

DIGITAL GAMES AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS: GAMES AS AN ART FORM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NICOLAS BOURRIAUD

• Prof. Dr. İlkay KANIK*

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the function of digital games as an art form within the framework of Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics. It explores how digital games transform social interactions in the context of contemporary art and create relational art through participant-oriented experiences. Using conceptual analysis as a method, the theoretical relationship between art approaches and digital games is discussed. The hypothesis is that digital games are art forms that create social connections in line with Bourriaud's theory. The findings reveal that digital games undertake the social bonding function of art by creating virtual communities and social dynamics. As a result, it is concluded that digital games redefine art as a co-creative process with participants, create micro-communities through anonymous interactions, and make a significant contribution to the social role of art. This study offers new perspectives on the artistic value of digital games. The results of this study emphasize the artistic value of digital games within the framework of relational aesthetics and their potential to create social bonds and offer new perspectives for future research.

Keywords: Digital games, Players, Relational aesthetics, Art, Design, Social interaction.

* Istanbul Topkapı University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Film Design and Directing, ilkaykanik@topkapi.edu.tr, ilkaykanik8@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-9717-6680

DİJİTAL OYUNLAR VE İLİŞKİSEL ESTETİK: NICOLAS BOURRIAUD PERSPEKTİFİNDEN BİR SANAT FORMU OLARAK OYUNLAR

• Prof. Dr. İlkay KANIK*

ÖZET

Bu makale, Nicolas Bourriaud'nun ilişkisel estetik teorisi çerçevesinde dijital oyunların bir sanat formu olarak işlevini analiz etmektedir. Dijital oyunların çağdaş sanat bağlamında sosyal etkileşimleri nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ve katılımcı odaklı deneyimler aracılığıyla ilişkisel sanatı nasıl yarattığını analiz etmektedir. Yöntem olarak kavramsal analiz kullanılarak, sanat yaklaşımları ve dijital oyunlar arasındaki teorik ilişki tartışılmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın hipotezi, Bourriaud'nun teorisi doğrultusunda dijital oyunların sosyal bağlantılar yaratan sanat formları olduğudur. Bulgular, dijital oyunların sanal topluluklar ve sosyal dinamikler yaratarak sanatın sosyal bağ kurma işlevini üstlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, dijital oyunların sanatı katılımcılarla birlikte yaratıcı bir süreç olarak yeniden tanımladığı, anonim etkileşimler yoluyla mikro topluluklar yarattığı ve sanatın toplumsal rolüne önemli bir katkı sağladığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Bu çalışma, dijital oyunların sanatsal değerine ilişkin yeni bakış açıları sunmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın sonuçları, ilişkisel estetik çerçevesinde dijital oyunların sanatsal değerini ve sosyal bağlar yaratma potansiyelini vurgulamakta ve gelecekteki araştırmalar için yeni perspektifler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital oyunlar, Oyuncular, İlişkisel estetik, Sanat, Tasarım, Sosyal etkileşim.

* İstanbul Topkapı Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Film Tasarımı ve Yönetimi Bölümü, ilkaykanik@topkapi.edu.tr, ilkaykanik8@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-9717-6680

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of art as a means of individual expression has started to change with the developing technologies. In the contemporary period, the interaction of art with the audience has become multidimensional. Digital media and interactive platforms make the audience more active, and art assumes the function of establishing a social bond. Nicolas Bourriaud explains the change from object art to subject art with the concept of *relational aesthetics* and proposes the artistic form of interpersonal interaction and social relations instead of the experience addressed to the observer. On the one hand, digital games are becoming increasingly popular with millions of players all over the world, and on the other hand, they create a unique space for themselves within contemporary art with the contexts they produce through the network of relationships they establish. The potential of digital games to go beyond traditional art and produce virtual spaces that encourage social interactions between individuals is quite remarkable. Multiplayer online games offer a dynamic platform for individuals to express themselves, enabling players to participate in collaborative, co-creative processes. Players become part of the art by forming a social community as designed by the game.

This article will examine in detail how digital games transform social interactions in the context of contemporary art and the participant-oriented experiences they produce with their unique narrative styles. At the same time, it will explain how individuals form meaningful social bonds in virtual environments made possible by art, with a focus on digital games. The originality of this study stems from the fact that it offers a new perspective on the relationship between digital games and contemporary art. In the literature, the debate on whether digital games are art or not, and if they are art, how they have artistic qualities, is quite intense. However, this study explores a new dimension of art by arguing that digital games create *relational aesthetics* by creating social bonds and aims to offer an original perspective that evaluates digital games in the context of *relational aesthetics*.

This article analyzes how digital games, as a part of modern arts, create a relational art. The hypothesis of this study is that digital games function as art forms that create social bonds within the framework of Nicolas Bourriaud's the theory of *relational aesthetics*.

The sub-hypotheses of this study are:

H1. Digital games create social bonds between individuals in a different way than traditional art by providing platforms that actively involve players in the artistic process.

H2. Digital games create an environment of artistic collaboration between individuals by involving players in creative processes.

H3. Online multiplayer games re-model the dynamics of cooperation, trust and social interaction between players in an artistic form.

H4. Digital games create spaces for artistic interaction by creating social communities and micro-communities among players.

H5. Digital games add a new dimension to artistic experiences by creating social bonds through anonymous interactions between players.

H6. Digital games support the individual-oriented creative aspect of art by offering players the opportunity to express their creative individuality and create artistic works.

Nicolas Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* approach and his evaluation of contemporary art after 1990 offers an understanding that encourages us to evaluate art from different perspectives. This study focuses on how digital games produce a space within the understanding of relational art. This study goes beyond the question of whether digital games are art or not and accepts digital games as a part of modern arts. The questions of this study are: How do digital games have artistic value in terms of social bonds and interactions in the context of Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* theory? How can players in digital games be considered as active participants in the artistic process? How do digital games provide an artistic platform and produce *relational aesthetics* by encouraging social interactions and creative processes? The main arguments of this study: Digital games fulfill the social bonding function of art, making the viewer (the player) not only a participant but also a creative subject. By enabling players to actively participate in creative processes, digital games create artistic artifacts and socially bonding communities within the game world.

This study is based on Jabareen's (2009) conceptual framework analysis method to examine how Nicolas Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* can be evaluated in a new context such as digital games. This method proposed by Jabareen offers a multidisciplinary analysis process by systematically addressing how an existing theoretical framework can be reinterpreted in different fields. The study follows a process of analysis consisting of mapping, categorising, defining, deconstructing, integrating and synthesising data in order to evaluate how *relational aesthetics* concepts work in the context of digital games. Accordingly, two levels of analysis were conducted to understand the artistic aspects of digital games: (1) the basic parameters of *relational aesthetics* (establishment of social bonds, audience participation and creative process, remodelling of human relations, interactive 'exchange space', artistic performance of games within the framework of art and modernism) and (2) the concepts of *relational aesthetics* (relational aesthetics, social interval, subjectification of the work, communicative situations, accidental materialism,

aesthetics of co-existence). The games identified in this framework were analysed in line with the conceptual framework determined in the literature, so that the forms of artistic production and social interaction mechanisms of digital games were evaluated in the context of *relational aesthetics*. Jabareen's method allowed testing how *relational aesthetics* works in digital culture and interactive media environments, rather than remaining as a fixed model within art theories, and provided a flexible conceptual framework for understanding the changing nature of art.

This study analyses digital games within the framework of Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of *relational aesthetics* and examines games in a conceptual framework rather than through a measurement process. Therefore, the selection of games is not based on any statistical data or experimental method; rather, it is based on a theoretical evaluation process in terms of the artistic functions of the games and the forms of interaction between the players. In the process of game selection, the literature on art and *relational aesthetics* was reviewed and digital games that conform to this theoretical framework were identified. The selected games are artefacts that represent different aspects of art and contribute to the collective production dimension of art through the social interaction processes of the players. In this context, the following criteria were taken as a basis for game selection.

Compliance with the concept of *relational aesthetics*: Games that establish social bonds between players, provide interaction and include community-based aspects of art were preferred.

Involving artistic production processes: Games that allow players to be actively involved in artistic creation processes within the game were selected.

Having different forms of player interaction: Different types of single-player, multiplayer, anonymous interactive or virtual community-based games were analysed.

Different forms of representation in art, identity, and community contexts: Different forms of artistic experience such as identity creation, community building, anonymous exploration or collective creation were considered.

During the selection process, a large list of games was created and the games that best represent the concepts of art and relational aesthetics were identified. However, the study aims to develop a conceptual framework not only by focusing on a specific group of games, but also by analysing various games that can address the relational art concept from different angles. For this reason, the artistic production processes and player interaction styles of each game were analysed, and the reflections of the concept of relational aesthetics in games were discussed from a multidimensional perspective.

Games	Art Function	<i>Relational Aesthetics Connection</i>
Fortnite & Animal Crossing	Community-based games, virtual activities, social interaction	It offers spaces where players come together to socialise, create virtual events and collective experiences.
Journey & Dark Souls	Anonymous co-operation and interaction	Players co-operate with other players without direct communication, forming anonymous social bonds.
Minecraft & LittleBigPlanet	Creative content production, participation of actors in artistic production processes	Players can create art objects, produce, and share their own artefacts in the game world.
Dreams	Completely user-generated content and digital art creation.	Players create their own artworks in a virtual environment, share them with others and participate in the collective art-making process.
World of Warcraft & Second Life	Virtual communities, belonging and social interaction	Guilds strengthen a sense of artistic and social belonging through social bonds, economic systems and virtual communities.
Pokémon Go & No Man's Sky	Discovery-orientated experiences that combine the real world with the virtual world	It enables players to connect virtual and physical worlds through augmented reality (AR) and procedural exploration.
Stardew Valley & The Sims	Social relations, community building and identity creation	Players experience community dynamics, reproduce human relationships and individual identities in play.
VRChat	Completely social interaction and user-generated art	Users create their own identities and artworks in the virtual environment and realise art production through interaction.

2. DIGITAL GAMES

Henry Jenkins (2005) explains the judgment that computer and video games are not art by pointing out that there was once a similar judgment about cinema in the 1920s when cinema technology developed. With the development of cinema technology, high art critics concluded that cinema was not art and Gilbert Seldes defended cinema in his book “*Seven Lively Arts*” (1924). Referring to Seldes’ defense, Jenkins evaluates the current state of video games. In his book, Seldes points out that the value of cinema is not recognized with its inferior and cheap characterization. He emphasizes the importance of the place that cinema and other popular media and entertainment tools of the time, such as jazz and radio, occupy in people’s daily lives, which are not seen as high art and are characterized as cheap entertainment. Seldes claims that popular culture needs to be rethought. Because the vitality and novelty of emerging media forms and people’s love

for them require rethinking. Jenkins argues that a situation like cinema, which Seldes characterizes as *lively art*, also applies to the artistic status of computer and video games. According to Jenkins, the question should not be whether it is art or not, but how it qualifies as art. Jenkins draws attention to the existing capacity of the live artistic dimension of digital games.

Binark and Bayraktutan-Sütçü, in their book *Kültür Endüstrisi Olarak Dijital Oyun*, examine digital games within the culture industry. They argue that digital games are not only entertainment tools, but also culture industry products with a high social and cultural impact and an ever-increasing market value. The content richness of digital games, the interaction of players with the game and each other, and their contribution to the digital economy are quite remarkable (Binark & Bayraktutan-Sütçü, 2008). H. Murray's article "*Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and the Co-Evolution of Media, Mind, and Culture*" focuses on the development process of digital games with media forms and their cultural effects. He examines how games affect the mindsets of players. Games are not just about entertainment. He concludes that they also affect players' intellectual skills, decision-making powers, strategizing skills, and creativity (Murray, 2006).

The production of digital games, which are considered within the creative culture industry, is multidimensional. Game design requires a multifaceted creation process. Games emerge with the collaboration of game design experts, each with their own specialization. Since the game involves an interactive process, visual and sound design, game mechanics and basic storytelling elements of the game are considered and implemented by taking this interactive process into account. Therefore, one of the most important criteria when preparing digital games is the players. As Işık Barış Fidaner emphasizes, "*with the support of finely crafted images and scenarios, the player is immersed in this new world*" (2009, p.172). The fact that players enjoy playing games and want to play them is one of the determining criteria of game production. Digital games are differentiated from other creative cultural products such as movies, cartoons, and animations because they are interactive, that is, they are based on participation. Therefore, the field of interaction that digital games establish with their players has quite unique dynamics that can be associated with art.

According to Grant Tavinor, author of *The Art of Videogames*, one of the important reasons why videogames are considered an art form is the incorporation of aesthetic pleasures into the gaming experience. While games have aesthetic qualities like other works of art, they differ from traditional art forms through their interactive nature and kinesthetic properties. In this context, Tavinor's aesthetic definitions suggest that video games are not just a visual or auditory experience, but an art form in which the player physically

interacts. For example, describing a game as “fluid” or “jerky” is an indication of the kinesthetic pleasure the game offers and the player’s participation in the interactive process of the game. This kind of interaction reveals that the artistic value of games derives not only from aesthetic pleasures but also from the physical and mental involvement of the player (Tavinor, 2009, pp. 180,181).

In Graeme Kirkpatrick's (2011,23,24,28) book *Aesthetic theory and the video game*, in which he discusses the artistic and aesthetic aspects of video games, he argues that video games offer a dynamic, interactive, and experiential art form that is different from traditional understandings of art. He argues that the experience of art and aesthetics emerges through the gameplay and mechanics of the game. He mentions that aesthetic experience occurs when the form of something is pleasing to us, and that this pleasing, that is, pleasure, occurs when it provokes and increases the emotional response. He associates this situation with the fact that the ontological structure of play, by its very nature, is made possible by the creative response to reveal meaning in a vast universe. He points out that works of art stimulate our sense of play, enabling us to discover the form in the compositional schemes of the play and thus communicate with the audience. Form and composition in plays gain meaning by integrating with the player's discovery process.

2.1. Digital Games and Players

The analysis of the player, who is the subject of *relational aesthetics* in digital games, is important for understanding the relationship that emerges in digital games. “Edward Burnett Tylor, in his book ‘Primitive Culture’, considers play as an anthropological concept. According to Tylor, play often imitates real life and in this way provides important information about social structure (Tylor, 1871, as cited in Mäyrä, 2008, 296). One of the first anthropological studies on games is Stewart Culin’s *Games of the North American Indians*. Culin categorizes Native American gaming habits into games of chance and games of skill, and details gaming practices (Culin, 1907, as cited in Mäyrä, 2008, 296). Tylor and Culin’s anthropological studies on games emphasize that games are part of social interactions and play an important role in cultural contexts.

In his book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga emphasizes the impact of games on communities. According to him, games create communities called gaming communities by offering a shared and intense experience, thereby developing a sense of togetherness, and belonging. (Huizinga. 1972, p. 12) Huizinga’s concept of gaming communities help to explain how the social bonds that develop between players in digital games today create a strong sense of belonging. Digital games become not only a means of entertainment, but also a platform where players build communities and develop deep social

relationships. By cooperating, showing solidarity and sharing common experiences within these virtual communities, players build a strong sense of community and belonging. Today, the sense of community created by digital games can be observed through players coming together in the physical world through practices such as 'cosplay'. These interactions contain important symbols that make players feel they belong to these communities (Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 296-300).

One of the first ethnographic studies on video games is David Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983). The author, who is a piano teacher, interprets the game console as a musical instrument, compares video games to a musical instrument, and evaluates the process of mastering the game. He experiences the game-playing process not as a traditional observer or consumer, but as an active participant and creative subject. Through the development of skills and strategies in the game, the player becomes a subject who creates the artistic meaning and experience of the game, not just a spectator or consumer (Sudnow, 1983).

In digital games, players are the most important actors in the games and have different motivations while playing. These motivations are shaped by the game style and the roles assigned to the players. Players prefer games according to their personal preferences, game genres, gameplay characteristics and abilities. In this context, gamers can be categorized into various groups such as explorers, achievement-oriented, social gamers, competitive gamers, creative gamers, story lovers, comfort seekers, and simulation gamers (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014; Charles & Black, 2004). According to the work of Elizabeth M. Reid, digital games offer players not only a playground, but also free spaces of experience where they can express themselves and develop different ways of communication. Reid emphasizes that players represent themselves uniquely while establishing social relationships in digital worlds and build different identities and social bonds in the process. In this context, gamers are not only game participants but also creative individuals who construct virtual identities and redefine themselves through digital games. Reid's findings demonstrate the potential of digital games to create virtual communities and meaningful interactions between players (Reid, 1991).

Games can be categorized in three different ways according to the number of players, single-player games, multiplayer games, and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). Single-player games provide an individual experience by presenting the player with tasks of varying difficulty levels. In these games, the player plays alone, advancing the story or trying to achieve certain goals. Multiplayer games can be divided into three main categories: local multiplayer, online multiplayer, and cooperative games. Local multiplayer games are games where multiple people play on the same device and in the

same physical space, sharing the same screen. Online multiplayer games are games where players come together from different locations over the internet. Such games often involve large online communities where players compete or cooperate. Cooperative games are games where players play as a team to achieve the same goal. In these types of games, players cooperate to overcome challenges and emphasize team spirit. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) are played in large-scale digital worlds where thousands of players come together at the same time. In these games, players build communities, trade, and participate in the game economy in a constantly evolving world. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are a subcategory of the MMO genre, in which players develop their own characters and go on adventures in a virtual world (Rollings & Adams, 2003; Bartle, 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003).

Amy Bruckman's (1997) study is one of the first studies on online multi-user games. It explores the relationship between online game worlds and player cultures and how games influence social interaction, collaboration and learning processes. Bruckman concludes that by creating original content in a virtual environment, players develop freedom of expression, increase their social communication skills, and develop creative thinking skills. In his book *Play Between Worlds* (2006), T. L. Taylor explores the interactive world of gamers, drawing on his own experience as an EverQuest player. This work explores how players take an active role in their game worlds through processes such as building social communities, developing online identities and collaboration. Taylor argues that players are not only participants, but also individuals who influence and transform game culture (Taylor, 2006). The game world is a world inhabited by players. It is a space where many real-world-like simulated situations, encounters, conflicts, interpretations, new cultures are created and different norms are produced (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 296).

3. NICOLAS BOURRIAUD AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* was published in French by *Les presses du réel* in 1998. An English translation was published in 2002 by the same publishing house. Bourriaud's views on how contemporary art is shaped by social relations and interactions provide a highly influential perspective on the art world (Bourriaud, 2002). He developed an important aesthetic approach in his work, which centers on the social context of art. In his book, he questions the traditional view of art as an independent and symbolic field, emphasizes its impact on human interactions and offers suggestions on how art should be evaluated in a social context. According to Bourriaud, contemporary art is not only an individual aesthetic experience. Human relations, communication, daily life, and

social interactions are important sociological elements of contemporary art. He argues that art should create space for social interactions and defines this space as “*relational space*”. He emphasizes the importance of works in which artists involve the audience in creative processes. He thinks that the state of art as an object to be viewed in a symbolic aura should change. Because today, while technological advances have made interactions so important, he criticizes the fact that art remains in the position of being watched independently of the audience. Art should deal with every day, encounters, social contexts, and interactions between individuals. The reason why Bourriaud brings such an approach to art is the necessity of interactive artistic practices that involve the audience in the face of the standardized artistic relationship of modern society. The collaboration and common experiences produced by the work of art in the field of interaction should be addressed within artistic expression. He questions the function of art galleries and defines the traditional relationship between artworks and art lovers in art galleries as a passive observer. However, artworks in which the audience is an active participant can make new and different experiences possible. He refers to these experiences as part of the artistic product. He draws attention to the power of art. As an extension of the work of art, he argues that the experiences shared by the audience because of coming together and interacting with the work of art create a social environment that shapes the work of art. It draws attention to the social role of the work of art. The content of the social role of art is to create new, different, unusual, new social bonds, micro-communities, to enable individuals to interact with each other in a way that they cannot encounter in daily life and to create a wider network of social interaction. Bourriaud (2002) emphasizes that *relational aesthetics* is not a reinterpretation of past art movements. He states that this approach to art is an original development shaped by the needs of today’s society. Within this framework, he defines the understanding of art as practices that establish social relations between individuals, create meaningful interaction spaces, create social bonds, and have the power to interact. Bourriaud refers to works of art not as “*independent and private*” (2002, p.5) symbolic space, but as spaces where viewers can interact with each other and with the viewer.

Bourriaud draws attention to the creative process created by audience participation with an approach that emphasizes the sociological components of art. According to Bourriaud, a work of art is a process in which the viewer is not a passive observer, but rather an active participant in artistic production. In line with their *relational aesthetics* approach, artists aim to involve the viewer in the creative process in their works. This participation ensures that art becomes not only an object to be experienced, but a dynamic space whose meaning is constantly reshaped by the viewer. The viewer not only experiences the

meaning of the work, but also directly contributes to the shaping of that meaning. The meaning and impact of the work becomes multi-layered through the individual experience of each viewer, and the relationship between the viewer and the artwork becomes a dynamic, living interpersonal experience. Thus, the work of art ceases to be a fixed object and becomes a process that is constantly redefined through audience participation.

Bourriaud's (2002) aim with the interaction between the work and the viewer is to create experiences in gallery or exhibition environments that go beyond the routine social interactions of the visitors' daily lives. Art becomes a platform for social bonding. This platform, where viewers become part of the artworks, is not a work in progress, but a place where meaning is co-created through *relational aesthetics* interactions. In art, connections, encounters, and random spaces of encounter that shape models of social interaction are characterized as the basic components of contemporary art.

Bourriaud evaluates the relationship between modernism and art through the revolution in human communication caused by the change in communication tools. While art emphasizes individuality and freedom in the modern period, contemporary art produces micro utopias through community building and sharing to keep pace with the change in communication technologies and social structure. The audience has expanded, and the proliferation of digital image technologies and screen-based artworks has transformed the way audiences experience art. The role of art in society has changed. Art has taken a form that reproduces interpersonal relations and social interaction.

3.1. According to Nicolas Bourriaud, community, interaction, social influences

The concepts used by Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics* will be used as parameters for the analysis of digital games in this article. The concept of *Relational Aesthetics* constructs art as a field of relational aesthetics through social interactions and human relations. Dialogues and encounters restructure social relations. Bourriaud's (2002) understanding of aesthetics is that artists' works are not static, unlike traditional artworks, but open to social interactions. *Relational aesthetics* expands the social context of art by involving audiences in the artistic process through models of aesthetic interaction. Aesthetics is constructed when the audience encountering the work of art is active rather than passive. The aim of *relational aesthetics* is not to create a work of art that plays a role in the construction of an ideal future society, but to discover and develop alternative forms of relationship in the present.

The concept of *social interstice*, borrowed from Karl Marx, refers to the spaces within the capitalist system where alternative non-profit groups come together and interact, and where change occurs because of these interactions. Bourriaud (2002) applies this

concept to the field of art. Stating that art creates a platform for communities and social interactions, he argues that the work of art creates a social interstice, and that this interstice reshapes social relations. Bourriaud defines contemporary art exhibitions and the artworks in these exhibitions as spaces outside the usual structure of everyday life, giving people a space of communicative freedom and enabling different social exchanges. Art exhibitions allow viewers to interact with the work and with each other, enabling them to produce new meanings and transform from the routine of daily life.

Subjectivization of Artwork is a concept influenced by Felix Guattari's aesthetic paradigm. This concept defines art not only as a visual or aesthetic experience, but as a dynamic process in which new forms of subjectivation are produced. Although the work of art exists as an object, the artist sees it as a vehicle through which social interactions take place. The work of art interacts with the viewer and produces meanings independent of the artist. The work comes to life and takes shape through encounters and interactions and thus produces multi-layered meanings. The work fulfills its functions of encounter, transformation, unification and change through the viewer's involvement in the creation process by becoming a part of the work. As the audience becomes the subject of the work, the traditional, symbolic, and objective boundaries of the work expand (Bourriaud, 2002).

Communicational Situations are created by the artist as part of the work. The purpose of these situations is to enable the artwork to interact with the viewer and thus pave the way for the emergence of new communication models. The value of the artwork increases with the bonds established between the audience through these communication models and the impact of these bonds (Bourriaud, 2002).

The concept of *Random Materialism* is based on the philosophical approach of Louis Althusser and considers art as a phenomenon that brings individuals together and is shaped randomly in a historical context, without being guided by a specific purpose. The aim is for people to interact through spontaneous experiences at different times and places. Regardless of the conscious efforts of the artist or the viewer, the creation of the work and the social dynamics around it are based on a random order. This randomness provides a multi-layered experience that emerges because of different individuals giving meaning to the work from different perspectives rather than a single meaning (Bourriaud, 2002).

Social Aesthetics (Aesthetics of Co-existence) refers to the aesthetics of the community brought together by the work of art. The work created by the artist, the viewer who interacts with the work, with each other and with the artist, have a common experience in

a social context and create a space of co-existence. explains the criterion of coexistence as the transfer of the spaces constructed and represented by the artist to experience, the reflection of the symbolic to the real, and describes the aesthetics of coexistence (Bourriaud, 2002).

4. NICOLAS BOURRIAUD'S RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND DIGITAL GAMES

When digital games are evaluated in terms of *relational aesthetics*, it is seen that they fulfill functions like a work of art. In digital games, it establishes social bonds between players, brings people together inside and outside the game, and provides a socializing environment. It encourages creativity within the rules of the game and within the game world. In parallel with Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* perspective for contemporary art, digital games create social bonds and interactions between individuals within the context of relational aesthetics.

4.1. Establishing social bond

Like the way contemporary art provides individuals with alternative models of social interaction, digital games create new spaces of interaction beyond the standard social bonds of modern society. Digital games create an alternative social bond by offering opportunities to socialize and collaborate not only in the real world but also in virtual worlds. Online games bring together individuals from different cultures and geographies, allowing them to communicate in a virtual community. Multiplayer games such as *Fortnite* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, this is evident in multiplayer games such as *Fortnite* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Players come together in these virtual worlds, chatting, doing quests together and building social bonds. Digital games, like contemporary art, thus offer a space that fosters social bonds. *Fortnite* is not just a fighting game but promises activities where users can socialize. With its multiplayer structure and virtual concerts and events organized in-game, the game becomes a social platform and supports interaction between players. Social bonds are strengthened. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, players form a social bond by sharing their island with friends and visiting each other's islands. This game contributes to the development of social bonds and friendships within the community. Games like *Second Life* offer players an alternative social environment and a space for self-expression. Players can organize events in the game world, create communities and represent their identities as they wish. Ramshaw (2020) argues that virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* create a home-like feeling for players and that these spaces should be protected. Players form alliances and complete quests together, creating a virtual community and developing long-term friendships.

This type of online gaming promotes social bonding in a virtual environment. Ramshaw argues that players develop a sense of belonging in virtual worlds and that such environments offer a social habitat. Players build their identities in these virtual worlds and establish social relationships with their new identities and even integrate these worlds into their lives in parallel with their real lives (Ramshaw, 2020).

4. 2. Audience participation and creative process

Rather than an independent and symbolic space, digital games create an environment open to social interactions with its *relational aesthetics* dimension. They encourage social bonds and offer a dynamic experience space. Digital games involve the viewer/player in the experience and enable them to be an active participant. The creators of digital games try to make players a part of the creative process. For this, the player needs to be in constant interaction. It allows the player to be part of the story and experience. Games like *Minecraft* allow players to create their own stories, so games also serve as a platform for building social bonds. *Minecraft* offers players an open world, encouraging them to create their own artifacts. Players can participate in both individual and collective building projects, making them part of a creator rather than an independent observer. Ringland (2016) explores the potential of the *Minecraft* community to provide a social environment for players, particularly those on the autism spectrum. Ringland claims that players with autism develop social skills such as communicating, collaborating, and participating in a community in the *Minecraft* environment. The study argues that these digital spaces have the effect of reducing feelings of social exclusion in the participation of individuals with autism in social environments and shows that such virtual communities can contribute to the social development of individuals. Nguyen, in her article exploring the opportunities that *Minecraft* offers in terms of creative individuality, argues that in *Minecraft*, players express their individuality and develop their creativity by building unique structures. The flexible nature of the game allows players to create a variety of designs, collaborate in a social context, and take part in large projects. Therefore, *Minecraft* provides a creative platform for players by fostering a sense of community and collaboration and supports individuals to express themselves within the community (Nguyen, 2016).

Games like *The Sims* offer a platform where players create their own worlds and characters. Players are not just spectators but active participants in the creative process. Games like *Little Big Planet* and *Dreams* give players the opportunity to create their own games and levels. By delegating the creative process to the player, such games allow them to feel like artists who create, not just play. Fyfe, Gaynor and Remo (2009), in their *Journal of Games Publication* focusing on game design for game creators, emphasize the

importance of diversifying games and providing players with specific tools to enable players to create different forms of creativity. Dividing players into these types, such as builders, imaginers, experimenters, and destructors, can enrich creativity and engagement in game creation. Designing players' interactions within the game is one of the most important stages in game creation.

Players develop interactive storytelling by creating different events, adventures, and quests in their world. By sharing their in-game stories, especially on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, players build their own communities and appeal to a wide audience. This extends the game's potential for interactive storytelling into the real world, expanding its *relational aesthetics* dimension.

4. 3. Remodeling and representation of human relationships

Within the framework of *relational aesthetics*, digital games represent relationships between individuals and model social dynamics. Games allow individuals to experience social dynamics such as friendship, cooperation, or conflict. In *The Sims*, players build a virtual society by creating their own characters and manage the social interactions between characters. Friendship, romantic relationships, or conflicts between players' characters represent different aspects of human relationships.

Journey game encourages players to cooperate with other players by comparing them anonymously. Without any words or names, players work collaboratively with other players towards a common goal. This models human relationships and trust-based cooperation. They rethink building a trust-based relationship and remodel different forms of bonding (Isbister, 2016). The players' individual journeys allow them to experience different forms of bonding with strangers.

Stardew Valley allows players to develop relationships and friendships with the people of the village, building social bonds by paying attention to their needs and emotional states. In the process, players discover the depth and complexity of human relationships. In her study, Bednorz (2024) models the emergence of emotional labor as an important value in the relationships that players build with characters in *Stardew Valley*. This game shows that emotional investment and care play an important role in relationship processes, alongside social dynamics such as friendship and romantic relationships. Furthermore, Stockton (2019) argues that the game includes a diversity of gender identity and orientation, enabling players to build social relationships based on their own identities, thus providing an opportunity to reinterpret social dynamics in terms of diversity and inclusion. Kilzer's (2022) study shows that *in games such as The Sims and Stardew Valley*, identity and social interactions are modeled, and different aspects of human relationships

are incorporated into the game dynamics. Relational art in digital games emerges in the remodeling of belonging and identities according to player dynamics.

4.4. Interactive ‘exchange space’

Bourriaud defines art as a space in which the viewer does not merely observe, but actively participates and interacts. Digital games provide virtual spaces of exchange where players are not merely observers but active participants. This means that the player shapes the experience through interactions within the game and the game becomes a social meeting space. *Dreams* allows players to create their own games and share these creations with other players. The game functions like a digital art gallery, with each player showcasing their own creativity and experiencing the creations of others. In *Minecraft*, players interact with other players by building structures on community servers or in their individual worlds. Players create a virtual exhibition space by sharing their creations and collaborating on projects with other players. In the virtual world of *Second Life*, players share their artwork or digital creations with other players. Community events, exhibitions and virtual concerts are also organized, making the game a space for social exchange. Geraci (2014) argues that *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* have a structure that supports the creation of myth and meaning. The myths generated create strong bonds between players and generate and develop shared values for the community. Shared values develop within the community. Geraci emphasizes that virtual worlds can build social structures full of religious and cultural meanings. Interactive exchange spaces enrich the aesthetic content of game art by generating myths, religious and cultural meanings in the virtual world.

4.5. Digital Games within the framework of Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics Concepts

4.5.1. Relational aesthetics: *Relational aesthetics* is particularly evident in digital games through multiplayer games and online communities. For example, games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* allow players not only to engage in in-game interactions but also to create social communities and dialogues. In *World of Warcraft* (WoW), groups of players called ‘Guilds’ come together in a social context to cooperate, solidarity and share. In this way, a strong bond is established between players. It gains a functionality like a virtual family, social interaction between players deepens and individual experiences gain group identity and the sense of community increases (Williams et al., 2006).

4.5.2. Social Interstice: Digital games offer social interstice that allow players to feel part of a community. These spaces create environments for friendship and collaboration in virtual worlds. For example, in *Minecraft*, community servers allow players to work on collective projects, sharing a common space and strengthening social bonds. Games have an impact on children's capacity for friendship and cooperation (Loudoun, Boyle, & Larsson-Lund, 2024). Multiplayer online games such as *Fortnite* offer a social interval by allowing players to come together collectively during virtual concerts and events. For example, during the *Travis Scott Astronomical* concert in 2020, *Fortnite* players experienced a virtual concert together. Millions of players participated in this event at the same time, strengthening the sense of community and creating a social bond between players. Such events transformed the game's venues from mere playgrounds into virtual meeting and socializing spaces (Cheremnykh, 2024).

4.5.3. Subjectivization of the artwork: Games provide a form of subjectification by offering players the opportunity to create their own stories and experiences. Especially in open-world games, players bring their own perspectives to in-game characters and stories. This allows the player to feel part of the creation and shape the game through their individual experience. In *The Sims* series, players can directly control the lives of the characters they create and shape them through their own decisions, making the creation subjective. Players manage the lives of Sims through their personal choices, making the experience of the game unique to them. Human bonds such as romantic relationships, friendships and conflicts are simulated in detail in the game world and human relationships are reproduced (Azad & Martens, 2021).

4.5.4. Communicative Situations: Spawforth and Millard's (2017) work describes how communicative situations in games play an important role in interactions between players. Games offer rich social experiences with limited means of communication that enable players to understand each other. For example, in *Journey*, players are encouraged to work together without any language or direct communication. This strengthens the sense of cooperation and solidarity within the game. Similarly, in the *Dark Souls* series, players guide each other through messages they leave in the game world. This encourages a sense of responsibility among players, while also creating a space for social interaction and building a strong bond between players.

4.5.5. Random materialism: Random materialism refers to players' encounters with unintentional, random events in games. In-game surprises, random events and unexpected encounters support this. Such elements allow players to create unexpected moments and meanings in the game world. *No Man's Sky* offers a vast universe full of exploration elements, allowing players to randomly land on various planets and encounter different

life forms. These unexpected encounters allow players to create their own meaning (Greenshields, 2023).

4.5.6. Aesthetics of co-existence: Aesthetics of co-existence refers to players' experiences of co-presence and interaction in multiplayer spaces in digital games. Games reinforce the aesthetics of co-existence between players by creating virtual environments where individuals are interconnected. *Journey* randomly pairs players with another player and allows them to support each other on a shared journey without communicating. This game creates the experience of two players coexisting in the same environment and accompanying each other. It shows how aesthetics of co-existence is embodied through play, the experience of silent solidarity between players. (Aghoro, 2019)

4.6. Digital games and Modernism

If digital games are evaluated within the framework drawn by Bourriaud in the relationship between modernism and art, according to Bourriaud, art is a tool that strengthens social communication as a reflection of modern society. Digital games also assume this function, allowing individuals to socialize in virtual environments. By bringing together individuals from different geographies and cultures, games create a space of interaction that enables them to understand each other. While modern art focuses on individualism, contemporary art creates micro-utopias that encourage community building and sharing. Digital games, too, offer freedom to the player and a structure that allows players to build virtual communities and collaborate. Bourriaud emphasizes that in the modernist period, art appealed to large audiences through technological advances. In the same way, digital games are reaching wider audiences thanks to advancing technology and transforming gaming experiences as a screen-based interactive art form. Virtual reality games such as *VRChat* provide players with a fully interactive social experience through the possibilities offered by technology. *VRChat* continues the function of digital art as a communication tool in modern society by enabling individuals to socialize in virtual environments with modern technology. *Pokémon Go* integrates the game world with the real world through augmented reality (AR) technology, thus supporting players' individual exploration and creating a social bond with other players (Fraser, 2024). Digital games, like modern art, create micro-utopian spaces where individuals can form communities. These spaces provide players with both a sense of belonging in the virtual world and opportunities for sharing-based social interaction. *Journey* randomly pairs players with another player, thus creating a micro-utopia that allows players to progress together and form social bonds (Pötzsch, 2022). *The Sims* series allows individuals to create their own characters and communities in the virtual world. By creating their own micro-communities and shaping social interactions, players experience a kind of virtual utopia.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that digital games function as art forms within Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of *relational aesthetics*. The artistic of the plays included in the scope of the research and their connection with Bourriaud's *relational aesthetics* theory are shown in the table.

Game	Art function	Connection with Bourriaud's <i>Relational Aesthetics</i> Theory
Animal Crossing	Establishing social bond	Players create their own virtual worlds and interact by sharing and visiting their islands. Interacting with digital communities enables the construction of art as a social experience.
Dark Souls	Communicative Situations	Players guide each other through the game world by leaving messages. This process creates a space for social interaction and fosters feelings of responsibility and solidarity among players.
Dreams	An interactive 'exchange space'	Players become active participants in digital art by creating and sharing their own games and artworks. The game functions as a virtual art gallery, allowing each player to showcase their own creativity.
Fortnite	Community-based play, virtual activities and social interaction	It allows players to socially connect with virtual events, concerts and communities. Players experience the social function of art by interacting collectively rather than individually.
Journey	Remodeling and representation of human relationships, Communicative Situations; Aesthetics of co-existence; Bridging the gap between the real world and the virtual world	Players rethink social bonds through wordless interactions. Anonymous collaboration emphasises the impact of art on human relationships and transforms aesthetic experience into a shared process.
LittleBigPlanet	Audience participation and creative process	Players participate in the process of creating art by designing their own games and levels. By delegating the creative process to the player, players feel like artists who not only play, but also create.

Minecraft	Audience participation and creative process; interactive ‘exchange space’ ;Social Interstice	Players participate in digital art processes by building individual and collective structures. The process of artistic production in the game world coincides with Bourriaud's idea that art is not merely an object to be observed but requires active participation.
No Man’s Sky	Establishing social bond; Random materialism	Players create unexpected moments in the game world through random events and surprise encounters. The procedurally generated universe allows players to experience artistic and meaning-making through the process of discovery.
Pokémon Go	Art is a tool that strengthens social communication as a reflection of modern society; Bridging the gap between the real world and the virtual world	Augmented reality (AR) technology integrates the digital world of the game with the physical environment, transforming it into a screen-based interactive form of art. It encourages players' individual exploration and strengthens social bonds.
Second Life	Establishing social bond; interactive ‘exchange space	Players can create communities in the game world, organise events and represent their own identities in the virtual environment as they wish. The game has a structure that supports the creation of myth and meaning.
Stardew Valley	Remodeling and representation of human relationships	Players build relationships with the people of the village, develop friendships, and explore the depth of human relationships. Social dynamics such as emotional labour, friendship and romantic relationships are integrated into the game world.
The Sims	Remodeling and representation of human relationships; Subjectivization of the artwork; Bridging the gap between the real world and the virtual world	Players participate in individual artistic production processes by creating their own worlds and characters. The game functions as a platform that supports individual creativity and self-expression potential of art.
VRChat	Art is a tool that strengthens social communication as a reflection of modern society	Players socialise with other individuals in a fully interactive way through virtual reality. It enables digital art to function as a means of communication in modern society.
World of Warcraft	Establishing social bond; interactive ‘exchange space’; Relational aesthetics	Players form guilds and establish social bonds in a culture of co-operation and solidarity. By creating micro-communities, it transforms art from an individual experience into a collective interaction space.

Digital games and art in the context of relational aesthetics:

Digital games fulfill the social bonding function of art by establishing social interactions between players through virtual activities and communities. This allows art to build new social bonds between individuals.

By providing players with the opportunity to build both individual and collective structures, games reveal that art is not only an object that is observed, but a process that is created with the participants. This creative process is shaped by the active participation of players and emphasizes the dynamic nature of art.

By encouraging anonymous collaborative processes, digital games strengthen social bonds by creating an environment of trust and cooperation between players. These anonymous interactions extend the impact of art on human relationships.

Online multiplayer games create communities that create a sense of sharing and belonging. These communities support Bourriaud's view of art's potential to create micro-communities and demonstrate the contribution of digital games to the social role of art.

Future research can continue to explore the artistic form of the digital world in a more comprehensive way, deepening the artistic quality of digital games and their links to *relational aesthetics*. Such research will contribute to a better understanding of digital games as new forms of art.

REFERENCES

- Binark, M., & Bayraktutan-Sütcü, G. (2008). Kültür endüstrisi ürünü olarak dijital oyun. Kalkedon.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002). Relational Aesthetics (S. Pleasance & F. Woods, Trans.). Les pres-ses du réel. (Original work published 1998).
- Bruckman, A. (1997). MOOSE crossing: Construction, community, and learning in a networked virtual world for kids [Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Tech-nology]. MIT DSpace.
- Charles, D., & Black, M. (2004). Dynamic player modeling: A framework for pla-yer-centered digital games. Proceedings of the International Conference on Com-puter Games: AI, Animation, Mobile, Educational & Serious Games, 29-35.
<https://www.academia.edu/download/101186852/DynamicPlayerModelling.pdf>
- Cheremnykh, P. (2024). Gaming the Metaverse: User experience analysis and insights from Fortnite [Master's thesis]. Theseus.fi. https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/850495/Cheremnykh_Pedcharat.pdf?sequence=2
- Fidaner, İ. B. (2009). Mod making: Mod yapımı: Oyun ile oynayanlar.. In M. Binark, G. B. Sütcü, & İ. B. Fidaner (Eds.), Dijital oyun rehberi (pp. 171-184). Kalkedon Yayınları.
- Fraser, E. (2024). The future of digital space: Gaming, virtual reality, and metaversal thinking. Dialogues in Human Geography.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/20438206231189586>
- Fyfe, D., Gaynor, S., & Remo, C. (2009). Journal of Games. Idle Thumbs.
http://downloads.idlethumbs.net/misc/journalofgames_gdc09.pdf
- Geraci, R. M. (2014). Virtually sacred: Myth and meaning in World of Warcraft and Se-cond Life. Oxford University Press.
- Hamari, J., & Tuunanen, J. (2014). Player types: A meta-synthesis. Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association, 1(2), 29-53. https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/99064/player_types_a_meta_synthesis.pdf
- Huizinga, J. (1971). Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture. Beacon Press.
- Isbister, K. (2016). How games move us: Emotion by design. MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2005). Games, the new lively art. In J. Raessens & J. Goldstein (Eds.), Hand-book of computer game studies (pp. 175-189). MIT Press.

- Kilzer, N. (2022). Queer representation and visibility in video games. Netlibrary.
- Loudoun, F. M., Boyle, B., & Larsson-Lund, M. (2024). Play value of digital play spaces: Children's voices. *Play & Digital Media Studies*.
- Mäyrä, F. (2008). *An introduction to game studies: Games in culture*. Sage Publications.
- Murray, J. H. (2006). Toward a cultural theory of gaming: Digital games and the co-evolution of media, mind, and culture. *Popular Communication*, 4(3), 185–202. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15405710pc0403_3
- Nguyen, J. (2016). Minecraft and the building blocks of creative individuality. *Configurations*, 24(4), 429-448.
- Pötzsch, H. (2022). *Microdystopias: Aesthetics and ideologies in a broken moment*. De Gruyter.
- Ramshaw, A. (2020). 'World of Warcraft is my home from home': An argument for the protection of virtual worlds. *Journal of Law, Technology and Trust*.
- Reid, E. M. (1991). *Electropolis: Communication and community on internet relay chat* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Melbourne.
- Ringland, K. E. (2016). "Will I always be not social?" Re-conceptualizing sociality in the context of a Minecraft community for autism. *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1256-1269.
- Rollings, A., & Adams, E. (2003). *Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on game design*. New Riders.
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. MIT Press.
- Spawforth, C., & Millard, D. E. (2017). A framework for multi-participant narratives based on multiplayer game interactions. https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/414445/1/framework_multi_participant.pdf
- Stockton, S. (2019). *Dating ga(y)mes: Queer performance in farming simulation roleplay games*. Prism: The University of Calgary's Digital Repository.
- Sudnow, D. (1983). *Pilgrim in the microworld*. Warner Books.
- Tavinor, G. (2009). *The art of videogames*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Between worlds: The emergence of online game culture*. MIT Press.

Williams, D., Ducheneaut, N., Xiong, L., Zhang, Y., Yee, N., & Nickell, E. (2006). From tree house to barracks: The social life of guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, 1(4), 338-361.

Game References

- Verant Interactive. (1999). *EverQuest* [Video game]. Verant Interactive.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of Warcraft* [Video game]. Blizzard Entertainment.
- Epic Games. (2017). *Fortnite* [Video game]. Epic Games.
- Nintendo. (2020). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [Video game]. Nintendo.
- Linden Lab. (2003). *Second Life* [Online virtual world]. Linden Lab.
- Mojang Studios. (2011). *Minecraft* [Video game]. Mojang Studios.
- Electronic Arts. (2000-2020). *The Sims series* [Video game]. Electronic Arts.
- Media Molecule. (2008). *Little Big Planet* [Video game]. Sony Computer Entertainment.
- Media Molecule. (2020). *Dreams* [Video game]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- thatgamecompany. (2012). *Journey* [Video game]. Sony Computer Entertainment.
- ConcernedApe. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Video game]. ConcernedApe.
- Hello Games. (2016). *No Man's Sky* [Video game]. Hello Games.
- FromSoftware. (2011-2022). *Dark Souls series* [Video game]. Bandai Namco Entertainment.
- Niantic, Inc. (2016). *Pokémon Go* [Mobile game]. Niantic, Inc.
- VRChat Inc. (2014). *VRChat* [Virtual reality game]. VRChat Inc.