Introduction
Between February 14 and April 17, 2011, the Smithsonian American Art Museum launched a
webpage that invited people to vote for their favorite video games from a preselected list of 240
games.

Eighty games were eventually selected to be showcased in the first Smithsonian exhibition
entitled *The Art of Video Games: From* Pac-Man *to* Mass Effect. The exhibition took place
between March 16 and September 30, 2012, before hitting the road for a national tour.

To video game enthusiasts, computer game scholars, and even to those people who remember
playing Atari when they were young, *The Art of Video Games* was a welcome homage; finally,
cultural institutions chose to acknowledge what the market and the people knew: Computer
games are part of the creative expressions of humanity. Thus, going into the review, I preface
everything that I write with appreciation. *The Art of Video Games* joins other exhibitions and
museums, such as *Game On 2.0* (2002) and the American Classic Arcade Museum, in making a
cultural argument for the importance of this ubiquitous medium.

In this review, I intend to offer a summary of the event, but more important in the context of
Kairos, I offer an analysis of the very rhetorical underpinnings of this exhibition. Like any
rhetorical situation, some of the rhetorical choices were conscious, discussed by the curator and
addressed in the exhibition. Yet an analysis of the material presentation (from hardware to
software) and the audience participation suggests that this exhibition is a victim of the dominant
discourses of the U.S. video game ideologies that it attempts to disrupt.

Entering the Exhibition
Those who attended *The Art of Video Games* exhibition might have entered from the museum's
contemporary art gallery. They faced a large wall on which the 80 games and the names of
donors were projected before turning right into the first exhibition room.

[Image description: Photograph of a lime green wall on the left with the exhibition title and
people walking around the gallery.]

It was is this room that the dominant narrative of the exhibition was established: computer games
provided players with immersive environments in which they could experience a wide range of
human emotions, such as love, longing, desire, or dislike. A series of screens on one wall
displayed continuous loops of people of all ages playing, their faces focused, sometimes showing
surprise, sometimes showing annoyance. Meanwhile, game designers reflected via video about
their gaming and design experiences, talking about the immersive qualities of the computer
game, the first time that they loved a non-player character (such was their connection with their
avatar), and their memories playing certain games. In short, the argument is that games
emotionally impact players. They are art.

And finally, the visual arts played a prominent role in this room. The concept drawings on display are beautiful. The film loops show sweeping vistas. And all of these images prep the viewer to translate their appreciation of two-dimensional representations and beautiful landscapes to their viewing of the games in the exhibition.

Playing Games

The visitor would then walk through the next opening where five projected games were ready to play: *Myst* (1995), *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), *Pac-Man* (1981), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), and *Flower* (2009).

[Image description: Photograph of dark gallery room with what appears to be a young person playing a video game being projected on the wall and other people watching or walking around.]

It is important at any games exhibition to allow people to play the games; the appreciation of this art form can only be realized in the act of play, not in the act of watching. Thus, this was a welcome sight. However, at the material level, the exhibition seemed to be undermining its core narrative that video games are immersive environments for everyone.

The very material formation of the game controller assumed the player was a child. At 5'10", I may be tall for a woman, but not in comparison to men. Yet I had to kneel to play the game; the controls were perfect for a 48" person. So I kneeled and started to play *Myst*.

The game was projected on the screen (good, since we know that the history of computer games is the history of social play); however, the game was timed to just 2 minutes. This time limitation doesn't make sense when the narrative of the exhibition and the game are taken into consideration. And this makes the choice of *Myst* as a timed example game even more baffling. *Myst* is an environmental game. It's a slow game. Most players cannot even leave the opening room in the 2 minutes allotted to them, let alone encounter a puzzle and forward the narrative. I had just finished playing through my third time (by which time I opened a door), and the game reset as soon as I started climbing stairs. In a situation like this, one would assume that games like *Pac-Man* make more sense.

However, the time limit inhibits experience here too. The decision was made to not maintain leaderboards, those screens where people insert their three initials next to their score to show that they are in the top ten. This is a particularly strange choice since competition is part of the designed experience of *Pac-Man* and games of that generation. Indeed, competition was so important to that particular contextual culture that Walter Day started Twin Galaxies National Scoreboard in 1982 (*Pac-Man* was released as an arcade game in 1980) to track top scores worldwide. To eliminate leaderboards seems to efface an important component of the gameplay in favor of an environmental narrative.

The Console Exhibition, the Games, and the Book (Part 1)

The challenge with any collection is what to include and exclude. After all, the history of computer games, while short, has a massive catalog of important games and even more games that appear in the 99¢ bin at the local megastore.

Eighty games were selected by popular vote for this exhibition, and the games were organized by console.

[Image description: Image of the games voting website that offered participants a chance to vote for 80 games from a pool of 240 proposed choices prior to *The Art of Video Games* exhibition.]

Each console case showcased its hardware and four games, and those four games are representative samples from four different genres: Action, Adventure, Target, and Tactics. These four genres have little in common with the more familiar genres based on gameplay. According to the book accompanying the exhibition, Target games "are all about efficiently striking identified targets in order to amass points" (Melissinos & O'Rourke, 2012, p. 12). Adventure games, on the other hand, "allow the player to participate in an unfolding story and encourage exploration and immersion above all else" (p. 12). Action games engage the player "in a series of activities that require a high degree of coordination and timing" (p. 12), and finally Tactic games are "[a]ny game that deal with strategic planning or structured logic" (p. 12).

From this generic organization, the curator decided to present the games in a chronological progression of system: Atari VCS, Colecovision, Intellivision, Commodore 64, Nintendo Entertainment System, Sega Master System, Sega Genesis, Super NES, DOS/Windows, Nintendo 64, Sega Dreamcast, Sega Saturn, Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox, Microsoft Xbox 360, Modern Windows, Nintendo GameCube, Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation 2, and Sony PlayStation 3. While this list is fairly comprehensive as systems go, it accidentally perpetuates the myth of obsolete hardware. All systems not being produced contemporary with this exhibition time were referred to in the past tense, insinuating that the systems and games are not played anymore and belong in an inaccessible past. Contemporary systems, on the other hand, were forward-looking, using present tense for the discussion and speaking of innovation and next steps. The technological progression, while probably unintentional, ideologically permeated this part of the exhibition. There was also an underlying sense—almost inescapable in chronological organizations—that one system builds from another in an orderly fashion, whereas we know that the console wars, as they are sometimes referred to, were heated and oftentimes illogical.

Visitors to the exhibition could move around and visit each console. They could pick up a phone, push a button next to the game, and listen to an explanation while watching a small video play on the screen about the game.

[Image description: Photograph from exhibition for Intellivision game console: orange background with screen shots from four video games and a separate screen with a telephone for exhibition information.]

[Image description: Photograph from the exhibition for the Xbox 360 game console: blue background with screen shots from four video games and a young person holding a telephone and viewing a separate screen with a game being displayed.]

There was no play in this room, which might be fine if the point is not about play as art but rather environment as art. This narrative, however, asked the curator to oftentimes misrepresent a game to highlight only one aspect of it.

The Console Exhibition, the Games, and the Book (Part 2)
As an example of this, I turn to my experience of *Doom II* (1994). *Doom II* is a successful horror-maze game that is also a first-person shooter. The player must navigate nine labyrinthine levels, shooting horrible monsters and demons from hell that jump out at every turn. It is often credited with popularizing first-person shooter games. And it is gory.

Now to the Smithsonian display of the game. When I hit the button, the audio started telling me about the importance of the game and the large environment that it created. And the camera was taking me through the environment. But nothing jumped out. Strange. Everything jumps out in this game. Everything. And then I started seeing dead monsters at the edges of the screen. And then I had this realization: the curators pre-killed *everything* in the game in order to shoot the video. And once I saw this, I went around and looked at the other ostensibly violent games. Indeedily-doo, if the game required the player to kill another living being, this action isn't displayed. Video games were sanitized; they were represented as non-violent environments that allowed for immersion (immersion without action, but immersion all the same). Add to this no Person-vs-Person fighting games (think *Street Fighter* (1987)) or sports games (think *Madden NFL* (1988) or even *Pong* (1972)), and the absence speaks just as much as the presence of certain games.

I understand on many levels this exhibition had to sidestep the arguments that video games are violent, and violent video games make people violent. However, a walk through the halls of the Smithsonian Art Museum exposes the visitor to hundreds of years of artistic violence, and artistic beauty, and lovely environments. Thus, to only emphasize some aspects and not all expressive aspects of computer games—those media commodities that are produced and consumed in our particular culture—seems in many ways to undermine the artistic argument. The whole of the game is the amalgamation of its parts, and those parts include design, yes, but also play and the directed interactions of players.

When finished with the exhibition, visitors can buy *The Art of Video Games: From* Pac-Man *to* Mass Effect book, written and edited by Chris Melissinos and Patrick O'Rourke (2012).

[Image description: Cover image for *The Art of Video Games* exhibition book with red *Pac-Man* character on black background.]

This book provides context for the exhibition and two-page spreads for each of the selected games. Enjoyable in this book is the series of interviews with different game designers, effectively engaging in the video-games-as-art debate by furthering a game-based auteur theory. Each interview asks designers what drew them to computer games, which opens the door to theories of expression, art, and interactive immersion. What we see appearing in these pages is a discourse forming among game creators that accounts for video games as a more culturally important form of art.

The People Who Play

At the beginning of the entrance to the exhibition, Melissinos included a contextual board on which this summative statement appears: "The short, yet prolific, forty-year history of video games offers some of the deepest personal and globally connecting experiences in human history". And the visitor log attests to the fact that the history of computer games is a deeply personal history. Images 6 and 8 below are representative of the many filled pages.

[Image description: Photograph of two handwritten comments from the exhibition's visitor log that give positive feedback but note the absence of shooting and sports games.]

[Image description: Photograph of hand-written comment from the exhibition's visitor log noting a love for Kirby. The entry seems to be written by a young person, with crossed-out letters and a hand-drawn picture of Kirby.]

People were excited to be at this exhibition, but two overriding themes emerged from the audience: nostalgia and fandom. These are both complimentary reactions—the nostalgia voiced in the retrospective, the fandom voiced in the here and now. Those who were nostalgic made notes in the visitor log about memory lane, remembering when, and the good times. Fans talked about the games they love now and loved then.

The less positive side, and also represented in the visitor log, was the powerful judgment passed from the subject position of nostalgia and fandom: expressions of disbelief, anger, and dismissal if a game a visitor found important was not represented in the collection. The above pages point to a careful critique, but some pages were graced with: "What, no *Resident Evil*?! Who put this together?" and "*Brutal Legend*? WTF." Nevertheless, the audience reception in the visitor log proved to be very positive with only a couple of dismissive exceptions.

Finally, what became increasingly apparent at this exhibition was that computer games are for children. Twice I went, and each time, I went for over five hours, only to find that mothers would hang out in the center while children waited in line to play *Pac-Man* again. Children ran underfoot throughout the entire exhibition, yelling for their parents to come to the next station. And children drew in the visitor log, showing their love for their favorite characters.

[Image description: Photograph of hand-written comment from the exhibition's visitor log noting a love for Kirby. The entry seems to be written by a young person, with crossed-out letters and a hand-drawn picture of Kirby.]

This observation is not to say that children should not be at museums. Children should be brought often, in my opinion. What rhetorical analysis I bring with this observation is that computer games are still seen as the safe domain of children. The under-twelve set were treating the exhibition as their local Chuck E. Cheese, and the museum felt more like an arcade than not. And really, how could this not happen? Computer games are interactive. They require playing. And the act of play is joyous, immersive, and irreverent. In many ways, the very act of allowing interaction with the art form seems to undermine the rhetorical argument that museums are attempting to make about computer games as art. And this cannot be avoided unless we take away the very interactivity that allow it to be a game.

Some Final Thoughts

The Art of Computer Games exhibition is a welcome text into a growing body of literature of computer games as cultural artifacts. This review was never meant to undermine the importance of this exhibition's role. Indeed, artistic discourses are emerging, this exhibition, the games now archived in the Museum of Modern Art, and the growing industry of art games, and the expressive potential of games are becoming a focal point for new scholarship and artists.

What this review points to is the need to engage with these emergent discourses rhetorically. Not all rhetoric is exigent; that is, not all rhetoric is part of the intentional message of transformation provided by the speaker. Indeed, to paraphrase Brummett, a whole heck of a lot of rhetoric is conditional and quotidian, playing out at the level of the ideological and the everyday. *The Art of Video Games* is no exception to this. The narrative provided much needed limitations to game choice. The playfulness of selection was in keeping with the interactivity of the medium (while unfortunately undercutting the seriousness of cultural production). And the exhibition was as much a child of cultural ideologies and everyday expectations as the games it presented.

Would I recommend this exhibition? Yes. And it's traveling, so attendance is even easier than going to the capital city. But I would recommend attendance with rhetorical glasses on. It is fun to step into a representation of a personal history. I, too, played *Super Mario Bros.* until my thumb hurt. However, the rhetorical arguments, the discourses in play, require a careful reading to allow us to step away from immersion and into inquiry.