



Henry Fuseli - *The artist moved to despair at the grandeur of antique fragments* (1778–79)

## AGAINST INTROSPECTION

### *A speculative manifesto*

As of Tuesday the 13th of February 2018 at 10:55pm it is now illegal to make videogames about videogames.

Pixel art is immediately outlawed, of course — the clearest symptom of a regressive yearning for a past that no longer has any power or influence beyond that very yearning. A self-perpetuating feedback loop that produced countless beautiful works with absolutely no aesthetic ambition whatsoever; a display of polish and proficiency that makes no attempt to convey anything other than a worship of the past. Games described as “retro” are now declared pure expressions of Neoclassicism:

a game development tradition that is ostensibly interested in exploring/innovating/maximising within a specific design space, but inevitably reproduces a tired rehash of misinterpreted ideals, reinforcing the (now illegal) monoculture.

For its utter aesthetic complacency and apparent lack of external cultural reference points, digital copies of 2012's *Fez* are deleted from the servers of all major online storefronts with the morbid air of a funeral pyre. It was a good game, with some interesting ideas, but rules are rules.

The legal status of videogames that refer *implicitly* to other videogames is initially dubious. After all, games are inescapably envisioned through the genre signifiers and design traditions of other games. There is a broad feeling that nearly all games lack a sense of cross-medium intertextuality, but this is difficult to pin down. Everyone agrees that videogames are (were) a monoculture — aesthetically, thematically, conceptually — but this is such a broad endemic problem that it's hard to point to concrete examples. *Half Life 2* is illegal. So is *Dark Souls*. *Minecraft*, for some reason, is spared.

An unexpected side effect is that the majority of entries in the late-2000s–early-2010s canon of works known as “artgames” are banned too. Various works by Tale of Tales, Molleindustria, Barr, Rohrer et al are now a kind of obsolete *samizdat* — once-radical works that expanded the boundaries of the medium, but only did so through the lens of serious disciplinary introspection. Though valuable, and diverse in their textual meanings, these works were all driven by the same essential purpose: to prove that videogames could express complex ideas, to prove that videogames didn't have to be fun, to prove that *videogames are legitimate!!* Despite their good intentions, they were all borne from a self-conscious awareness of the cultural baggage of their medium, and these works' whole reason for being seemed to be to circumvent that

baggage. They were important, but they were videogames about videogames, and they too are now illegal.

(Interestingly, works by artists like Yang, Lavelle, Lawhead, Gillmurphy et al were exempt, as these were deemed earnest explorations of the medium's form - using virtual spaces, rules of play, and systemic interaction as tools of invocation, but without as much to prove. Comfortable in the antinomies of their medium, happy to use or discard its tropes in service of a broader creative objective. They remain legal — for now.)

Although the eventual goal of the bold new law is to completely erase “videogames” as a unified medium/discipline, for now its purpose is to at the very least abstract it. Without the comforting retreat of memetic self-reference, a creative vacuum is left and new influences are frantically gathered and incorporated. First it's anime, prestige television, young-adult literature, etc. but this is already too many referents for mainstream tastes to properly calcify. Soon games are borrowing aesthetics and signifiers more widely, and cues are taken from cooking documentaries, participatory artworks, institutional procedures. Inward-focused perspectives on videogames eventually re-emerge, but as simple self-reference is now illegal, creators are forced to critique and dissect (critical reflection is still considered fair use). Finally, this introspection evolves from an aesthetic interest to a material one — a brief wave of New Introspection, as creators explore and reflect on the peculiarities of game engine interfaces, the affordances of game controllers held upside-down, the politics of proprietary middleware.

Videogames' obsession with its own past and status gradually begins to dissolve and the centripetal force of its cultural engine reverses direction, now spinning centrifugally outwards into new critical futures.

— *written for Manifesto Jam 2018 by Michael McMaster*