

THE NUANCES OF VIDEO GAME CURATION

LESSONS FROM ARGENTINA

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“Add the word ‘art’ and you instantly create a problem.”¹

Video games have managed to permeate all levels of society and are fast on their way to becoming the dominant medium of the 21st century, like the moving image was for the 20th century and the photograph was before both of them. Eric Zimmerman’s 2013 “Manifesto for the Ludic Century” summarizes in a concrete and direct manner the various reasons why we could assert we are living in the age of play.² Is there, then, no escape from this playful present? Characterizing games as the Copernican twist for the 21th century may be putting too much responsibility on a medium that is still fighting to shake its reputation as a form of entertainment alone, but regardless, video games are prepared for the battle.

So powerful is video games’ capacity to break down boundaries that even the normally hermetic and impenetrable art world has been drawn into their technological magic circle. Perhaps it was just a matter of time, after all a flirtation between games and art has existed for centuries, as Johan Huizinga noted in *Homo Ludens*, when he declared, “All art derives from play.”³ Dadaism is one of the usual suspects when analyzing the connections between games and art, but there are traces of this intricate relationship that can be found much further back, for example in hieroglyphic depictions of the ancient Egyptian board game of Senet, dating to c. 3100 BCE. On a parallel path, art has a lengthy history of experimenting with technology, and there is a broad and deep discussion among scholars, critics and curators regarding the place and role of new media art within the art world.⁴ In this context, video games represent another device with which to experiment, a logical continuation of the artistic exploration of the notions of interaction and immersion. As Arthur Danto has observed, “[n]ot everything is possible at every time,”⁵ meaning that certain artworks simply could not be inserted as artworks into certain periods of art history. Since 2005, new art media curator Steve Dietz has remarked on the explosion of artistic activity aroused since the invention of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. Dietz has long reflected on the impact that new media art has on museum collection practices, along with the importance of establishing new ground rules for this curatorship that must take into account research, presentation and conservation: “Regardless of institutional structure [...] it is important to consider how to integrate new media art into the museum’s collection practices as well as to consider how its distinctive features raise certain conceptual issues and pragmatic concerns.”⁶ Recent scholarship exploring the historical relationship between video games and the art

1. Geert Lovink, “New Media Arts at the Crossroads,” Paper presented at Conference at Argos Center for Art and New Media, Brussels, 2007.

2. Eric Zimmerman, “Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” *Being Playful: Eric Zimmerman’s Game Design Blog*, 9 September 2013, <https://ericzimmerman.wordpress.com/2013/09/09/manifesto-for-a-ludic-century/>.

3. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Emecé, 1968): 65

4. For deeper insight into this matter, see Domenico Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art* (Link, 2013). Throughout the book Quaranta explores the historical, sociological and conceptual roots of New Media while suggesting new critical and curatorial strategies for its insertion in the contemporary art field.

5. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Harvard University Press), 44.

6. Steve Dietz, *Collecting New-Media Art: Just Like Anything Else, Only Different*, *NeMe.org*, 2005, <http://www.neme.org/texts/collecting-new-media-art>.

world, such as John Sharp's *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, shows that the time has come for video games to enter the art world and engage its debates.

Whether or not video games can be categorized as art is of no interest here—a wide range of scholars are already debating that matter and, like all discussions regarding the definition of art, it is likely to devolve into a never-ending cycle. The objective of this chapter is to deepen our discussion of how video games and the art world relate to one another. What does an *artgame* exhibition tell us? What insights can we glean regarding the society it represents? Curating video games involves merging diverse disciplines and areas of knowledge, including art history, technology and gaming. New media art is important to the art world not because of the technology it involves, but because of the uses it gives to these devices and the stories it tells. In the end, new media art it is like any other form of artistic expression—it is not about the materials, except when it expressly *is* about the materials.⁷ The same goes for video games. The inclusion of video games in the art world involves examining their use for “critical play [...] built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics.”⁸ But it also means using games to think about new forms of interactive narrative such as those envisioned by Janet Murray in her writings on cyber-narratives,⁹ pushing the medium to create new aesthetic experiences based purely on play. Video game exhibitions are a great window to these important ways in which games can push us to think and create differently.

With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will look into the way that art and video games have been interacting over the course of the last decade in Argentina, by critically examining my own experience over the past nine years curating the exhibition *Game on! El arte en juego (Game On! Art in Play)* in Argentina. This chapter invites readers to revisit the history of this exhibition as a way of understanding how video games have come to blur the limits of interactive art and create an aesthetic of their own. As Paul Callaghan, former director of the Australian independent game festival Freeplay, explains, “Games are an art, one of many ways of producing meaning of and about the world and our experiences.”¹⁰ Likewise, every exhibition can tell us something not only about the works exhibited but also about the society within which they were produced. Today in particular, exhibitions can speak to the transformation of the public from a passive audience into a conglomerate of curious protagonists, and about the mutations this evolution implies for art museums and galleries.

THE LATIN AMERICAN CONUNDRUM

Latin American artists and game designers have been experimenting with video games for a long time. The first approaches within the art field can be located by the early works of artists such as Venezuelan digital art pioneer Yucef Merhi, who began working with video games in the mid-1980s, and by the late 1990s games began to gain greater prominence in the Latin American art world, mostly in the form on artgame production like the game mods created by Mónica Jacobo in Argentina and the hacking activities of new media artists like Arcángel Constantini in Mexico.¹¹ On the other hand, the first artgame productions within the Latin American video game development community can be traced at the very start of the 21st century in the works of independent Argentine developer Daniel Benmergui, who has become the leading figure for indie production in the region, in addition to being

7. For more on this matter, see Stephen C. Foster, “Clement Greenberg: Formalism in the ‘40s and ‘50s,” *Art Journal* 35.1 (1975): 20-24.

8. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009).

9. For deeper insight on this matter see Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1998).

10. Paul Callaghan, “Cultural Connections for Games,” *British Council Film*, <http://film.britishcouncil.org/comment/2017/continue> (2017).

11. For more on the work of Mónica Jacobo and the beginning of the Argentine game art scene, see her interview with Mathias Jansson on *Gamescenes*, October 2011, <http://www.gamescenes.org/2011/10/interview-monica-jacobo-and-the-argentinian-game-art-scene.html>. Regarding the career of Arcángelo Constantini and his video game-related works, see his website: <http://www.arc-data.net/>. For more on Yucef Merhi's works, see his official web page: <http://www.cibernetico.com/works>.

internationally recognized for winning the Nuovo Award prize at the International Game Festival in 2014 with his game *Storyteller*. Since then, an increasing number of game developers have been working alongside artists, experimenting with new game mechanics and narratives.

Despite these instances of crossover between video games and the art field, there has not been a sustained tradition of exhibition and reflection on this topic. Until very recently, there had only been a few isolated exhibitions and scarce material developed by Latin American scholars regarding their cultural impact, and even less regarding the implications of video games for the art world. It is high time for local academics to join the discussion that is taking place worldwide, reflecting on the role the new media art world plays in producing, exhibiting and discussing video games. As Domenico Quaranta argues: “The importance of this should not be underestimated: even if the piece never fulfils the idea of art that other arenas have, it will have heralded a new development in knowledge that can be brought to fruition elsewhere.”¹² Quaranta’s writings echo the reflections of renowned art critics and curators like Christiane Paul or Sarah Cook on the new challenges that technology imposes on museums, galleries and art exhibits in general.¹³ Dietz, likewise, has observed the following regarding the challenges of new media art: “Interactivity and user-friendliness are just a couple of the expectations with which we view digital art. On the museum side of the equation, there are a whole set of parallel issues to do with touch/don’t touch, how much time you spend with a time-based work, and other learned gallery behaviors.”¹⁴ Academics working on digital culture are beginning to ponder the specific strategies and practices necessary for the preservation of an exhibition of video games, taking into account their incorporation into the museum as pedagogical tools and taking note of a “tendency in the future [...] to put more emphasis on permanent collections, as well as special thematic exhibitions instead of general overviews of digital game cultures.”¹⁵ We are also beginning to see academic work on the history of new media art and artgames, such as Sharp’s *Works of Game*, a great introduction for a general audience to the three main fields of interaction between games and art: artgames, artists’ games and game art. While this seems to be a subject of increasing interest in North America and Europe, it is difficult to find theoretical production from Latin America aside from the early writings of Mónica Jacobo or the current productions of Claudia Costa Pederson, who writes with a focus on media theory and social practice, being a strong advocate for gender issues and Latin American visibility.¹⁶

In 2009, the birth of the exhibition *Game on! El arte en juego* arose from this need in Argentina. As renowned Argentine curator and media critic Rodrigo Alonso asserts, “a discourse generated at the periphery is not necessarily a discourse on the periphery, nor is it a peripheral discourse,” and indeed, a lengthy history of critical reflection from the southern cone has impacted global game culture. In April 2001, Gonzalo Frasca presented his Georgia Tech master’s thesis “Video Games of the Oppressed,” in which he argued that video games were a medium capable of fostering critical thinking and advocated for a more active presence of the global south in the gaming world. In a section of her 1994 book *Scenes of Postmodern Life*, Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo pondered the impact of video games, shopping malls and channel-surfing on postmodern society: “How can an intellectual from the southern cone respond in the face of the enormous cultural transformations of the West, which are already perceptible in her own country, and which form part of a new group of collective

12. Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art*, 193

13. For more on this matter, see Sarah Cook, “Immateriality and its Discontents: An Overview of Main Models and Issues for Curating New Media,” in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, ed. Christiane Paul (University of California Press, 2008): 26-49.

14. Steve Dietz, *Interfacing the Digital, Museums and the Web*, 2003, <https://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2003/papers/dietz/dietz.html>.

15. Tiia Naskali, Jaakko Suominen and Petri Saarikoski, “The Introduction of Computer and Video Games in Museums – Experiences and Possibilities. Arthur Tatnall; Tilly Blyth; Roger Johnson,” *Proceedings of the International Conference on History of Computing, June 2013, London, United Kingdom* (Springer, 2013).

16. See Claudia Costa Pederson, “Gaming Empire: Play and Change in Latin America and Latin Diaspora,” *NMC: Journal of the New Media Caucus* (2016).

experiences?”¹⁷ Since its start, *Game on! El arte en juego* has taken on Sarlo’s question and has aimed to foster a space for rethinking the merger between video games and art.

The first commercial Argentine video game was created in 1982, and by the end of the 1990s the first local game development studios came about, at a similar pace to that of Mexico, Peru and other countries in Latin America.¹⁸ Today, there are some 2,000 people involved in the Argentinean video game industry and around 100 active game development companies,¹⁹ most of which could be classified as independent due to their financing structure.²⁰ That said, there is a rising community of indie developers producing creative and cutting-edge games, including some internationally renowned names like those of Benmergui, Fernando Ramallo and Agustín Cordes. These developers’ productions are aimed at exploring games’ inner logic and thinking about ways of constructing meaningful experiences. In so doing, they are a perfect example of the current situation of new media art, which has built upon a longstanding (if sometimes unstable) tradition of interest in the merger between technology and art, beginning in Argentina with the exhibition “Art and Cybernetics” back in 1969.²¹

Latin America has managed to develop an aesthetic of its own when it comes to new media art. Latin American new media artists have a DIY/craft tradition that translates into highly inventive low-tech art works. This is also a matter worthy of academic attention: how is technology-based art produced across Latin America? How is the art world appropriating technology and transforming it within the region? Likewise, video games need to be a part of the discussion. Developers and artists have already taken the first steps, it is now time for the local academy to acknowledge that we must look at games in culture, not only to understand them, but in order to understand ourselves as society.

GAME ON! EL ARTE EN JUEGO: AN OPEN-ENDED QUEST

The concept of culture has brought about many debates throughout history. It has been redefined over and over again, since it is a concept in constant evolution. For many, video games today seem to be the form of cultural production most fitting to the contours of the present century. For this reason, starting in 2009, subsequent editions of *Game on! El arte en juego*—each with entirely unique content—have been exploring the interactions between video games, technology and art. Thinking locally—or more properly *glocally*²²—the exhibition has been showcasing national and foreign works in dialogue. It has been recognized as an exhibition of cultural interest by Argentina’s national government, and has been hosted by several major local cultural centers and institutions, creating a constantly-evolving curatorial challenge due to both the ever-changing content of the exhibition and the material conditions of the different locations. Along the way, the exhibition itself has become an exploration of national identity vis-à-vis artgames. *Game on! El arte en juego* was the first exhibition of its kind in Argentina, and it remains one of the few events in Latin America dealing with the intricacies of artgames and experimental games in the context of the art world. This exhibition, with all its idiosyncrasies, is situated amidst myriad game festivals and exhibits across the globe, such as A MAZE. (Germany), Playful Arts Festival (Netherlands) and FILE (Brazil), among others.

17. Beatriz Sarlo, *Escenas de la vida posmoderna: Intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina* (Titivillus, 2004): 4.

18. For further information on the history of Latin American video games see Mark J. P. Wolf, ed., *Video Games Around the World* (MIT Press, 2015).

19. These numbers were reported by the Argentine Video Game Developers’ Association (ADVA) in the Video Game Sector Report delivered by the Ministry of Production at its Annual Meeting. The complete report can be accessed at <http://fundav.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Informe-Mesa-Videojuegos-26072017.pdf>.

20. For more on the “independent vs. indie” debate, see Maria B. Garda and Pawel Grabarczyk, “Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game,” *Game Studies* 16.1 (October 2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/gardagrabarczyk>.

21. For more on the history of new media art in Argentina, see Rodrigo Alonso’s chapter “Argentine Art and New Technologies,” in *Elogio de la low-tech. Historia y estética de las artes electrónicas en América Latina* (Luna, 2015).

22. For an introduction to the concept of globalization, see Victor Roudometof, *Glocalization: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2016).

In 2009, the first edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* was conceived as an open question to art institutions and the video game community: Can video games be considered art, and if so, what would that mean? This initial exhibition was arranged in two separate stages on the two floors of the Buenos Aires art gallery Objeto a. When visitors entered the gallery, they were welcomed by a display of video games and interviews produced by major Argentine game developers, who explained in their own words why video games could be considered art. The interviews approached video games from the viewpoints such as narratology and film studies. Spectators were invited to reflect upon Deleuze's concept of the moving image: "It is not the same as the other arts, which aim rather at something unreal through the world, but makes de world itself something unreal or a tale [recit]. With the cinema, it is the world which becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world"²³ This section invited the audience members to ponder their role as protagonists in a new immersive present to which they had been summoned in order to marvel at the virtuosity of the visual artwork incorporated into these interactive stories.

The exhibition continued on the second floor with a selection of video games that had been intentionally created as art works by game developers. Here, visitors experienced the works of Benmergui, Agustín Pérez Fernandez and the artist collective *Proyecto Untitled*. There was also a selection of international indie games from That Game Company (United States), Tale of Tales (Belgium), Amanita Design (Czech republic), Natalie Boockhin (United States) and Van Sowerwine (Australia). The exhibition brought together a variety of artgames and non-game works, encouraging reflection through the frameworks of game studies and new media theory, while helping move video games to the center of discussions on new media art and curatorial practice. As Quaranta has argued, the curator's role is ever-less-frequently that of "caretaker" of objects, and increasingly that of mediator and interpreter.²⁴ This initial iteration of *Game On! El arte en juego* brought to light key questions that would remain a part of the exhibition's planning and development in the years to follow: What was it that made these games suitable for an art exhibition? And what was the proper way of exhibiting them? Since video games are generally created with the intention of being played in the comfort of one's own home, resituating them within the context of an art gallery or museum implies a process of re-signification and re-contextualization that cannot be overlooked.

The first iteration of *Game On! El arte en juego* in 2009 succeeded in getting museum visitors in Buenos Aires to think about video games as something more than mere entertainment. It attained a great deal of press coverage, and over 1,500 people visited the gallery in all. Not only was 2009 the opening year for the exhibition, it also marked the initiation of the artgame genre itself and of video game curatorial practice in Argentina—there were no previous experiences related to the exhibition of video games within local art circuits, so the inspiration had to come from a merger between new media practice and the video game tradition. Here, video games were exhibited *as* video games—there was no intention of masking that. The exhibition was also accompanied by a schedule filled with activities that helped provided a 360° behind-the-scenes panorama of video game production, circulation and reception.

The second edition of *Game On! El arte en juego* took place two years later, a lapse that was due not only to curatorial decisions but also logistical choices in response to local constraints. On one hand there was the funding issue: exhibitions of this kind involve great costs and local companies are not accustomed to investing outside their pre-programmed marketing budgets. On the other hand, an exhibition of this kind would not have enough novel local production to show on an

23. Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 57.

24. Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art*.

annual basis. Even though Buenos Aires had (and has) a thriving community of indie developers, when it comes to producing artistic or experimental projects they have to work on the side, without the time or resources needed for stable production. These kinds of works—those that step outside the mainstream arena—are the ones selected for exhibition in *Game on! El arte en juego*. A similar phenomenon has taken place in the art world—interest in video games was just getting started back in 2009, and even now, there are relatively few exhibitions that are focused specifically on games. Many recent developments in curatorial practice center around interaction, but in forms and works that are not play-related, and that therefore are not directly related to video game culture.²⁵

This second edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* was presented in 2011 under the umbrella of FASE-Encuentro de arte, ciencia y tecnología (FASE – Encounter of Art, Science and Technology), the main New Media Arts festival in Argentina. The producers of FASE allotted three rooms for the exhibition at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, one of Buenos Aires' main cultural centers. Once again a program of live performances, guided tours and talks accompanied the exhibition. The previous edition had already established that video games were a cultural device and could be considered a form of art, so this edition delved into experimental works being made by indie developers and new media artists. The local artgames selected included: *Crédito ambiental/Biogame* (*Environmental Credit/Biogame*, Joaquin Fargas, 2011), *Conflicto Local* (*Local Conflict*, Martinez-Zea, 2011), *Rabbits for my closet* (Purple Studio, 2011) and *Atmosphir* (Minor Studios, 2011). The selection showed how video games can engage the audience in reflection on social issues. The main challenge faced at that time had to do with the security and functionality of the technological elements involved in the exhibition—*Game on! El arte en juego* necessarily involves a significant amount of technological equipment in plain sight, in contrast with most local new media exhibits, which tended to have more low-profile technological setups. Moreover, it was situated in a heavily-frequented cultural center near the city's downtown area. These factors had a direct impact on the content and aesthetics of the exhibition, as certain works had to be secured with padlocks, while others had to be omitted entirely because they involved wireless equipment or small devices that could be easily stolen.

That same year, the Buenos Aires Municipal Government commissioned a special edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* that was held at the city planetarium during Buenos Aires Futura, a large tech festival. This time, the curatorial challenge was directly related to the location's infrastructure and the particularities of its audience. The narrow aisles of the planetarium and never-ending lines of visitors led to a meticulously edited selection of games. The audience was taken by surprise with the exhibit—visitors would enter the building housing the exhibition as they strolled around before the planetarium screenings, so the games had to be easy to play, visually engaging and powerful enough to convey an experience or a message within a few short minutes of play. The final selection included artists' games and works by Pérez Fernández and Benmergui as representatives of Argentina's experimental and artsy indie dev scene. There was also a lineup of foreign titles that had been previously exhibited by *Game on! El arte en juego*, which were mostly puzzle games or those that allowed for brief experiences, such as *Samorost* or *Tunning*. This edition was similar in intention to the first one, as it invited the public to see video games from a new perspective, and focused on nationally-produced works but showed them within the context of current global production.

The third full edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* took place simultaneously in three locations, reinforcing the logic of working in narrative clusters. This iteration of the exhibition further developed the exploration of the artgame scene in Argentina, situating it among other countries

25. For more on the differences and similarities between interactivity and play, see Eric Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," in *First Person*, eds. Noad Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004).

of the global south by featuring Argentine production within a showcase of Latin American video games and related works. For this purpose, we teamed up with the San Martín Cultural Center as well as the Spanish Cultural Center, which has offices in different Spanish-speaking countries and a well-established cultural network, enabling us to contact a variety of game developers and artists. Each location for the exhibition dealt with a specific thematic issue: party games and workshops, indie games and artgames in Latin America, experimental games, playable media and interactive ludic installations. The public could decide to visit one or two of the locations, or all three of them. The segment of the exhibition at the Spanish Cultural Center was dedicated to the Latin American indie scene, focusing on artgames, artists' games, experimental games and serious games. The selection of games included *Consecuencias* (*Consequences*, Agustín Perez Fernandez, 2012), *Chromodigmatic* (Martin Gonzalez, 2012), *Storyteller* (Daniel Benmergui, 2012), *Intervalo lúcido del individuo inconsciente* (*The Unconscious Individual's Lucid Interval*, Alejandro Grilli, Chile) and *Laberintos Invisibles* (*Invisible Labyrinths*, Andrei Thomaz, Brasil). The second location, also belonging to the Spanish Cultural Center, was in the very center of downtown Buenos Aires and was dedicated to workshops and performances along with a selection of national party games and arcade games including *Nave* (*Ship*, Videogamo, 2012). These games were selected due to being easy to play as well as experimental and funny, with humor and togetherness connecting them all. The third and final location for this edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* was the San Martín Cultural Center. It involved a more theatrical setup displaying playable local media, interactive installations and foreign artgames and experimental indie games. This final location dealt with games that challenged the very definition of a video game, such as *Johann Sebastian Joust* (Die Gute Fabrik, 2012), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Passus Exilii* (Federico Joselevich Puiggros, 2011) *Anamorphoss* (Diego Alberti and Gabriel Rud, 2012) and *Profesora Clásica* (*Classic Professor*, Gabriel Rud, 2005).

The third edition of the exhibition was the first to include playable installations and new media artists producing works that challenged the standardized categorizations of video games and interactive installation. *Passus Exilii* by Federico Joselevich Puiggros and *Anamorphoss 1.1* by Gabriel Rud and Diego Alberti were interactive installations that used the Xbox Kinect to produce playable experiences that actively engaged the body. *One-hit wonder* and *Ballhala*, created by Proyecto 032, were outside-the-box games created by new media artists who used standard gaming devices not only as a playful relic but also as a means of pondering the technologies used by the game industry.

One year later, the Festival Cervantino commissioned a special version of *Game on! El arte en juego* for the next edition of the festival. The Festival Cervantino, or Cervantes Festival, is a very well-known traditional event featuring all kind of art that takes place every year in a small town 600 km (375 mi) from the capital city of Buenos Aires. The director of the festival wanted to introduce the category of media art into the festival, so they asked *Game on! El arte en juego* to take care of all the details involved in setting up the exhibition. This edition took a pedagogical approach and received a very positive response from the high school teachers and other educators who organized several visits with their students, using *Game on! El arte en juego* as an example of new forms of art and new opportunities for the intersections between technology and culture.

One of the primary characteristics of *Game on! El arte en juego* has been its quest to reach different locations as a way of connecting with new audiences and trying out different combinations of works and themes in order to create novel ludic experiences. In 2015, at the invitation of Noviembre Electrónico—Buenos Aires' main technological festival, whose outreach was an acknowledgment of the impact of video games in the art field—the fourth edition returned to San Martín Cultural Center. The selection of works exhibited resulted from an open call to the media artists' community and the

indie developer community. There were also a few titles that were specially invited, as well as three commissioned works: *Brain Dump* by Pérez Fernández, *The Tale of the Fox and the Crane* by visual artist Laura Palavecino and *Two Computers Playing PONG* by media artist Diego Alberti. This last work summed up the spirit of the exhibition: a media installation and homage to the movie *Wargames* (United Artists, 1983) involving two computers competing in a match of *PONG* on top of an actual ping-pong table. The installation raised several issues simultaneously, and in so doing it was able to reach different audiences at the same time: the media arts field, game developers and the general audience. This work was about the role of play in our lives and at the same time about the role of technology. It questioned what was needed for a game to occur—who set the rules and who decided the winner—and asked about the roles of both the player and the audience. This non-interactive installation, placed right in the center of a video game art exhibit, invited the audience to take a second look and to rethink what was taking place in the exhibition space.

This fourth edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* showed a marked increase in the number of proposals submitted by media artists, demonstrating increasing interest from academia and the visual arts world in exploring video games. A wide range of technological devices were involved, including interactive virtual reality experiences using Oculus Rift and alternative controls involving motion sensors or handcrafted devices. Although the technology was typical of the low-tech scenario faced by many curators across the global south, the works exhibited demonstrated ingenious creativity and were proof of the diverse ways that technology, art and games can come together.

The fifth edition of *Game on! El arte en juego*, which took place in Buenos Aires' Cultural Science Center in December 2017, was the result of an international open call that ran for a month that resulted in over 100 applications from some 25 countries. This edition incorporated a track dedicated to the state of the art in Latin America game studies, an area that would not have been possible in the first edition of the exhibition, when video games were just beginning to be taken seriously within academia. In Argentine institutions of higher education, there are currently numerous undergraduate and master's theses being written analyzing video games from an aesthetic perspective, as well as research in progress on the power of video games as communication tools and Ph.D. theses on game production focused on the relationship between video games and education. Simultaneously, an increasing number of media artists are experimenting with the language of video games, producing artworks and publications. What began as an art/video game exhibition is turning little by little into a post-media festival that explores the role of video games within the context of an emerging local ludic culture. To paraphrase Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito's iconic book,²⁶ *Game on! El arte en juego* is about video games at the edge of their medium.

THE NUANCES OF VIDEO GAME CURATION: LESSONS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

When merging video games with the art sphere, exhibition curators have to take into consideration three main challenges: their audience's literacy, the inherent limitations of any video game experience and the criteria of selection. Curators must also be prepared for three types of audiences: the general public-at-large, who may spend only a short time interacting with a handful of the works on display; the traditional art gallery/museum audience, who may initially react with reluctance when faced with interactive technologies like video games in a gallery setting; and tech-savvy visitors, who may be prone to overlook conceptual aspects and feel drawn to the games' mechanics or to the devices themselves. Art curators have faced this divide since the dawn of new media art, and Quarante spoke

26. Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito, *Art at the Edge of Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2006).

of it repeatedly: “the audiences of the two spheres are still so different, even though the art itself is often culturally very similar; that those who write about contemporary art know nothing about New Media Art, while those who write about New Media Art hardly ever do so in a contemporary art journal.”²⁷ Video games seem to have re-awakened this issue, and in the face of these circumstances, curators may either decide to address a particular group or try to handle the dual demands of art audiences and technological consumers. Since its inception, *Game on! El arte en juego* has been conceived as a site for shared encounters and discussions among these diverse types of visitors.

A curator’s first challenge is dealing with the literacy of the audience. The exhibition brings together game developers and media artists simultaneously by focusing on current experimentations that address the audiences of both video games and art. One smart approach is to work with narrative nodes or themes, allowing curators to create parallel curatorial tracks that offer diverse paths to the audience, empowering them to choose and create their own itineraries, engaging in a ludic tour that demonstrates the variety of stories that can arise through engagement with art and experimentation with video games. Another arrangement that has proved effective is to organize a range of activities that round out the exhibition and provide a glimpse of the world of video game development. Lastly, it is important not to underestimate the significance of the human factor, especially in an exhibition focused on the use of technology. This is one reason every edition of *Game on! El arte en juego* has adhered to one tried-and-true, foolproof tactic: live, in-person exhibit guides. Of course, it is crucial to select the right profile of guides for such an exhibit, and the experience of *Game on! El arte en juego* has shown that art students are often the best fit for this kind of exhibit, since they have the historical and conceptual knowledge that allows them to make the connections between video games and the art world.

Second, a curator must consider the experience of play. German philosopher Hans-Georg once said, “In play, in every play, there is something like a ‘sacred seriousness.’”²⁸ The role of curators is to convey this in the best possible manner, taking into consideration what is needed to convey the experience of a game, how to display video game hardware and/or software and the ways the play experience is altered when taking place in an exhibition. Any object placed within the context of an art exhibition will be instantly reframed and resignified, and this transformation is the principal task that curators must address. How should a curator proceed when faced with a game that is either too enormous to be grasped during a single visit to an exhibition, or too controversial to be included in a show for an all-ages audience? Video game exhibits raise many questions that are still being dealt with by critics and curators worldwide, and there is no magical recipe to resolve them all. Every curator has to find her own path by learning from previous experiences and keeping in mind the two traditions being brought together in this new context: commercial video game exhibitions and media art history.

The third issue curators should take into consideration when preparing a video game exhibition is the criteria of selection: why would you take a game from the living room into the museum, and what makes that particular game worthy of selection? These are questions that all curators must face, regardless their object of analysis. Curators of video game exhibitions around the world provide varied explanations for following this curatorial trajectory. The Victoria and Albert Museum proclaims that “Video games are one of the most important design fields of our time,”²⁹ and in a similar vein, Paola Antonelli justified the MoMA acquisition of video games in the name of a broader the

27. Domenico Quaranta, “Guest Column: When ‘New Media Art’ Loses Its Prefix,” *Vice*, 20 May 2011, https://creators.vice.com/en_au/article/wnzmpq/guest-column-when-new-media-art-loses-its-prefix.

28. Hans George Gadamer, *La actualidad de lo bello: el arte como juego, símbolo y fiesta* (Paidós, 2008).

29. See V&A’s official website: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/video-games>.

understanding of design, explaining that she was drawn to video games because they place a “focus on this idea of interaction design and on behaviors.”³⁰ Berlin’s A MAZE festival is about celebrating independent and alternative games, playful media and games culture, while Babycastles is an event focused on connecting the independent game development community with the broader New York art world. *Game on! El arte en juego* was conceived as a place for experimentation and critical thinking around playful culture, where the video game and media art communities could come together in a shared creative process.

VIDEO GAMES AND ART: THE PRESENT SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Video game exhibits are now an undeniable part of our artistic present. They are being held in hybrid spaces in capital cities and at small galleries in remote towns, at internationally acclaimed avant-garde venues and traditional art institutions. The art world is courting video games like never before, taking them into account for their cultural significance rather than their commercial impact alone. Across the globe, curators are beginning to learn and work with the specific characteristics of the medium. This process of adaptation shows how video games are being reappropriated and resignified according to the idiosyncrasies of different communities, as described in the work of anthropologist Néstor García Canclini, who has proclaimed the need to understand the cultural effects of electronic media within the context of the processes of globalization that have so deeply affected our society.³¹ Along those lines, Phillip Penix-Tadsen asserts that more often than not “we simply accept outdated characterization of the global south as a massive technological backwater, strictly on the downside of the ‘digital divide’ between hi-tech haves and have-nots when the reality of technological acquisition and usage in Latin America tells a much more nuanced tale.”³² Together with other video game exhibits in Latin America such as Anigames (Colombia), FILE (Brasil) and DevHr (Mexico), *Game on! El arte en juego* showcases the complex ways video games are merging with other forms of culture in the region today.

This chapter was conceived as an invitation to walk through the evolution of the exhibition *Game on! El arte en juego*, reviewing the history of the past decade of artgames in Argentina and the consequent birth of video game curatorial practice in the country. This journey has demonstrated the increasing interest of new media artists in the video game medium, not only as a type of work to be explored but as a device to be repurposed under the terms of new media art production. The artists’ approach to video games has evolved from producing game mods and game art to developing their own ludic experiences influenced by the video game logic and game design. On a parallel path, independent video game developers have taken interest in the medium for its communicative properties and its capacity to create and explore alternative ways of storytelling. This phenomenon has been taking place worldwide and is also now occurring in Argentina, though there is not yet an Argentine identity inherent to national video game and game art production, which is still in the process of self-discovery. We will have to wait and see what the future holds for this blossoming relationship between video games and art, and when it comes the time to write that tale, Latin America will have plenty to tell.

30. Paola Antonelli, “Why I Brought Pac Man to MoMA,” *TED Salon 2013*, New York, https://www.ted.com/talks/paola_antonelli_why_i_brought_pacman_to_moma

31. Nestor García Canclini, *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: mapas de la interculturalidad* (Gedisa, 2004).

32. Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (MIT Press, 2016): 44.

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