

## **Can we interpret games separately from their makers?**

### **Making meaningful games in unsafe spaces**

#### **Abstract**

In this extended abstract, we focus on assessing critical and meaningful play from a holistic lens by including the “making processes and experiences” within games. We consider designers, artists, and developers as the ‘makers’ of games. We first highlight the historical view on art and design as cultural products, where the final product is typically considered separately from its maker and their identity. Then, we challenge this approach and its implications for games, claiming that it hinders creating inclusive spaces for all players and developers -- regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or race. Finally, we discuss two games, *Florence* and *Night in the Woods* as examples of how such a separation might cause overlooking issues associated with maker experiences. We conclude with an invitation for having maker experiences included in the assessment and interpretation of games, especially if we do not want to repeat the discriminatory practices of our history regarding cultural products.

#### **Extended Abstract**

In this extended abstract, we discuss how meaningful, critical play experiences should not be considered limited to gameplay. Instead, the games should be interpreted in relation to their maker and making conditions similar to how we should approach any cultural product. First, we give examples from the historical figures in established cultural products from other visual arts. We then move on to the games as a newer yet impactful visual, cultural product which we are

currently forming the history of, through existing issues in the game industry and how these should not be separated from how we interpret games.

The ‘meaningfulness’ of a game should include the development processes, experiences of the designers, and their identities as well. As a society, we begin to talk more about the artists and designers behind cultural products, which is an essential step towards a more critical, holistic approach. We should apply the same sensitivity to video games. In that sense, to thoroughly analyze or discuss a game in terms of its criticality, we should also look at it from a holistic lens. This suggestion applies to any cultural product that will inform the future of the interpretation practices we are starting to see in more established areas. For instance, in visual arts research, many people started discussing art or design work alongside its maker. These conversations also created a rise in awareness by being accessible to circles outside of the makers. Such articles examining this relationship between makers and cultural products can easily be found on social media, such as Morris M.’s (2022) “Respected Artists Who Were Actually Terrible People” which does not necessarily concern itself with the ethical dilemma of how to approach these works in relation to their makers. However, it is still an important step to understanding makers as a part of their work. Conversely, articles like Dixon’s (2019) try to make sense of this conflict in interpretations of work versus maker by reflecting on different schools of view through famous names and works,

This ontology of art has implications for how we should interpret paintings like Picasso’s given that an artwork is a historically informed object, if we want to enquire into its meaning – moral or otherwise – we should interpret the artwork as a particular historically informed object. When we enquire into the meaning and effect of Picasso’s *Nude Woman in a Red Armchair*, the object of interpretation we’re concerned with is not

the painting's visual forms alone, but the painting as a whole with its historical identity, i.e. the artwork. The painting's balmy curvaceous forms are only the beginning.

Video games are relatively new compared to many art or design objects that Dixon positions as "historically informed" (2019). Hence, although we already have a past of video games that can be discussed in relation to historical events of their time, video games are not very old. The new games and design spaces we are creating are modern "objects of interpretation", which are not historically meaningful yet in the sense that Dixon discusses. Therefore, we are at the beginning of creating a video game history and can make space for considering these cultural products in relation to their makers, unlike what has happened with more established cultural products such as traditional paintings and their histories. Such an understanding is crucial for not repeating the history of valuing and creating cultural products only created by well-represented groups who are not held accountable for their actions and who they were as people.

Hence, at this point in our history, it is imperative to understand the existing issues in the gaming industry. We should deter the course of events from creating Picasso's of game design before games become historically informed objects that create the same duality we feel towards historical art and design pieces. This argument translates into how we view and assess games in terms of meaningful experiences and critical play. For example, we can look at *Florence* (Mountains, 2018) and *Night in the Woods (NITW)* (Infinite Fall, 2017), and interpret them from a similar perspective that is discussed in Dixon's (2019) article, which addresses the conflict of interpretation between the maker and the product. We noticed this similar dichotomy between what these games can communicate through gameplay and narrative versus how the game studios were revealed to be structured. Both games tackle issues like mental health, discrimination, and abuse which are topics that create meaningful gameplay experiences that

enable critical play. In a way, these games create “safe spaces” to explore these issues (Flanagan, 2013). However, especially for games that target such critical concepts, it comes as a shocking contrast to learning about the alleged issues that are addressed by the team members, about the unsafe environments in which these safe spaces were created. While these two games are used as examples to discuss this issue, unfortunately, the scale of this problem is more extensive. It is an issue that many scholars and individuals who work in the industry address (Bergstrom, 2021; Rand, 2019; Bulut, 2020; Webster, 2019; Sinclair, 2021; Batchelor, 2019; Robertson, 2022). Now, whenever the subject of abuse is discussed, it is imperative to acknowledge our position as outsiders. This is done for two reasons: we do not know everything regarding the situation, so in our discussion, we must be fair to all those involved. We must also ensure that the voices of those who bring forward allegations, including, in this instance, employees at Mountains, the studio behind *Florence*, and Infinite Fall, the studio behind *NITW*, are the primary voices that are heard. These are their stories, not ours. In situations involving abuse, it is imperative that the voices of those involved are the primary voices heard. All we can do is listen and engage with the conversation, but we cannot judge the situation as outsiders without all the information. Hence, we refer to these accusations with the hope of contributing to the betterment of the game industry, strengthening the visibility of the relationship between the cultural products of interpretation and their makers, and not acting as judges who deliver a verdict on accusations with which we cannot independently confirm. Ultimately, we are not judges of these allegations, we are spectators, game designers, and scholars who hope for a game design industry that is equitable and safe for all developers, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or race. In a way, this is a contribution to stopping Picasso(s) from leading studios, making history, and stealing space from other voices to be heard.

To briefly introduce the issues that we mentioned; after the completion of *Florence*, multiple allegations against Mountains founder suggest that he was abusive towards all employees, and particularly towards women, all matters of internal issue, the matter which can be publicly addressed is that there were glaring issues at Mountains Studio on the subject of emotional support (Batchelor 2019). In addition, a similar allegation has happened with Infinite Fall, where the lead programmer was accused of sexual abuse towards one of the female employees (Carpenter, 2019). As we previously discussed, we are not the judges of these events. However, these infamous allegations are unfortunately not the beginning or the end of the story. Being surrounded by these stories, especially when it comes to games like *Florence* and *NITW*, which highlight the exact issues the games are targeting through gameplay and narrative, calls for interpreting these cultural products from a similar lens to the visual art examples we mentioned through Dixon. They need to be interpreted alongside the experiences and actions of artists, designers, and developers, their makers. Naturally, games are more complicated as they are a collective making process that differs from a single artist. However, similar to the individual artist and their impact on others, the teams often have a hierarchy that might mirror the importance attributed to a single artist where the main vision of the product belongs to a leader. On the other hand, there is a massive amount of contribution from all team members at intellectual and labor levels that are not often discussed enough. This intentional power structure and lack of recognition of the individuals who work at games like *Florence* also contributes to issues around inclusivity and creating safe spaces and platforms where individuals are heard and listened to. For example, the employees at Mountains voted unanimously to remove Wong from leadership at the studio. However, he was never removed from that leadership position, and he is now the only remaining employee at Mountains. Two leadership members cited Wong's

behavior as a primary factor for their leave (Bratt 2022). While *Florence* is a game about overcoming marginalization and abuse, these issues seem to have been present at Mountains. Nevertheless, these issues are not constrained to a few studios. Instead, the issue of equality, especially regarding women, has been present throughout the industry. Unfortunately, this resembles our well-known history regarding older cultural products, which we should try not to replicate. Recently, there have been many instances of women being abused: verbally, physically, and sexually. This has been seen throughout the industry and continues to be a factor that prevents design practices from achieving equality. It is concerning to see that these issues are separated from how we interpret games, as they are on their way to becoming “historically informed objects” in Dixon’s (2019) words. Interpretation of video games should not be separated from their development conditions and makers. By bringing awareness to these issues and making the victims of abuse heard, the game industry can become more equitable to all, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, or any other matter of societal inequality. Marginalized voices may often be the strongest ones in the industry. Bringing about equity will, fundamentally, improve the games that are made, make them more meaningful, and offer a higher level of criticality through play.

As a result, our goal with this abstract is to raise awareness and suggest tips for game lovers to look at games from a holistic lens and put pressure on the industry. As gamers and consumers of this cultural product, we should examine the studios and companies in which the games are developed. Often, the team members that are in leadership positions are known, respected, and listened to better, which contributes to the power dynamics and silencing of lower-ranked, underrepresented team members. Consumers of games can pay more attention to the rest of the team by supporting them through their selected communication tools to give them a larger

platform. Also, a critical eye toward the structure of the team and teammate experiences is necessary. Players can look at how well each team member is represented, for example, if they are acknowledged during press releases, interviews, etc. In addition, games are tools of storytelling. It is important to understand whom we are listening to these stories from and if it is their stories to tell. This does not mean silencing empathy. However, for instance, if a game has a storyline around mental health and lived experiences regarding it, it is vital to make sure that the team works with or gets consultations from individuals who have experience in that area, which can be at a personal or professional level. In that sense, the goal is to use our voice as consumers of the product of games to put pressure on the teams and team leaders through online and in-person channels like social media, conventions, talks, and conferences, in addition to an intentional selectiveness in games that we support by our purchases. This holistic perspective that considers the making processes and maker experiences can prevent the next decade's "Respected Game Artists and Designers Who Were Actually Terrible People" articles from being written.

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