All Game Play is Performance: The State of the Art Game

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Richard Schechner, theater practitioner and founder of the field of performance studies, famously argued in the first major performance theory treatise of the 21ˢᵗ century: "Playing is at the heart of performance" (4). In any performance act, Schechner believed, the performer is always already playing. There is no performance without play.

For game studies and game designers, the time has come to acknowledge and to explore the converse of Schechner's proposition: *Performing* is at the heart of *play*.

All game play is performance. There is no gaming without performance.

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John Reaves, artistic director for the groundbreaking digital performance group The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theater, once made a bold proposition on behalf of theatre practitioners everywhere. In the mid-1990s, from the front lines of digital, interactive theater practice, he wrote: "In the coming century, we can take a timid, parochial view of what theater is, or an aggressive, imperialistic one. […] Why not be aggressive in the tumultuous context of the Digital Revolution? Why not claim all interactive art in the name of theater?" (3) The future of new media, Reaves believed, belonged to the performance artists. All new media art installations provided sufficient grounds for a theatrical event. All new media art installations were playgrounds for performance.

Reaves presented two cases for claiming all interactive art in the name of theatrical performance — the first, phenomenological, the second typological. "Multimedia as art is much closer to theater, and the performing arts in general, than it is to film, video, or the visual arts," Reaves wrote. Because new media art tends toward the live, collaborative and mimetic, it has an essential theatrical quality. This is the phenomenological case. There is also the typological case. "Theater has always been an integrative, collaborative art which potentially (and sometimes actually) includes all art: music, dance, painting, sculpture, et cetera," Reaves argued. Theater is a total art capable of incorporating all other arts — why not the emerging digital arts, as well?

Reaves claimed all digital art in the name of theater in order to call attention to the potential for live performance as an end-product of digital networks, broadcasts and platforms. His theater company had a vested interest in locating opportunities for embodied action and interaction in an increasingly mediated culture.

For the same reasons, I choose to make a corollary claim. I stake out all digital *game* art in the name of theatrical performance. Art games are not new media installations, objects or systems. They are scripts for embodied action and interaction. They are opportunities for live, collaborative mimesis.

I claim all digital games in the name of theater.

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All game play is performance, all digital games belong to theater — but there is more.

The current leading edge of digital game design — the *avant* game — represents a particular kind of performance: *all* performance.

As digital games become more immersive, more pervasive, more persistent, and more massive, they clearly and convincingly approach *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Richard Wagner's classical ideal of "total performance," the theatrical event that encompasses all art practice in a single unified experience (5).

To what field of art do digital games belong? The visual arts? Yes — think game graphics. The literary arts? Yes — think interactive storytelling. The media arts? Yes — think code, audio production, and A.I. processors. The plastic arts? Sure — think game hardware and innovative interfaces. Architectural arts? Indeed — think real-world game environments.

Digital games belong to all of these art fields simultaneously. And the platform that connects them is performance. It is through the players' collective performance that games create a total aesthetic experience.

Gamers create *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

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Wagner wrote of his desire for a total performance genre, through which "the public, that representation of daily life, forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World."

Jordan Weisman, game designer, describes the creative vision for his company's groundbreaking alternate reality, massively multiplayer, pervasive games *The Beast* (2001) and *I Love Bees* (2004): "Install base: Everyone. The entire public. Platform: The world. The entire electronic sphere. If we could make your toaster print something we would. Anything with an electric current running through it. A single story, a single gaming experience, with no boundaries. A game that is life itself."

Weisman channels Wagner. Gaming *Gesamtkunstwerk* is here.

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A few weeks ago, game designer Ernest Adams stated in an interview:

> I certainly don't think Wagner would recognize the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in today's video games. They don't contain the breadth and depth of vision that he expected of himself. Could they perhaps be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the future? I'm not sure. We have to remember that Wagner lived in the days before motion pictures, before recorded sound, and in a time when all art was presentational, not interactive. Therefore Wagner's own intentions were informed by an assumption that drama would be live action performed by real human beings directly in front of other real human beings. Because video games do not (and

generally will not in the future) include an element of live performance, I don't think Wagner would recognize them as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (1).

Adams is wrong. Digital games do include an element of live performance already. All game play is performance.

Digital game play is dramatic performance. Players act "as if," that magic Stanislavski acting technique; they act as if they believe the rules are *real* limitations, as if the artificial goal is of *real* importance. Digital game play is spectacular performance. Digital game play, especially physical, pervasive and tournament game play, generates attention and audiences. Digital game play is demonstrative performance. Players demonstrate their mastery of the game system, showing off their understanding and skill in manipulating and reading the game system's input, feedback and control mechanisms. Digital game play is expressive performance. Players reveal aspects of their personal identity through their choices in avatar and verbal exchange. And digital game play is, increasingly, about traditional kinds of performance: singing, rhythm, dance, movement, social engineering, and even in-game protest.

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The same year that John Reaves claimed all interactive art in the name of theater, new media theorist Lev Manovich wrote: "We are still waiting for a true digital *Gesamtkunstwerk* which will take full advantage of the ability to interweave the distinct languages of different media" (2).

We are no longer waiting.

All games are performance, and today's avant game is already approaching the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Total performance *is* the state of the digital art game.

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