

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5178-2549>

Filip Jankowski

Uniwersytet Jagielloński

mail: filip.jankowski@uj.edu.pl

ART, NOT-ART OR SIMPLY AESTHETICS?

(Book review: Frank Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, The MIT Press, 2023)

Abstract: This article presents a critical analysis of Frank Lantz’s book *The Beauty of Games*. The book proposes a reevaluation of whether games can be considered art. Despite some inconsistencies, Lantz shifts the focus to a less controversial question: whether all games can be regarded as aesthetic objects. He structures his arguments by referencing various types of games – from board and card games to contemporary digital artifacts. He then highlights that the beauty of games stems from the nuanced simulations of the real worlds that these games emulate. Lantz emphasizes the role of games as cultural objects and the significance of digital games as by-products of the modern world in which we live. Although the dilemmas concerning the artistic status of games remain unresolved by Lantz, his book is written in accessible language and offers a fresh perspective on the issue of the relationship between games and art.

Are digital games art? And if they are, to what extent? For at least two decades, a fundamental dispute has been ongoing about whether video games should be considered art, without much understanding of what grants them this status.¹

¹ The debate surrounding games as art was fueled by film critic Roger Ebert, who haughtily attacked digital games as mere entertainment,

something that could be won, but not experienced: R. Ebert, *Video Games Can Never Be Art*, 16 April 2010, <https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/video-games-can-never-be-art> (accessed 18 September 2024); significant voices opposing the journalistic assertions of Ebert include the following publications: A. Smuts, *Are Video Games Art?*, “Contemporary Aesthetics” 2005, Vol. 3, No. 1, https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contemporaryaesthetics/vol3/iss1/6 (accessed 18 September

But what if the question itself is incorrectly posed? After all, “art” does not merely signify objects of aesthetic admiration; the Latin word *ars* originally referred simply to craft, while the similar *artitus* (later dubbed “artisan” in English) referred to all people engaged in crafts.² Misunderstandings associated with the term “art” are merely dilemmas of the contemporary cultural world, as aptly captured by Ellen Dissanayake:

Plato discussed beauty (*kalon*), poetry (*poesis*), and image making (*mimesis*), not “art;” Aristotle, tragedy and poetry. By *techné* they meant “the capacity to make or do something with a correct understanding of the principle involved,” and had in mind not only the ancestors of what we call “the arts” but prototypes of what we call philosophy, pure science, applied science, engineering, and even industrial technology. As in non-Western societies today, the arts were judged and appraised for their level of

craftsmanship, their “correctness” of execution, and their appropriateness.³

In this understanding, “art” signifies quality work on any subject matter, not as a catalyst for sublime expression. Perhaps it is time to cut through the entire discussion about digital games as art with Occam’s Razor? This approach is proposed by American designer Frank Lantz in the book *The Beauty of Games*, published by MIT Press, where he directs the audience’s attention not to games as objects of art, but as aesthetic objects; not to *ars*, but to the Platonic *kalon* mentioned earlier. Lantz’s approach is interesting, although he does not entirely avoid the word “art” consistently, as will be discussed later.

Lantz begins his book with a bold statement:

games matter [...] Not just because games are an enormous pop cultural industry, or because they reveal something essential about digital media, or because they can be put to use turning the paddles of education or industry. Games matter in the same mysterious way that music, literature, and film does: because we love them, we refuse to live without them, we weave them into our lives and sometimes build our lives around them. Games are beautiful.⁴

Lantz thus sets aside issues that often engage game studies researchers: the ideological entanglements of games,⁵

2024); F. Parker, *Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate*, “Cinema Journal” 2018, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 77–100; G. Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA 2009; M. Burden, S. Gouglas, *The Algorithmic Experience: Portal as Art*, “Game Studies” 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, https://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/the_algorithmic_experience (accessed 18 September 2024); D.I Vella, *Beyond Agency: Games as the Aesthetics of Being*, “Journal of the Philosophy of Sport” 2021, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 436–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2021.1952880> (accessed 18 September 2024).

² M.J.S. Hergueta, *Approaches to the Analysis of Mingei in Japan*, “Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies” 2023, Vol. 23, No. 2, <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol23/iss2/santamaria.html> (accessed 18 September 2024)

³ E. Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?*, 3rd ed., University of Washington Press, Seattle 1995, pp. 34–35.

⁴ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2023, pp. 9–10.

⁵ See N. Dyer-Withford, G. De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*,

their dependence on technology,⁶ and their rhetorical capabilities.⁷ He presents the matter unequivocally: here are only myself and the aesthetics of games. Specifically “aesthetics,” as the author of *The Beauty of Games* eschews the term “art” as much as possible. “Art is often used as a sacred superlative, a badge of seriousness and status. Aesthetics is more simply descriptive; it denotes the full spectrum of creative endeavors from the rare and precious to the common and disposable and everything in between.”⁸ Furthermore, to disarm the arguments of critics who depreciate all games – from board games to digital games – he acknowledges all games as aesthetic experiences (though not necessarily as artistic objects). Drawing on C. Thi Nguyen’s assertion that “games [...] are the crystallization of practicality,”⁹ Lantz believes that “the game’s capacity to produce different outcomes under different conditions is a – perhaps *the* – primary feature of its quality as an aesthetic experience.”¹⁰ Experimenting with game mechanics is an activity that provides pleasure and renders games an aesthetic experience.

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009.

⁶ See O.T. Leino, *Death Loop as a Feature*, “Game Studies” 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature (accessed 18 September 2024).

⁷ See I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2007.

⁸ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

⁹ C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 2020, p. 13.

¹⁰ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., p. 28.

Here, one might pragmatically ask why we should consider games as a manifestation of aesthetic creativity, given that players often treat them as a means to kill time or socialize with friends. Lantz is aware of this, though. Games may be hobbies, pastimes, and social rituals, but foremost – all of them, as he claims – they are aesthetic experiences:

One of the benefits of recognizing games as an aesthetic form, in a broad, inclusive, general sense, is that it helps guide our understanding of related questions – what should we expect of them? How should we discuss them? What is their current and potential value? If we have to pick and choose between different games to decide which are aesthetic experiences using subjective criteria of quality or seriousness, we forego any of the benefits of this general categorical understanding. Better to say games are, in a general sense, an aesthetic form and, *in addition*, some are hobbies, pastimes, and social rituals.¹¹

Due to this generalization, Lantz is inclined to argue that games (again, not just digital ones) are a mature domain of culture, reaching back millennia.¹² Instead of comparing games to visual arts such as painting, sculpture, or film (which are typically passive), the creator of *The Beauty of Games* chooses a different metaphor: games are like music, as they are based on a score (in the case of digital games, the equivalent would be a script or game design document), but players can replay them anew each time, much like Chopin’s compositions which vary depending on particular pianists.¹³

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 43.

¹² Ibidem, p. 44.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 48.

For example, a game of Chess can produce multiple outputs, although the rules and mechanics remain similar.

Not coincidentally, Lantz turns to the least obvious examples of games offering artistic experiences: Go and Poker. Regarding Go, Lantz interprets this intellectual game in a captivating style as a dialogue between players, aimed at meditating on their own thinking abilities, the mistakes made so far, and learning from them.¹⁴ Conversely, Poker appears as a game about uncertainty and managing it, “full of psychological and sociological nuance.”¹⁵ Both games stimulate thought and need to be contemplated during play, to the point that Lantz treats them as masterpieces – but they do not need to be called “art.”¹⁶ Games like Go and Poker can be simply called “vibrant, accessible entertainment,” but they are still meaningful – and if supposedly simple board or card games encourage enhancing our mental skills, digital games are also destined to do so.¹⁷

However, Lantz’s thinking quickly leads to excessively lofty observations. He argues that games (including digital ones), with their ability to encourage players to experiment with problem-solving in the manner of the scientific method, are one of the most important bastions of Enlightenment thought. Following the example of Immanuel Kant, Lantz even treats games as an “art form of instrumental reason.”¹⁸ To support his thesis, Lantz cites the game *QWOP*,

which was designed by Bennett Foddy, an Oxford graduate. However, not all game developers are conscious philosophers. Moreover, digital games have long been considered a product of post-modernism,¹⁹ which has been viewed as an anti-Enlightenment movement.²⁰ It is also worth noting here that Lantz barely struggles to consistently speak of games as an aesthetic experience without referring to them as art. He candidly admits that he is also uncertain whether digital games are truly used for intellectual development, or quite the opposite. As he himself writes:

gamer culture often seems to demonstrate exactly the opposite – a way of engaging with the world that is stridently anti-intellectual, stubbornly literal-minded, completely inflexible, combining extreme naiveté with massive over-confidence, and willfully deaf to the subtleties of systems-thinking even as it exhibits a highly effective practical mastery of actual, real-world networked systems.²¹

This statement, especially in the context of the toxic culture under the #GamerGate banner²² and the extreme right’s vehement reaction to progressive currents

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 66.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 76.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 82.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 99–100.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 127.

¹⁹ A. Brown, *Are Video Game Narratives Postmodern?*, “Alluvium” 2013, Vol. 2, No. 3, [https://web.archive.org/web/20151107151143, http://www.alluvium-journal.org/2013/05/13/are-video-game-narratives-postmodern/](https://web.archive.org/web/20151107151143/http://www.alluvium-journal.org/2013/05/13/are-video-game-narratives-postmodern/) (accessed 18 September 2024).

²⁰ M. Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 2003, pp. 18–24.

²¹ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., p. 139.

²² Cf. T.E. Mortensen, *Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate*, “Games and Culture” 2018, Vol. 13, No. 8, pp. 787–806,

in digital games, shows that Lantz, in his praise of the beauty of games, is not detached from the discourse surrounding them. However, Lantz emphasizes that one cannot blame the games themselves for gamer culture, as the psychologist Philip Zimbardo, who is associated with the discredited Stanford Prison Experiment²³ and whom the author of the book cites, did.²⁴ Lantz is closer to the position of Eric Zimmerman, who asserts that the criticism of games as corrupting players' minds is fundamentally biased, as music, images, or novels are not criticized in this manner.²⁵

Lantz, however, immediately moves to the defense of digital games, arguing that the primary question to be asked is not the impact of games on humans, but rather the impact of computers and software as such. This rather obvious and unoriginal statement,²⁶ however, serves

as Lantz's reflection: perhaps modernity in its own right brought about the rise of computers? And if so, then the question about the beauty of games also becomes a question about the beauty of modernity.²⁷

The author of *The Beauty of Games* moves along, sharing reflections on concepts such as game theory and artificial intelligence (AI). He risks stating that although the game theory behind computers, AI and digital games has served military and weapons purposes, it may have somehow saved the world and prevented nuclear conflicts.²⁸ For one reason – game theory has made it possible to measure the risk of using atomic buttons, not to accelerate escalation. This is where Lantz returns to the example of Poker, which undoubtedly influenced the development of game theory (namely thanks to John Nash's theory of equilibrium).²⁹ AI, though also developed for military purposes, is nevertheless also crucial to the aesthetics of contemporary digital games. To accentuate AI's influence on digital game aesthetics, Lantz reaches the example of a space first-person shooter game *Descent* (1994), this time providing his intimate account of interacting with a robot companion called Guidebot.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408> (accessed 18 September 2024).

²³ T. Le Texier, *Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment*, "American Psychologist" 2019, Vol. 74, No. 7, pp. 835–836, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000401> (accessed 18 September 2024).

²⁴ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., pp. 131–132; P. Etchells, *The Professor Who Thinks Video Games Will Be the Downfall of Men*, "The Guardian", 16 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2015/may/11/the-professor-who-thinks-video-games-will-be-the-downfall-of-men-zimbardo> (accessed 18 September 2024).

²⁵ E. Zimmerman, *Keynote – Games Are Not Good for You*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic9prLfrMg> (accessed 18 September 2024).

²⁶ Compare a study that nuances the views on effects of digital games and software on users: K.M. Lee, W. Peng, N. Park, *Effects of Comput-*

er/Video Games and Beyond [in:] M.B. Oliver, A.A. Rayan, J. Bryant (eds.), *Media Effects: Advances and Theory Research*, Routledge, London–New York 2008, pp. 567–82, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203877111-31> (accessed 18 September 2024).

²⁷ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., p. 147.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 150–151.

²⁹ Cf. R.B. Myerson, *Nash Equilibrium and the History of Economic Theory*, "Journal of Economic Literature" 1999, Vol. 37, No. 3, p. 1074, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.37.3.1067> (accessed 18 September 2024).

Crucially, Lantz reminds that Guidebot was “an extension of my sensory perceptions, a kind of phenomenological augmentation, a new way of situating myself in the world.”³⁰ Moreover, he compares Guidebot to Paul Cezanne’s paintings, thus stressing the importance of AI in the aesthetic experience with digital games:

If you could, in the game, open up Guidebot and examine the code that defined it, you would see the same actual code that defined Guidebot the game object. It feels a bit like the brushstrokes in a Cezanne painting when they stop trying to be trees or clouds or mountains and start to become what they are – strokes of paint on a canvas – giving us a hint of the new century of abstract art that was just around the corner, during which paintings became, not just windows into imaginary worlds, but direct explorations of color, texture, shape, and form.³¹

Digital games consist of code, just as paintings consists of abstract strokes of paint. However, games are not merely science, just as paintings are not merely a chemical substance. Thanks to such ambivalence, according to Lantz, games can be called aesthetic forms. Lantz does not hesitate to call them once again “the defining art of the twenty-first century, [...] a passage into a realm beyond ordinary life.”³²

Eventually, the Occam’s Razor in Lantz’s book is not as effective as it should be. However, the inconsistency of *The Beauty of Games* tells us, as a society, about how we understand aesthetic objects. It appears that we cannot regard digital games as aesthetic objects without

acknowledging them as an art form in the contemporary sense. However, aesthetics are intrinsically linked to ethics. Returning to the Platonic concept of beauty (*kalon*), which advocated both for aesthetic and ethical qualities of a particular work,³³ one would summarize that games are both aesthetic and ethical objects.³⁴ Lantz supports this assumption, asserting that games – from Go and Poker to contemporary digital artifacts – bear a close resemblance to real life. Despite their artificial nature and simplified rules, games possess emergent meanings that provide pleasure because they enable us to comprehend the rules governing the modern globalized world:

The beauty of games is deeply related to the idea of systems, to the dynamic interplay of multiple elements, including ourselves, woven into complex networks of logical and material connections. This makes games especially relevant to our world, a world increasingly composed of, and understood through, systems and software.³⁵

Although the dilemmas concerning the artistic status of games remain unresolved by Lantz, his book is written in accessible language and offers a fresh perspective on the issue of the relationship between games and art. Ultimately, it is left to the reader to determine how to resolve the debate regarding games

³⁰ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., p. 154.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, p. 162.

³³ J. Moss, *Art and Ethical Perspective: Notes on the Kalon in Plato’s Laws* [in:] A.E. Denham (ed.), *Plato on Art and Beauty*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, pp. 206–207.

³⁴ Cf. M. Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2009, p. 4.

³⁵ F. Lantz, *The Beauty of Games*, op. cit., p. 163.

as art, but Lantz's book introduces some novel viewpoints for consideration.

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