



TENSION: BETWEEN ART AND ENTERTAINMENT

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In July 2008, a newly released commercial video game was displayed in a separate room at a 'Game art' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. Showcased as part of the International Biennale of Young Art 'Qui Vive?', *Turgor*¹ was presented to the public as a work of art.² The game was produced by a Moscow-based development studio, Ice-Pick Lodge, whose earlier release, entitled *Pathologic*, was already well known to hard core gamers. While exhibiting a commercial game in an art gallery may be interpreted as a deliberate publicity stunt, the game's main developer and the founder of the company, Nicolai Dybovskiy, was adamant that games should not simply be seen as entertainment, but as an art form in their own right. The exhibition itself was accompanied by an academic conference entitled 'games as an art form'. In this paper, I will argue that video games, such as *Tension*, straddle a fine line between art and entertainment and, as is the case with *Tension*, can be seen as symptomatic of the new cultural and social realities in post-perestroika Russia.

Art in the West / Art in the East

In the West, art, crafts and technology were indistinct from one another before the 16th century. All three were part of the same thing, i.e. production of a 'masterpiece' by a master or an apprentice in a guild of craftsmen. It was only since the Renaissance that

the status of painters and sculptors was elevated above that of potters, weavers and other so called 'decorative arts' professions.³

Throughout the centuries art has been variously theorised in philosophical and aesthetic terms. As a form, it has its roots in Immanuel Kant's aesthetics. He was the first to make a clear distinction between art and crafts, or what he called *free art*, and *mercenary art*, or labour.⁴ It was not until the late 20th century, however, that it became clear that it is fairly impossible to define what art actually is since it means different things to different people at different times. Any definition, therefore, will be by its very nature polemical and open to interpretation.

In Russia, art has traditionally been linked with religion and spirituality. The famous 19th century Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, treated art as a religious question.⁵ The arts, in particular literature, have had a defining role in shaping the psyche of the Russian people. Svetlana Boym points out the significance of literature in Russia which was 'not merely one of the branches of general education but a guide to life, a sort of nineteenth-century liberation theology.'⁶ Moisei Kagan, a Russian art historian and philosopher, argued that for the past two centuries art has been associated with freedom of creative expression which is very close to the spiritual. Artists have been expressing their spiritual states and appealing to our emotions both directly through words, sounds and gestures, but also indirectly, through the materials they use, i.e. paint, wood, stone, etc.⁷

Game as Art

The 'are video games an art form?' debate has been going on in the West for some time now, although it is only just beginning to be discussed in Russia. It

¹ According to Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary turgor is 'the normal state of turgidity and tension in living cells; especially: the rigidity of a plant that is due to the pressure of the cell contents against the cell walls and that is lost or greatly diminished in wilting'.

² The game is marketed in the West as *Tension*.

³ Hugh Honour & John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (Laurence King Publishing: London, 2002), p. 15.

⁴ Mary J. Gregor, Immanuel Kant, and Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Judgement* (Hackett Publishing Co: London), p. 305.

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, *What is Art?* (Penguin Classics, 1995).

⁶ Svetlana Boym, 'From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia', *Representations*, No. 49, Winter 1995, p. 9.

⁷ Moisei Kagan, 'Art, Science and Technology in the Past, Present and Future', *Leonardo*, vol. 27, No. 5, Prometheus: Art, Science and Technology in the Former Soviet Union: Special Issue, 1994, pp. 409-411.

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resembles similar disputes, long since resolved, over photography and film. It is symptomatic of the contentious relationship between technology, mass culture and art, or as the French philosopher Paul Valéry is quoted as saying, 'great innovations ...will affect artistic invention itself and perhaps even bring about an amazing change in our very notion of art.'⁸

In the gaming industry itself, the question of whether games can be considered art has stimulated heated discussions among hard core gamers, with many developers fervently opting in favour of games as art. The success of the gaming industry has led many artists to experiment with the new interactive medium as a way of creating new narratives and cultural critique.⁹ They have used the medium to try and subvert, undermine and challenge the existing social order. The sceptics, on the other hand, have argued that games lack 'characters of human complexity or stories that stress the consequences of our actions', therefore, they cannot achieve the status of art.¹⁰ Some, though, remain undecided. Ian Bogost, the co-founder of Persuasive Games, a company based in Atlanta, USA, which develops arcade games, admits that the question needs to be explored further to find the new artistic capabilities of video as a medium.¹¹ The controversy seems to centre around the fact that games are interactive, i.e. the player can influence the outcome of the game by making choices. Doubters would argue that the lack of authorial control makes games an inferior medium, therefore they should not be raised to the status of art. Those who support the idea, however, see games as 'the most advanced form of art thus far in human history as they combine many different media with interactivity'¹², thus they empower the players to take control over the medium and transform themselves from passive art spectators to active participants.

What is clear is that the 'games as art' debate is a contested territory and it will take some time for it to be resolved one way or the other.

Tension: The Story

Tension is a single player video game which seems to escape easy categorisation. Marketed as a survival adventure game, it is part 'simulation', part a role-playing game which is aspiring to become an experimental art form while titillating the audience with a good deal of erotica.

The story in *Tension* is both simple and complicated. The protagonist is unceremoniously placed in the middle of the Void, the space between life and death, from which he has to escape.¹³ Void is a dark, menacing place full of threatening cyborgs, called Brothers. The longer he stays in the Void, the quicker he will die. To get out, he needs to fill his virtual body with colour. Colour is the main instrument of the gameplay. It can be likened to life energy, perhaps blood, or some other vital substance which keeps him alive. It can be harvested by filling trees with colour in the garden or by mining it in the rocks. If he runs out of colour, he will die. It gets even more complicated. Different colours give the protagonist different qualities, whilst at the same time altering the balance of energies in the Void. For example, red gives him strength but the Void becomes more menacing; green improves his defence levels, but when he uses it, the colour growth slows down.

At first it may appear that the game is very simplistic and cruel – to get out from the Void you need to remove all colour from the universe. But it is not that simple. The choice of colour disturbs the inhabitants of the Void and leads to unexpected events. The key to progress in the game is growing colour, to harvest

⁸ Paul Valéry, 'Pièces sur L'Art', 1931 in: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

⁹ Tiffany Holmes, *Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre*, 2003, www.tiffanyholmes.com.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, 'Art Form for the Digital Age', *Technology Review*, Sep/Oct 2000, Vol. 103, Issue 5, p. 118.

¹¹ Quoted in Bryan Ochalla, *Are Games Art? (Here we go again...)*. 16th March 2006, http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20070316/ochalla_01.shtml.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In Russian, as in other languages, nouns and people are given gender. *Tension* is seen from a male point of view; the protagonist is male and the whole game is structured from a male point of view.



it and use it to navigate, communicate and interact with the Sisters. They are glamorous, temperamental semi-naked creatures who mesmerise, taunt and lure the player. They will either help him or put obstacles in his way. Although there is no familial relationship between Brothers and Sisters, Brothers are Sisters' guardians and keepers and zealously protective of them. Sisters are unable to free themselves unless they are filled with colour by the player who has to make choices constantly which influence his and other characters' lives. The choice he makes is between living and existing, between spiritual and technological, and between good and evil. Life in the Void is not unlike real life.

Tension: Between Art and Entertainment

So, where is art in *Tension*? First of all, the player is an artist. He is the creator, who with one touch of a brush can influence the state of the world around him, the world which is full of metaphors, allegory and poetry. Communication with the Sisters and Brothers is through monologues, some of which are based on the poems by a 16th century Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões. They are abstract, poetic and deeply philosophical.

Nik Kelman in his book *Video Game Art* argues that game designers are creating art. Firstly, because they are skilled artisans who create compelling visual worlds. Secondly, because the games themselves are 'meaningful experiences which tap deep chords within our culture.'¹⁴ Full of symbolism, *Tension* is steeped in mythologies as well as artistic and cultural influences. Grotesque surreal Brothers, part machines, part humans, could easily feature in Salvador Dali's paintings. Sisters resemble glamorised Russian folk heroines, like Princess Vassilissa, or a Swan Princess painted by the 19th century Russian painter, Mikhail Vrubel. Naked Yan's dance is based on the famous ballet routine, *The Dying Swan*, performed by Anna Pavlova to the

music of Camille Saint-Saëns. Influences from the traditional Japanese theatre Kabuki as well as contemporary Japanese anime are also evident.

Visually, the world of *Tension* is akin to those old time favourites *Myst* and *Riven* developed by Cyan Worlds, albeit featuring more sophisticated imagery. While the modelling of characters is in places crude and lacks finesse, landscapes are visually dramatic and create a mythical mysterious atmosphere with winding staircases, broken bridges and mysterious caves. Coupled with engaging music, haunting sound effects and voices, the game succeeds in creating new aesthetic experiences and narratives which bring emotional satisfaction through immersion and engagement with the medium.

Tension straddles a fine line between art and entertainment. To attract wider audiences, the developers used erotica, thus potentially alienating many women players.¹⁵ The more colour the player gives to one of the Sisters, the more she will strip down until she is totally naked. The game turns into a voyeuristic peep-show. Representation of women as glamorous, passive, stay-at-home wives and mothers is, regrettably, symptomatic of the position of women in post-perestroika Russian society. Svetlana Aivazova, Russian political scientist, attributes the increasingly visible status of patriarchy in Russian society to women's disappointment with Soviet-style emancipation.¹⁶ The growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, a deeply patriarchal institution, should also be noted in this respect. Eminent scientists, journalists and critics have recently offered their support to the idea that woman's 'natural' role in life is to be a good wife and mother. They argue that to destroy the hierarchy of society would lead to the death of culture.

According to Hoffman, Russia is experiencing a period of 'post-socialist patriarchal Renaissance'.

¹⁴ Nik Kelman, *Video Game Art* (New York: Assouline, 2005), p. 8.

¹⁵ As John Tierney argues "in the history of communications technology, sex seems to be the most enduring killer app" in: John Tierney, *Porn, the Low-Slung Engine of Progress*, The New York Times, 9th January 1994.

¹⁶ S. Aivazova, 'Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Rossii: traditsii i sovremennost' in: *Obshchestvennyye nauki i sovremennost'*, 1995, No. 2.

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The offspring of the 60s and 70s feminists are now opting for a cosy family nest instead of fighting for equality. During perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev famously declared that women should be allowed to stay at home. What he probably meant was that women should be allowed a choice either to stay at home or go out to work, many women, however, whole-heartedly embraced this option, tired of having to juggle work, home and raising children.

Tension is, undoubtedly, a game for the boys. The protagonist can only be a male player as all voice-overs refer to him as a 'he'; there is no option to select a different persona. Half of the brothers are overtly phallic, fusing technology, power and sexuality in an allegory of a patriarchal society, while the Sisters are the objects of the male gaze. This game is not for mass audiences. Those who are used to fast paced, violent, mindless shooting games will soon find *Tension* tedious, repetitive and too much of a mental challenge. There is no instant gratification through killing or maiming. Rather, the player is encouraged to immerse himself in an aesthetic interactive experience and to reflect on the consequences of his actions.

As art evolves over time and the medium of games matures, *Tension* may come to be seen as an innovative experiment, or even a new art form, which has fused art and entertainment together while highlighting 'the tension' between the artistic aspirations of its developers with the harsh commercial realities of the games market.