

Defining Games as Art:

A Sociological Study of Reactions to

Bientôt L'Eté

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ABSTRACT

Upon its release, *Bientôt l'été* was met with mixed receptions, from outrage to high praise. Tale of Tale's interactive experience threads several, parallel paths around the definition of what is a "game", asking questions such as how and by whom can such an artefact be defined. This paper will examine the critical reception and the related discourses that took place around *Bientôt l'été*'s commercial release, instead of relying solely on a formal analysis. By drawing from Nathalie Heinich's sociological definition of the artist¹ as well as Jason Mittell's analytical work on TV genres², I will analyse the content of the debate

¹ HEINICH, N., « *La Sociologie de l'Art* », La Découverte, 2001.

² MITTELL, J., « *A Cultural Approach To Television Genres* », Cinema Journal, No. 3, 2001

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over whether *Bientôt l'été* is a video game or not, which was the starting point of the discussion. The afore-mentioned debate had three main groups of contributors, all of them having a particular role to play and a particular voice to be heard in this attempt to define what exactly is *Bientôt l'été*. Through this double theoretical lens and the cross-analysis of three different rhetorics, it will become clear that, while this piece of software isn't a work of art *per se*, it doesn't belong either to the category of digital games as they are traditionally understood by the mainstream audience.

Keywords

Art sociology, *Bientôt l'été*, player definition, public reaction

INTRODUCTION

As the videogames industry's profits sky-rocket beyond anyone's wildest hopes, the collateral consequence is the leveraging of most games being produced, in their formal aspects as in their publication. Yet, the low barriers to entry in order to be part of that industry, that is, to develop and distribute a video game also allow for more original experiments. This tension between mainstream digital games (with a wide player base and commercial success, relying on large development teams and proven game mechanics) has contributed to a debate attempting to define what is a digital game. Does it have to respond to certain codes ? Does it have to be distributed to a certain audience, through certain channels ? *Bientôt l'été* (Tale of Tales, 2012), seems to lie at the heart of these questions. Released on Steam in December 2012 by a studio known for its artistic experiments, it sparked a discussion typical of those happening whenever a non-traditional digital game is released among the midst of mainstream games.

This paper will aim at examining the rhetorics of the different parties involved in that discussion, examining the different opinions regarding the status of *Bientôt l'été*. The theoretical frameworks used here will mainly be Nathalie Heinich's sociological definition of the artist –as Tale of Tales are formally trained, self-reference and are often considered as artists- applied to digital games and their developers, along with Jason Mittell's cultural approach to Television Genres. Mittell's work will be helpful by his take on how to define a cultural product beyond a formal, textual analysis and classification.

Finally, I define three categories of actors in the debate aiming to define, or at least classify a digital game. The first one is composed of the broader audience of players, individuals with no or little ties to or interest in the videogame industry, mainly voicing their opinion through community-dedicated channels (forums, community hubs on Steam). The second one consists of critics, developers and academics. These individuals have a higher knowledge of the intricacies of defining a digital game, as well as more influence over the community of players, as the concerns they voice appear more relevant due to their close ties with the videogame industry and their dedication to the medium. The last category only consists of the two developers of Tale of Tales, and they are here being given a special status due to their role of creators.

This paper will thus shed a light on the different voices at stake in the definition of a digital game, and will make clear to what extent is *Bientôt l'été* considered a game, and to what extent does it stretch the traditional definition of a digital game.

AN AMBIGUOUS FORMAL AND PROCEDURAL REPRESENTATION

Bientôt l'été, as a formal experience, walks a thin line between a product featuring original experiments, drawing from more artistic intentions and aspects of a digital game, as they are traditionally understood. We will first

examine the first category, which is the one that defines Tale of Tales' previous releases, and then switch our focus to the second category to see why *Bientôt l'été* creates a kind of tension regarding the definition of a game.

The most obvious cue that a player experiences is the disclaimer featured at the start of the game:

"This is not a game to be won. Play for experience. Walk and look. There is no goal. There is no story. Simply allow the atmosphere to embrace you. Do not think. Do not want. Just be."

This disclaimer voluntarily refocuses the expectations of the player, and therefore hoping to let him experience the product as it is designed, and not as a part of socio-economical construct implying the necessary presence of goals or story as a standard for a digital game experience. In the virtual environment, the player then wanders on a beach, as each wave bring about a poetic sentence that displays on the screen. There is indeed no goal. The only possible interaction is to enter a building, where the player is then connected through the internet to another user. Together they can play a game of chess, stripped out of its original rules, drink a glass of wine, or smoke a cigarette. There is indeed no story. Another option is too chose a background music, from a set of popular French songs in the 1960s, which will then echo through a distorted filter. This brings about a familiar element from the real world into a game, disregarding popular concepts such as the magic circle or the fourth wall that are foundations for most people's understanding of a digital game.

On the other hand, *Bientôt l'été* presents some interesting aspects of a traditional digital game. It has been released both on the developer's website and on Steam, the go-to distributor for dematerialized games. It features a somewhat classical control scheme, involving the mouse and the keyboard, and even a dedicated screen to help the player figure out those controls. It is ergodic (Aarseth, 1997), in the sense that it responds in interesting ways to player input, especially when playing with another user over the Internet. In fact, one might argue that the game is even more interactive than other, because the lack of

clarity about what needs to be achieved in the game can be an incentive for the player to explore that system even further.

ART AS THE INTERACTION OF AGENTS

If we try to analyse the status of *Bientôt l'été* by using Nathalie Heinich's framework of the artist's definition³ (work conditions, legal status, institutional integration, hierarchy, category of belonging, wealth, lifestyle, fame, criteria of excellence, representation by their selves, and by others, of their position), we can distinguish the origin of the ambiguity. While Tale of Tales consider themselves as artists⁴ and only use videogames as a medium, the player base assumes that the opposite: that videogames should be their end, and therefore fit into a particular mould. The idea of videogames as a means to a different end, to a more experiential and artistic end, was however well-understood by critics and journalists. The biggest tension that appears, then, is the one between the players' understanding of art and Tale of Tales'. On the one hand, it is seen as something pretentious and aloof, while the developers are trying to use Steam, and some familiar tropes of digital games to bring their art, and that experience, closer to the player. Referring to Jason Mittell's analysis of cultural products⁵, it is obvious that the discontinuity between the audience and the producers is what creates the blur around the definition of *Bientôt l'été*, and such a blur is either embraced by the developers, critics and some players, trying to enlarge the definition of digital games, or rejected by others, as it asks them to take an extra step to grasp that *this is not a game* (like any other).

³ HEINICH, N., « *La Sociologie de l'Art* », La Découverte, 2001.

⁴ See full interview in the Appendix.

⁵ MITTELL, J., « *A Cultural Approach To Television Genres* », Cinema Journal, No. 3, 2001

MULTIPLE SOURCES OF DISCOURSE

Because of this ambiguity between two possible frameworks (an interactive, digital experience and a digital game), *Bientôt l'été* was received among players with confusion, and sometimes resentment. Based on the Steam Forums posts related to the game, the majority of users seem to wonder whether this is a game or not, and dismiss the game for being too “fartsy”, that is being too pretentiously artistic. On the other hand, a vocal minority tries to persuade them to “give the game a chance”, and to approach it as an experience different from what they know.

As for critics and developers, it was well-understood that this was not a traditional digital game, and it was welcomed as such. Some critics, for instance, didn't feel like that could properly evaluate the game experience or review it on an objective scale⁶. As a technical product, writes Chris Schilling for the Telegraph, it is not particularly worth mentioning, but because of the intent behind it, he says, it is a game worth celebrating⁷. This seems to be a common ground, that the game industry needs more experiments like these, even if the end product isn't as polished as traditional games –numerous bugs were mentioned in critics' and users' reviews alike.

This second category seems more in line with the developers' position. Tale of Tales, throughout the development phase, regularly posted notes and thoughts about where the project was going as well as what would be the best way to make it enjoyable for the users. We can see here an awareness of the fact

⁶SCHILLING, C., “*Bientôt l'été review*”, The Telegraph, <http://www.edge-online.com/review/bientot-lete-review/>

⁷ ANONYMOUS, “*Bientôt l'été review*”, Edge Magazine, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/video-game-reviews/9877814/Bientot-lete-review.html>

that players might not be completely open and tolerant regarding this new kind of work. Even though they personally consider this as a work of art, they want to make the said work as accessible as possible to the broadest audience.

GAMES AS ARTISTIC PROCESS

Our first perspective on defining games as art through the lens of Mittell and Heinich seems to lead us towards the conclusion that the public isn't ready to accept games presented as works of art. As a major component of games consumption and a defining force in how games are presented in the public space, the public's reluctance to accept them as art would tend to appear as a significant obstacle to critics and developers.

However, the work of other sociologists allow us to shed a new light on this process. Assigning artistic quality to a product is a long-term unfolding of interactions between different groups of actors, and the public might not be the most important component of such a process. Howard Becker⁸, in his conceptualization of the art world, lays out the idea that contemporary art creates a rupture about the very nature of the work of art. The switch is operated from being a work of art to being the work of an artist. As a technological, interactive media, games are eminently part of this contemporary art shift. The work of the artist is also a work that is documented, justified and communicated to an audience, and we see clearly the correlation with the multiplication of development blogs (*devblogs*), where designers write down and explain their design and formal decisions. This was particularly the case during and after the development of *Bientôt l'été*, with the developers actively explaining and justifying their position on the game⁹. As such, designers and critics are putting

⁸ BECKER, H., *Art Worlds*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

⁹ <http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/>

together a body of text, on which the product relies in order to be set as an artistic work, which, Becker argues, will then be accepted by the public.

More than a simple struggle between different groups having different opinions on the same definition, then, we can see the debate surrounding *Bientôt l'été* as the on-going process of inserting a new kind of discourse within the public space, a discourse emanating from different actors and justifying the belonging of this game in an artistic sphere. Interestingly, Becker also talks about the cycle of contemporary art, as it circles from transgression to reintegration into the institutionalized art world and veers back towards transgression. Player reactions to the release of the Tale of Tales game is a strong incentive to believe that it is the manifestation of a transgression phase, with *Bientôt l'été* at its forefront, which could ultimately lead to the reintegration of “art games” as a common genre within the commercial sphere.

CONCLUSION

The reception of *Bientôt l'été* was, because of both its ambiguous formal and procedural representations, met with mixed reviews. However, after analysing the origin of these reviews, we notice that the discourses behind the game consisted in a part of the public of players denigrating the game as a work of art, while another group of individuals, namely critics and developers, argued in favour of it being an artistic product. Through the lens of art sociology, it has become clearer what such a phenomenon represents. On the one hand, the public is still a major component in the acceptance of games as a product of art, particularly in this highly-commercialized medium. However, the production of text and intellectual justification behind *Bientôt l'été* being as much as a work of art as it is a game is, according to sociologists such as Howard Becker, a first step towards public acceptance and artistic legitimacy of digital games.

APPENDIX – Tale of Tales Interview

This interview was conducted over e-mail with the two developers at Tale of Tales on the 25th of February 2014.

AUTHOR: On your website, you describe *Bientôt l'été* as "an interactive computer program that requires 3D hardware acceleration" while, in the software's disclaimer, you refer to it as "video game". Is there any reason why you would make the distinction ?

TALE OF TALES: We also describe it as a way to "Smoke, drink, play music, play Chess™, speak French (to others!)" ; as The Intergalactic Holocom Transmitter II which is "a state of the art virtual reality simulation and communication unit specifically designed for deep space conditions." ; and "an interactive program that uses realtime 3D videogame technology."

The web page for *Bientôt l'été* is part of the fiction. It creates a frame within which the story takes place. It's also a joke.

What kind of reaction did you expect from players when you released *Bientôt l'été* on Steam (as a platform for the most traditional digital games of all) ? Did you want to push its status as a game and not an art work to the broader audience ?

We only release our games on Steam to reach a bigger audience of people who actually play our games. Which is always preferable to people who look at our

work from afar and nod approvingly. *Bientôt l'été* is very similar to other videogames when compared to, say, film or sculpture or books or utility software. So why not distribute it in a similar way?

Do you know what was Michaël motivation behind his post on the Steam forums telling players to "give it a chance" ? Was it a need to justify the relevance of *Bientôt l'été* among other, more traditional digital games ?

I felt that *Bientôt l'été* was being dismissed too quickly by players expecting this or the other. Since I don't think *Bientôt l'été* is an especially difficult game, I wanted to encourage people to try and meet it on its own terms. Because I have seen the joy it can bring to people who play it. I wish for others to experience that joy as well.

Are you glad that some "non-orthodox" games generate conversations (e.g. *Proteus*, *Dear Esther*, *Journey* to a certain extent, etc.), or would you rather have them being accepted as games without questioning ?

These conversations make clear that videogames have been stuck in a mold for decades. I think it is good to recognize this. There is finally a group of creators willing to take videogames seriously as a medium for the generation of beauty. Any conflict this causes simply illustrates that it was high time.

During the making of *Bientôt l'été*, how much of it did you want to be a game, how much of it was going to be an "interactive experience" (that is, deliberately ignoring accepted commercial tropes of the medium) ?

Bientôt l'été was entirely created as a work of art. But we did do a lot of playtesting to make the playing as smooth and pleasant as possible. This brought us to remove some conventions (like an inventory) because they distracted from the pleasure that could be found in the game. I think of Bientôt l'été as the first piece where we were entirely liberated from game conventions and free to use this medium as is, as we find it. So much so that we could include a chess board in the game. And a score in Luxuria Superbia.

Finally, are you even interested in defining what a digital game is ?

We're more interested in exploring what they could be. Why nail things down? Our job as artists is to expand, to always look at things in a different way, to see alternatives for everything. We will challenge ANY definition through our work. We can't help it. It's a reflex.