

## An Art World for Artgames

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### Abstract

Drawing together the insights of game studies, aesthetics, and the sociology of art, this article examines the legitimization of ‘artgames’ as a category of indie games with particularly high cultural and artistic status. *Passage* (PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, 2007) serves as a case study, demonstrating how a diverse range of factors and processes, including a conducive ‘opportunity space’, changes in independent game production, distribution, and reception, and the emergence of a critical discourse, collectively produce an assemblage or ‘art world’ (Baumann, 2007a; 2007b) that constitutes artgames as legitimate art.

### Author Keywords

Artgames; legitimization; art world; indie games; critical discourse; authorship; *Passage*; Rohrer

### Introduction

The seemingly meteoric rise to widespread recognition of ‘indie’ digital games in recent years is the product of a much longer process made up of many diverse elements. It is generally accepted as a given that indie games now play an important role in the industry and culture of digital games, but just over a decade ago there was no such category in popular discourse – independent game production went by other names (freeware, shareware, amateur, bedroom) and took place in insular, autonomous communities of practice focused on particular game-creation tools or genres, with their own distribution networks, audiences, and systems of evaluation, only occasionally connected with a larger marketplace. Even five years ago, the idea of indie games was still burgeoning and becoming stable, and it is the historical moment around 2007 that I will address in this article. Specifically, I am interested in the emergence of ‘artgames’ as a category, genre, or mode within the larger field of indie games, that first came to prominence with *Passage* (PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, 2007), and also includes games like *The Marriage* (PC, 2007), *The Graveyard* (PC, Mac, iOS, 2008), *Braid* (Xbox 360, PS3, PC, Mac, Linux, 2008), *Flower* (PS3, 2009), and *Every Day the Same Dream* (PC, 2009). As other essays in this special issue attest, the concept of ‘indie games’ is far from stable or predicable – it is a complex assemblage made up of many cooperating and competing elements. ‘Artgames,’ equally ambiguous, can be understood as a particular configuration of these elements, overlapping and interacting with other configurations, all of which collectively make up the heterogeneous field of indie games. The recognition of artgames around 2007, and the unusually high degree of cultural and artistic legitimacy they have received, is an important part of the general re-framing of what indie games, however they are defined, can or should be, and the role that they play in a larger socio-cultural context.

Sociologist Shyon Baumann (2007a) argues that the legitimation of a cultural object or practice as art is a process driven by three factors: changes outside the field in question establish the necessary preconditions for it to be conceived in aesthetic terms, creating an “opportunity space”; institutional shifts and transformations within the field recontextualize its production, distribution, and consumption; and the emergence of a critical discourse ascribes it with value and significance. Baumann argues that these three factors collectively produce an ‘art world’ that constitutes and sustains the cultural form as art. In his case study of Hollywood in the 1960s, he points to the opportunity space opened by the earlier legitimation of European art cinema, the institutional shift to a director-oriented mode of production, and the incorporation of French ‘*auteur* theory’ into American critical discourse on film as three of the key factors (among others) in the development of an art world for Hollywood films (2007b). Like older popular cultural forms including film, popular music and dance, comics, and narrative television, digital games are now in the midst of a process of cultural and artistic legitimation. In this article, I will examine the phenomenon of artgames as one specific part of this much larger process using *Passage* as my primary example, building on Baumann’s conceptual framework. What pre-existing structures produced an opportunity space for artgames? What institutional changes allowed developers like Jason Rohrer to position their work as art, rather than entertainment, and themselves as artists? How has *Passage* been categorized and intellectualized as an aesthetically significant work of art by critics and scholars?

### Artgames

Although the various games grouped under the heading of artgames<sup>1</sup> (sometimes ‘art games’ or ‘art-house games’) bear little surface similarity, they are understood to have analogous approaches to game design practice and shared conceptual/aesthetic concerns. Common features of artgames include: a distinctive or highly stylized audiovisual aesthetic; small (or entirely individual) development teams with identifiable author figures; and an existential-poetic ‘point’ or ‘message’ that the player is intended to discover and ponder, however obscure or ambiguous. These features are not universal – in fact, for any supposedly defining characteristic of artgames, exceptions can be found. The specific audiovisual aesthetic of artgames varies greatly (compare *The Graveyard* to *Passage*); not all artgames have an identifiable individual author (*Every Day the Same Dream*); not all artgames are intended to express a specific existential theme (*fIOW*); not all artgames are short (*Braid*); not all artgames are non-commercial (*Flower*); not all artgames are produced by independent companies (*Lucidity* [PC, Xbox 360, 2009]). Evidently, the term ‘artgame’ is loose and amorphous, and it is not my intention to delineate its boundaries or present a generic taxonomy. Rather, taking into account the insights of contemporary genre theory, it is more productive to frame artgames as a discursively constructed site of struggle and cooperation over meaning and value. Artgames, then, can be productively approached as a genre or cultural category not due to any *essential* shared characteristic, but to the extent that the concept is an “active process” (Mittell, 2004, p. xii) deployed pragmatically by different users to different ends (Altman, 1999).

### *Passage*

The game that popularized the term artgame is *Passage* (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> It was made by previously unknown game developer Jason Rohrer for Gamma256, a curated game design challenge

organized by the experimental game collective Kokoromi during the Montréal International Game Summit (MIGS) in November 2007. The challenge invited independent developers to make games using less than 256 square pixels. *Passage* lasts exactly five minutes, and is played at the tiny resolution of 100x16 pixels, with its images and simple scoreboard rendered in ultra-low-resolution pixel graphics.



Figure 1: Screenshot from *Passage* (2007)

The player controls a male avatar who ages gradually over the course of the game's short timeline, and is able to explore a procedurally-generated maze of obstacles and treasure chests, which increase the player's score. The score also increases gradually the further 'forward' (left) the avatar progresses. The game also includes a computer-controlled female 'companion' who, if found by the player, moves along with the male avatar. Finding the companion limits access to certain areas and treasure chests, but doubles the number of points gained by moving forward. The game has no sound effects, and the background music is a slow, repetitive synthesized march. After four minutes and twenty seconds, the companion dies, followed shortly by the player's avatar, and the game ends, returning to the title screen. *Passage* renders this fixed time limit visually by showing the 'past' and 'future' areas of the game world distorting and condensing on the left and right sides of the screen; at first this visual effect dominates the right side of the screen, but it gradually shifts to the left (behind the player) over the course of the game.

### Theorizing Legitimation

Art produces aesthetic experience, value, legitimacy and capital (both cultural and material), and is made up of an assemblage of elements, including not only the materials, form and content of the art object, but also the activity of artists, performers, and other participants in the construction of the work, the communities of practice in which this activity take place, the material and expressive-symbolic resources mobilized to support it, the institutions and organizations which fund, distribute, exhibit, promote, document, and archive the works, as well as audience reception, critical and academic discourse, and other 'uses' and appropriations of the work (Becker, 1984; Baumann, 2007a). As pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman (2000) argues, following John Dewey, the art object or product is inert until activated in a dynamic, socially- and materially-situated aesthetic experience comprising all of the above. The purpose of studying art is to 'reassemble' the aesthetic, *including* these elements. This does not invalidate art, or somehow reveal it to be illusory and false (Wolff, 1993) – these diverse elements, usually understood to be peripheral, can be considered *part* of the artwork, because without them the work is not art in any meaningful sense.

Art, and the experience, value, and legitimacy it produces, is always already situated in a specific

material-historical place and time, social-cultural milieu, and political-ideological system. At different moments in its existence, a given artwork circulates through many such situations. The specific kind of assemblage in which objects, artifacts, and practices are constituted and legitimated as art is sometimes referred to by aestheticians and sociologists as an ‘art world,’ and I will loosely adopt this term<sup>3</sup> (Danto, 1964; Becker, 1984). As Manuel De Landa (2006) argues, social assemblages like art worlds cannot be reduced to their elements, and are constantly changing, becoming more or less stable and autonomous as the relations between their elements and with other assemblages shift and transform over time. There is no objective structure that art worlds must take – it is a necessarily fluid concept, because it must capture the wide range of different kinds of art in different societies and cultures, and in different historical periods.

New art worlds do not emerge in isolation; they are contingent on other, pre-existing systems of production, distribution and reception, whether they adopt and adapt these systems, or react against them. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) contends, art is not exempt from the social relations of power and domination in a given society – art worlds, their participants, and the artworks they produce, are value-laden and serve all manner of ideological functions, with cultural capital and distinction (not to mention actual capital) at stake for those involved. Cooperation among participants is an important part of the functioning of art worlds (Becker, 1984), but Bourdieu's insights stress the equal importance of competition within and between different art worlds over material and symbolic resources – this is part of the reason why conflicts over the artistic legitimacy of different cultural forms can be so heated and dramatic (Bourdieu, 1984). However, Bourdieu's wholesale reduction of aesthetic judgment and taste to mere symptoms of structural class relations is inadequate. Aesthetics must be understood *in conjunction* with politics, and the complex interplay between them must be made central to the study of art and culture – particularly in the case of popular forms, the aesthetics of which are too often ignored by academics in favour of ‘purely’ socio-political and industrial analyses (Wolff, 1993).

Bearing the above in mind, the legitimation of an individual work (like *Passage*), a movement or group (like artgames), or an entire cultural form (like digital games) is achieved through a process of collective action and interaction (including not only makers but also thinkers, talkers, watchers and players, as well as organizations, places, and objects), and the configuration of their various constitutive elements in relation to one another, to other art worlds, and to society at large (Baumann, 2007a, 2007b). For Baumann (2007a), artistic legitimation resembles other processes, such as the legitimation of the goals of social movements, and political ideas. Legitimacy, in this context, is defined as general acceptance of an art world's ideas – specifically, its claims to status as art. The form and scale of this “general acceptance” varies greatly depending on the specific context, and may be internal to a particular group, such as an insular local “scene” (as was the case in earlier independent game communities) or widely accepted throughout a society, and the material and symbolic benefits of legitimacy vary accordingly (Baumann, 2007a).

As sociologists Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (2012) argue, “art emerges over time as the sum total of institutional activities, everyday interactions, technical implementations, and attributions of meaning” and becoming-art (which they call *artification*) is “a dynamic process of social change through which new objects and practices emerge and relationships and institutions

are transformed.” The question, therefore, is not *is this cultural product art?*, but rather *how has this cultural product been repositioned materially, institutionally, and intellectually and thus redefined as legitimate art?* Baumann’s general theory of artistic legitimation (also known as the legitimation framework) is stated as follows:

“Discrete areas of cultural production attain legitimacy as art, high or popular, during periods of high cultural opportunity through mobilizing material or institutional resources and through the exercise of a discourse that frames the cultural production as legitimate art according to one or more pre-existing ideologies.”

Baumann, p. 60 (2007a)

As noted above, Baumann demonstrates this framework in practice with his own research on the legitimation of Hollywood cinema as art in the 1960s. Artgames, by contrast, are a much smaller and more specific art world than the expansive, relatively homogeneous field of popular American film. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that the legitimation framework is a useful and productive way to understand cultural and artistic legitimation at all scales. While Baumann employs quantitative sociological methods, I contend that a qualitative approach is more appropriate here, given the relatively small scale of the art world in question. I will begin by examining the opportunity space for artgames, followed by a discussion of the internal changes that set artgames like *Passage* apart from other kinds of games, and finally an analysis of the critical discourse on *Passage*.

### Opportunity Space

Baumann argues that the opportunity space for an art world is opened by changes and structures outside of the art world in question, through “pre-existing discursive and organizational resources” that can be adopted or adapted to enable and facilitate successful legitimation (2007b, p. 14). Contextual, external factors constitute the environment in which art worlds emerge and operate, and are reconfigured as part of the new assemblage (Baumann, 2007a). They may be material (such as favourable geographic conditions), expressive-symbolic (such as changes in the cultural status of related art forms), or both (such as the implementation of government grants); some affect the emergence and stabilization of the new art world, others affect its legitimation and the value associated with it; some factors may be known to participants and deliberately exploited, others may be unknown (Baumann, 2007a). In order to understand the legitimation process, it is necessary to understand the different roles played by these exogenous factors.

#### ***The general legitimation of games***

The more general legitimation of digital games in popular culture (itself predicated on the twentieth-century legitimation of other popular cultural forms), and the attendant debates about digital games and art plays a key role in producing the opportunity space for artgames. It is no longer uncommon for mainstream, big-budget digital games to be marketed and received according to the logic of auteurism, elevating star figures such as Shigeru Miyamoto, Hideo Kojima and Peter Molyneux, and there exist commonly recognized (if hotly debated) canons of great games. ‘Prestige games’ like *Shadow of the Colossus* (PS2, PS3 2005/2011), *Okami* (PS2,

Wii, PS3, 2006), *BioShock* (2007, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac), and *Portal* (2007, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac), are framed as exemplifying the whole medium by developers, fans and critics, in the much same way as Oscar-nominated Hollywood movies and premium cable TV shows are held up as the highest achievements of their respective industries. Since the 1990s, there have also been many ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions of digital games in museums and art galleries (Kim, 2012), including the high-profile Smithsonian American Art Museum's *The Art of Video Games* exhibit (ongoing since May 2012), that focus on the most popular, canonical games, and help to popularize the idea that games are a legitimate form of culture. These developments also widen the possibility space for artgames, by popularizing the idea of games as art, and encouraging both digital game fans and the general public to think about games in aesthetic terms. These developments provide a readily available set of discursive resources for developers and critics of artgames.

### ***Indie games***

Indie games, as a more-or-less stable and unified community of practice and as a highly visible (and marketable) cultural category, are a necessary precondition for artgames. With only a handful of exceptions, games identified as artgames are independent productions, produced by individuals or smaller companies understood to be outside of the mainstream games industry. Out of isolated, stratified amateur game design scenes have developed larger and more networked online communities of indie game developers and fans, centred around hubs like *The Independent Gaming Source*, *IndieGames.com*, *The Experimental Gameplay Project*, and, more recently, geographically localized indie development communities (of which Montréal's Kokoromi collective is an important predecessor). Facilitated by broadband Internet connections and faster download speeds, this extended indie games community is influenced by the experimental DIY aesthetics found in indie film, music and comics, and the ideal of small-scale, ‘alternative’ forms of production, distribution, and reception. The accessible development tools, pre-constituted audiences, distribution networks, and support systems made available by the indie gaming community has enabled and engendered the development of various genres and sub-genres, including artgames.

Events where indie developers converge, like *The Independent Games Festival*, *Indiecade*, *Gamma*, and other festivals, competitions, exhibitions, and design “jams” formalize the community of indie developers and provide further legitimacy, support, and resources for the development, distribution, and reception of experimental or intentionally artistic games positioned outside of the commercial industry. On the other hand, many of these events operate under the aegis of larger industry events and institutions like the Game Developers Conference (GDC) and MIGS oriented towards commercial games. Likewise, increasingly accessible software development kits (SDKs) for commercial game engines and consoles, digital distribution of games (especially through The App Store, Steam, Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network), and partnerships between indie developers and major companies provide explicitly commercial frameworks and resources for the development and distribution of artgames, such as *Braid* and *Flower*, allowing developers to reach a larger audience (while still allowing them to be distinguished from other kinds of commercial games through marketing, critical discourse, and other forms of paratextual framing). In this sense, resources and support are made available by the mainstream industry for certain kinds of indie developers and artgames, even if other developers and games do not benefit from this support for various reasons (whether practical or

ideological).

This stabilization of indie games as a category and as a culture has also helped to stabilize and professionalize the role of the indie developer, to the extent that making indie games is seen as something more than a hobby, and even as a legitimate career in some cases (whether self-sustaining or leading to mainstream industry work). This too contributes to the opportunity space for artgames – if making indie games is a legitimate pursuit, supported by a community of like-minded people and institutions (in the same way as indie music or comics), then the product of that pursuit must also be legitimate, perhaps even as art. Partially thanks to their positioning as part of the indie games community, making games has become a full-time occupation for Rohrer and other artgame developers (and in some cases quite a lucrative one – *Braid* made Jonathan Blow an overnight millionaire [Clark, 2012]).

### ***Games in the academy***

The growing legitimacy of games in general and indie games in particular is bolstered by scholarly attention to games, academic game studies, and the introduction of practical game design degrees and diplomas at colleges and universities. These institutions serve an important legitimating function, expanding the discursive and material opportunity space for the production and reception of digital games as a significant cultural form, and situating games alongside other legitimate art forms like visual art, theatre, literature, and film. The presence of digital games as an increasingly acceptable field of study and training in the academy is necessarily predicated on the notion that games must be *worth* making, thinking about, and talking about, and perhaps also worth evaluating in aesthetic terms. Leading up to 2007, a growing body of work on questions of art and aesthetics in relation to games, from various perspectives (Jenkins, 2005; Smuts, 2005; Clarke & Mitchell, 2007), helped set the stage for artgames by making a space within respectable institutions for the serious consideration and discussion of digital games as art.

## **Internal Changes**

With the opportunity space established, internal changes in resources and activities *within* an emerging art world, and in the institutional arrangements that organize the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of its products, work to legitimate those products as art (2007b). By collectively mobilizing specific resources both tangible/material (money, labour, equipment, etc.) and intangible/expressive (knowledge, prestige, traditions, etc.), the activity of an assemblage is re-framed as legitimate artistic activity. These strategies may be learned and copied from other art worlds, or may take on new and unique forms. Resources are competed for, earned, invested, and spent in service of both the practical production of new works and the expressive production of new forms of aesthetic experience and cultural value (2007b).

### ***Independence and ‘artist’ status***

The art world for artgames is a particular configuration of resources and practices within the larger assemblage of indie games, and the opportunity space outlined above. The specific textual and paratextual strategies at work in artgame development and distribution distinguish artgames from the mainstream game industry, as well as within the field of indie games, in a number of ways. These strategies play a central role in the ‘invention’ and legitimation of artgames as a genre. Even more explicitly than other indie games, artgames trade on the high cultural status of their indie-ness. The cachet and presumed freedom, authenticity, and integrity ascribed to other

forms of independent cultural production is used by artgame developers to position their work as a more ‘pure’ alternative to other kinds of games – commercial, functional, or amateur. As I have already pointed out, the establishment of indie games as a heterogeneous but relatively stable field is modelled on other cultural assemblages with high cultural capital, especially indie music and comics. The independence of artgames is a crucial component of their claim to artistic legitimacy, as exemplified by *Passage*: produced by an individual developer with no budget, released as a free download completely outside the game industry’s distribution networks, with no creative constraints save for the rules of the *Gamma256* competition.

The highly stylized, often lo-fi, pixelated or deliberately ‘retro’ aesthetics of indie games, and their often brief duration, simplify the production process and allow for smaller teams, making it easier to map the intent behind a game onto a single author (unlike the mainstream industry) and thus to understand it as an intentional artistic object (Bogost, 2011). This echoes other forms of ‘indie’ production, in which a pragmatic DIY ethic works in conjunction with a ‘lo-fi’ aesthetic (consider punk music, or the rough, hand-drawn quality of some indie comics). As noted above, other artgames adopt different aesthetic strategies, ranging from realistic 3D models rendered in black-and-white with high-quality recorded music (*The Graveyard*) to total abstraction (*The Marriage*). In all of these cases, however, the audiovisual style of artgames contrasts against the big-budget hyperrealist spectacles of popular ‘AAA’ titles that dominate the game industry, in the same way that experimental film art and electronic glitch music present a challenge to the glossy perfection of Hollywood movies and Top 40 hits. The short duration of many artgames, as well as small download sizes, playability in web browsers, and availability for cheap or free, makes artgames more accessible, and encourages players to share them by circulating links, reinforcing the idea that these games are meant to be replayed, contemplated, and discussed.

As in other forms of independent cultural production, the subject matter of artgames reinforces their paratextual framing as unique and outside of the mainstream. Deeply personal explorations of the ‘universal’ themes of love and death (a distinctly modern conception of art that emerges from nineteenth century Romanticism [Heinich, 1997; Shiner 2003]) recur frequently in artgames. Many are explicitly designed to be *memento mori*, offering moody, esoteric meditations on life, relationships, and the inevitability of death – *Passage* is archetypal in this sense. Compared to mainstream games, which tend to be goal-oriented and action-driven, artgames are slow and meandering, and rarely offer the sense of accomplishment and narrative closure provided by traditional games. *Passage*, *The Graveyard*, and *Dear Esther* (PC, Mac, Linux, 2008/2012) all end abruptly with the death of the player’s avatar, with no definitive conclusion; other games, such as *Braid* and *Every Day the Same Dream* involve complex, non-linear narratives that similarly contrast against popular conventions. This can be linked to the ‘realism’ observed by David Bordwell (2009) in art cinema – a realism based not in audiovisual representation, but in psychological or narrative complexity, and thematic ambiguity. As Bordwell puts it, “life lacks the neatness of art and *this art knows it*” (p. 722). Dealing with profound, existential themes long associated with fine art and high culture thus works to further distinguish artgames from ‘ordinary’ digital games.

However, this distinction between independent and mainstream is not clear-cut, and as indie games have become less autonomous and more integrated into the industry and gaming culture, the boundaries continue to blur. One of Rohrer’s next games was a commission from *Esquire*



magazine, and *Passage* was later made available for purchase on Apple mobile devices, and as part of a Nintendo DS compilation cartridge called *Alt-Play: Jason Rohrer Anthology* (2011) in the vein of the Criterion Collection's lavish DVD boxed sets (Ian Bogost took this to new heights with a leather-bound, \$500 deluxe edition of *A Slow Year* [Atari VCS, 2010]). More recently, Rohrer has released commercial games via digital distribution (*Sleep is Death* [PC, Mac, Linux, 2010] and *Inside a Star-Filled Sky* [PC, Mac, Linux, 2011]), and for the Nintendo DS (*Diamond Trust of London* [2012]). Other artgames are also not as starkly independent as they might appear – *Braid*, for example, was produced in conjunction with Microsoft and released as a commercial indie game on Xbox Live Arcade, selling thousands of copies.

In spite of these ‘compromises,’ however, artgames maintain their independent status and distinction by openly inviting players and critics to engage with their work as art. The small development teams associated with indie games are granted additional expressive weight in artgames: more emphatically than other game developers, the makers of artgames reflexively identify and promote themselves as artists, with games as their chosen medium. As Baumann (2007b) contends, this strategy of self-identification has been well established historically in other art worlds, such as Hollywood in the 1960s. Discourses of authorship will be addressed in more detail below, but it is worth briefly noting here that it is a powerful rhetorical tool for reconciling ‘independence’ and artistic freedom with the demands of the market. The author is understood to be the organizing intelligence that unifies the text (Bordwell, 2009) and transcends the limitations of industry, commerce, medium, genre, and subject matter – if an authorial figure is presented or identified, all other concerns fade away in the shining light of its presence. *Passage*, *The Marriage*, and many other artgames feature paratexts like artist statements and manifestos designed to frame them as serious works by serious artists. Rohrer's public talks, interviews, and written articles are almost all focused on discussions of digital games as an artistic medium, and the role of the artist-designer (for example, Rohrer, 2008). Even in cases where artgame development is a less obviously individual practice, the status of the developers as artists is maintained: *Tale of Tales* is a two-person team, and their games are paratextually presented as the product of an artistic collaboration between two strong individual personalities.

### ***Institutional resources***

In addition to the largely discursive resources of ‘indie’ status, artgames also mobilize material and expressive resources through cultural institutions and organizations. In the case of *Passage*, Kokoromi's *Gamma* series acted as an important cultural gatekeeper, identifying new talents like Rohrer and introducing them to a wider audience by providing a high-profile venue for exhibition and distribution. The members of the Kokoromi collective include not only widely known indie game designers, most notably *Fez* [Xbox 360, 2012] developer Phil Fish, but also curators of game/art events and exhibitions around the world, such as Cindy Poremba, thus bestowing *Gamma* participants with the approval of both the world of indie games and the institutions of the Art World. In addition to *Gamma256*, *Passage* has been featured in numerous festivals, anthologies, gallery shows about games and art, and blockbuster museum exhibitions, often with Rohrer as an invited special guest. One of the biggest and most prestigious of these was the Museum of Modern Art's *Talk to Me* (2011), which included not only artgames and game-based artworks, but also digital and computer-based works from a diverse range of traditions. More recently, MoMA announced that *Passage* would be one of the first fourteen games acquired for their new digital game collection (Antonelli, 2012). In addition to providing

Rohrer with financial remuneration, the presentation of *Passage* in one of the most famous art museums in the world, alongside other legitimated works of art and design, makes a clear statement about its status and value.

Other artgames have taken advantage of material resources in the form of government grants (such as *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery EP* [iOS, Windows, Mac, Linux, 2011], discussed by Daniel Joseph in this special issue) and private commissions (such as Rohrer's commissioned games for *Esquire* and the 2010 *Art History of Games* symposium, or Anna Anthropy's work for the Cartoon Network's edgy *Adult Swim* brand). Allegedly, Rohrer receives "monthly checks from his 'patron,' a wealthy software-industry figure who has taken a liking to his games" (Fagone, 2008), an interesting – and no doubt calculated – throw-back to patronage practices associated with historical fine art. Rohrer was also hired as a creative consultant on *LMNO*, a since-cancelled collaboration between filmmaker Steven Spielberg and Electronic Arts (Fagone, 2008). These connections provide both material and cultural capital, reinforcing the framing of artgames as works of art worthy of greater autonomy, while also ascribing legitimacy to those institutions and individuals that are hip and contemporary enough to support artgame development. As I have argued throughout this section, artgames gain artistic legitimacy in their modes of production and distribution, and in their paratextual framing. The emergence of this particular configuration of resources and internal activity positions artgames for critical consideration and popular reception as legitimate art.

### Reception & Critical Discourse

Finally, critical discourse intellectualizes and provides theoretical grounding for the value and legitimacy of an art world (Baumann, 2007a; 2007b). Although they can be understood as part of the internal changes described above, expressive and discursive elements are granted privileged status in social assemblages (De Landa, 2009), and so the popular and critical reception of *Passage* requires particular attention. When an art world becomes distinct, it begins to offer a distinct form of cultural capital that needs to be justified, and popular and academic critical discourse "provides a rationale for accepting the definition of a cultural product as art and offers analyses for particular products" (Baumann, 2007b, p. 17). Theory and criticism frame the goals, tactics, and activities of an art world and make them "comprehensible, valid, acceptable and desirable," either by appealing to already-established ideologies (Baumann, 2007a, p. 57), or by devising entirely new justifications that distinguish the new art world from other forms (Danto, 1964; Becker, 1984). Barbara Klinger (1994) describes criticism as a form of textual appropriation, reflecting the preoccupations and pragmatic concerns of critics in a given historical moment. Over the course of the last ten years, there has been a growing range of 'serious' criticism of games, reacting against the consumer-review model of most game journalism. Artgames like *Passage* provide an ideal object for critics – a sophisticated, distinguished work of art requiring sophisticated, distinguished criticism. Thus, artgames and game critics are mutually elevated and legitimated in critical discourse. The importance of criticism is not lost on artgame developers – Rohrer quotes and catalogues links to (positive) critical and popular responses to each of his games on his website, a self-reflexive strategy reminiscent of the reviews and accolades used in book and film paratexts. In this section, I will focus on the popular and critical reception of *Passage* in the months following its release in November 2007.

Rohrer's 'creator statement,' entitled "What I was trying to do with *Passage*", is the first instance of critical commentary on the game. Discourse on *Passage* spread rapidly after the *Gamma256* event (facilitated, as I have already suggested, by its brevity and small download size), beginning with a December 1, 2007 blog post from influential game scholar (and future artgame designer) Ian Bogost (2007), identifying *Passage* as a "superb specimen", and the "standout" of the *Gamma* show. The game circulated on blogs and online forums dedicated to indie games and pixel art, inciting effulgent praise and angry polemics among players and designers. Mainstream gaming news sites also posted about *Passage*, including *Kotaku*, which dubbed it their "Weird Artistic Timewaster of the Day" (Greene, 2007). Other journalists were far more verbose in their accolades: in particular, an effusive article on *Destructoid* by Anthony Burch (2007) helped introduce the game to a wider audience, announcing *Passage* as "one of the most clever, meaningful, affecting, and memorable games ever made." *Passage* and other artgames have frequently been the object of this kind of enthusiastic criticism. *Passage* was also cited as an important contribution to the artistic advancement of games by a number of high-profile game developers in interviews and blog posts around this time, including Brenda Brathwaite (2007), Clint Hocking (Totilo, 2008a) and David Jaffe (Totilo, 2008b). Not long after *Passage* made the rounds in the gaming world, a number of mainstream news and culture outlets also published articles on the game, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek*, *The Guardian*, and later *Esquire* magazine and *The New York Times*. Aside from lavishing *Passage* and Rohrer with acclaim, a number of recurring themes can be identified in the popular and critical reception of the game, including authorship, ambiguity, emotion, and exemplification. In this section I will also examine negative responses to artgames and academic writing on *Passage*.

### ***Authorship, intentionality, and autobiography***

Authorship is almost always central to the textual appeals of cultural objects seeking legitimation, and to their reception (Newman & Levine, 2012). Critical discourse on artgames, like auteurist film criticism and pop music criticism, identifies distinctive styles and recurring themes, attributing them to the intentions of a defined author figure and situating them as part of a coherent oeuvre of works. Many artgame developers engage directly in this discourse, through artist statements, manifestos, post-mortems and other texts that serve to explain their intentions, declare principled stances, and situate their practice as legitimate art. As Klinger (1994) argues, authorial statements about the meaning of texts are a privileged form of discourse, and are often internalized, sustained, and canonized by critics and scholars, rather than challenged or revised. Rohrer's 'creator statement' (2007) presents the game as a *memento mori*, and links it to Rohrer's personal life and experience: "I turn 30 tomorrow. A close friend from our neighbourhood died last month. Yep, I've been thinking about life and death a lot lately. This game is an expression of my recent thoughts and feelings." The statement outlines the intentions behind each aspect of the game in fairly straightforward terms (the maze represents life, the blurring edges represent the future and the past, the points are ultimately meaningless, etc.), and these authorized explanations are frequently taken up and repeated by other critics.

While authorship discourses circulate in gaming culture more generally, the authorship of artgames is much more closely linked to autobiography. Peter Molyneux and Hideo Kojima's games are certainly understood to express an authorial intentionality and style, but not so much

their actual life history or subjective personal experience. Autobiography has been a reliable strategy for establishing the artistic legitimacy of various cultural forms, including independent film and comics – as Bart Beaty (2007) argues, discussing European alternative comics in the 1990s, autobiography “becomes a mode which foregrounds both realism [...] and the sense of the author as an artist demanding legitimacy,” rather than as a hack working a commercial mass medium (p. 144). Autobiography reinforces authorship by imbuing it with a deeper aesthetic significance.

The autobiographical character of Rohrer’s games is well-established by his artist statement (“That’s me and my spouse in there, distilled down to 8x8 pixels each” [Rohrer, 2007]), and has been embraced by critics. In *The Guardian*, Aleks Krotoski (2008) writes, “It’s not often you get an autobiographical game. Perhaps that’s why it’s had such an impact.” As in his own writing, Rohrer’s personal history, lifestyle, and relationships are made central to the reception of his games – *Passage* is framed as “a special kind of game made by an unusual kind of game developer” (the99th, 2007). Jason Fagone’s lengthy *Esquire* profile (2008) argues that “video games need a figure like Rohrer so badly: an auteur. A person of great energy, courage, ego, and, yeah, pretentiousness,” foregrounding Rohrer’s eccentric, simple lifestyle. Rohrer lives ‘off the grid’ in a ramshackle house with a meadow, on supposedly less than \$14,000 a year, and Fagone points to this asceticism as part of his genius. “If he didn’t live this way, he couldn’t make the games he makes,” Fagone concludes. According to this masculinist, Romantic paradigm of the artist, only the passionate, lonely genius can transcend the commercial and popular status of ‘stupid’ games to produce art: “Rohrer with a laptop, sitting cross-legged in the dirt, inventing a new way of showing the world what it means to be alive” (Fagone, 2008). Other artgames, such as Anna Anthropy’s *dys4ia* (Flash, 2012), and *Papa y Yo* (PS3, 2012) are even more explicitly framed as autobiography. These personal stories, granted authority by the makers themselves, circulate through artgames and in the critical discourse surrounding them, setting them apart from other kinds of games.

### ***Ambiguity and interpretation***

While authorship and intentionality are powerful rhetorical tools, and do much to legitimate artgames as a worthy aesthetic form, appeals to ambiguity and interpretation are also effective, especially in gaming culture, which places great aesthetic value on interactivity and non-linearity. In the case of *Passage*, Rohrer (2007) explicitly invites players to come to their own conclusions about the game’s meaning in his artist statement. Almost all popular writing on the game (including Rohrer’s own) begins with a statement encouraging players to avoid ‘spoilers’ and other undue outside influences on their interpretation by playing the game before reading about it. *Passage*’s apparent ambiguity and openness to interpretation helps situate it within well-established conceptions of the serious artwork that requires thoughtful engagement and contemplation on the part of the viewer. Burch (2007) is most emphatic on this point, saying that “There is no true ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way the play the game, and much of *Passage*’s brilliance can only be understood through completing it yourself.” He goes on to say that his reading of the game as expressing “the lonely, meandering nature of life” is “the *only* right interpretation for me, and, hopefully, it is the exact *wrong* interpretation for you” (Burch, 2007). The game’s procedurally generated game world and abstracted audiovisual aesthetic serves an important rhetorical function here, reinforcing the idea that each player’s experience is unique (Bogost, 2009).

However, the notion that *Passage*'s artistic value lies in its openness to interpretation grates against the discourse of authorship and intentionality addressed above. Elsewhere in his article, Burch paradoxically states that "whatever emotions you feel, whatever symbolism you notice, or whatever meaning you derive from the game's movement and visual mechanics, were all totally intentional" (2007). This echoes Rohrer's artist statement: "There's no 'right' way to play *Passage*, just as there's no right way to interpret it. However, I had specific intentions for the various mechanics and features that I included" (2007). In spite of the rhetoric of ambiguity, *Passage* has consistently been interpreted in the way that Rohrer intended: as a *memento mori* and a meditation on love, loss, and priorities. As noted above, Rohrer's artist statement firmly establishes the terms for reception and criticism of his work, and the game's intended allegory is not particularly opaque or difficult to decode. The range of interpretive possibilities is limited by both the manifest structure of the game and by Rohrer's statement – Burch's "exact wrong" interpretation is more or less the same as anyone else's. This presents an interesting contrast to *Braid*, which has produced a much more diverse range of interpretations, perhaps in part because developer Jonathan Blow has declined to make an authoritative statement on its meaning (Clark, 2012). As Bordwell (2009) argues of art cinema, Rohrer and his critics strategically mobilize the tension between authorial intentionality, 'realistic' existential subject matter, and the ambiguity of player interpretation and agency (which is central to debates about games as art), simultaneously affirming Rohrer's status as artist and aligning *Passage* with popular notions of the complex, nuanced work of art.

### ***Emotion and affect***

Outpourings of emotion and affect abound in critical writing on *Passage*, which is described as "a pregnant, forlorn sentence" (Johnson, 2007) and "an emotional suckerpunch in 256 colours and a midi soundtrack" (Meer, 2007). In particular, critics focus on the ability of the game to make the player weep, a cliché notion that has become a sort of litmus test in discussions of games as art. In a *Play This Thing* article entitled "A Game That Almost Made Me Cry," the author writes:

"I'm talking about 8-color pixel sprites making me feel something that *Final Fantasy* could only pull off non-interactively with cheap (read: extremely expensive) parlor tricks of CG and professional voice acting [...] when you see [the death of *Passage*'s female companion] happen, so abruptly, you may feel something more dramatic and real than when Aireth was impaled."

the99th (2007)

The author not only aligns *Passage* with one of the most frequently cited affective moments in the gaming canon (the death of Aerith/Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* [PlayStation, PC, 1997]), but suggests that *Passage* surpasses it. Rohrer, for his part, also makes emotional impact central in his accounts of the game: "There have been a number of people who have written stuff about this being the first videogame to make them cry [...] That's definitely what I was trying to evoke" (Rutkoff, 2008). Blogger 'Lord Regulus' (2007) goes even further: "What I always longed to see was a game that could evoke tears of joy or understanding; the sort of 'beautiful sorrow' that comes with a moment of revealed truth or heartfelt inspiration," (2007). This is no mere

emotional manipulation (or “suckerpunch”), but a transcendent, pure affect normally only associated with highest-order aesthetic experiences and the greatest works of art.

### *Artgames as exemplary*

In many cases, *Passage* is held up as ‘proof’ that games can be art, exemplifying the whole cultural form of digital games. The mere fact that the moniker ‘artgames’ (analogous to ‘art cinema’) has been so widely adopted in discussions of games like *Passage* is telling – these, according to artgame developers and critics, are the games that are art. In a rhetorical flourish typical of critical discourse on artgames, Burch (2007) declared upon playing *Passage* that “The ‘games as art’ debate is officially *over*.” Elsewhere, *Passage* is presented as “the simplest, strongest blow struck for the ‘games as art’ argument in years” (Gladstone & Sharkey, 2008), and Nick Montfort (2008) frames the game as nothing short of epochal: “[In the future] they will remember [*Passage*] because it showed them, for the first time, how games can model our world and what we care about in it.” Some critics align *Passage* with established cultural forms, particularly poetry (Thompson, 2008; Fagone 2008), but most (including Rohrer himself) focus on the specificity of games, arguing that the game’s achievements would be impossible, or at least very different, in other media (Thompson, 2008; Totilo, 2008; Brathwaite, 2007). Distinguishing artgames radically from other forms helps to establish digital games as a unique medium, requiring its own art world and its own systems of criticism and appreciation (Carroll, 1988), and providing a unique form of cultural capital (Baumann, 2007b). As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (2012) argue, legitimation also produces “a bifurcation of the medium into good and bad” (p. 7) – *Passage* is juxtaposed against more mainstream games, as evidenced by game designer Clint Hocking’s complaint, “Why can’t ‘Halo’ make me feel what ‘Passage’ made me feel? It’s clearly not a question of budget” (Totilo, 2008a).

### *Counter-arguments and critique*

While the glowing praise discussed above is important, negative and dissenting voices help stabilize and consolidate art world assemblages by drawing boundaries and galvanizing common goals and opponents for participants in the legitimation process (De Landa, 2009). Some critics and commentators have questioned the status of artgames as games due to their short duration and limited interactivity, thus questioning their claim to art and legitimacy. Alec Meer (2007) argues that, in spite of its emotional impact, “its credentials as actual game versus interactive experiment are debatable”. If *Passage* and *The Graveyard* aren’t *really* games, then they can’t prove anything about the form in general (similar arguments are raised about game-based art in galleries, which is seen as a ‘cheat’ and not a true legitimation of games as art [Lopes, 2009; Bogost 2011]). Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Braid*, which is much longer and adopts many of the generic conventions of popular side-scrolling platformer games, has not faced similar charges. The simplicity of artgames is also sometimes attacked, in the same terms as the ‘my kid could paint that’ critique of abstract art: “I hate to be a dick but what a complete and utter waste of time. Which part of that was supposed to be impressive?” (Sapiens, 2007). Another common criticism is that artgames are impossibly pretentious. Consider this colourful blog comment, which negatively aligns artgames with other cultural forms deemed to be overly pretentious and highfalutin:

“Now, to be an indie art-film maker, you have to be pretty pretentious. To be an

indie art-game maker is another thing entirely. You have to have your head shoved so far up your own ass that you can eat your heart. Wow Jason Rohr [sic]. I hate you.”

Quoted in Fagone (2008)

Linked to the charge of pretentiousness is distaste for (and mockery of) the purportedly too self-serious or emotional themes of artgames, which mirrors the de-legitimation of soap operas, melodrama, and other feminized cultural forms on grounds that they are too emotional, too messy, and too overwrought (Newman & Levine, 2012). Blogger Alex Kierkegaard (2010) writes, in a lengthy, homophobic, pseudo-intellectual screed, that developers employ “various cunning aesthetic tricks that pander to the sensibilities of women and effeminate males” to hoodwink players into mistaking artgames for ‘true’ art. These critiques of artgames also take the form of direct parody (affectionate and otherwise), such as the Flash game *Passage in 10 Seconds* (Flash, 2010), which distills its basic elements (the spouse, the treasure, and death) into a pithy 10-second game.<sup>4</sup> As De Landa (2009) points out, “a [social] movement typically breeds a counter-movement,” in this case resistance to the idea of artgames, “both of which should be considered component parts of the overall assemblage” (p. 59).

### *Academic writing on artgames*

As I have already mentioned, the academy is a powerful legitimating institution, and academic game studies has granted legitimacy to artgames in a number of ways. As Becker (1984) argues, aestheticians and theorists provide high-level ideas about art forms that are subsequently applied in the form of criticism – this process is cyclical, as artworks, criticism, and theory co-constitute one another over time, serving the interests of each. Artgames are something of a privileged genre in game studies, and have been considered from a range of perspectives, and *Passage* has received passing mention in countless academic books, articles, conference presentations, and blog posts. Ian Bogost presents the most sustained account of the game, using it and other artgames, which he calls ‘proceduralist’ games, to exemplify his theories of fine processing (2008) and procedural rhetoric (2009; 2011). In addition to discussing many of the themes found in other critical discourse (including authorship, ambiguity, and emotion), *Passage* is positioned as ‘proof’ of the viability of these approaches, simultaneously legitimating the game by demonstrating its value and importance as an object of inquiry, and aligning Bogost’s theory (and his own artistic game design practice) with an object already high in cultural capital. Likewise, my own research trades in the status and legitimacy of artgames, even while interrogating the processes by which they are achieved. The role of the academy in art worlds is thus always double: on the one hand, it acts as a gatekeeper institution and confers legitimacy on artgames, while on the other, it gains cultural capital and legitimacy by studying fashionable new cultural forms like artgames. The “atmosphere of artistic theory” (Danto, 1964, p. 577) produced by academic and critical discourse on *Passage* and other artgames thus enables their reception and appreciation as art, building internal consensus and external acceptance (Baumann, 2007a).

## **Conclusion**

The art world for artgames has brought acclaim, status, and capital (both cultural and material) to its participants – not only developers like Rohrer, but also players, critics, scholars, companies,

and institutions. According to Newman and Levine, the study of legitimation should “document emergent discourses of legitimation and critique them, seeking to expose and denaturalize their ideological underpinnings, as well as opening lines of inquiry into other ways to consider the medium” (2012, p. 3). What is at stake, why, and for whom, in processes of legitimation? Why were artgames able to achieve such a high degree of acceptance as art compared to other kinds of digital games in such a short period of time? With this case study, I have attempted to show that the constitution of *Passage* as legitimate art was “neither simple nor obvious” (Wasson, 2005, p. 2), and must be understood as a convergence of many different processes, activities, ideas, and elements.

According to this theoretical framework, art worlds can be understood in relation to one another, in spite of their specificities. It is productive, for example, to compare artgames to other forms of independent cultural production like indie comics and music, which follow a similar legitimation trajectory, and interact directly in the form of events like *artXgame*, which organizes collaborations between comic artists and game designers, and Brooklyn’s Babycastles collective, whose ‘New Arcade’ parties combine live music, visual art, site-specific installations, game-based artworks, and indie games of all kinds. Studying cultural and artistic legitimation makes it possible to understand very different kinds of art worlds in relation to one another, ranging from canonical fine art (DiMaggio, 1982; Heinich, 1997) to upstart popular forms like digital games, and even *failed* attempts at legitimation (Dowler, 1993).

These are not benign, neutral processes. The legitimation of certain kinds of digital games comes at the expense of other configurations, other art worlds both actual and potential, that also pursue legitimacy as art. Celia Pearce (2012) attributes the lack of explicit continuity between artgames and the gallery-oriented experimental ‘videogame art’ of the 1990s and early 2000s to a gendered de-legitimation of these earlier artists and critics – many of whom were women – in spite of their important contributions. Likewise, as Newman and Levine argue, the legitimation of certain kinds of television shows is premised on an acceptance that television *as a whole* has no cultural value whatsoever (2012, p. 18). Constructing a dichotomy between the idiotic, mainstream ‘masses’ and the thoughtful, elite ‘classes’ re-inscribes, rather than challenges, traditional cultural hierarchies, and the social inequalities upon which they are premised (Newman & Levine, 2012).

Artgames, while putatively elevating digital games, in some ways reinforce and reproduce the very forms of distinction that actively deny most games status as art. Unlike the populist arguments about games and art presented by Henry Jenkins (2005) and Anna Anthropy (2012), which explicitly challenge the elitism of canonical art, the art world for artgames does not contradict the standard critiques of digital games as childish, sensational low culture – they accept this devaluation, and attempt to position themselves as a better class of games within the same dominant hierarchy. This is not to say that the aesthetic challenge to the hegemonic game industry and its products presented by artgames is not valid or necessary, but it must be understood in relation to *other* configurations of material and expressive elements. The study of cultural and artistic legitimation enables comparisons “across symbol-producing realms” (Baumann, 2007a, p. 61), situating art and aesthetics in relation to the complex and contradictory historical, social, cultural, and political processes to which they are inexorably linked.



While I have limited my study to the historical moment immediately following *Passage*'s release, Jason Rohrer and *Passage* continue to circulate and transform alongside shifting opportunity spaces, practices, and discourses, far surpassing other early artgames such as *The Marriage* and *The Graveyard* in prominence and prestige, culminating most recently with MoMA's acquisition of the game. *Passage* has played an influential role in sustaining artgames as a category, and in the ongoing entrenchment of indie games as an important area of digital games and gaming culture. The contingent assemblage of resources, people, discourses, and practices I have mapped and analyzed in this article, guided by Baumann's conceptual framework and the insights of other scholarly work on artistic legitimation, have collectively produced an art world that makes *Passage* and artgames sensible and valuable as aesthetic objects and works of art.

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<sup>1</sup> This usage of ‘artgame’ should not be confused with earlier, unrelated uses of the term ‘art game’, for example in Holmes (2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Passage* can be downloaded from <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/>.

<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the ‘official’ institutions of gallery art, sometimes collectively called “the Art World.” For my purposes, the Art World is one of *many* art worlds operating in different contexts and at different scales.

<sup>4</sup> *Passage in 10 Seconds* can be played online at <http://www.kongregate.com/games/raitendo/passage-in-10-seconds>