Pwned - 10 Tales of Appropriation in Video Games

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Abstract

The concept of appropriation - of turning property into ones own (or "pwning it" [1]) - is common to art at least since the 1970s. Back then, Appropriation Art sought the de-contextualisation of consumerism's symbols: brands, advertisements and logos. Today, it is paralleled by the digital hijacking of mass-produced (cultural) products and the succeeding abduction of digital content. A number of pieces of Game Art can be regarded as contemporary Appropriation Art. These appropriations of games are critical comments on politics, playing, and society. The cases of deliberate misuse of the product "video game" described in this paper have in common that they change the position of the player/user from consumer to producer. Artists mold games into new forms. Of course, these new forms are targeted at players, again. And the deconstructed games tell these players something about how games work as social and cultural structures. Appropriating a game means meta-playing. It means playing with the game (as coded possibilities) rather than playing the game.

On Appropriation Art

To appropriate something means to take possession of it. It means making something one's own. In art, appropriation means incorporating alien cultural signs into someone's own work. Branded *Appropriation Art,* so far mostly consumer culture's symbols where imported into artistic works. Well-known appropriation artists are Tom Sachs, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. While the roots of Appropriation Art lie in the Cubists' tradition of letting real objects stand for themselves (Tate 2006), readymades were the first examples of its modern form. In 1917 Marcel Duchamp submitted his famous Urinal, signed "R. Mutt", to a sculpture exhibition. Duchamp challenged the art world and art itself. With his readymades, he changed the face of art forever. Today, Tom Sachs builds McDonalds Shotguns, Chanel Guillotines, and Prada Deathcamps (Sachs 2006) in order to comment on consumer culture. While Sachs copies the labels, logos, and corporate brandings of well-known companies, he rarely uses readymade objects. He merely cites (and infringes) corporate intellectual property, tediously copying them element by element by hand. Tom Sachs successfully appropriates the aura of any company he bases his work on.

Fur's "PainStation" and Cory Arcangel's "Super Mario Clouds" are tales of appropriation that can clearly be understood as successors of this traditional, referential kind of appropriation art. PainStation obviously appropriated the brand "Sony PlayStation" and Super Mario Clouds' title even contains the famous Nintendo game's name "Super Mario".

The Player of Games

Traditionally Computer Games are discussed from the perspective of literature theory, media theory, technology, or even cultural theory. One of the aspects of video game theory crucial for the notion of appropriation is how the player interacts with the game. Hereby, I argue that the players interactivity extends far beyond what the author intended and designed. It even extends beyond what is usually considered as a game. If soccer is discussed from the perspective of sports, the habit of sitting in front of the television with beverages and snacks is usually

neglected. Though in order to understand the culture of soccer, it would have to be incorporated into a compound theory of what constitutes the medium.

In her seminal work "Hamlet on the Holodeck" (1997), Janet Murray discusses multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and cyberdramas (a generalisation over adventure games and other narrativity-centred games) in their relation to literary texts. While arguing that the player needs a certain amount of agency in order to intensively perceive the plot, she still strives for the control of the author over the cyber-play (Murray 1997, pp. 185-213). Espen Aarseth goes a step further in calling collective production of works of art a "myth" or "ideology" (Aarseth 1997) that comprises the problem that "the function of the beholder and the function of the creator are quite separate, temporally, materially, intellectually, and socially" (p. 178). He continues, stating that "there is no audience active in the artist's studio" (p. 178). While this situation might hold true for paintings (Aarseth is in fact referring to paintings in this particular section) they are neither given in new media art nor in computer games. Most media art pieces are presented, discussed and documented long before they are shown for the first time. Most new media artists work in groups and are constantly discussing technical, aesthetical, and conceptual questions in intensive communication. Video games usually receive alpha and public beta testing as well as public presentations before they are released. Additionally, at least the technological gap between video game designers and players is negligible. As gamers get older, the social and intellectual gap also closes. Still, the authors of video games keep control over most aspects of the game, over how it is perceived by the beholder, over how the player makes sense of what happens in the game.

Yet, in the following discussion of examples of appropriation in video game culture, some examples surely exceed the wildest dreams of video game authors. All examples show the autonomy of the players and how their playfulness extends the notion of play beyond the intended gameplay. The game and the metagame (Zimmerman & Salen 2004, p.481f) are held together by playfulness (among other factors rooted in the culture of playing). Playfulness depends on coherence of the metagame behind the game and the game itself. A concrete manifestation of a playful metaplay that successfully turned into a game on its own is the modification of first person shooter games. Most of these modifications (short "mods") consist of levels, player and non-playing character (NPC) models, textures, levels, storyline, and adapted game physics. "[domestic]", one of the tales of appropriation, is an example of a mod. So is jodi's 1999 piece "SOD". The "Mod Database" [2] lists 4085 mods, 163 alone for Epic's Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic 2006). Clay Shirky explains why mods are a success while other networked 3D authoring environments failed:

»This willingness to allow users to do stupid things, on the assumption that they will learn more quickly if the software doesn't try to second-guess them, has given Quake a development curve that looks like HTML in the early days, where a user's first efforts were often lousy but the progress between lousy and good was not blocked by the software itself. Quake encourages experimentation and incrementalism in the tradition of the best tools out there.« (Shirky 1998)

Obviously some games were designed open enough to allow for experimentation and thus also appropriation. The question of authorship - of who designed the game if 80% of the content comes from the original game - directly leads to concerns regarding violations of copyrights and intellectual properties. How can a game based on original assets be distributed? How much internal information about the game engine is a company willing to share? And under what obligations does it share? Linden Labs' Second Life [3]answered this questions by making everything a user creates in the game her property (Lasica 2005, pp. 243-255). Second Life is an online massive multiplayer game with built-in editors that allow the players to contribute to the world. Playing Second Life means communicating and building. And it means owning what was built. Laukosargas Svarog's ecosystem, another tale of appropriation, was built in Second Life.

The first Tale of Appropriation: SOD (jodi 2000)

Technically, SOD is a modification of the once popular shooter game Wolfenstein 3D by id Software 1992. Conceptually, it is a deconstruction of the game space. For creating SOD, jodi (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) removed most of the game assets, replacing them with generic bare-bone placeholders. Textured walls were changed to flat black surfaces, and enemies converted to black triangles. The levels were renamed "Untitled 1", "Untitled 2", and so forth. The load and save dialogues are barely recognisable. SOD is a fundamental

deconstruction of the original video game. Taking a game apart and subsequently reassembling it in an unexpected way introduced postmodernism to game art. SOD was a striking disturbance to New Media Art. Just like Wolfenstein 3D kick-started the first person shooter genre, SOD established the genre of game mods that reflect on games. SOD appropriates the game Wolfenstein 3D in order to reflect on this particular genre of digital games and games in general.

The second Tale of Appropriation: Apartment Huntin' (The ILL Clan 1999)

"Apartment Huntin'" [4] is a so-called Machinima, a movie produced in a game engine. It is a comedy commenting on the rude and hostile setting of id Software's 1996 first person shooter "Quake" [5] that was used to create it. The story is simple: The two lumberjacks Larry and Lenny go hunting their for real estate. The movie stars Larry, Lenny, the landlord, and an estate agent. Since all Quake's models need to carry weapons, the landlord is equipped with a rocket launcher while the agent and the lumberjacks are carrying axes. Apartment huntin' combines unexpected references to Heidegger, Hegel, and contemporary political events with slapstick humour.

Machinimas are a bold type of appropriation. In the case of Apartment huntin' the actual artwork, the movie, was greatly shaped by the aesthetics and theme of the original game. All characters carry weapons and the rooms the movie takes place in look very much like the original levels. In fact, the story draws its humour mainly from the inappropriate movements and rough expressions of the "actors" and the contrast to the story and gameplay of the game itself.

The third Tale of Appropriation: PainStation (///////////fur//// 2001)

PainStation, a new media art piece by fur produced in 2001, can be regarded as appropriation art in several respects. On one hand it successfully implemented an intuitively perceived reference to the Sony PlayStation. On the other hand, PainStation appropriates one of the first video games: Pong. With some simple additions to the principle of the game, the whole essence of gameplay is subverted. If the player misses the ball with her pad, she experiences pain. The pain is induced via a so-called pain execution unit the player places her hand on. If she removes her hand from the unit for longer than a short timespan, the game is lost. The highscore list gives a further twist to the game. While ordinary games reward for successful playing, PainStation remunerates endured torture with a top rank.

PainStation is one of the several examples in this paper that takes an existing game concept and bends and twists it in order to turn them into something unique and new. It references a number of cultural concepts (brands, merit, endurance, competition) and brings them together in one piece of interactive art. PainStation even goes a step further in manipulating, instrumenting, and bodily assaulting the audience.

The fourth Tale of Appropriation: Velvet-Strike (Anne-Marie Schleiner 2002)

Velvet-Strike is »a collection of spray paints to use as graffiti on the walls, ceiling, and floor of the popular network shooter terrorism game "Counter-Strike"« (Schleiner 2006). A player having installed Velvet-Strike enters a usual online shooter game and is able to spray clearly seeable messages to other players on her surroundings. The sprays one can download from the project's web site range from textual anti-war messages ("If god says to you to kill people/kill god") over rendered posters of soldiers in intimate poses to graffitiesque depictions of teddy bears shooting "love bubbles". Velvet-Strike clearly was an immediate response to the politics of the "War against Terrorism" (Schleiner 2006). Yet the sophisticated and well thought-out approach of introducing just one element to the game that completely disrupts the principles the game stands for happened by intention. It was also a reaction to the primitive modifications of games working up the September 11 shock:

»Not long after the Sept 11 attacks, American gamers created a number of game modifications for games like Quake, Unreal and the Sims in which they inserted Osama Bin Laden skins and characters to shoot at and annihilate. Since the Sims is not a violent game, one Osama skins distributor suggested feeding the Sims Osama poison potato chips.« (Schleiner 2006)

Anne-Marie Schleiner appropriates the genre of the war shooter with the intention of opening the game up and loosening the firm grip of its creators over the content. Together with the release of the software she opened a web platform where people can contribute images to be sprayed in the game.

The fifth Tale of Appropriation: Super Mario Clouds (Cory Arcangel 2002)

In 2002, Cory Arcangel published a tutorial on the Internet about how to take apart a Nintendo Super Mario Brothers cartridge and erase everything but the sky and the clouds. There are two interesting aspects to this work of art: First, Cory Arcangel gave detailed explanations on how to build the art work as well as showing the art work itself. He even printed the description - the code and step-by-step instructions on wiring and soldering - in exhibition catalogues. Second, the game is the second canonical example of revealing what is inside a specific game through removing 90% of the content. The visual appearance is even more reduced than it is the case in SOD, described above. It consist only of clouds travelling pixel by pixel from right to left, yet for the knowing eye it stands for the whole game.

Super Mario Clouds clearly demonstrates the mechanisms behind appropriation art: The process of producing a piece of art is of the same importance as the finished piece. The piece itself is constructed out of appropriated material. Making art means selecting from what is already there. The author (artist) weaves new meanings around an existing object, transforming it into something else or - as in the case of Super Mario Clouds - condensing parts of it to a concentrated essence of the item in question.

The sixth Tale of Appropriation: [domestic] (Mary Flannagan 2003)

Mary Flanagan is a new-media artist interested in the social and political dimension of games. Her piece [domestic] reflects on the cold impersonal architecture of shooter games. In this project she tries to reflect on the game space by creating an environment with the Unreal Tournament game engine that tells a personal story she had experienced when she was seven years old. Back then, Flanagan came back home finding the house of her family in flames. Knowing that her father was at home, she rushed into the burning building in an act of desperation. In Mary Flanagan's own words:

»This personal, ethnographic work on memory poses the question, what are the ways space and memory are cognitively tied, and can such ties be re-experienced? What is the role of narrative and memory in computer games, and how do game environments, particularly the physical architectures constructed in game environments, radiate cultural and social meanings?« (Flanagan 2006)

Flanagan's mode of telling the story is found in a number of narrative art pieces: She turns an internal state of mind into an external environment. At the same time, Mary Flanagan appropriates the game universe in much the same way as traditional installation artists make use of the gallery space (Tribe 2006, p. 44). The main difference is that while the gallery space is intended to be modified and adapted, game engines are geared towards their original intention: building first person shooters. Transforming the rough and brute environment of a shooter into a fragile and personal space is an act truly demonstrating appropriation.

The seventh Tale of Appropriation: fijuu (Julian Oliver 2004)

Fijuu is just one example of the plethora of performance environment that incorporate game engine characteristics. Years ago, a number of audio-visual artists started implementing sonic landscapes as levels in popular game engines. Back then, Julian Oliver started a number of this type of projects. One of fijuu's predecessors was "q3apd", an add-on to the Quake Game Engine that allowed for the connection between the game and audio software. Thus, it made it possible to build audio levels in Quake - virtual worlds with the sole purpose of producing specific audio (and the fitting video). While the sound was formed in a different Software, the game was used as an interface to this new instrument. Fijuu is a dedicated playful audio game. Thus, it is more difficult to classify as appropriation art because it does not reference so directly to specific games. Yet, fijuu draws its aesthetics and forms of interaction from games. The intended goal for Fijuu is:

»In the future fijuu will be released as a Linux live CD project, so players can simply boot up their PC with a compatible gamepad plugged in, and play without installing anything (regardless of operating system). This effectively turns the domestic PC into a console for game based audio performances.«

This makes Fijuu a hijacking tool for PCs based on computer game content, technology and aesthetics. Yet Fijuu ventures a step beyond game modifications in that it is a game in itself.

The eighth Tale of Appropriation: dead-in-iraq (Joseph Delappe 2006)

Dead-in-iraq is a very political piece of art. The artist, Joseph Delappe, logs into "America's Army", the US army recruiting game, using his login name "dead-in-iraq". In the game, Delappe starts typing names of American victims of the iraq war. He does so until he gets killed by the other players. When he re-incarnates he continues to type. In his own words the intention of the piece is the following:

»The work is essentially a fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed in this ongoing conflict. My actions are also intended as a cautionary gesture.« (Delappe 2006)

As of 6/14/06 Delappe has input the names of 700 victims. His plan is to continue typing the names until he reaches the total number of fallen soldiers. He does not list the Iraqi casualties. Delappes project has stirred much attention in the gaming community and in the media as well. Tim Guest writes in the current issue of the game magazine "Edge":

»DeLappe's words seem to offend other players more than the simulated experience of being shot in the head.« (Guest 2006)

Delappe plays his own game within (or with) "America's Army". He appropriates it as a medium of critique and artistic expression.

The ninth Tale of Appropriation: Svargas (Laukosargas Svarog 2006)

Laukosargas Svarog created an interdependent ecosystem populated by artificial life forms populating her virtual plot of land, an area called Svargas, in the massive multiplayer environment Second Life (Linden Labs 2002). Her land is populated by flowers, trees, bees, and bats. The flowers grow with the sun and the water that falls on the land from the clouds roaming the sky. Bees distribute virtual pollens of the flowers. A plant receiving pollen from another of the same species produces a seed. The seed grows to be an independent plant. To keep the system in stability, birds sometimes land near the plants to pick seeds and even chase the bees. Laukasargas witnesses the fragile emergence of a stable system:

»It's very sensitive to very small changes ... like if a gene emerges which gives a plant an extra seed in its lifetime, that can cause huge growth in its locale. And the opposite of course, one less causes thinning growth. I've also seen the same color become a dominant gene so all the meadow cup plants became blue once. Simple things like that emerge quite often.« (Au 2006)

Laukosargas' goal in creating the world is pure playfulness. She rejects academic or scientific objectives admitting instead: »I love it-- for fun, you play god. Everyone needs a hobby.« (Au 2006). Laukosargas is driven by playfulness and curiosity. She appropriates Second Life for her very personal goals, building an environment beyond the intention of the game's designers.

The tenth Tale of Appropriation: TeleZoneGame (Martin Pichlmair 2000)

TeleZone was an installation artwork by Ken Goldberg, realised by the Ars Electronica Futurelab (Ars Electronica 2006). TeleZone was a telerobotic installation where a robot connected to the internet allowed the web user to plan and construct architecture. The structures built were assembled in the physical world and a virtual reality vrml world at the same time. In conjunction of the project launch, a group of international architects and artists provided an initial architecture on the TeleZone playground. Their work was also made available as vrml files. In 1999 Peter

Purgathofer, who was involved in the design of the TeleZone project's community web site, suggested to me to build a representation of the architects buildings in a game engine. After hijacking the VRML files, I wrote a small converter for transforming the architectural data to a format the Unreal Game Engine [6] can import. Since the complexity of the structures was too high for the then game engines, the converter slightly optimised the architectural data. The resulting level was completely unplayable because the layout of the TeleZone map was too far from traditional first person shooter levels. Thus, I had to remove the weapons of the opponents and make them as tame as possible. The result was a non-shooter with ironclad enemies stumbling around mindlessly on a vast plane scattered with impossible buildings. I called it TeleZoneGame.

After six years, in 2005, TeleZoneGame was first exhibited at the Microwave International Media Festival in Hong Kong. PainStation and [domestic] were in the same show. Curator Hector Rodriguez set up a show to reflect on the theme of "play". In his words, play has several aspects:

»First of all, "play" can be treated as an umbrella term for a class of artworks, mainly "toys" and "games". Secondly, it is also possible to think of playfulness as a core feature of all art. ... Thirdly, play can be seen as a fundamental principle of culture and as a basis of political activism. It can be understood, for instance, as the highest expression of human freedom and creativity.« (Rodriguez 2005, italics his)

Conclusions (or: What separates appropriation from misuse and plain modification)

What do the above pieces of art have in common? Certainly all of them feature some aspects of appropriation (while not all can be put in the drawer labelled "appropriation art"). Summarising, it can be stated that:

- appropriation is frequently breaking the original (SOD, PainStation, Super Mario Clouds, dead-in-iraq, Velvet-Strike)
- appropriation is a personal act ([domestic], Ecosystem)
- appropriation is frequently repelled by the originators of the appropriated technology (Apartment huntin')
- appropriation is referencing the original (PainStation, SOD, Super Mario Clouds, dead-in-iraq)
- appropriation is a playful endeavour (fijuu, Ecosystem, TeleZoneGame)

Hints on how crucial appropriation is to cultural development are to be found in Hector Rodriguez statement on playfulness, above. Another link not mentioned so far is that between playfulness and post-modernity. While the theme of post-modernity was discussed in length in other places there lies an essence in it worth to be mentioned here:

»A media user who uses the media after a controlled pattern of choice and rejection which some call poaching (Gripsrud 1995, p. 260, Collins 1992, p. 337) is seen as an active subject within the framework of postmodern theory, and thereby an active co-creator of the texts. Postmodern consciousness has been described as leading to an extreme awareness of the text. All statements have been used before, everything quotes something else, and the user has an ironic distance to the message and the content. This leads to a playfulness in relation to the text which goes beyond intertextuality. The audience are the poachers who fetch what they like, and also use what they like according to their own whim.« (Morensen 2002)

Morensen is talking about the player of games' - and the reader of post-modern texts' - involvement into the construction of meaning. The question of agency is central to game studies. The post-modern theories on the open process initialised by an art piece are well established. Yet, the above statement can be read differently in regard to the ten tales of appropriation. Here, the media users (or poachers, see Jenkins) are artists and their approach is in most cases playful. Artists are trained in forming media, material, and ideas according to their own whim. And by consciously deconstructing a video game they bring awareness of the game to the surface. They not only happen to understand what games are about by playfully playing with them, they also manage to communicate these new insights to the audience. By taking a game apart and reassembling it, artists transform the game into something conceptually tangible.

The very same attitude steers the modding (game modification) community. Here, games are also treated as liquid media. They are cast into forms the game engine developers never expected or intended. While most of the game

mods feature the same blood & sweat themes as their original games, some of them demonstrate a light-hearted and playful application of new media rare to be found. This rise in media literacy leads to self-determination. Other media could learn a lot from the mature and vivid player-artists' attitude toward a complex medium.

Footnotes

[1] In geek-speak (also called "l33t" or "leet", which stands for "elite"), "pwning" stands for "owning". A player capturing the enemy base would say she pwns it. A hacker taking over a host pwns it. In the title of this paper "pwned" stands for both: for the way artists pwn video games and for players pwning the english language, appropriating it as it fits them.

[2] The Mod Database, http://mods.moddb.com/

[3] Linden Labs: Second Life, http://secondlife.com/

[4] ILL Clan movies, http://www.illclan.com/movies.htm

[5] Id Software: Quake, http://www.idsoftware.com/games/quake/quake/

[6] Epic Games: Unreal Engine, http://www.unrealtechnology.com

Images

[1] SOD by jodi (2000)

[2] Apartment Huntin' by The ILL Clan (1999)

[3] PainStation by ///////////fur//// (2001)

[4] Velvet-Strike by Anne-Marie Schleiner (2002)

[5] Super Mario Clouds by Cory Arcangel (2002)

[6] [domestic] by Mary Flanagan (2003)

[7] fijuu by Julian Oliver (2004)

[8] dead-in-iraq by Joseph Delappe (2006)

[9] Svargas by Laukosargas Svarog (2006)

[10] TeleZoneGame by Martin Pichlmair (2000)

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