has been created and accepted as an exceptional work (Wenzel 144).

The concept of aesthetic ideas relates well to the modern concepts of symbolism and the importance of narratives in the game world. Kant explicitly mentions that symbolism is a part of an aesthetic idea. According to Kant, some commonly accepted symbols can increase comprehension of new, great ideas (Kant 225). He particularly mentions morality, which proper symbolism can assist us in understanding. In a very simplistic sense, many narratives will use a nighttime setting to represent evil and a daytime setting to represent good. Video games often follow suit, with horror games being set in dark places and more jovial games using bright settings.

Kant explains that the narrative is an important tool that can work to evoke particular ideas in the minds of the audience. This allows the audience to engage the work intellectually and make personal decisions on its meaning. In a similar sense, Lee says in 2005 that "The mental engagement in narrative worlds (along with the ability to pretend and imagine) provides the solution. Thanks to the engagement,

human beings can have the secondary experience of the narrative worlds both by transporting themselves into the narrative worlds (Lee 270). In both cases, the viewer is lost briefly in the contemplation of the work due to its implicit narrative.

Supplementary representations within aesthetic ideas are those ideas to which all people are familiar and can be universally used to connect to greater meanings. Kant offers the example of lightning, which holds similar meaning to all people (Kant 315). In short, this allows a simple object to be used to represent a much greater idea. Similarly, Lee explains that one of the most important uses of the narrative in interactive media is because they significantly reduce cognitive load when people are trying to understand game world (Lee 270). While ideas of morality and death are often confronted in video games, the simple task on comprehending an entirely new world can be an intimidating one. Much like Kant he claims, the effective use of universal symbolism and narratives can allow a simple representation build up the comprehension of a greater concept.

According to Kant, the genius who applies commonly accepted narratives and symbols to their work will benefit from doing so (Kant 186). According to Lee, the game designer who applies the same concepts will be benefited with greater sales and recognition (Lee 271). This is particularly interesting when viewing the success of video games based off movies. Games which by all industry professional would be considered weaker in programming often find greater success because of the successful narratives that they are being based off of. While this may be a result of the movie's carry-over success, it hasn't worked when popular games have been turned into movies; perhaps suggesting that interactive media is one of the most

highly benefited formats from the use of narratives. Regardless, the two authors, from two very different times, speaking on different forms of expression, show an agreement on the importance of the use of the narrative.

Kant's concept of free play also seems to connect to the second part of the narrative theory; the connection to interactivity. Interactive media gives the audience member control over what they are viewing. Kant would say that the more engaged an audience member is in a work, the more successful that work is (Kant 102). It is particularly interesting that Kant defined his free play as the interchange between understanding and imagination. He describes this process as the functions of 'apprehension' and 'comprehension' complementing and strengthening each other (Wenzel 62). Interactive media seems to work the same way, perhaps to a heightened degree, where the player imagines, interacts, understands, and the cycle continues. Lee describes this process as a "reciprocal effect", where a player interacts with the game and then receives feedback to their mind (Lee 263). The player "apprehends" their world, interacts with it, and "comprehends", often through a narrative, what is going on.

This also links with the Kantian idea that a viewer should be able to autonomously interact with the work. Lee says, "Players can shape the way in which a story line is constructed by freely interacting with environments and agents in a game. Through this procedure 'interactive narrative' is made possible (Lee 267)." Kant's viewer is required to be creative as a video game player is required to be creative in their interaction with the world and their comprehension of the images on their game screen.

While there are clear parallels between some modern theories on media and Kant's thoughts on aesthetic judgments, Kant's theories have not been applied to modern expressions in order to determine if he would consider them legitimate art forms. Video games are perhaps the most radically new form of narrative expression that has received the least amount of attention as a potential art form. Aaron Smuts of contemporary aesthetics online suggests that philosophical aesthetics has entirely ignored the area of video games as art (Smuts 1). By applying Kant's standards for defining fine art, one could likely decide whether video games are an art, or a science, or a handicraft, and so on. Likewise, Kant's theory allows for the examination of the video game's capacity to approach beauty or sublimity and whether genius and aesthetic ideas are required in making a successful video game.

Kant explains that arts are created out of freedom; acts of instinct can only create the acts of nature (Kant 182). Quite obviously, video game programming does not come about through instinct, but from a long and arduous game creation process that can take many years. Steven Poole explains the amount of effort that goes into making a video game by writing;

A video game is put together by highly talented artists and graphic designers, as well as programmers, virtual architects, and sonic engineers. Increasingly, first-class graduates in computer science from such universities as Cambridge and MIT are moving into video games rather than academic research; there is also a large flow of animation talent from traditional cartoons into video game development. Musicians who might have become television or film composers are now writing video game soundtracks, and there is even such a beast known as the professional video game scriptwriter. There's a huge amount of thought and creativity encoded on that little silver disc (Poole 12).

Quite clearly, video games are not acts of nature.

Art is then distinguished from science in that it cannot be created in total effectiveness simply by following specific steps and instructions (Kant 183). Despite the fact that the nation's top science and math students are entering video game professions, video games design is much more than a science. While knowledge of the science of programming allowed Steve Russell to create the original *SpaceWar!*, it will never have the same artistic impact of some of the newer games which are based on narrative structures and character development. This is not to say that Steve Russell did not make a major technological break-through when he created his game, but it means that his work struggles to fit the definition of art.

There was a time when French novelist Georges Duhamel described the film industry as, "A pastime of illiterate, wretched creatures who are stupefied by their daily jobs, a machine of mindlessness and dissolution (Poole 13)." Yet, Stephen Poole claims that few people today would claim that movies are not works of art. Jazz, too, was shunned and looked down upon during its early years. Poole explains that art forms that depend on new technology are rarely, if ever, well-received (Poole 13). Even though video games rely on the newest technologies and the brightest scientific minds, the fact remains that successful video games are born out of creativity and imagination, not the basic steps of the scientific method.

Lastly, Kant distinguishes art from handicraft in that art "is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play (Kant 183)." The occupation of art, therefore, is agreeable in itself, while handicraft may be burdensome but worth its effects (Kant 183). Kant defines play as one of the two components which make up all of the capacities of the senses (Kant 110), explaining that the more play

that takes place when experiencing a piece of art, the more pleasurable it is to the viewer. Kant admits that there are many cases that are vague according to this definition. In many activities, the motives of the creator play a major role in determining whether a work should be classified as art or handicraft (Kant 183). After all, many works of art have had beneficial effects, ranging from fame for the artist to monetary gain. Yet, it is assumed that great painters, such as Leonardo DaVinci or Claude Monet did not have monetary gain in mind when they created their works, but did so because of the enjoyment of their craft. While it would be as impossible to find the motives of video game designers as it would be to find the motives of every individual poet or painter, it can be certain that “play” may be more central in the medium of the video game than any other. As Stephen Poole explicitly states, “there’s one critical difference that we need to bear in mind, and it throws a huge spanner in the works of any easy equation between videogames and traditional art forms. It’s this. What do you do with a videogame? You *play* it (Poole 13).”

While Kant had proven that art is not a product of nature, he maintained that some aspects of art must imitate nature in order for it to be effective. First, Kant explained that beautiful art must express either the physical aspects of nature or the internal nature of something (Kant 185). This is, again, is up to the motives of the artist. While some video games inately deal with a smiley face eating tiny white dots and enemy ghosts, other games are based on an extensive narrative and emotional engagement with the game (Lee 260). The second criterion is that a beautiful work of art will appear as free from rules as nature appears to be.

Naturally, no work of art can be fully free from rules, but it would appear that video games may be the most free of every art form. The interactivity element of video games allows for multiple lines of narratives (Lee 267). “Interactive narrative”, as described by Lee, Park, and Jin, is the first way to offer the possibility of constructing a situation where the audience has the freedom to interact with environments and agents throughout the game in order to, in essence, write their own narrative (Lee 267). The use of emergent narratives has become a major trend in the video game industry, beginning with games such as *Fallout 2* and *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. It is becoming increasingly common for games to offer character and world-creation systems within their programming language, giving players a greater sense of freedom and realism (Lee 267).

For video games to be considered works of “fine art”, then they must be able to, at least, approach beauty or sublimity. Kant explains certain aspects that must be inherent in a work for it to be judged as beautiful. In his second moment of judging the beautiful, Kant mentions that a work must be able to be judged as universally beautiful. In other words, if one person claims that a thing is beautiful, they are implicitly making the argument that everyone else should agree with their judgment. Based off of this concept, common ratings have been established in the video game industry in order to achieve some universal standard for judging success.

A great video game can overcome an individual’s genre biases, further proving a video game’s potential universal appeal. Role-playing games were always popular in Japan, but hardly recognized in America until 1997. In 1997, *Final Fantasy*

*VII* was released, bringing the role-playing genre to America (Poole 40). The game became one of the top selling games in America, despite its place in a relatively unpopular genre. It has come to be named by Sony as one of its “Playstation Greatest Hits” games (Squaresoft 1997). In months, gaming communities across the world agreed that this game was one of the greatest of all time.

Any game publication which releases a “Top Ten Games of All Time” list consistently has the same few games listed on it. According to a study done by [filibustergames.com](http://www.filibustergames.com), where they studied the top ten lists released by the top 27 video game websites and magazines, games such as *Mario Brothers 64* and *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time* appeared on over sixty-percent of the lists. Games such as *Final Fantasy VII*, *Goldeneye 007* for Nintendo 64, and *Super Metroid* were also mentioned as appearing on a majority of top ten lists (<http://www.filibustercartoons.com/games.htm> 5). This study suggests that great works can be expected to please universally.

Furthermore, some of the best video games have been shown to cross gender lines. While dissatisfaction with most modern video games has been shown among women, men seem to be satisfied so long as technology continues to progress (Poole 146). The only variable that reconciles the differences between the two gender’s satisfactions with video games is ‘quality’. As Stephen Poole says in his book Trigger Happy:

The “gender” differences are dissolved in the face of a truly great game, such as *Mario 64* or *Final Fantasy VII* (the latter was ranked overall favorite by equal proportions of men and women CESA respondents). Videogame developers in the future will appeal to

more men and more women only as long as their games mature aesthetically (147).

This quote seems to apply aesthetic development to the universal acceptance of these games which is a direct application of Kant's second moment in the judgment of beauty. It also suggests that certain games that have already been released to the public have begun to accomplish these lofty goals.

Kant divided the sublime into two categories; one challenging the individual's conception of greatness, the other challenging the individual in force. The sublime would create fear or discomfort, except that it provokes understanding about overwhelming experiences. *Doom*, according to J.C. Herz in Joystick Nation, brought fear into the video game industry, yet it was fear that made the game wildly popular (Herz 89). This feeling of Kant's dynamically sublime is what drove the world's fascination with *Doom*. On the other hand, the mathematically sublime, the feeling of absolute size, drives the success of many role-playing and simulation games. Games which take nearly one-hundred hours to play are often touted for the sheer magnitude of their programming (Poole 41). Similarly, the vast amounts of options that are found in many new video games transfer a feeling of the mathematically sublime to the player.

In his explanation of judging beauty and sublimity, Kant also says that beautiful art must depict morality and possibly other "supersensible" concepts. These grand ideas, such as the battle of good versus evil, are to be expressed through the use of aesthetic ideas and common narratives. While primitive games, much like early cinema, did not express these grand ideas, new games are beginning to deal

with supersensible concepts. Mark J.P. Wolf lists *Mortal Kombat* and the *Final Fantasy* series as games which have begun to emphasize the destruction of the anti-social and evil forces and the protection of the positive hero character (Wolf 179). He also explains that new action games are beginning to deal with the concepts of death and conquest (Wolf 178).

Wolf also discusses the archetypal characters that are beginning to emerge in video games. He mentions the valiant heroes, sexualized women, and evil villains of current popular games. Kant would agree as he said that an attempt at art is when an author attempts to portray a character according to the image that he or she had for the character in their head ([www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu) 18). The author who attempts to depict these characters may be inborn with “genius” or the ability to apply rules to art. In the video game industry, game developers are the geniuses who, for one reason or another, are able to create wildly successful and revolutionary games. Once a game becomes recognized as a success, future games are based off of its innovations. For example, Will Wright, the famous designer of *The Sims* and *Sim City*, revolutionized the simulation game genre with his new camera movements, in-game options, and user-friendly game-play (Herz 29). These open-ended games about building something and watching it evolve led to the creation of games such as *Roller Coaster Tycoon* and *Mall Tycoon* which followed the path carved out by the “genius” Will Wright. Video game developers are attempting to do the exact same as they play the role of script writer, author, and composer, all in one.

The video game medium may actually turn out to be superior to movies, painting, or poetry. Kant, in all of his genius, foresees the possibility of beautiful

arts being combined in one form. He offers the example of poetry and music combined in a song or the play of music and shapes together in a dance. He explains that, "in these combinations beautiful art is all the more artistic, although whether it is more beautiful can be doubted in some cases (Kant 203)." Video games are an example of one product that combines many aesthetic forms. Much of the writing in video games, role-playing games in particular, is poetic. Musical scores for games can be over one-hundred tracks long and are being composed by world-famous musicians. Screen shots for video games rival the splendor and realism of some of history's most acclaimed paintings. The game play in a video game revolves around an engine based on shapes and movement, similar to the choreography of dance. The video game is the first medium to combine imagery, sound, and interactivity (Wolf 5).

Video games most certainly follow the guidelines for art that Kant sets out. They clearly surpass the simple steps of science or the basic motives of handicraft. Videogames are only successful when the genius' mind is able to revolutionize his genre and are further popularized when a good narrative is applied. Modern video games have been applying grand ideas of the supersensible into their forty-plus hour narrative structure. The symbolism and stories of these great games are being recognized universally, regardless of the audience's location or gender. Kant even recognized the fact that the combination of the arts found in one medium actually makes the medium an ever more artistic expression. This expression, although more artistic, may not necessarily be more beautiful. Examination of individual famous,

“classic”, games is needed in order to determine whether video games have actually begun this move towards Kantian beauty.

## VII. A Kantian Aesthetic Critique on *Final Fantasy VII*

On the back of the 3-disc case for Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VII*, a quote by Game fan magazine reads, "...quite possibly the greatest game ever made." Its appearance on nearly every gaming publication's "Top Games of All Time" list backs up this claim and makes *Final Fantasy VII* a video game worthy of a Kantian aesthetic analysis. In light of such an analysis, *Final Fantasy VII* will likely demonstrate that video games are a form of fine art and can, if rarely, reach levels of Kantian beauty and sublimity.

At the game's original release for the Sony Playstation game console on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1997, Game Pro Magazine said that it "Towers over the competition in terms of graphics, sounds, story, and playability." Graphically, Gamespot.com made the bold claim that *Final Fantasy VII* was the most dazzling game ever to be released on any console (gamespot.com 1). Amazingly, the game's graphics remain captivating by today's current-gen standards. Additionally, the depth of the game's soundtrack, composed by world famous composer Nobuo Uematsu, is mind-blowing, consisting of 85 full-length tracks (gamespot.com 1).

*Final Fantasy* set sales records in Japan by selling 2.3 million copies in three days, moving American sellers to push up its release date. In its first weekend in America, the game sold 330,000 copies and in a few weeks had sold over 500,000 copies. By December, Sony reported that the game had sold over 1 million copies, prompting Business Wire to explain that, "Sony redefined the role-playing game (RPG) category and expanded the conventional audience with the launch of *Final*

*Fantasy VII* (Business Wire 1).” The game had transcended their typical niche audience, reaching people who would otherwise be uninterested in the role-playing genre.

The game’s acclaimed story centers around the main character, Cloud Strife, who joins the rebel group called AVALANCHE. AVALANCHE, which is led by a belligerent man named Barret and Cloud’s childhood friend Tifa, is standing against the Shinra, the world’s largest corporation. Cloud was previously a member of SOLDIER, an elite fighting force in the service of “the Shinra”. The Shinra Corporation is based in the metropolis of Midgar and was using energy reactors to suck ‘Mako’ out of the planet. Mako is the planet’s energy and when Mako is removed from the planet, the planet slowly dies. Mako is an energy source which was replacing coal mines throughout the planet, giving the Shinra Co. greater power over lesser companies.

After numerous attacks by AVALANCHE on Shinra’s Mako reactors, Shinra decides to wipe out the entire section of Midgar in which AVALANCHE is known to be located. Shinra accomplishes their mission, and in doing so they capture a girl, Aeris, who Cloud met on one of his missions to a mako reactor. Naturally, Cloud, Barret, and Tifa set out to save Aeris who was taken to the Shinra Headquarters. In their attempt to do so however, they are captured and placed in prison. They escape only after waking up to find all of the guards and many of the Shinra executives, including President Shinra, murdered. A man named Sephiroth, an ex-veteran of SOLDIER, the group Cloud was previously a member in, had left evidence of his committing these murders. Sephiroth had also stolen the Jenova specimen, a

powerful creature hidden in Shinra laboratories. After a series of events, Cloud, Tifa, Barret, Aeris, and Red VIII, a talking-dog found in a Shinra laboratory, escape Midgar.

The group meets in a nearby town to discuss what they had witnessed. Cloud explains that Sephiroth is widely recognized as history's greatest warrior. Cloud even had the chance to work with the legend during a mission to the town of Nibelheim. Cloud recounts when Sephiroth discovered that he was created from harnessed Mako energy by the Shinra's head scientist; Professor Gast. Upon this discovery, Sephiroth went on a quest to find the "Promised Land" and his mother, Jenova, who was one of the last descendants of the "Cetra", an ancient race of beings who settled the planet. The player would soon discover that Aeris herself is the last living descendant of the "Cetra". Sephiroth took the news of his bloodline to mean that he was superior to the rest of the world's inhabitants, losing all attachment to human life and slaughtering the population of Nibelheim, including Cloud's family.

Cloud and the group set out on a quest to stop Sephiroth, who they fear may be even more dangerous to the planet than the Shinra are. Throughout their journey, the party acquires new members Vincent Valentine, Yuffie Kisaragi, Cait Sith, and Cid Highwind. As the game progresses, the player learns the details of each of these character's lives. For a strange example, the player will learn that Red VIII's grandfather is actually a floating, human, astrologist named Bugenhagen. Bugenhagen will help the party at various times throughout their journey and will show Red VIII the truth about his family's past.

As the game progresses, Sephiroth's plan is slowly revealed. It seems that if the planet is damaged enough, the lifestream, which is the spirit of the planet, will gather to heal the injury. Sephiroth plans to use his power to merge with the lifestream, to gain supreme power over the planet. In order to do so, Sephiroth needed to attain "Black Materia" and release a powerful spell, called "Meteor", to do significant damage to the planet. The party succeeds in capturing the Black Materia, but Sephiroth uses a strange power he possesses over Cloud to make him relinquish the materia back to him.

Aeris then retreats to a holy place to pray to stop Sephiroth. During this time Sephiroth appears and kills Aeris, a scene which has become perhaps the most famous scene in video game history. An Electronic Gaming Monthly article from the January 2005 issue says that without *Final Fantasy VII*, "Aeris would not have died, and gamers would not have learned to cry ([www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com) 1)." Throughout the game, Sephiroth continues to make Cloud doubt the memories of his past by telling Cloud that he was also created in a laboratory. Cloud eventually comes to realize who he is and the truth about his past because of his journey.

Sephiroth eventually fortifies himself in the crater that his "mother", Jenova, made on her journey to the planet many thousands of years ago. As he fortifies himself, the WEAPONS are released by the planet. WEAPONS are powerful creatures sent to protect the planet in times of danger. The WEAPONS judge all humans to be dangerous and threaten the safety of all people. Shinra, and its new president, Rufus, begin to shift their focus to defending the world from these WEAPONS, while Cloud and his companions continue the pursuit Sephiroth.

Many events and additional subplots unfold, revealing true identities and alliances, all leading to the group's final confrontation with Sephiroth. They plan on invading his crater and releasing a spell that Aeris had sacrificed herself to prepare, called "Holy". This is when the party encounters Sephiroth and attempts the final boss fight of the game. If they are successful, meteor is partially destroyed by Holy and Aeris' spirit helps to control the lifestream. Midgar, Shinra's main city, is destroyed in the chaos, leaving an unpolluted land of lush greenery (Final Fantasy VII 1997).

While many games can boast impressive graphics and sound, Gamespot.com explains that, "for all its top-notch graphics and sound, truly the best aspect of *Final Fantasy VII* is the plot that these peerless aesthetics help weave (gamespot.com 2)." Interestingly, by using the term 'aesthetics' Gamespot.com begins to recognize the importance of narratives within video games. They go on to claim that *Final Fantasy VII's* story line reflects influences by Frank Herbert's Dune, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and Godzilla, all famous and widely respected works of art (gamespot.com 3). If *Final Fantasy VII* can be paralleled to such great works, then it stands to reason that it is more than worthy of a Kantian aesthetic critique.

In order for one to judge any work of art as beautiful in this context, they must assert that Kant's four moments of beauty hold true. The first of his moments is disinterestedness. A person must be able to judge something as beautiful without any personal biases towards the object. He or she should not need to own the object nor be the creator of it. First of all, the sheer breadth of sources which hail *Final Fantasy VII* as a masterwork shows that bias played little role in its fame. The

chances of one source being bias may be high, but the approval of hundreds of video game publications whose credibility is based on their reliability makes for a highly trustworthy assertion (www.gamefaqs.com 1).

Furthermore, the game introduced the successful use of full motion videos (FMV's). An FMV is a break in the typical game play of a video game where a graphically advanced video clip is shown in order to progress the story line. This was a major graphical advancement in video games (Low 4). Similarly, *Final Fantasy VII* advanced musical compositions in video games as the famous composer Nobuo Uematsu created its 85 track soundtrack (Low 3). This soundtrack took over eight months to complete and hit the top of the Japanese charts upon its release (Low 8). These advancements made video games more appealing to the observer. While players are bound to be somewhat engaged in the video game, a person who may not be directly playing the game could now enjoy the game through its beautiful screenshots and musical compositions. This enhances the judgment's disinterestedness.

The second moment Kant names is universality. A universal judgment calls every other person to agree with it. A truly beautiful object isn't only effective to a small group of people, but touches a wider public who open their minds to the work. As stated earlier, *Final Fantasy VII* allowed role-playing video games to find success in markets outside of Japan (Business Wire 1). As Andrew house, the VP of marketing for Sony Corp. said in a news article on December 4, 1997, "*Final Fantasy VII's* success in North America has surpassed our original sales expectations and with the holidays steadily approaching, this is only the beginning." He continues,

“The sales success reported from our retailers to date is proving that an expansive variety of video game players are buying *Final Fantasy VII* (Low 11).” This shows that the game had universal appeal. Admittedly, many games appeal only to fans of a specific genre. *Final Fantasy VII* changed that, showing that players can appreciate a good game for its inherent beauty more so than because genre biases.

Kant’s third moment is titled; purposiveness. He explains that works of art must not be created with a specific goal in mind, but must accomplish some purpose in the end. In *Final Fantasy VII*’s case, it would have been very easy for the game’s developers to follow the paths carved out by the previous installments of the *Final Fantasy* series to achieve their already ground-breaking success. Instead *Final Fantasy VII* took one of the biggest risks in video game history: they were the first to allocate a Hollywood level budget to a video game. It is reported that over \$45 million was committed to the development of the game itself. An additional \$100 million was allocated for advertising expenses (Low 2). The game also took the risk of weaving FMVs into the actual gameplay of the game. Furthermore, the game was the first to combine the influences of developers in the US and Japan, creating a game that appeals to a more widespread audience. Lastly, the game’s story line is many times more complex than any other video game up to date, even surpassing most novels and movies ever released (Wolf 91). As Gek Siong Low says in his article [Coming to America](#):

It was a very radical thing to do. The conventional wisdom then was that RPGs were all about fighting monsters and leveling up – graphics was not seen as an important factor. Squaresoft believed otherwise, and thought that graphics would appeal to a much wider audience.

They took a huge gamble with the production budget and proved that their intuition was right. They also showed that a Hollywood-sized budget can in fact work for an RPG, and raised the status of RPGs away from the perception that RPGs were made by a few guys tinkering around in a garage (Low 3).

These risks show that the developers of the game were devoted to creating something great. Without a doubt, the taking of such chances shows that their aim was outside of simple profit. While their risks paid off, many more safe bets would have made them substantial amounts of money. Instead of planning their project with ulterior goals, the advancements that they made to the game industry were a result of their beginning with artistry in mind.

The final moment is titled; necessity. This moment is defined by the free play of imagination and understanding that naturally takes place in the human mind when engaged in a beautiful work. This free play enhances the viewer's cognition of and emotional response to the work in general (Wenzel 62). Naturally, this free play affects different viewers to varying degrees. There are moments in the game that affected many people in powerful ways uncommon to the video game medium. The death of the character, Aeris, in particular, was perhaps the most emotionally powerful moment in video game history ([www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com) 1). Steven Poole explains that the death of "a certain character in *Final Fantasy VII*" is the primary example of a videogame's power to induce emotional responses in the player (Poole 100). Emotional responses this strong can only be the product of a work that affects people's imagination and comprehension to a very significant degree.

Kant also explains that if art is to be considered beautiful, it must resemble nature in its themes and construction (Wenzel 145). Each Final Fantasy game creates

a new world to immerse the player in. Every world has new rules and personalities, all establishing a relationship to real life nature. Additionally, the particular world of *Final Fantasy VII* began a trend towards non-linear story lining. Kant explains that a beautiful work of art will appear as removed from rules as nature is. The non-linear progression does not set a player on a specific course, but allows them to bend their world more and more to their will. Lastly, the game, much like many great novels or musical compositions, deals with the nature of man. There are characters who represent the power of science (Rufus Shinra, Prof. Hojo), of religion (Aeris, Bugenhagen), and of man (Sephiroth, Cloud). These themes pervade many great literary and philosophical works as they are some of the fundamental building blocks of humanity.

Aesthetic ideas are used to make the audience think, imagine, and engage the work that they are dealing with. Aesthetic ideas play off of commonly used symbols to represent popular narrative themes and characters. Kant describes an author who strives for beauty by attempting to create prototypical characters, such as the morally impotent villain or the redeemed hero. Likewise, the directors of *Final Fantasy VII* attempted to utilize these commonly accepted symbols in order to promote the understanding of their master work. Aeris plays the role of the Christ figure in the game. She sacrificed herself when she was preparing a spell that would save mankind. By no coincidence, the spell was named "Holy". She was portrayed as a happy and innocent girl with exceptional wisdom. She was dressed in light pinks and whites, symbolizing her innocence.

Sephiroth was the morally impotent and selfish villain, often seeing things only from his own point-of-view. He was clad in black and silver. In a famous FMV scene from the game, Sephiroth turns his back on the camera while shrouded in fire and smoke. The smoke and fire reference another famous, if not Biblical, symbol, showing the hellish evil that surrounded the man. The Shinra represented the common image of the corporate world. The Shinra put their profitability ahead of all other priorities: nature, the future, even human lives. They were represented by their sky scraper buildings and their suit-clad employees. The audience's reception of the game creator's way of representing the story's institutions and characters shows that *Final Fantasy VII* strives for art and achieves beauty. The use of color and shape symbols fit Kant's definition of an attempt to apply aesthetic ideas. These aesthetic ideas, which *Final Fantasy VII* implements effectively, are a critical element in creating beauty.

Aesthetic ideas can also be used to provoke contemplation about the "supersensible". *Final Fantasy VII's* messages about pain, death, and nature are all conveyed using aesthetic ideas. As Kant explains, the creator of a work must weigh their artistic decisions based on natural human judgments of beauty. For example, one night a designer for the game called the game's director and suggested killing Aeris' and replacing her with Tifa. The director used his judgment on video game and narrative design to confirm the designer's idea. That small decision allowed the game's aesthetic symbolism to provoke thoughts within the player about life and death. Aeris' death was a profound moment in the timeline of videogames because of the important issues it forced the audience to confront (Low 5).

The game also contains artistic elements of the sublime. The mathematically sublime comes from being overwhelmed by the sheer size or quantity of something. Up to 1997, *Final Fantasy VII*'s programming language was the most complex of its kind. The sheer multitude of programmers and game designers was overwhelming (Low 2). The game play lasts for at least 40 hours, doubling any game's length preceding its release. The directors of the game created a massive world, often making the player feeling minute in the grand scheme of its mass. There are many towns to visit and secrets to uncover, taking many real-life game hours to fully examine. This impressive work can easily create the feeling of the mathematically sublime in the player.

Similarly, feelings of the dynamically sublime are perhaps more present in *Final Fantasy VII* than in most other games to date. First of all, *Final Fantasy VII* is very successful at instilling presence in its player. This is perhaps one of the reasons for its exceptional success in every market. With the player feeling as if they are part of the game world, perhaps even in the main character's shoes, the challenges that they face are direct challenges to their efforts and decision-making. The element that makes *Final Fantasy VII* truly challenging is the introduction of the WEAPONS into the game world. These creatures were quests outside of the main story line, yet they were by far the game's most difficult enemies to defeat. Unless you had played the game for many hours, these challenges were seemingly impossibly difficult. While this may not be a direct challenge to a person's physical well-being, they represent great mental challenges and a physical threat to the character that the player embodies in the game.

The men who are credited with the creation of *Final Fantasy VII* play the roles of Kant's "geniuses". Hironobu Sakaguchi was the game's producer, having produced every previous installment of the Final Fantasy series. After trying his talents in a number of genres, he found his niche in the business of making role-playing games. Nobuo Uematsu was the musical producer. He has been referred to as the John Williams of video games. Yoshinori Kitase was the director of the project. He began his career in the film industry and moved to video games. Many of Final Fantasy's mature and cinematic aspects are products of his influence (Low 1). These three men, in combination with some of the most talented programmers and animators from around the world, collaborated to create this work of fine art (Low 4).

Kant admits that men cannot be labeled as geniuses, nor can a work be an example of a masterwork until it is accepted by the public as such. Now, the game has paved the way for future installments in the series and of the genre. Its fighting system has come to be known as the "Final Fantasy turn-based fighting system" and is fundamental in role-playing games. The non-linear open world style of game play has been adopted by game designers across many genres. *Final Fantasy VII* paved the way for high-budget game making, with high profile soundtracks and art design teams. The risks these geniuses took are now viewed as exemplary ways to create a good video game.

As video games have become an artistic medium, *Final Fantasy VII* has, without a doubt, attained high levels of both beauty and sublimity. It has not lost any of its effectiveness despite advancing technology. Its music and images please

both player and the viewer. Furthermore, the game has set the bar for all future role-playing games. Amazingly, even with new technologies and more funding, few game narratives have reached the level that *Final Fantasy VII's* has set. *Final Fantasy VII* truly shows that video games can achieve Kantian beauty, sublimity, and can surpass more traditional forms of art in the impact that their narrative can have on the future and the audience.

## VIII. Conclusion

Kant's famous work on aesthetics, the Critique on the Power of Judgment, explains the criteria by which fine art should be defined. Fine art imitates nature, is neither handicraft nor a science, and uses aesthetic ideas. Kant also explains that works of fine art will achieve some level of beauty or sublimity. Beauty is judged according to four "moments": disinterestedness, universality, purposiveness, and necessity. A beautiful work will induce a free play of our cognitive abilities which will engage us in the work itself. A sublime work overwhelms the viewer and forces them to examine the feelings that the work creates.

Kant's two-century-old theory connects to contemporary Communication theories on interactive media. Presence theory is very similar Kant's explanation of the free play that occurs when viewing a beautiful work. Kant explained that a work which engages more sensory channels would likely find greater success. Presence theory echoes these beliefs. The narrative theory from Communication studies also mirrors Kant's beliefs on aesthetic ideas and the genius. Narrative theory explains the importance of symbolism to convey critical and significant storylines. Kant's belief on the genius' application of aesthetic ideas parallels the process and importance of conveying an engrossing story within the narrative theory.

The narrative and presence theories were created for their application to video games and other interactive media. While Kant's theories were made well before the age of the video game, he mentions the possibility and enhanced artistry of a form which combines many other artistic forms. Interactive media imitates

nature in ways that traditional art forms cannot. By allowing the player control in an increasingly open atmosphere, video games are breaking free from constraints and rules. Video games have proven that they can achieve universal acclaim as many “classic” games have been highly rated across the industry. Video games also deal with narratives as immersive as any art form, with their story lines taking over 50 hours to unfold. These narratives often revolve around character types made famous from past literary and artistic works. It seems to some that video games are moving to a point where their stories rival great works of literature, their visuals rival great paintings, and their soundtracks rival great musical compositions.

The video game industry has been developing for nearly four decades and is finally receiving the attention it deserves as an artistic medium. From the earliest years with games like *Spacewar!* to the newest technological masterworks, video games have been playing technology and artistry off of one another in order to create the best possible product. The 1997 “Playstation Classic”, *Final Fantasy VII* by Squaresoft Inc., is proof of the video game’s entrance into the art world. *Final Fantasy VII* brought video game fans of every genre together in reverence of one game. It took the risk of introducing the use of the FMV into video games. The creation of the game was another great risk, being the first big-budget video game ever made. Its characters and story was the most complex of any game at the time and remains one of the most captivating tales in video game history. Most experts agree that it was the first and potentially only game to evoke such a strong emotional response that it actually brought many players to tears (www.findarticles.com 1).

Video games quite clearly rival the cinema and more recent artistic expressions as an effective form of art. It would seem that they compete with even the most ancient and respected forms of expression. When Kant explained that one medium could combine various forms of artwork, he could have never imagined the complexity of the forms that technology has created. Likewise, few seemed to expect that video games would come to deal with the legitimate artistic issues found in classic narrative forms. While all video games are not beautiful works of art, the video game technology itself can, without a doubt, be used to for the purpose of artistic expression. The existence of video games like *Final Fantasy VII* are evidence that even according to the strict and respected standards of Immanuel Kant, this media can be used in order to achieve artistic beauty and sublimity.

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