

Art (Re)production as an Expression of Collective Agency within Oddworld Fan-culture

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Introduction: The Quintology

In 1997, *Abe's Oddysee* (Oddworld Inhabitants) was the first game to be released in the 'Oddworld Quintology.' The main character and player's avatar is 'Abe' (see Fig 1), a Mudokon (MOODOCK-un) who begins the game as an ignorant and happy floor-waxer working in the meat packing plant 'Rupture Farms.' Abe's voiceover narrative in the opening animated scenes, however, reveals that his bosses, the Glukkons, have exhausted all the meat reserves in the local ecosystem for their meat products ('Meech Mynchie's', 'Paramite Pies' and 'Scrab Cakes'). While working a late shift, Abe—to his horror—learns that the Glukkons' solution to their dilemma is to turn to their Mudokon workforce into the main ingredient of their new range of meat products ('New and Tasty')! The game's introduction and re-telling of the story ends with Abe fleeing for his life issuing a plea to higher forces to 'get me outta here!' Before he can free himself, however, Abe discovers it is his destiny to sabotage the Rupture Farms factory and secure the release of his co-workers.

Abe's World Iconography

The Oddworld games offer their fans a specific iconographic landscape. The design of the player character, and protagonist of the saga-like narrative of the quintology, Abe, suggests a number of influences (see Fig. 1). Rather than simply seeing these as vague origins, we see them in terms of the idea of provenance that Kress and van Leeuwen describe in their theory of multimodal design. Provenance here means the specific use of existing semiotic resources in the making of a new text. Though this resembles the well-known post-structuralist notion of inter-textuality, there are

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Figure 1 – Abe (right) interacts with a fellow Mudokon.
Image courtesy of Oddworld Inhabitants, Inc

specific differences. In particular, the emphasis in provenance is on the signifier-material, whose physical origin, texture, substance, and inscriptional surfaces are important contributors to the socially-shaped significance they bring with them. In the case of Abe's design, for instance, the green colour of his skin has specific signifying properties. In the traditions of comic-book and sci-fi iconography, it refers to a particular vision of the alien. In combination with the bulbous eyes, gleaming bald skull and skinny body (also deployed by Abe's designers), it originally signified menace and strangeness, as in the figure of the Mekon in the Dan Dare cartoons of the *British Eagle* in the fifties and sixties (see Fig. 2). However, with growing familiarity, the image of the 'little green man' became, arguably, an affectionate stereotype with almost comic properties. The evocation of this figure in contemporary popular media thus produces a mixture of strange, magical qualities and a familiar, almost pet-like appeal, as in Dobby the House-Elf in *Harry Potter, the Chamber of Secrets* or Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films. In both cases, the figure of the hairless, bug-eyed goblin is also seen as enslaved—Dobby to the wicked Lucius Malfoy, Gollum to the power of the Ring; and in need of emancipation, from, respectively, Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins. However, as we shall see later, it is not only the images evoked that are important in fan art, but the material properties of pencil, paper and computer-based graphic design that produce important social meanings for fan communities.



Figure 2 – The Mekon. Reproduced by kind permission of the Dan Dare Corporation Limited

These meanings are also imported, with the image, into the Abe narrative. Abe also begins life as a slave, along with the Mudokons in general, and his quest is for emancipation—though through his

own agency in this case. However, we can look further at the construction of Abe as a semiotic bundle, as he obviously consists of more than just an image—he is an animated and interactive character, with sounds as well as visual properties; in fact, he is what Kress and van Leeuwen would call a multimodal ensemble. His most celebrated sound is a powerful fart. We can regard this also as an element of his design with a particular provenance. In this case, the provenance is clearly not that of the popular comic-strip, but of the cult fanzines, such as the U.S.'s *Mad* or the UK's *Viz* that actually includes in its pantheon of scatological anti-heroes the character Johnny Fartpants.

Though there are many other references in the iconography and multimodal semiotic of Abe's world, these two make the point that quite different cultural worlds are being invoked. The cultural world of Dan Dare, Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins all have quite sober heroic aspirations, and can be located in traditions of popular narrative reaching back into the quest-based sagas of mediaeval Romance literature and folktale. The popular culture of *Mad* and *Viz* is essentially anti-heroic. Its social function is directly oppositional and subversive. Like the Rabelaisian practices of Bakhtin's carnival, it operates to upset the pomposity and arrogance of official culture, to displace it and substitute its own defiantly grotesque version of authority, if only for a day. What we get with Abe, then, is a curious mixture of the two provenances. We get something of the seriousness and heroism of the quest-sage, as Abe struggles for the liberation of the Mudokon slaves; but also something of the subversive irreverence and grotesque humour of the carnival anti-hero.

A final feature of the semiotics of Abe that is important to note in respect to the discussion of fan-art below is its use of inscriptional technologies. Kress and van Leeuwen regard the physical media of inscription as important contributors to the meaning of a text, and suggest that they are themselves saturated with cultural meanings. They group them into three overarching epochs—the technologies of the hand (brush, pen, chisel, etc.); the technologies of the eye and ear (the recording technologies of the twentieth century); and the synthesising technologies of digital media. Each of these, they propose, represents a particular epistemology, so that we move from a set of technologies that represent the world, to one that records the world analogically, and finally to one that synthesises pre-existing resources, re-presenting not the world, but earlier representations. This argument clearly echoes, in some respects, Benjamin's (1935) theory of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, though it is, on the whole, an optimistic argument that sees such development as progressive. However, as we shall see later, it is not only the images evoked that are important in fan art, but the material properties of pencil, paper and computer-based graphic design that produce important social meanings for fan communities.

In this context, the artwork of Abe, like that of all computer games, might be regarded by those with a negative view of the cultural value of games as derivative, mechanistic, superficial, facile

(in Bourdieu's sense of 'easy'), and, in general, opposed to a view of art as original, individual, based in hard-won craft skills. Behind the smooth surface of the digital aesthetic, however, all games contain a design phase rooted in traditional craft skills. Japanese games are well-known for having designs based on the elaborate paintings of their concept-artists. *Oddworld* is no different. The official website is at pains to emphasise the hundreds of iterations of pencil sketches of Abe, and presents some of them on the site (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3 – Design taken from the official *Oddworld* website.
Image courtesy of *Oddworld Inhabitants, Inc*

The game designers, then, are anxious to reveal a form of inscrip-tional practice much more reminiscent of Kress and van Leeuwen's first era, the technologies of the hand, than the processes of digital synthesis of their last era. The old, individual, craft technologies of the hand and pencil sit alongside the digital modelling of animat-ed characters and interactive worlds. As we shall argue, fans

engage with these practices and values in their own work of transformation and tribute. The provenance here, then, while it might draw on the iconography of games and comic-books, also derives meanings from the material shapes and substances of traditional pencil and paper drawings, in which the quality of the graphic art is foregrounded, rather than the specific image. One expert artist, for instance, puts up a carefully-drawn baseball glove as a model of the skills needed for concept art.

The Oddworld Vision

Oddworld Inhabitants, the California-based game studio responsible for the Oddworld series, has always possessed a clear vision for the development and evolution of their franchise (now entering its fourth commercial iteration). This was evident by the way that they mapped out their quintology from the onset. Their bold approach and strong ideals for the medium of gaming have also been exemplified by the way that *Abe's Oddysee* and *Abe's Exoddus* (1998) were 2.5D games when most other developers were already conventionally working in 3D. Lorne Lanning and Sherry McKenna, co-founders of Oddworld Inhabitants, defended their position with regard to the use of 2.5D as a stance against compromising the art, animation and charm of the game. The level of technology at that point (PSX, 120MHZ PC) was not considered sufficient to handle the vision that Oddworld Inhabitants possessed for their game universe in 3D. Furthermore, the developers have expressed an intention that each Oddworld game be accompanied by major technological leaps. All Oddworld Inhabitants' design decisions are characterised by their intent not only to promote a subtle and classically entertaining mode of gameplay but also to challenge people to re-evaluate the capabilities of digital technology and the gaming industry.

Unusual for a character/avatar in a console action adventure, Abe's strength lies in his agility, versatility, humour and ability to interact with other characters, either directly through 'gamespeak^R' or through his ability to possess and embody other characters. The communicative capacity of the game is further enhanced by player-responsiveness to the Mudokons' collective and individual predicaments (enslaved, dependency or incapacitation) and emotions (angry, wired or depressed). The Oddworld series therefore delineates the depth of Oddworld with its ever-expanding cast of characters (Sligs, Scrabs, Paramites, Fleeches, Slurges, Slogs, Greeters and Glukkons) and beautifully rendered landscape environments (factories, temples, forests, vaults and mines). An interesting factor in the back-story of Oddworld Inhabitants' success is the combination of film effects and game-design expertise that has gone into the production of the quintology and its bonus games (additional games to the planned character shifts of the quintology). The game's cinematic feel is evident not only in its rich landscapes but also from its mood-sensitive soundtrack and seamless and well-crafted cut-scenes. Here again, the notion of provenance

offers an explanation of how meanings are constructed by players out of a recognition of the material source of the game's visual aesthetic, in the cinema.

The *Oddworld* quintology is arguably one of the first in a line of games, like *Black & White* (LionHead Studios), *ICO* (SESJ) and *Halo* (Bungie Software) that have begun to shift public perception of computer games from 'cultural flotsam,' 'candy entertainment,' or 'digitised blood sport' to legitimate art (Benedetti, 2002). Indeed, *Abe's Exoddus* received the honour of being the first video game to gain an Oscar Nomination for 'Best Short Animation.' The emphasis placed on outstanding contributions to art-design and the strength of the worlds created by designers, are in turn drawing a number of comparisons with artists, writers and filmmakers (Provenzano, 2002). In increasing the cultural relevance of gaming and breaking the pattern of the 'me-too' market (*Edge* #111, 2002), such games are also discernible for the strong ethical and moral issues that underline the narrative and drive its characters. Indeed, Lanning (2002) has commented that *Oddworld's* "characters are driven in a way that is fired by larger issues" (2). To produce a successful odyssey, or odyssey, required Abe to be more than a 'flat character'; he had to evolve and develop within the course of the game.

Examining Games as an Interactive Medium

Despite possessing strong aesthetic qualities and storyline, character development within *Abe's Oddysee* occurs most substantially within the game's animated cut-scenes that also signify reward and significant progress to the player. Although the finale to the first game offers alternative endings based upon whether the player fulfils the quantitative, cumulative element of the game's aims (the number of factory working Mudokons rescued), it is possible to question where else players exert their influence upon the underlying game narrative or game world. Typically, theorists who grapple with the origins of captivation, fascination and allure inherent in individual engagement with new media technologies (Rafaeli) have used the construct of interactivity as an explanation. Video or computer games have variously been described as 'interactive narrative' (Frasca), 'interactive games' (Haddon) and 'interactive entertainment' (Provenzano), in which interactivity is typically understood as a process-related construct based upon the principle that individuals are not just deterministic 'undergoers,' acting in a fashion orchestrated by the environmental events created by the game, but also agents of experience.

Some scholars (e.g. Schultz) have however questioned the extent to which some mediums actually succeed in balancing the power and unidirectional nature of traditional mass media in favour of 'consensus-finding processes.' In assessing the extent to which console gameplay offers interactivity, it is helpful to refer to the distinction Rafaeli has drawn between declarative communication—in which a source sets the agenda and receives no or indirect feed-

back—and reactive and interactive communication. In this model, interactivity represents the extent to which forms of communication relate to each other, whereas bilateral interaction refers to reactive communication. In an attempt to define the contours of the role playing game (RPG) genre, Warren Spector has argued that without both “character development and genuine choices placed within a player’s control, a game cannot be called a role-playing game” (1). However, the notion of ‘genuine choice’ is ambiguous when applied to the console action-adventure genre. Within console action adventure games, the text provides a setting or space in which the player can operate, but the eventual direction of progress is specified and remains there to be discovered rather than created. Thus, although the structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfilling its potential, progress and movement is very much guided, pre-structured, and moulded.

In order to fully grasp the interactive nature of console gaming it may therefore be necessary to seek additional accounts of instances in which the players are not just ‘reactive’ but generative, creative, proactive and reflective (Bandura). Janet Murray, for example, identified a sense of agency as a desired outcome of engagement with interactive games. Models of human agency conventionally explore the nature of individual capacity to exercise control over the nature and the quality of behaviour and actions. Indeed, at one level, definitions of both interactivity and human agency share a description of players/people as producers as well as products. One of the ways in which the pleasures that players derive from engaging interactive narratives like *Abe’s Oddysee* can be understood is to examine how the game functions as a medium for creative interpretive strategies and practices.

Albert Bandura has employed a model of agency that distinguishes between independence, interdependence and collectivity that may be applied to individual engagement with the different conditions of the ‘meta-game.’ That is, beyond individual consumption of the game product, games stimulate cultural production through a fan community that not only offers a network of support for gameplay but also for other generative practices such as fan-art, fan-fiction and game related theory building. Bandura’s theoretical model extends conventional understandings of direct personal agency to account for proxy agency, a socially mediated mode of agency in which the mediating effects of others with the necessary resources or expertise are employed to secure a desired outcome, and collective agency in which certain outcomes are only achievable through socially interdependent efforts. The application of this model to gaming accounts for the complex, multi-dimensional nature of some players’ engagement with games but also offers an explanation for the function of players’ participation in the production of art that both replicates and extends the fan community’s conceptual understanding of the game-world as form of collective agency.

The Oddworld Forums: A Research Design

Henry Jenkins (1993) has long argued that the academic study of games needs to be:

more attentive to the experience of playing games rather than simply interpreting their surface features. We need to situate them more precisely within their social and educational contexts, to understand them more fully within their place in children's lives. (69)

The practices of fan sites not only support the popularity of the product but also represent it on a day-to-day basis. This section focuses on the contributions that fans of the games make to Oddworld Forums (www.oddworldforums.net). The forum facilitates a variety of discussion topics that are divided among Zulags 1 through 3 (drawing on the factory zones found within Rupture Farms). The whole site currently (9/30/2004) has 2,437 members who have amongst them contributed 9,864 threads and 164,933 posts—numbers that grow every day. Within Zulag 1 there are three discussion forums, the 'General Oddworld Discussion' devoted to speculation about upcoming games, queries, theory building and general enhancement of Oddworld knowledge and trivia (51,222 posts). Proxy agency is achieved by players of the Oddworld games through the remaining 'Spoiler Forum' (2,625 posts) that addresses the narrative direction of future games, and 'Oddworld Help' (2,468 posts) in which technical support and advice is offered to fans continuing to play the games. Within Zulag 2, members can offer feedback on the running of the forum within 'Forum Suggestion and Help' (5,671 posts). Additionally, members may engage in 'Off-topic Discussion,' which constitutes the most popular communication forum on the game-related web-site (79,733 posts); in this space, friendships are formed and cemented. Collective agency is apparent in the remaining forums. 'Oddworld RPG' (6,025 posts) represents an on-going text-based RPG game that expands upon Oddworld Inhabitants' original concept and allows fans to transport themselves into the environments of Oddworld. This study mainly focuses on the collective practices found within the 'Fan Corner' forum in which those who enjoy writing fan-fiction and making fan-art converge (15,089 posts).

An ethnographic account of the manner in which fans relate to the Oddworld games as cultural objects was achieved through examination of, and participation in the discussion threads posted on the general discussion board and fan-corner at Oddworld Forums over a 14-month period between 2002 and 2003. The forums were accessed in order to explore how game fans extend the gameplay experience and sustain the immersion levels achieved during Abe's epic journey. The first author's initial participation in the forums was as a fan and player of the game. Participation led to the identification and recognition of Bandura's three-tiered model of agency being realised within fan-culture

interactions and their active meaning making practices. Fans young, old, male, female and globally were observed engaging fervently in multi-literate discussions that dissect and draw upon the full range of symbolic resources that converge within contemporary digital games. Key to the discussion threads examined here is the exhibiting, appreciation, and criticism of game-inspired fan-art.

Consistent with the discussion of player agency, contributors to the forum environment also take responsibility for its governance. Fans are elevated to supervisory positions, maintaining the etiquette of online communication. They steer discussions and contributions into acceptable realms, sanctioning those who attempt to violate the 'family values' of the game. Unlike the resistance to similar attempts by Lucasfilm Ltd. to maintain the PG-rated world of *Star Wars* and censor fan-fiction from engaging its characters in 'pornography' (cf. Jenkins), Oddworld fans appear to honour their role as representatives of the game brand; they are rarely critical of—in fact, they often celebrate—the stock Oddworld universe, especially in their art practices. The showcasing of work and artistic skills within corporate appended fan-culture raises interesting questions about the motivation of contributors to the Oddworld Forums. In seeking to answer these questions, it was necessary to move beyond our immersive research technique of reviewing discussion threads on a consistent basis, to step forward and approach fans of the game more directly off the forum to elaborate and discuss their practices and engagement with the Oddworld concept. The combination of a sustained period of observation and participation in the forum together with more research oriented questioning of fans permitted access to, and first hand experience of the cultural practices surrounding the game.

Oddworld Fan-Art

Terms such as 'communities of practice' (Wenger) and 'textual poachers' (Jenkins) have been used to describe firstly the practices that serve as a source of coherence for a community, based on the dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire, and the objects through which social groups create meaning, which others have (often incorrectly) characterized as trivial or worthless. In our analysis, Oddworld-related fan-art is illustrative of what Jenkins terms "the material signs of fan cultures' productivity" (3). Games like Oddworld offer players an opportunity to understand art as something that has relevance to their lives. A key constituent of personal agency for players during gameplay comprises not only engagement with the iconography of the character design and animation (as already discussed) but also the depth and breadth of the work of the background artists (see Fig. 4). As fan "Xavier" commented to us in private communication, a key pleasure during gameplay comes from the discovery of "new details, the games are incredibly rich. Thousands of details in each screen, stop play and look at the picture, it's really beautiful" (1 [sic]). "Pinkgoth" offered a similar perspective:

Back when I first played Oddworld, I fell in love with the graphics. Its one of the most beautiful things in the 2D games with Abe – the background images, especially of Scrabania and the Free Fire Zone, the perfections of red and blue hues respectively. (2)

As a ‘classificatory system’ (Atkinson 1999) in which understanding and meaning are constructed, the exhibitor of fan-art on the forum also explores the aesthetic concepts of Oddworld through the manipulation of different materials and processes (e.g. pencil sketches, inked illustrations, puppets, plasticine models, computer-edited montages and original art). In doing so, fans publicly refine and control their use of art tools and techniques, and evaluate their own and others’ work and the lessons they learn from Oddworld Inhabitants’ artists and designers.



Figure 4 – Screenshot taken from Abe’s Oddysee.
Image courtesy of Oddworld Inhabitants, Inc

At one level, a good proportion of the art exhibited by fans are guided and epistemologised by the process of game development and industry pre-production practices at the foundation of successful games. Much like the pre-visualisation of characters through concept drawings prior to programming (see Fig. 5), a good proportion of the fan-art exhibited follows these conventions in the reproduction or expansion and development of the game’s creatures, environments and various habitats. More generally, work exhibited by fans often holds a concern with cultural reproduction and the perpetuation of the Oddworld style and traditional artistic practices and skills associated with concept drawing and game art.

Examination of the work produced by fans at first glance appears to offer little by way of innovation or imaginative variation on the key principles of the original designs. Within a number of submissions risk taking is minimised in place of a pursuit for the Baconian principle of understanding (or technique) achieved through reconstruction and reproduction¹. Rather than offend or challenge traditionalist respectability, fan-art is not transgressive in its depiction or means of production, but instead is perceptualist with the occasional pastiche. Its deviance lies in the legitimation of games as an art form and fans' homage to digital artists over and above mainstream fine art elite forms. From a culturalist perspective, such fan-work locates itself in a popular aesthetic opposed to the Kantian 'pure gaze' and its social function of distinguishing cultural elites, as in Bourdieu's critique of post-Enlightenment bourgeois taste. Such engagement with popular cultural forms has often been celebrated in this way, and characterised in terms of Bakhtinian carnival, for instance. It is true that this work is carnivalesque in that the boundary between cultural producer and consumer, between actor and stage, is dissolved to some extent. This distinguishes fan art from the more general notion of 'active readership' in the Cultural Studies tradition.

The location of this kind of fan art in a popular aesthetic alters conventional arguments about artistic originality, characteristic of post-Romantic ideologies of artistic genius. The kinds of artistic practice engaged in by the Oddworld Forums contributors are much more like the apprenticeship practices of Renaissance studios, in their admiration of master-practitioners of cartoon, manga and digital art, and in their diligent attention to graphic techniques which are often surprisingly traditional. Consider, for example, this advice about how to do pencil drawings based on a kind of brass-rubbing technique:

Paramiteabe: Its not that hard after you know what the type of method is used its quite easy. Anyone can do it and it involved outlining the photograph. All you do is get a photograph of anything black and white. Take a pencil and just scribble on the back of the photograph. Turn it over and outline the image on the photograph onto the paper don't press hard. You will altimatically get a line because you scribbled on the back of the photograph you will get a line of the image transfered altimaticallly to the paper. In other words your tracing it. Then altimatically you have the shape. The only thing you do now is fill in the tones of darks and lights by only using small line strokes. That's it its that simple. Its basically like a tracing or a rubbing. That was something I learned in class. but the tones were freehand that's what the purpose of the drawing was and believe it or not Concept artist are aloud to trace when its the right time. So trace and that will be great. (5 [sic])

This use of pencil drawing, as we have mentioned, associates itself with the industry practice of concept drawing, or similarly the practice of pencilling prior to inking and colouring in comic book design. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that an inscriptional medium, such as this, also carries its own significance and should not be regarded as a marginal, incidental aspect of the communicative act. This is a clear example of how the meanings constructed by the fan-art depend on the two aspects of provenance – on the one hand, on a reshaping of the iconography of Abe; on the other hand, on the material medium of pencil drawing, whose meanings are to do with the expert status of the artist in a tradition of concept-drawing. Far from aspiring to emulate the surface aesthetic of the digital medium—the actual look of *Oddworld*—fan art such as the concept drawing in Figure 4 uses a medium that proclaims several kinds of social intention simultaneously: a serious interest in the craft of the artist, a desire to penetrate the surface of the game and reach into the early stages of its production, and a desire to make an original contribution to the gameworld, albeit (and necessarily) cast in the generic visual style of the game.



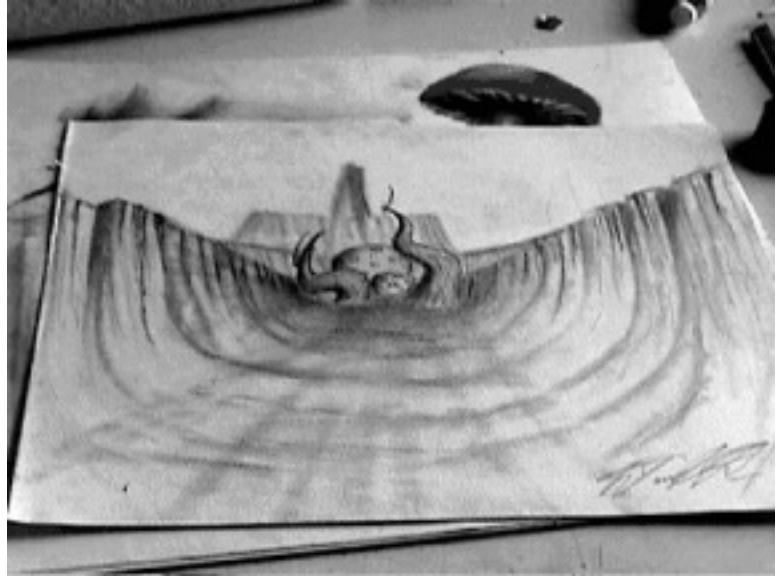


Figure 5 – Concept illustrations posted on the Oddworld Forum by Paramiteabe. Image courtesy of Oddworld Forums.

Fans do engage in forms of appropriation and adoption of digital media, for instance, incorporating images from the game into iconic representations of their fan identity badges and banners (see Fig. 6), in ways that fit perfectly into the model of synthesising technologies proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen we referred to earlier. However, in the work of fans like Paramiteabe (Fig. 4), the origin of the game's designs in older inscriptional technologies is much more important, and its social function and aesthetic nature lies in the valuing of craft skills, models of apprenticeship and individual originality which consists of the gradual adaptation of learnt, generic characteristics.





Figure 6 – Banners by Xavier, Abe Babe & Paramiteabe.
Image courtesy of Oddworld Forums.

Interactive Galleries

Interactive communication central to the manner in which the Oddworld Forum functions, and the fashion in which fan-art is presented, critically evaluated and discussed, may be interpreted as reflective of aspects of what has been labelled 'post-modern' or 'neo-avant-garde' (Efland, et al.). That is, practice that is plural, inclusive and accommodates difference. Yet, in the utilisation of traditional art practices to produce fan-art and new media technologies to disseminate and discuss work places fans' active contributions to the Oddworld community also rest somewhere between the more modernist curriculum practices of art education and spontaneous engagement with contemporary art. Importantly, the key function of the fan forum is how it facilitates processes of communication through which the aesthetic experiences attached to the game become meaningful (Read).

Examination of forum members' responses to submitted work revealed, for example, the common use of 'industry standard' (as indicative of career potential in the game industry) as the highest form of compliment offered to exhibitors of artwork. For example, in response to the artwork of "Tybie_odd" and "Red Muse," "Splat" declares: "Wow those pics are really great! You should all become designers for computer characters! You'd make millions a year!" (14 [sic]). Similarly, comparisons to Oddworld artists and other artists (for non-Oddworld art and literature) also constitute and reflect a well-received and highly acclaimed submission to the forum. Again, the approving "Splat," this time in a different thread, is the thirteenth person to respond to the work of "Canned Gabbiar," exclaiming:

WOW! Those were brilliant! I laughed, I cried, I stared in awe at your pure artistic genius! No exaduration! I'm being solely truthful when I say that you should take up a job as a character designer for Oddworld! You'd get the job, no competition. Honestly, I just applied your fuzzles [game characters] as my wallpaper! Brilliant! (9)

Digressing for a moment to pick up on the comment made at the end of Splat's post, fans' creative products are sometimes rewarded by others' embracing and adopting their work (in this case as desk-

top wallpaper). Another interesting illustration of this observation was found in a thread that contained photos of fan-created models of key Oddworld characters. The plastic figures presented in the thread mirrored merchandising practices commonly found within the film industry. Popularised by *Star Wars*, 'action figures' are now commonly produced for similar films like *The Matrix* and *Planet of the Apes* and extend further to cult films like Tim Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas* and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. Oddworld fans responded positively to fan-created Oddworld figures, showing a desire to own versions of these models. In this sense, fan constructions fill a demand not commonly met by game developers and the industry (the marketing of the *Tomb Raider* franchise being an exception). Yet, interestingly when "Sydney" posted a message that an official 14.5-inch resin statue of Abe was available to buy on eBay, fans were both critical and declared the price too costly. For example, *Oddbod* questioned the likeness of the figurine to Abe stating that; "He looks like a frog" (2). While fans *Danny* and *Teal* picked up inaccuracies, such as, "no chest tattoo" (4) and "he's got four fingers" (4). Oddworld's critical appraisal of capitalism may constitute a key theme of the game narrative in both *Abe's Oddyssey* and *Abe's Exoddus*, yet the comments of these fans appear to embody the internal contradiction of capitalism. On the one hand they appear to be celebrating the game's subversive message, whilst on the other hand possibly suggesting a demand for cheaper and better spin-off merchandise.

Returning to fans' responses to exhibited work, in appreciation of several design drawings by "SeaRex," "TheRaisin" expresses his approval of how the influence of a popular cult cartoonist has been incorporated into the artwork:

These ... are incredible. Are you a Jhonen Vasquez fan by any chance? Y'know, Invader Zim, Squee, Johnny the Homicidal Maniac? Cause your artwork definitely looks Vasquez-inspired ... Kick Ass! You have won my respect! nay!, my devotion! Rock on!

SeaRex: Yeah, you're dead on, Raisin dude, I'm a big Vasquez fan. If it wasn't for JTHM, I probably wouldn't be trying to make a comic (or even using ink for that matter). (6)

Vasquez cultivates an ironic gothic sensibility that challenges conventional Western bourgeois values through images and narratives of joke violence and hatred. However, the fan cultures surrounding his work, like those of the Oddworld Forums, promote collective and supportive tribute art. One site (www.bunnyofdoom.org) for instance, offers fans a whiteboard resource with a basic set of digital drawing tools, to draw and save their own pictures, but also a "groupboard" where participants can draw and chat collectively with other online fans "Oddsville" shows recognition of the legitimacy of proxy agency in drawing on the generic conventions of Oddworld in this post:

its ok if you borrow from other people because eventually you will mold it into your won style. Me, I took a lot of styles from people here [Oddworld Forums] and the people at OWI [Oddworld Inhabitants] and now I have a mix of each. (6 [sic])

Generally, responses and feedback from forum members is often unrestrained in its support, especially with regard to admiration for the bravery of exhibitor's public displays in which they share their work. Fans' comments are both generous in their praise and empathetic to the courage of exhibitors. It is not uncommon for fan-art to receive the following kind of zealous responses:

Mac the Janitor: I LOVE LOVE LOVE your artwork ... I cannot express to you how awesome your style is. All the characters you've posted in the past look absolutely PERFECT ... I can't say this enough times ... I LOVE LOVE LOVE your stuff. (3)

Reptile: Man, those images will haunt my dreams. That's great work. I love 'em all! (2)

GTdragon: WHEEEEEEEEEEEEE
CAN I HAVE YOUR AUTOGRAPH?!
I'm serious, this is pure skills home gurl!! NEED ... MORE!!! (3)

Zach Roy Wilson: Whoa and double Whoa! (2)

Here exhibitors are receiving direct and immediate reinforcement from an audience who is deeply entrenched and cultured in the representational signification systems and the visual design of the game. Members' duty to support and encourage both new and experienced artists and writers submitting work to the forum is illustrated by forum moderator "Al the Vykker," who interrupted a long and exclusive thread communication with a request that members "try to be fair and go and read other peoples' work and artwork also, instead of just going to one in here. I suggest that most people around FC [fan corner] try and be a bit more attentive and give some other artists ... feedback" (5). Here we see a relationship emerging between the different modes of agency where fan engagement in collective agency (in producing a database of advice and support for Oddworld artworks) also encourages recognition of the anxiety, stress and risks attached to acts of personal agency and what Bandura describes as the cultivation of personal competencies in exhibiting work online.

When praise turns to advice, posts are equally tender in their approach to dispensing constructive criticism. In no threads were posts unearthed in which any member excessively dissected the contribution of another member's art. When "Dipstikk" (Matt Seeger) submitted work under the title 'Abe art' (see Fig. 7) "Sligslinger" commented: "Nice drawings ... keep up the good work, ps: may I suggest u make Abe look less elfish" (15). "Dipstikk" acknowledges this critique, conceding "Yeah, the ears were a problem. I forgot that they were immobile, plastered to the

side of the head” (16). Whilst “Alector” chooses to add a focus on standards of presentation and materials for exhibiting art in the thread, after praising “Dipstikk” and his pleasure in viewing his work, Alector subtly raises this issue:

But notice: Drawings look much better when you draw them on white non-lined paper. The lines disturb the pencil drawings a lot.

The ... picture with the yellow background looks good [Fig 8]. It shows the power of the Shrykull. The havoc and the danger of it. The poem gives the drawing a mysterious touch. (17)

The question of provenance here, as in earlier examples, shows not only that meaning for fans resides as much in the physical medium as in the icon, but also how developed their explicit awareness of it can be, in a meta-discourse of provenance.

An influential thread on the forum entitled ‘Share Your Artwork Tips’ begins with a statement by “One, Two, Middlesboogie” which reads: “Among true artists, there are no secrets. Pooling our knowledge can only make us better, so share the secrets of your success” (1). The thread provides comprehensive tips on pencil drawing, pastels, inking and computer colouring techniques, a guide to buying art supplies as well as links to other web-based art tutorials (e.g. by computer artist Kristen Perry) and texts (e.g. Andy Smith’s 2002 text *Drawing Dynamic Comics*). As a socio-structural arena, the forums necessitate ‘agentic transactions’ in which fans oscillate between producers and products of the social system. By working conjointly to produce a thread of this nature, Oddworlds’ fan culture sets the standards for its own production practices, levels of aspiration, and presumably the subsequent self-efficacy experienced by those who are reinforced for meeting these standards.



Figure 7 – Depiction of a Shrykull a powerful force that transforms Abe and permits him to defeat those who have exploited his people. Image courtesy of Oddworld Forums.



Figure 8 – ‘Abe Art’ by Dipstikk (Matt Seeger) that stimulated discussion of appropriate materials for presentation of work and the anatomical accuracy of his depiction of Abe. Image courtesy of Oddworld Forums.

It is not uncommon for fans’ critical comments to also have a direct impact on the artwork presented, in which sketches will be re-drawn or altered in line with feedback. Consistent with Bandura’s concept of collective agency, this practice most commonly occurs in fan-art in which fan-fiction characters are fashioned and realised combining the input of the fiction writers, illustrators and other contributors. Likewise, within multimodality theory the text is regarded as a “process, as unfinished business, rather than a neat, sealed object on a shelf, or in a timeless space” (Burn, 78). “Tybie_odd” provides a good example of this in his work, which he posted in the form of four character pictures titled ‘Work at Rupture Farms’. About this mini text-based role play he initially stated: “They aren’t my characters but I really liked them so I had to try and draw them, I have included a favourite quote and credit

to their owners on all of them" (citation). With one character, A Glukkon named 'Arnie' (see Fig. 9), "Dripik" the creator of that character comments that despite appreciating the work, there was "maybe one thing: I imagined smaller shoulder pads for Arnie" (3). In response, Tybie_odd is happy to oblige and accurately realise the creators' mental image of Arnie:

YAY! They like them! Now I am encouraged to do Otto [another fictional character] Coming right up, dripik! I changed Arnie's shoulder pads smaller, I post the new pic when I get done with Otto. (4)

In this respect, the discursive network in which art is exhibited fosters a process of transformation, adaptation and reworking, highlighting collective stages to art production found in these spaces. It is not uncommon for fans to employ/commission other fans to illustrate their fan-fiction. This process functions in such a way that input and feedback is expected from the author(s) and the readers of the fan-fiction as to the appropriateness of the graphical illustrations. Fans who engage in this process are required to produce work that fits with the vision of the author of fan-fiction thus enhancing the self-development of the artist. Group attainments of this nature are not only a product of shared intentions—knowledge and skills of the forum members—but also the interactive, coordinated and synergistic dynamics of their transactions.

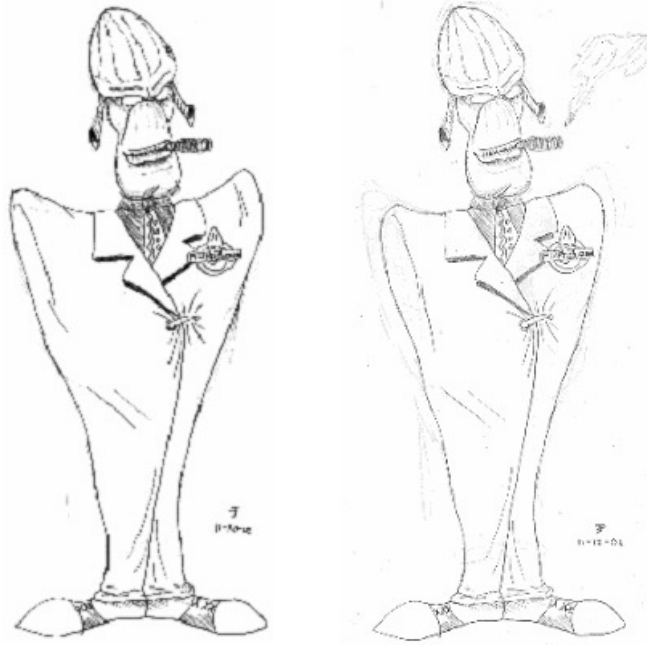


Figure 9 – Arnie a fan-fiction character created by Dripik and illustrated by Tybie_odd. Image courtesy of Oddworld Forums.

Conclusion

Games and game communities offer its fans opportunity to understand art as something meaningful that symbolises an important part of their everyday practices. The value of 'production' and 'making,' contributes to an aesthetically evolved and culturally aware population, fostering a positive and informed attitude toward art. These practices represent an education in art in which computer games constitute one facet in a 'pan-cultural' range of signs, symbols and images within a post-modern world. In this sense, collective agency operating within fan-culture contributes in practice to the continuous re-evaluation of assumptions as to what art is, who produces it and by what means. Fan art cannot simply be dismissed as an extreme form of Walter Benjamin's mechanically reproduced image. While it does indeed incorporate forms of technical and representational synthesis from pre-existing semiotic resources, it also reaches back into traditional cultures and media, including for instance those of apprenticeship and pencil drawing. Rather than simply being a form of intertextual exchange, then, the process of semiotic provenance allows fans to make their own meanings by employing the signifier resources both of the Abe iconography, and the semiotically-rich substances of a variety of design materials. While the highly mobile, popular aesthetic of this artwork seems a perfect instance of the post-modern moment, its appeal to traditional craft skills hints at a much longer historical hinterland of amateur and professional practice, and the interesting space between them which some of these fan-artists inhabit.

Note

¹This refers to Sir Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) notion that only through remaking the world under controlled conditions can we understand how it functions and behaves. This is a principle that was adopted by Behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner in his laboratory work and the construction of the 'Skinner Box'.

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