Do Video Games Matter? Examining Video Games' Pathways to Legitimacy and Cultural Value Through Cultural Intermediaries

Abstract

After years on the fringe of our cultural and social life, video games are becoming more recognized as legitimate and culturally valuable. This paper examines the process of their legitimation through the role of 'cultural intermediaries', who frame video games as meaningful cultural artifacts. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories, this paper explores how external cultural institutions legitimize video games and how cross-media pollination further reinforces their cultural status. By analyzing how broader industries have integrated and contextualized video games within their own domains, this paper highlights how video games contribute to cultural production and are gradually being positioned within established cultural hierarchies.

Introduction

It is suggested that more than half of British adults play video games, with only 9% of children between 3-15 not playing one form of video game (DCMS, 2023). This pattern is replicated internationally, with an estimated 3.2 billion people globally playing video games (Wijman, 2022). While a substantial percentage of the population play video games, the industry is still haunted by lingering stereotypes of video games only being for a male, even toxic, and potentially violent audience, with the legitimizing of the cultural value of video games happening slowly over time.

As video games continue to be omnipresent in our everyday cultural landscape, and as they continue to interact with other cultural fields, it is crucial to understand the ways in which their cultural value and contribution are assessed, and their legitimation is created. Thus, in this paper, we track the pathways to the legitimation of video games through focusing on the role of 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu 1984, 1996). Utilizing the term coined by Bourdieu, we examine actors in the cultural industry such as, social commentators and cultural critics who navigate the space between producers and consumers, shaping how video games are seen and valued. More specifically, we suggest that it is those outside of the game industry who already possess the greatest cultural capital, who play the most important role in redefining video games from 'just' entertainment to a significant part of contemporary cultural discourse.

This paper emerges from a workshop entitled *Video Games in/as Culture* that took place in June 2024 in Salford as part of the Horizon Europe funded Gamehearts[1] project. This event was co-organized with BAFTA Games and brought together experts from the worlds of journalism, broadcasting, video game development, curation, charitable organizations, and government bodies to discuss their experience of the cultural value of video games. The workshop consisted of a keynote by TV and radio presenter Elle Osili-Wood, followed by two panel discussion sessions – one on video games *in* culture, and the other video games *as* culture. The outcomes of this event not only uncover the positioning of video games, as and in culture, but also highlight the role of the cultural intermediaries that support processes of cultural legitimation (Kuipers, 2014). This paper draws on, explores, and develops these themes in more detail.

The primary contribution of this paper is its exploration of how the cultural value of video games is developed beyond its economic, functional, and even artistic merits. It argues that video games are gaining recognition as significant cultural artifacts, despite a history of being undervalued relative to other cultural forms. Applying Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries, the paper examines how various actors are legitimizing video games as a culturally valued medium. Through analyzing cultural institutions, events, and cross-media influences, we demonstrate that video games contribute to cultural production and are increasingly seen as socially and culturally significant. This work advances our understanding of video games as integral to contemporary cultural discourse, beyond entertainment or economic value.

Understanding culture and cultural intermediaries

Before examining the ways in which video games obtain legitimacy through cultural intermediaries it is necessary to briefly consider what we mean by the terms 'culture.' Williams (1976) highlights that 'culture' has multiple meanings. One could be understood as 'Culture' with a capital 'C', which reflects the idea that culture should be understood, as Arnold (1869, p. 8) argued, as 'a study of perfection'. For Arnold, culture is 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (Shafer, 1960, p. iv). This perspective values certain practices, such as art, literature, poetry, and philosophy. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that what culture is valued is historically and socially specific. For instance, opera is a popular cultural

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[1] This article focuses on certain key themes that emerged from the workshop and as such does not cover all attendees' contributions, for a wider discussion of the workshop and methods please see (FORTHCOMING).

form in Italy, enjoyed across social classes, while in modern Britain, it is more typically associated with the upper class (Cox and Mantell, 2024). On the other hand, Williams (1976) also identifies another meaning of culture, which we could see as with a small 'c', as 'a way of life'. This broader view sees culture as encompassing all practices and values within a society, including those of different groups and (sub-)cultures, emphasizing that culture is ordinary. What implicitly underlines these two definitions is the understanding that 'Culture' is typically seen as more 'valuable' than 'culture'. In this paper, and following Bourdieu, we acknowledge that the different understandings of culture can function as forms of social distinction between groups and individuals. Our aim is, however, to critically engage with these definitions and their implications, rather than to privilege one over the other.

An important theorist who contributes to our understanding of culture, in all its forms, is Peirre Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* Bourdieu (1984) presents a comprehensive study of cultural preferences and consumption patterns, based on his analysis of French social and cultural life in the 1960s. Bourdieu argues that not all cultures hold the same value or serve as an equal social resource. People's cultural beliefs, practices, and tastes are tied to their social status, class, and education. While individuals may believe their tastes are natural — simply having 'good taste' — Bourdieu (1984) contends that these are learned preferences that serve the purpose of legitimizing social distinctions. In other words, knowledge and expertise in esteemed cultural forms, such as opera or fine art, function as markers of social status and distinction; however, for Bourdieu social distinctions do not just help form preferences, but in turn, it is these tastes that help create and re-create culture and class structures.

Of relevance to us here, is Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of 'cultural intermediaries'. For Bourdieu, cultural intermediaries are the 'expert critics and commentators of literature and other artistic products …as well as lifestyle advocates and consultants' (De Propris and Mwaura, 2013, p. 5). These cultural intermediaries, include museum and gallery curators, art critics and others, who claim to have 'professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 552) and who use this to help 'frame particular practices and products as worthy' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 21). They are the 'taste makers' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 14), and for Bourdieu (1984, p. 365) they are those who 'perform the tasks of gentle manipulation' of taste. It is, therefore, the cultural intermediaries who help define, and defend, what is deemed as a valued and legitimate 'Culture'.

Evaluating Video Games and the Importance of Legitimacy

The 'value' of video games can be understood across multiple dimensions, encompassing economic, social, and cultural significance. Among these, the economic impact of the industry is the most frequently highlighted. Video games have, for decades, generated a lot of money for the studios and investors (Gerken, 2023; Alt, 2023). For example, it was suggested that in the UK in 2023 the video game industry employed 76,000 workers and that the value of the UK video game consumer market was £7.05 billion (Ukie, 2023). These figures make a compelling case in the discourse regarding the significance of video games.

In recent years, however, the value of video games has expanded beyond the amount of money the industry makes or the number of people it employs. For instance, video games have been gradually more recognized for their value through their application to various other areas of social life. This argument has at least three aspects to it. First, playing video games has been shown to offer psychological, health, and social benefits. These include (amongst numerous examples) providing routes into reading for young people (Picton *et al.*, 2020), aiding recovery from trauma for emergency service personnel (Mead, 2013), as well as warding off loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ballard and Spencer, 2023). Second, gamification, the integration of game design elements into non-game contexts to motivate and engage individuals (Deterding *et al.*, 2011, p. 1), has become increasingly important. Gamification has transformed many traditionally non-playful domains like health and education by incorporating game-like features, as seen in examples such as the mental health app *Finch* (Finch Care, 2021) and the language learning platform *Duolingo*, which utilize experience points, streaks, and leaderboards to encourage user-engagement (Huynh, Zuo, and Iida, 2018). Third, is the spillover of the video game industry's innovations into other sectors, offering broader applicability beyond gamification. The automotive industry, for example, uses the Unreal engine to streamline the car design process, as well as simulate dangerous scenarios such as animals running into the road (Seppala, 2020). Similarly, architecture, engineering, and construction use game engines to plan buildings and visualize how space will be experienced with different lighting and building materials (Curtis, 2023).

Yet, despite these contributions, video games still struggle to be recognized for their cultural value. For example, Purhonen *et al.* (2023) highlight how respondents to their survey identified video games as having *no* cultural value — alongside reality TV, tattoos, and shopping malls. As other video games scholars have argued, video games are the 'other' of other, more legitimate and accepted cultural products (Chess and Consalvo, 2022; Shaw, 2024). A contributing factor is the relative newness of video games, as they are far from the first 'new'

media form to be dismissed as trivial or even potentially harmful. For example, the rise of Gothic fiction in the 18th century was met with concerns surrounding its appropriateness for their young female audience (Howard, 1994). Additionally, the work of Adorno on jazz music demonstrates the disdain this was greeted with by many cultural commentators in the inter-War years (see, Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2002). Gothic fiction, jazz music, and even the work of Shakespeare (Bristol, 1996), highlight how once populist cultural practices can over time become accepted as valuable cultural content.

However, video games have at least three additional challenges that have prevented them from being considered culturally legitimate and valuable. The first includes their association with a particular stereotype of young, geeky, possibly toxic, masculinity. Certainly, the earliest video games, such as *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham, 1958), emerged from scientific laboratories. Early home computers, such as the IBM Personal Computer (1981) or the BBC Micro (1981), were first adopted mostly by those with a keen interest in science and technology (Turkle, 1995) - which might help explain gaming's initial association with geek culture. When video games left the laboratory, it was bars and cafes where they were first located, but it was the rise of the home computing and consoles in the early 1980s that saw gaming become much more associated with children's play and toys (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Second, this figure of the young beta male gamer is also often linked to the continuing idea that certain games, can lead to increased aggression. This idea was demonstrated when the families of victims of the 1999 Columbine High school shooting attempted to sue a number of video game companies, arguing that their games had directly contributed to the actions of the two killers (Ward, 2001). Moreover, this perceived connection between video games and violence has been continually returned to in academic literature. For example, there are arguments that video games can lead to desensitization (Carnagey *et al.*, 2007), appeal to a masculine need for competitiveness (Schmierbach, 2010) or contribute to the possibility of someone committing a violent act (Barlett *et al.*, 2009). In recent years the focus on the link between video games and violence has shifted to exploring contemporary campaigns of harassment and the radicalization of some gamer communities to encourage violent acts. Studies include examinations of gamergate's actions towards women (Gray *et al.*, 2017), the use of technology in disseminating hatred in gamer communities (Salter, 2017), as well as interrogating the increase in online gaming sites being used as spaces to radicalise players with violent ideologies (Rosenblat, 2023). Hence, debates around the presumed links between violence and video games has continued into the 2020s; however, the games being played are

now not necessarily the focus compared to the intersecting cultural contexts which these players exist within.

Third, and linked to the stereotype of the 'typical' gamer, is what Osili-Wood in her keynote at the *Video Games in/as Culture* workshop referred to as video games' 'playwall' ([AUTHORS, 2024]). This is the argument that video games have an 'accessibility' problem, which is not necessarily encountered in the same way with other media such as television, film, or radio. This most obviously involves video games' varying levels of accessibility for people with certain disabilities, though in recent years many games designers have sought to address these barriers (Aguado-Delgado *et al.*, 2020). However, additionally, there are also subcultural and image barriers to consider, including, for example, that those playing and writing about games will often use insider language, such as describing games as a 'loot-shooter' or 'dungeon-crawler' (Stuart, 2021). There is also video games' image problem. For example, people may be put off from playing video games because they see it as for people 'not like them,' and as Muriel and Crawford (2018) argue, even many of those who regularly play video games may not necessarily describe themselves as 'gamers,' as they do not think they fit the 'typical gamer' stereotype mentioned above. Today, the video game industry continuously publishes figures that seek to challenge these stereotypes, and there is evidence that video games are now played by a wide cross-section of the general public (see, Baker, 2024; Video Games Europe and EGDF, 2021). Furthermore, the causal links between video games and increased aggression has been challenged by many (such as, Ferguson, 2009); however, the origins, basis, or even validity of these stereotypes matters little, as the figure of the typical gamer has become a folk devil (Cohen, 1972) that continues to be perpetuated by popular culture, such as, in television shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019, created by Lorre and Prady), *South Park* (1991 to date, created by Parker and Stone), and films, like *Pixels* (2015, dir. Columbus).

This quest for legitimacy is important not only for challenging stereotypes but also for ensuring that video games are recognized as a culturally significant medium. At the most obvious level, people want their work to be appreciated and understood. Making video games is both a highly creative and work intensive process, which Koster (2005) suggests, can produce games that have the power to convey deep cultural meanings and emotional responses. There is therefore good reason why those making video games may feel that their creations deserve equal recognition to that of other cultural forms. Beyond recognition of creative efforts, there are other reasons why being valued may matter. This includes, first, that the cultural

legitimation helps video games reach a wider audience, which in turn challenges persisting stereotypes of who constitutes the typical gamer (Newman, 2008), and also opens games up to wider social (critical) discussion and reflection (Bogost, 2015). Moreover, there is also the importance of capturing and recording video games' cultural and historical significance. For example, in the early days of television, programs were typically made for short-term broadcasting reasons only, and lack of awareness of their cultural significance meant that many television shows, such as numerous early episodes of *Doctor Who*, were discarded or recorded over. Similarly, in the early days of video games, very few considered preserving them, which resulted in, for example, the now infamous case of when Atari dumped hundreds of thousands of games and consoles into landfill in New Mexico in 1983 (McNally, 2024).

The need for obtaining legitimacy also matters in light of the lack of funding and government support, which has been a key point of contention for the video game industry. For example, in the UK the industry struggles to receive the same level of financial support as other cultural sectors like film. While funding initiatives such as the UK Games Fund (UKGF) and a 2024 Content Fund offer some support (DCMS, 2024), these are limited compared to the extensive funding available to the UK film industry, which includes dedicated programs like the BFI Film Fund and BBC Films (BFI, n.d.). Organizations like TIGA have called for a more comprehensive Video Games Investment Fund to support studio growth and original IP development (TIGA, 2024); however, video game funding is often folded into broader cultural or innovation funds, leaving a significant gap in support beyond early-stage development. The gap created by a lack of video game specific funding in the UK is also reflected more widely within a European context. The 2024 summary of EU Video Game Industry Funding Calls, distributed by the European Games Developer Federation, identified a small number of video game focused funds, with the majority being part of innovation funding, or wider cultural funding on a specific subject, including encouraging democratic participation, promoting European values, and sustainable climate transition (EGDF, 2023).

Lastly, the need for legitimacy of video games is also noticeable in academia. Academic engagement has been a crucial pathway for other media forms to achieve legitimacy. As we explore later, the rise of Game Studies as an academic discipline in recent decades has been pronounced and rapid. Nevertheless, as Shaw (2024) highlights, Game Studies is still significantly behind other cultural fields, such as art, literature, and film, in both volume and frequency of academic engagement, particularly in Cultural Studies journals. The lack of acknowledgement of the legitimacy of video games as an academic scholarly field is perpetuated by a lack of academic funding for research into video games. Crawford and Muriel

(2018) argue that video games have historically been marginalized in academic discourse, making it difficult to secure funding for research. The first significant funding to study video games in the UK was not awarded until 2001 (Crawford *et al.*, 2018), and until very recent EC Horizon Europe funding, sizable grants to explore social and cultural aspects of video games have been difficult to find.

Having presented the challenges of legitimizing video games, the significance of this process, and examples of their value, this paper utilizes this contextual framing in order to examine how video games' struggle for status is located in the wider creative and cultural industries through cultural intermediaries. We explore the pathways that enabled the cultural legitimization of video games by highlighting the role of museums, festivals, television, and cinema as cultural intermediaries in this process. In doing so, we illustrate the cultural value of video games and their reciprocal contributions to other cultural sectors.

Legitimization through cultural intermediaries

Baumann's 2007 study of how cinema gained cultural legitimacy in the United States highlights three critical factors. First, is an 'opportunity space,' which encompasses demographic and technological shifts, including a rise in university graduates and the advent of television as a competing medium. Second, key institutional developments, such as the establishment of film festivals and academic programs, and third, the emergence of a discourse that recognizes cinema as an art form. It is evident that the first of Baumann's (2007) criteria, of a demographic shift, is taking place with video games. The generation who played the first consoles and home computer games, such as *Pong* (Atari, 1972) and *Pac-Man* (Atari, 1980), in the late 1970s and early 1980s are now middle-aged. Many have continued playing video games, but even for those who have not, gaming has been part of the cultural landscape for most of their lives. For film, the rise of television significantly altered the perception of cinema by shifting audiences away from theatres, forcing Hollywood to differentiate itself from TV. As television became a dominant form of everyday entertainment, film studios focused on creating content seen as more prestigious, artistic, or intellectually engaging (Baumann, 2007).

Video games are yet to see a new technology that sits in the same cultural space as television did with film. However, other technological advances, most notably the rise of mobile devices, streaming services, and smart televisions, may be helping to at least widen the opportunities to play video games. Video gamers are no longer tied to consoles or computers, as mobiles phones and tablets now allow people to play games wherever they are and whilst engaging with other tasks on the device (Leaver and Willson, 2016). Also, many smart

televisions or connected devices such as Apple TV or Samsung's Gaming Hub, enable console-free gaming, while similarly, Netflix's first foray into allowing their subscribers to access video games, all suggest the start of a new era where video games will be streamed without the need for game-specific technologies (Lindzon, 2024). Hence, these and other new technologies potentially open video games to a wider audience.

Though television was seen as a direct competitor to cinema, it has also proved beneficial by forcing it to evolve and providing a new outlet (and source of income) for film. Cultural industries then can play a key role in helping cement other, and in particular emerging, cultural forms, and this is something we have similarly seen with video games. Initially, cinema did very little to help secure video games cultural legitimacy, as many early video game film adaptations, such as S*uper Mario Bros.* (dir. Jankel and Morton 1993) and *Street Fighter* (dir. de Souza, 1994) were generally seen as poor quality, and did not perform particularly well at the box office. And on television, programs about video games were typically aimed solely at children, such as in the UK, Channel 4's *GamesMaster* (1992-98). Recently, things have changed. The *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (dir. Horvath and Jelenic, 2023) was the second highest-grossing film of the year, and critically acclaimed and award winning TV adaptations, such as *The Last of Us* (created by Mazin and Druckmann, 2023 to date) and *Fallout* (created by Wagner and Robertson-Dwoert, 2024 to date) are generating interest and accolades outside of arenas where video games are typically discussed.

Second, Baumann (2007) suggests that cinema gained legitimacy through the rise of academic and cultural institutions that helped establish a critical engagement with the medium. For instance, Baumann (2007) argued that cinema gained cultural legitimation (partly at least) through the rise of academic and cultural institutions that helped foster a critical engagement with film. Semiotic theory offered new ways to understand how film communicates meaning through visual and auditory signs (Metz, 1974), while the theory of montage has profoundly influenced both filmmakers and theorists (Eisenstein, 1949). In addition, engagement with Feminist, Postcolonial, Queer Theory, and Critical Race Theory (to name but a few) have informed critiques of representation, power dynamics, and identity in cinema, leading to more diverse and inclusive storytelling in films which has additionally impacted the types of films that are studied and made (hooks, 1996).

Aarseth famously suggested that 2001 was 'Year One' for 'Computer Game Studies,' with the founding of the journal *Game Studies* – a first for the discipline (Aarseth, 2001). The advent of academic associations, such as the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA) (2003), and journals like *Games and Culture* (2006), have undoubtedly increased the internal

criticality of this discipline; however, Game Studies as a degree topic seems a long way off the popularity of other subjects such as Film Studies. For example, in the UK, a search for 'Film Studies' on the UCAS[2] website (in September 2024) lists 933 courses at 158 institutions and while there are plenty of games design and development programs (275 at 81 providers), there are no specific 'Game Studies' degrees listed at all. While Game Studies degrees do not currently exist, we are starting to see several other (already legitimized) cultural institutions engaging with video games, most notably museums and galleries, and the rise of game festivals.

Alongside film and book festivals, we have in recent years seen the advent of video game specific festivals and conventions, which includes gamescom, Nordic Games, Women in Games Festival, and the London Games Festival, to name but a few. Also, we are beginning to see video games having a presence at other festivals, such as more general cultural events like SXSW, or at film festivals, like the Tribeca Film Festival. There is a small but growing literature on game festivals, for example, both Juul (2014) and Dixon (2011) discuss the importance of independent video game festivals in generating new game ideas. The rise of video game festivals, and their inclusion in other existing events, therefore, helps raise the cultural standing and visibility of video games. Game festivals, however, should not be seen as only catering to video games' existing audiences, for as highlighted by one of the panelists at *Video Games as/in Culture*, Michael French, Head of Games at Games London, at the London Games Festival you will often see family groups there with just one member who is a gamer ([AUTHORS, 2024]). Hence, the organizers of festivals and events of this nature are important cultural intermediaries who play a key role in drawing in not just gamers, but also a wider audience.

In recent times we have also seen the development of several video game specific museums. Examples here include the Computerspielemuseum (Computer Games Museum) that opened in Berlin in 1997, Moscow's Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines in 2007, the UK's National Videogame Museum, which opened as the National Videogame Arcade in 2015, as well as the Nintendo Museum that opened in Kyoto in 2024. This devotion of public space specifically to the history and cultural importance of video games, recognizes video games as being a legitimate medium that belongs in an institution that 'researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage' (ICOM, 2022, para.1). Here, video games become labelled as heritage to be preserved and contextualized, similar to how film is exhibited in The Cinema Museum in London or pottery at the Gladstone Pottery Museum.

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[2] The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, which is the Uk's central admission service for university entrance.

Furthermore, Cat Powell, Director of Visitor Experience and co-CEO of the UK's National Videogame Museum, during the *Video Games in/as Culture* workshop suggested that placing video games in a museum setting therefore highlights the cultural value of video games, and further opens them up to a wider audience, beyond those who typically play them (Bagnall *et al.*, 2024]).

It is not just museums that are specifically dedicated to video games that are now recognizing gaming's cultural and historical value. Other more general museums and galleries now house video games as part of their permanent collections or have held specific video game exhibitions. For example, museums such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York have incorporated video games into their collections, recognizing them as 'outstanding examples of interaction design' (Antonelli & Galloway, 2022, para.3). Initially this included only 14 games, such as *Pac-Man* (Atari, 1980), *Tetris* (Nintendo, 1984), and *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), but this has since expanded to include more titles. In 2018 the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London put on an exhibition entitled *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt* that examined game designers' creative processes and video games' cultural impact. The exhibition responded to the museum's assignment 'to champion design and creativity in all its forms, advance cultural knowledge, and inspire makers, creators and innovators everywhere' (V&A, 2024, para.1). Another notable exhibition was the Imperial War Musuems' (IWM) *War Games: Real Conflicts | Virtual Worlds | Extreme Entertainment* that ran from the end of 2022 to mid-2023. This was promoted as 'the UK's first exhibition to delve into one of today's most popular storytelling mediums and ask how the reality of war is represented in the virtual world of a video game' (IWM, 2022, para.2). These exhibitions, and others, place video games alongside (physically and culturally) other key artefacts, such as significant works of art like the sculpture *Cybele* by Rodin (at the V&A), or historical items, like the fuselage of a Lancaster bomber (at IWM London), arguably one of the most important planes of the Second World War.

Hence, curators and museum professionals act as cultural intermediaries, playing a pivotal role in recontextualizing video games within museum spaces, thereby granting them cultural legitimacy. Drawing parallels to Baumann's (2007) framework for cinema's legitimization, the demographic shifts of aging gamers, technological advancements like streaming, and institutional developments such as video game festivals and academic engagement have created an 'opportunity space' for video games to gain recognition as cultural artifacts. Curators strategically frame video games alongside established cultural forms, helping to shift public perceptions of video games from mere entertainment into objects of

design, culture, and heritage. This expert framing is critical, as Nixon and Du Gay (2002) note, in translating new and potentially marginal cultural forms into recognizable and legitimate entities within broader cultural frameworks.

This has, however, not been without its controversies and challenges. For example, museums often must contend with the issue of video games' 'playwall'. For example, Ian Kikuchi, Senior Curator of the IWMs' *War Games* exhibition, at the *Video Games as/in Culture* workshop spoke to the difficulty of bringing video games to public spaces such as museums ([AUTHORS, 2024]). This is because interactive design has to be accessible to accommodate the museum's visitors who often have diverse needs. For example, asking visitors to interact with a video game controller to access an exhibit, risks implementing too many barriers to entry (*ibid*.). Furthermore, many have reacted with outcry to the idea of introducing video games into museums and galleries. For example, Jones (2012) objected to the MoMA adding video games to their collection, arguing that video games, like chess, were a game and not art. And, as Carlsson (2020, para.8) argues, 'there is a perceived childishness to video games; an idea that people who regularly play them are easily entertained by low-brow stories, formulaic button pressing, and the addictive glow of a screen. They [*sic*.] argument goes that gaming has no place in a museum, which remains the home to high culture'.

There is, however, the argument that video games are 'good' for museums and galleries. For example, Carlsson (2020) suggests that video games can help attract a new, often younger, audience into museums, and that gamifying exhibitions can bring a more engaging experience for visitors. Furthermore, Avard (2016) discusses how virtual museums can be used to house exhibitions that could not be displayed in a physical museum. There is, however, already a growing literature on the location and role of video games in museums and galleries (which includes, amongst others, Paliokas and Sylaiou, 2016; Camps-Ortueta *et al.*, 2021). In this paper, we are specifically interested in the role these institutions and their curators play in framing video games as objects of design and culture. This act of curation aligns with Guins' (2014) argument that museums are legitimizing spaces for digital media, providing the cultural capital necessary for them to be recognized as significant artifacts. The legitimation this curation provides is also reflected in findings from research on museum and gallery audiences that identifies the value that visitors give to the curatorial expert (Hanquinet and Savage 2012; Bagnall *et al.,* 2013; Bagnall and Randall 2020). By presenting video games within the same institutional framework as fine art and design objects, curators (as cultural intermediaries) position them within the cultural hierarchy as valuable and worthy of preservation and study.

The presence of video games, and game-related paraphernalia, at festivals, and in museums and galleries, alongside other culturally valued items relates closely to Baumann's (2007) third point, concerning the importance of emergent discourses that recognize (in his case) cinema as an art form. Placing video games alongside other cultural artefacts, physically and symbolically, is important in generating discourse concerning their legitimate place within (valued) culture. It is here again that cultural intermediaries play a crucial role in creating focus and discussion on games. There is a small video game-related literature that utilizes the concept of cultural intermediaries, such as, for example, Woo (2012), Parker *et al.* (2018), and Perks *et al.* (2019); however, in the majority of cases these consider the role of cultural intermediaries *within* game culture. For example, Woo (2012) discusses the role of what he terms 'alpha nerds' in organizing and maintaining gamer events and communities. However, Baumann argues that cultural legitimation comes more keenly from outside than in. It is those outside, who already have cultural capital, that play the most important role in legitimating new and emerging cultures. For example, Janssen *et al.* (2008) discuss the historical key role arts journalists and reviewers played in classifying and evaluating cultural products, including both traditionally high-brow (such as, classical music, literature, and visual arts) and emerging, often considered lowbrow, popular cultural forms (such as, film and television). Other examples include nouvelle cuisine (Rao *et al.,* 2003) and pop music (Street, 2003), where authors highlight how it is most notably external influencers, such as critics or government agencies, who played a central role in legitimizing these emerging cultures.

This is important then, as there are limits to what those working within the field of video games can do to secure cultural legitimacy. To a large extent it is those who already have cultural capital, and in particular, external cultural intermediaries, who have the power to determine video games' value. This is evident in how some powerful cultural figures from the world of film have moved over to take roles in big budget video games. One such case being how the award-winning film producer and director Eloise Singer chose to make a game of *The Pirate Queen: A Forgotten Legend* (Singer Studios, 2024) instead of a film, and cast Lucy Liu in the titular role. As a panelist in the *Video Games as/in Culture* workshop, Singer spoke about utilizing established film industry methods and networks to promote the game. Singer took the game to film festivals, where the game won awards at Tribeca and Raindance (Tribeca, 2023; Singer Studios, 2023), as well as setting up press junkets with herself and Liu. By engaging with the processes and institutions of an already legitimized medium, as well as their experts and celebrities, Singer played the role of a cultural intermediary, bring her existing social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to promoting (the cultural status of) her game.

Conclusion: But is it Art?

Emerging from the *Video Games in/as Culture* workshop, his paper examines the video game industry's pathway to achieving legitimacy and being recognized as culturally valuable beyond economic and functional aspects. Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediaries, it highlights how curators, media professionals, and other actors play essential roles in legitimizing video games within the broader cultural landscape. Through discussions of cultural institutions, events, and cross-media influences, the paper demonstrates how video games are increasingly recognized as contributors to cultural production.

However, we wish to briefly engage with a discussion we have (so far) purposefully avoided. Baumann's (2007) discussion focuses on the acceptance of cinema as 'art'. It is evident that one way that those working within and writing about video games have sought to assert its legitimacy is by arguing that video games should be seen as art. As Gee (2006, p. 58) argues 'video games are a new art form'. The inclusion of video games in respected international galleries and museums has added weight to this argument. As Antonelli, the curator of the MoMA who first introduced games into their collection argued, 'are video games art? They sure are' (Antonelli & Galloway, 2022, para.3). Such claims are not without their critics. Famously, film critic Ebert (2012), argued that video games can never be art because they are interactive, requiring player input, which distinguishes them from traditional art forms that present a fixed expression of the artist's vision. Ebert believed that the player's influence over the game undermines the possibility for video games to offer a deep, reflective experience, and that video games are more focused on entertainment and goal-oriented tasks, rather than providing timeless, universal messages typically associated with art.

This paper does not aim to revisit the 'are video games art?' debate, as it has been extensively discussed by others (such as, Pearce, 2006; Bourgonjon *et al.*, 2017; Parker, 2018); however, there are still two important points to acknowledge here.

First, the argument for video games as art is only typically applied to certain video games, which usually includes the likes of, *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), and *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 1993) (see, Ambrose, 2023). Certain, often popular, video games, such as the *Call of Duty* series (Activision, 2003 to date) or *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), rarely (if ever) get considered as art. In particular, it is much more typical for 'indie' games to have the label 'art' attached to them than their larger studio counterparts (see, Frey, 2023). This creates an unhelpful dichotomy of video games that are seen as 'worthy' and

those that are not, and therefore, does not necessarily advance video games overall acceptance as a legitimate cultural form.

Second, when seeking to assert the legitimacy of video games (beyond their economic and functional value) often the recourse is to turn to the argument that video games are art with the hope that this association with established culture will enhance their acceptance. However, we argue that conflating the question 'are video games art?' with 'are video games culturally valuable?' distracts from identifying the process in which games are enveloped into a perceived cultural hierarchy. Hence, as we have argued in this paper, following Baumann (2007), internal debates within game culture over the status of video games as art or not, are unlikely to change wider perceptions of the medium – as change will more likely come from cultural intermediaries, beyond the walls of game culture.

This paper has therefore advanced discourse on video games by reframing their value in cultural, rather than purely economic or utilitarian, terms. It has highlighted the role of cultural intermediaries — external actors with cultural capital — in shaping public perceptions and securing institutional recognition for video games as a cultural medium. By shedding light on the mechanisms through which video games are integrated into cultural institutions, new insights can be garnered into how emerging media forms achieve cultural legitimacy.

Acknowledgments

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