# SERIOUSNESS OF PLAY: VIDEO GAME ART IN SERBIA Vera Mevorah

### Serious business of gaming

Video games have made an important impact on contemporary society, especially during the last decade. Among the important spheres of production affected by this phenomenon are global economy, technology development, Internet and popular culture, media consumption, but also the very world of high art, affected not only by the steadfast development of new media aesthetics in this genre, but also by further erosion of tightly knit borders between artistic disciplines and slow changing of the very definition of "Art" in contemporary context. I will present shortly these discourses that invoke the signifier of *seriousness* in video game world, as I attempt to position the specific appropriative practices of so-called *art games* or video game art in global and "Serbian" context. The reason I put the Serbian in quotation marks comes from distinguished *globalized* and *virtualized* identities of these art pieces, one that I will present as closely connected to the practice and culture of Internet art genre.

In 2013, video game industry had an estimated value of over 60 billion dollars (Zackariasson, Wilson 2012: 1). This vast system of production had by far outraced film and music industry and shares most of their production methods, yet in many ways it remains equated to somewhat insignificant and unrecognized *gaming* subculture, a favorite pastime of a stereotyped figure of lone male, sitting in his parents' basement or boyhood room doing nothing all day long, but *playing* video games. The concept of play here is fundamentally opposed to what is deemed necessary productive (and serious) behavior of one member of society. While playing games in history of Western and other civilizations has long been considered a social activity intended for both adults and children and not differentiated in this sense, with evolution of thinking about child development and pedagogy, *playing* has slowly come to be fixated as a thing for children, one that is required to be overgrown with

adulthood. Yet, more to the point, we seem to forget that gaming as *digital* entertainment did not evolve out of children's play, but with technological advances in the eve of Cold War. In those early days of computer technology, dealing with this kind of equipment was reserved for highly skilled technicians and programmers, who, immerged in the popular culture of the time, especially science fiction, developed the very first video games, with the mind set to experimenting with the possibilities of technology. Also, this was an important period for history of technology because it marked a beginning of thinking about the usage of computers outside of military and research goals. Video games have always been an important factor in pushing the limits of computer technology, where general hardware and software production was often forced to follow the demand of more and more demanding and complex video game production. Today, it is impossible to separate culture of personal computing to that of video games. In time, this technological flux produced a rich and diverse culture.

Gaming today consists of many elements, particularly in its online production, with game servers, fan sites, clans, forums etc. Woody Evans in his study of informational aspects of gaming in 2011 comments on writings of one Edward Castronova when he writes that "[..]Recent developments suggest that all games are going to go online within a very few years. And when they do, they will all acquire a social dimension" (Evans 2011: 24). The development and culture of video games have always been connected to the overall development of computer science and technology, but have only in recent part of their history been tied to the Internet, especially with the popularity of Massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft, in the last decade. One could call this culture truly contemporary in the sense that it is tightly connected to global capitalistic production, uses aggressive marketing and complex production systems and has a strong communication aspect. Such culture is also present in today's Serbia. One of the most popular gaming message boards and information platform in Serbia founded in 1998 - KlanRUR has 25.516 members today. There is a notable gaming community in Serbia, although its production, as well as visibility, is strongly afflicted by the general economic situation, as well as social perception of gaming as playing, that is, the opposite of doing anything serious or important. One of the clear signs that this culture and industry is set for making society take them serious is string lobbying for so professional gaming, so called e-sports, that is the campaigning for equalizing the sporting events in the gaming world to status of other sports. Just recently here in Belgrade was organized one of many gaming competitions - the final of The World Championship 2015 Counter-Strike: Global Offensive tournament with more than 100.000 dollar reword. Two million people worldwide watched competition stream online. It is interesting to mention that if you visit the website of Serbian E-sports Association what you encounter is not

its

an informative database but a strong visual promotion video defending the "sports" status of competitive gaming. Academic investigation into this culture has opened some new important issues concerning the contemporary subjectivity as well as deepened the significant cultural investigations of postmodernism. The questions of immersion, identity, gender, interactivity, aesthetics, communication, democracy, self-organization and creativity have moved the international academic community forward in a similar sense as the video game software moved forward computer hardware technology.

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As the discourse diverged, another important battle was waged by the gaming community, not just winning the status of serious sport activity and professionalism, but also cultural significance and value, the status of gaming as Art. It is important to stress that we are not talking about simple dichotomy popular/high art here. Today's media culture is much more complex and overlapping than it was in the middle of the 20th century. I strongly believe that the question of naming something as "Art today" is tied not to its structural elements, seriousness of approach or social value, but to the slow moving of signifiers in the Art World machinery and assimilation of media objects in this vast social system. Although video games could be well on their way to become an art genre, today, it is still mostly considered as the part of popular art culture (Jenkins 2005) and growing industry. This kind of study specifically provokes the question of art status of video games, especially since our thesis introduces video game art not as an aesthetic theory and practice of gaming, but as a kind of artistic appropriation of this popular genre, one we connect to contemporary conceptual and new media art discourses.

On the other hand, gaming discourse, especially in the last decade has developed its own form of moving outside the gaming community with the idea and development of *serious games*. This concept that came from Clark Abt in 1970 (not surprisingly a US laboratory researcher in Cold War period), that opens up the idea of *gamification* of fields such as education, urban planning, military, health etc, that is, the idea of beneficial aspects of applying gaming in different spheres of human activity (Abt, 1970). Today, this field is the part of a growing gaming industry as well as widening of the discourse itself. As they are loosely defined by Baek, Ko and Marsh:

..serious games are games or game-like interactive systems developed with game technology and design principles for a primary purpose other than pure entertainment. (Baek, Ko, Marsh 2014: v)

These purposes diverge from government systems and education sector to healthcare and corporative usage. The military is particularly involved in investing in this new field giving that its implementation of new technology and simulations has a long and successful tradition. Gamification of education on the other hand has brought forth all the alternative methods of education, from interactivity to peer learning. These untraditional educational

methods are used to accommodate various forms of learning behavior, as well as to communicate with digital natives' generation. It is not only children who have been targeted for this kind of electronic learning. Corporations are also developing games for personnel training, exactly because more and more their employees are coming from generation accustomed to video games. Widening of definition of this new economic field has also resulted in inclusion of various artistic exploration of games, or video game art as we discuss it here. The term was popularized by the *Serious Games Initiative* at the beginning of 2000s. As David Michael and Sande Chen cite an explanation of Ben Sawyer, one of the founders of this institution:

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...'serious' in 'serious games' is intended to reflect the purpose of the game, why it is created, and has no bearing on the content of the game itself. (Michael, Chen 2006: 23)

These authors present art games together with other forms of political and social activist and educational projects where the main goal of game production is not playing (which they say is sometimes excluded), but the artistic/political/ideological message that an author intends to convey.

As we have seen, gaming with its diverse culture and production is considerably serious business in its own right and the level of misunderstanding of its impact in significance in today's world stems greatly from the lack of understanding of our very technologically saturated societies. There is also a valid opinion that the mere term "serious games" is an oxymoron, considering the deeper understanding of *playing* in human culture and mind.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it would be quite natural for artistic endeavors in the world of gaming to follow these trends. But I want to argue that video game art has been connected to a different discourse than their "original" counterparts, both in the sense of digital entertainment and serious games, to that of Internet art genre and that it is this difference of "origin" that dominantly characterizes the genre of video game art and the very meaning of *play* within it.

## Video Game Art as an Internet Art: The Play of Appropriation

In my research, I've found that there are several categories of artistic exploration in the gaming world. First, we have games specifically designed by artists. This is one of the most widespread forms of the genre and it usually brings simple graphics and interactivity, focusing mainly on the concept of the artists. All the examples of game art in Serbia that I will present will fall under this category. The second category is *mods* – artistic modification or appropriation of video games. One of the most famous examples of this form of video game art is work by Brody Condon from 2002 called *Velvet Strike*. Created as a response to "war on terror" proclaimed by US president George W. Bush, Condon with two others created a modification (a game patch) that

allows the player to spray anti-war graffiti on the walls within the *Counter Strike* online game. The third category represents artistic performances within virtual worlds. Today, we can find many examples of artists being active in games like *Second Life*, creating performances and exhibitions, usually bringing in them critique of the virtual world itself. Last category presents the widest context of gaming, and it's not closely related to the gaming culture in the digital world, but exploration of concepts of *play* and *games* in artistic creation and performance.

One of the works by Serbian artists I want to discuss is an Internet art game called *Symbols of Fortune* by Katarina Kaplarski. As she explains the game play:

User formulates her/his question and types it in the white box on the main page. User pushes the start button and chooses one of the 4 symbols. User waits for the second cycle to start and chooses another symbol that will define the answer to her/his question... $^3$ 

Kaplarski uses the idea of playing referring to our earliest experiences of this activity - a children's game. But as we will see, for Kaplarski, as well as many other artists', the idea of playing games is far more serious than a mere child's play. Presenting us with a paper fortune teller game, the artists invite us to play through the choices in our lives. There is somewhat inherent need in people to know their future. That fact is used to point out that what happens is always about our choice. The artist postulates that these choices can be either good or bad framing them in form of symbols we use to represent these polarities in our societies (symbol for radioactive, biohazard symbol, the Nazi swastika, Jolly Roger or death symbol, hearth, the symbol of love, smiley face, yin-yang, peace, male and female symbols, four-leaf clover and five-pointed star). Paper fortune teller, a popular children game, usually consists of symbols of some kind which when we choose lead us to another choice, then another, and ultimately to the answer to our question. Kaplarski's fortune telling brings what on the first glance seems like a feel good message: "Hard work pays off", "Do a good deed today", "Start saving money for a rainy day", "Your talents will be recognized and reworded", "Don't be so sad", "Try to look on the positive side", "Something you lost will soon turn up" "You will be invited to an exciting event" etc.. All those messages are nevertheless ironic, because the artist also gives us a visual message that speaks about the underlying symbolism to our lives and our choices. When you choose the five pointed star, it gives you a message that "Hard work pays off" showing a video of factory production of weaponry in World War II, inviting us to reconsider whether this message is true in governing systems around the world? Or for what is our work being used and who gets the payoff? When you choose the four-leaf clover, the message "You will be invited to an exciting event" shows in the background a video of a Nazi general Anton Dostler execution event in Italy, in 1945. The featuring video behind the female symbol answer "Your talents will be recognized and reworded" serves as a reminder of yet unequal woman rights, while the male symbol leads us to a video of male exotic dancers and the message "Start saving money for a rainy day".

Another example is the work by Aleksandra Jovanic, titled Over 7 seas & mountains. This online game again calls up a child in us, a fairytale. She brings us a playful interactive story about moving through stages in life's events, many of which are not pleasant. Jovanic uses the psychological system of seven stages of grief, an extended version of the well known Kubler-Ross model, a so-called grief cycle, invented to help dying people come to terms with their faith. Jovanic, instead of speaking about grief, takes us, level by level, through seven stages of acceptance: Shock, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Testing and Acceptance. She uses the most popular old forms of video games such as puzzle, maze, arcade etc., with Space Invaders game characters presented as heroes of the game. Not creatures of alien invasion coming down upon us, but happy and colorful avatars, who make flowers grow and depression go away. The artist appropriates the formalistic aspects of video games - game levels, and in a sense equates our playing to possible overcoming of our everyday issues, bringing to light mental health problems in contemporary society.

The last example is a board game and smart device application game by *Les Miserables* trio (Isidora Todorovic, Andrea Palasti and Luka Ranisavljevic) titled *Can you feel the spill?* As artists explain, the game is "conceived as a turn-based strategy game for two players, which deals with a 'glocal' ecological issue of offshore oil drillings and its environmental impacts". It explores the specific issue of oilfield in one of UNESCOs World Heritage Sites – Curonian Spit. Two players of the board game are taking up the roles of oilfield management and respectively environmentalist management. This very detailed game has the goal similar to *Risk* game, take all the territories and eliminate the other player. But for the artists here there is no good and bad side, because both are equally part of the same corrupt capitalist system. As Andrea Palasti writes:

In its dense disposition of intricate rules, the game is therefore using an ironic language to reflect the notions of the capitalistic power formations and through that, to play around with the players subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

The artists use the player's subjectivity as a form of performance, inviting him or her to play as the market does, and to start thinking critically about it. Game is almost impossible to finish, as they write "mostly because of the lack of concentration and/or interest", where presenting an important environmental issue, artists critically position their work as a game, one even when a catastrophe is at hand, we rarely have interest to follow and think about. The online active version is a simple game application for smart devices, mainly

android phones and it uses the "clickability" or the simple interactivity element in a game to make us map out the oil spills in the area of Curonian Spit giving us along the way the educational messages about environmental dangers of oil drilling.

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Video games have been from the start a point of interest for the Internet artists. Internet art is a specific form of artistic production which uses the structural elements of technology in order to bring forth the "final" product. As one of artistic signifiers of new media aesthetics these pieces are mostly characterized by interactivity, experimentation with form and strong ideological positions. These forms are inseparable both from the contexts of their creation (the Web) and many complex discourses of cyberculture as well as their status of new media art form. This multifaceted genre emerged from experimentation in avant-garde and conceptual art practces such as performances, pop art, mail art etc., but is also closely related to experimentation of artists with technology culminating with telematic art of Roy Ascot. Ascot is also the author of one of the very first Internet art pieces from 1983 -La Plissure du Texte: A Planetary Fairy Tale. But, defining of the field came much later with widespread popularity of World Wide Web in the second half of the 1990s with the working of artistic community called net.art, among whom were Vuk Cosic, Heath Bunting, duo JODI, Olia Lialina, Alexei Shulgin etc.. Most of the pioneers of internet art dabbled in one way or another in the question of gaming culture. Also, most video game art pieces are using if not depending completely on the Internet as an operating and spreading mechanism. Anne-Marie Schleiner, American artist and gamer in an interview in 1999 says:

I am interested in the notion of art as culture hacking, art with a critical agenda that seeps outside the boundaries of prescribed art audiences and engages itself with a broader public (i.e. the gaming public). Art that finds cracks in the code and hacks into foreign systems. I also want to invite a cross-pollination of gaming and art strategies by providing artists with tools and techniques developed by game hackers and exhibiting game patches created by gamers as art. (cited in: Greene 2004: 146)

Beside some very obvious signifiers of cyberculture like *hacking*, Schleiner describes some of the basic aspects of Internet art and its achievements, such as cross-pollination of discourses, *new* forms of art public or art for public. Video game art has maybe most in common with one specific form of Internet art, which today can be defined also as a separate field of artistic production, but one that nevertheless shares the same origin and faith as the rest of technologically mediated artworks – software art.

In the very categorization of art games as serious games, we also find overlapping of artistic striving in game design in general (video games as art) and artistic experimentation with games (game art), but also the differences between them. Whereas *serious* in serious games stands for non-entertainment objectives of game, in video game art, the play is about taking seriously the gaming culture itself, bringing questions and applying the concept of playing to everyday issues. David Parlett in *Oxford History of Board Games* writes:

Play validates itself. Its purpose and value are intrinsic. True games serve no conscious practical purpose beyond that of satisfying an urge to play which is sometimes regarded as an instinct. (Parlett 1999: 2)

Even though this is somewhat a crude definition of playing games, it points to a set of differences between games and video game art. I argue that there is a different form of *seriousness* in video game art, as well as a different concept of *play* than the one we find in the field of serious gaming today. One that is more connected to the idea of *play* in Internet art in general than playing as we know in gaming. In all the pieces we discussed artists' use of the context of "games" as conceptual critique of games as such, as well as our seemingly game playing-like activities in the world. Opposed to playing a game, where the model is almost always a certain set of rules made for completing an objective, video game art uses this model as a concept to be played with, usually without any objective other then raising issues and questions. As Aleksandra Jovanic writes about her piece:

In order to emphasize the fact that this is an art project, rather than a computer game, many of the usual characteristics of classic video game cannot be found here. Real aspiration for competition is not provoked in a player, since everybody is able to pass all levels very easily. Points are not accumulated and the goal of the game is not obvious. However, by pretending to be an artwork, maybe it will provoke some questions and emotions?<sup>6</sup>

There is a *playfulness* in Internet art genre that is critical and provoking, *serious* and which correlates more with how art games utilizes the concept of *play* then how playing has been utilized in serious gaming. It is also important to mark, that creation of these artistic game pieces is a very much different process than the production of commercial games, serious or otherwise.

Just consider the crew credit of 2004 *Halo 2* game Simon Egenfeldt-Nilsen and his colleagues present in their study:

Project lead: 1 person; Executive producer: 1 person; Engineering leads: 4 people; Design leads: 2 people; Art director: 1 person; Writer, director of cinematic: 1 person; Composer, audio director: 1 person; Producers: 3 people; 3d artists: 4 people; User interface designer: 1 person; Multiplayer and user-interface lead: 1 person; Engineering: 11 people; Other: more than 80. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, Tosca 2008: 16)

Left mostly to their own devices, artists don't have the means or expertise to create complex gaming environments, and their projects, usually completed

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in collaboration with programmers, mainly serve to question, explore and put to use form, aesthetic and ideology of gaming. Also, while commercial game production can team up to 30 programmers, artistic projects are usually done with one or two individuals. Michel and Chen, when discussing art, political and religious games, posit that *meaning*, that crucial element of majority of contemporary art projects, is becoming an especially significant element of game design. But where in games visual and other layers of meaning are only an element, in most video game art pieces it is that central component which is usually the only one that communicates, where interaction and goals of the game are completely insignificant and sometimes non-existent.

Serbian context itself is another argument that puts video game art more naturally with the Internet art discourse than a gaming one. Apart from Katarina Kaplarski's appropriation of five pointed star symbol, used in many governments and militaries around the world, a symbol remains a particularly significant for the specific political context of former Yugoslavia as a red star, a symbol of communism; there aren't any Serbian signifiers beside the country of origin of the artists themselves in these works. This is one of the main characteristics of Internet art in Serbia, together with pervasive use of English language. These pieces are created for a global online/gaming community and just as other forms of digital interactive art became inseparable part of the digital media ecology itself, pushing the borders between art and our widely spreading digital lives.

We are talking about different levels of origin. Even though gaming culture has always been an important part of new media culture which inserted many of its values and methods to the very structures of Internet and other new media interfaces, the direct influence and field of production that gave birth to video game art is of much later date, and in many ways a rounded subculture, the same one which birthed Internet art genre. A perspective I'm suggesting here is not a lone one.

In Wolf's encyclopedia of video games Martin Picard writes alongside, citing some of the important names in Internet art field:

Such software is better categorized in the genre of art games, which are mostly works of art made by artist from a game engine, or those intended to be experienced as an artistic (and ludic) interactive encounter. (cited in: Wolf 2012: 39)

Stephane Natkin writes that these works would better be called "art about games' than game art" (Natkin 2006: 127). Why is this question important? Internet art itself is today a conflicted field of study, for some, one that seized to exist in the middle of the 2000s and that is today more about the overall influence of cyberculture on young generation of artists, whatever their technique, than it is about the technologically generated artworks we are discussing here (post-Internet art). New media practices are particularly prone to

diminishing and lessening the tight nit borders of disciplines. One example of overlapping of gaming and artistic discourses in this context are game modifications, at the same time an important part of the gaming community participation in the game development and production, and a popular artistic intervention in the gaming world. Also, some examples of serious games, especially developed by NGOs and governments out step from what could be called "game like" to what seems like any other example of socially engaged interactive software. It will be interesting to see how games as the possible Eighth Art would transform the Art World. The experience of other new media art forms in this sense has showed many difficulties, yet none of them were such a strong contender, especially considering the magnitude of the industry. But even though the Art World has begun to slowly explore the impact of multi-authorship and interactivity, video game art being tightly connected to the history and practices of Internet art, as I tried to point out shares many of its aesthetics and ideology, as well as problems of reach, financing and appreciation. I believe that studying these art forms from the Internet art discourse, as well as from the gaming one, can prove beneficial in untangling the complex workings of this marriage between artists and gaming, art and games, as well as bring us closer to understanding better digital culture that surrounds us. Perhaps we are witnessing a coming transformation of gaming as an art form, one that would bring "new modes, new dimensions of human experience"7; perhaps, the experimentation of the artists with games will play some role in this new field, but I argue that this form will be very different from the art games we are currently having, those modest and gravely overseen artistic experiments in contemporary digital culture.

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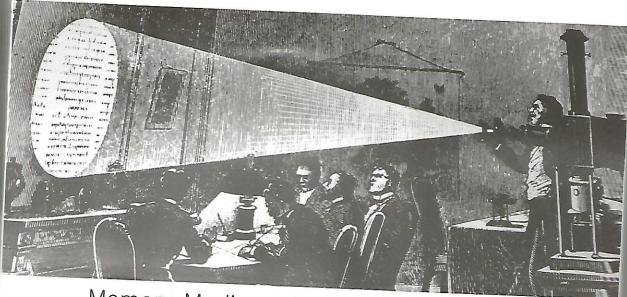
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- The first successful video game developed in this period and the one that is often considered to be the beginning of video games was Spacewar in 1962.
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# MERBASRAHERS LOGYA



Memory Media and Culture in the Digital Age Sećanje mediji i kultura u digitalnom dobu

Edited by/Uredile Nevena Daković Mirjana Nikolić Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović



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