

The Dreamcast, Console of the Avant-Garde

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Abstract

We argue that the Dreamcast hosted a remarkable amount of videogame development that went beyond the odd and unusual and is interesting when considered as avant-garde. After characterizing the avant-garde, we investigate reasons that Sega's position within the industry and their policies may have facilitated development that expressed itself in this way and was received by gamers using terms that are associated with avant-garde work. We describe five Dreamcast games (*Jet Grind Radio*, *Space Channel 5*, *Rez*, *Seaman*, and *SGGG*) and explain how the advances made by these industrially productions are related to the 20th century avant-garde's lesser advances in the arts. We conclude by considering the contributions to gaming that were made on the Dreamcast and the areas of inquiry that remain to be explored by console videogame developers today.

Author Keywords

Aesthetics; art; avant-garde; commerce; console games; Dreamcast; game studios; platforms; politics; Sega; Tetsuya Mizuguchi

Introduction

A platform can facilitate new types of videogame development and can expand the concept of videogaming. The Dreamcast, however brief its commercial life, was a platform that allowed for such work to happen and that accomplished this. It is not just that there were a large number of *weird* or *unusual* games developed during the short commercial life of this platform. We argue, rather, that *avant-garde* videogame development happened on the Dreamcast, even though this development occurred in industrial rather than "indie" or art contexts. Our understanding of the avant-garde is not limited to any particular medium of art, or even to what is currently understood as art practice, and is informed by ideas from intermedia artist Dick Higgins, electronic literature author and scholar Scott Rettberg, and the Diana Crane typology of ways in which art movements can connect to this category. We see the Dreamcast as supporting a type of development practice that did not occur on contemporary platforms (the Xbox and the Playstation 2) or in other commercial development contexts before or since, one which relates in important and interesting ways to the work of 20th century avant-garde movements.

We look to several specific games to make connections between the avant-garde and Dreamcast development. Certainly, Dreamcast developers did not share *all* the important principles and qualities of avant-garde movements. Creating an early game for the Dreamcast was a commercial project that almost always involved large teams and had the bottom line, rather than political or

aesthetic expression, as a central concern. Development required the approval of corporate higher-ups and was done with a market in mind. In this context, it is hard to imagine a commercial console game expressing strong resistance to the commodity perspective and to the view that game production is commerce. But even when it comes to resisting commercialization, it is arguable that Dreamcast games came closer to expressing this attitude than any other console games have.

The Dreamcast was not, as we see it, an occasion for an actual avant-garde movement, since the system was short-lived. Nevertheless, we believe that characterizing the Dreamcast as we do and following through on the implications of this association provides some important insights about videogame development, its connection to other arts, and how its corporate and industrial contexts affect these connections. We consider the Dreamcast as a platform using several methods, including the content analysis of reviews of games, by comparing and interpreting the media elements and workings of games, and by interviewing a Sega executive to learn about the organization of the company and corporate decisions. Our approaches are meant to help further develop the family of approaches called platform studies (Bogost & Montfort, 2009).

The following five Dreamcast games, although certainly not the top sellers for the console, are memorable ones that are often named in player-created top ten lists:

- In *Jet Grind Radio*, released in Japan as *Jet Set Radio*, the player controls the members of a multi-racial group of street artists who must evade the police as they spray-paint different urban landscapes; the visuals of the game itself are abstract and stylistically resonate with graffiti art.
- In *Space Channel 5*, a music game, the player leads Ulala to befriend seeming opponents through imitative dance; she and a growing group discover that the true enemy is the corporate leader of Ulala's TV station, who is willing to discard integrity for profit.
- In *Rez*, the player's initially wireframe avatar flies through a non-representational cyberspace, influenced by *Tron* and the art and writing of Kandinsky, where gameplay, music, visuals, and even tactile feedback relate to each other in completely novel ways.
- In *Seaman*, an amphibian and humanoid pet, who can be spoken to via the microphone controller, is able to converse about "baseball, politics, reproduction, dating, movies, music, television, gangster rap, and pharaohs" (Robinson, 2000). The narration is by actor and photographer Leonard Nimoy.
- In *SGGG* (pronounced "Segagaga"), a game released only in Japan, the player attempts to rescue a failing Sega. The RPG is critical of the industry and offers many repurposed, Sega-licensed characters.

Because of the short time the Dreamcast was on the market, and because not all of these games were released in all markets, ranking these games in terms of their popularity is difficult. They were certainly not all minor oddities, though. *Seaman* was the top-selling Dreamcast game in Japan in the summer of 2000 (Robinson, 2000). *Rez* was released simultaneously on the

Playstation 2, developed a dedicated following and was revived as *Rez HD* on XBox 360 Live Arcade many years later.

While these games at least number among the better-remembered ones for the Dreamcast, the legacy of the Dreamcast's main rival looks quite different. In About.com's top ten list for the Playstation 2, nine of the ten games listed are sequels (Altizer, 2005). This doesn't foreclose the possibility of innovation, but it suggests that the offerings on the Playstation 2 achieved their effects by being more polished and expansive, by extending past successes rather than breaking with them.

Characteristics of the Avant-Garde

Dick Higgins (1966), writing about his influential concept of intermedia, describes the essence of the avant-garde — the enlargement of possibility for practitioners:

But there is always an avant-garde, in the sense that someone, somewhere is always trying to do something which adds to the possibilities for everybody, and that that large everybody will some day follow this somebody and use whatever innovations were made as part of their workaday craft. "Avant-garde" is merely a conventional metaphor drawn (in the mid-nineteenth century) from the military, in which an avant-garde moves in advance of the main body of troops.

(Higgins, 1966 [web])

He continues by describing how the term is better understood as a direction or tendency rather than a fixed category:

"Avant-garde" is relative, not absolute. A conservative poet can be at least morally avant-garde by moving in the direction of ever-greater integrity and purity, of vividness or metaphor and excellence of line. Others seek to follow, even when they cannot; and thus the metaphor retains its relevance. But when one is thinking of the avant-garde of forms and media, one is often thinking of artists who, for whatever reason, question those forms and media.

(Higgins, 1966 [web])

Higgins, whose focus is the transgression of the boundaries of media, has a particularly productive perspective on the concept of the avant-garde, a concept which is applied to theater, visual art, literature, and other categories of cultural production but which belongs to no single one of them. The main early, defining movements of the 20th Century avant-garde — Futurism in its Russian and Italian formulations, Dada, and Surrealism — were only "art movements" by the broadest definition of art, as they extended through work with the printed and spoken word to the visual and plastic arts and beyond.

We hold with Higgins that "avant-garde" is best considered a relative term. With that in mind, in the context of commercial videogame consoles, we think it useful to see the Dreamcast as an avant-garde console as compared to systems on the market at the same time and the Sega systems that preceded it.

Looking at the relationship between Dada and a particular type of digital practice, the creation of electronic literature, Scott Rettberg (2008) identifies several important aspects of Dada:

"... the rejection of the dominant modes of distribution and valorization of cultural artifacts, the elevation of the importance of audience response to and interaction with the art object or event, interdisciplinarity and anti-disciplinarity, the abstract use of language and sound as material, an embrace of randomness as an aspect of artistic practice, the use of diverse 'at-hand' media and found objects, and the representation of the human body as man/machine hybrid or grotesque deformity rather than as idealized beauty".

(Rettberg, 2008 [web])

Some of these are very clearly seen in particular Dreamcast games: *Rez* features "the abstract use of language and sound as material," *Seaman* the grotesque representation of the human (or human-like) body, and in *SGGG*, found media (in the form of graphics from various Sega properties) are employed a rather collage-like way, in a title that questions the very ability of a mainstream game (or console) company to break from established commercial imperatives. Others aspects of Dada and the avant-garde more generally, such as challenges to standard modes of distribution, are certainly not as evident, but do surface in relation to the Dreamcast after its official cancellation, as indie developers began to make use of the platform as a space for experimentation with design.

Scholars have argued that such unlikely candidates as melodrama (Shepherd, 1996) and multitasking (Auer, 2003) are avant-garde, and Lev Manovich (2003) has written that

"The greatest avant-garde film is software such as Final Cut Pro or After Effects which *contains the possibilities* of combining together thousands of separate tracks into a single movie, as well as setting various relationships between all these different tracks."

(Manovich, 2003, p. 15)

Without engaging these particular discussions any further, we mean to show that videogame production on the Dreamcast, as represented through five particular titles, corresponded in significant ways to aesthetic activity in avant-garde movements and cultural production by others who hold with the principles of these movements. We find that certain Dreamcast games were received in similar ways as avant-garde work has been, and has been discussed by gamers using terms typical of such work. By looking at economic, cultural, and technical factors, we try to shed light on why the Dreamcast occupies a seemingly unique place as an avant-garde console.

We do refer to criticism specific to particular media and categories at times, but we see no particular need to deal with the question of whether videogames are art — a question that is not entirely sensible in any formulation and would likely be of very little relevance to a member of the avant-garde, who would be interested in transgressing rather than establishing artistic boundaries. Our concern here is explaining how Dreamcast game production was avant-garde videogame production, not whether it counts as artistic production in some narrower sense.

Many Dreamcasts

Although we write of ‘the Dreamcast,’ there are many. One is the physical Dreamcast designed as a technological system, built to run particular operating systems and to allow for certain types of code (games, web browsers) to be run. A few words about this: The technical Dreamcast was innovative but not without problems. The Dreamcast hit the market significantly earlier than other systems of its generation: Sony's Playstation 2; Nintendo's GameCube; and Microsoft's Xbox. When the console was released in Japan on November 27, 1998, it boasted network connectivity via an integrated modem (a first) and the first 128-bit graphics system, driven by the NEC PowerVR2. That chip proved difficult to produce initially, leading to shortages of the console. Another Dreamcast innovation, its proprietary GD-ROM drive, lost alignment more often than happened in other optical drives, such as the one in the Playstation 2. The biggest problem, though, was that the Dreamcast's optical drive didn't play DVDs. (The Playstation 2's ability to do so has been cited as a significant factor in introducing the video DVD to Japan (Stenger & Sieberg, 2000).) Another innovation was the Dreamcast's Visual Memory Unit (VMU), a sort of large memory card that plugs into the controller and not only stores game data but is also a complete, if minimal, game system in itself, with a low-resolution monochrome screen, a directional pad, and basic sound capability. All in all, it would be hard to attribute the console's failure to gaffes on the part of its designers, but it would also be hard to point to specific technical factors that led by themselves to the system's many outrageous games.

Beyond the view of the Dreamcast as a single, canonical artifact of hardware, there were other Dreamcasts — different ones in different markets. There were the consoles as they were conceptualized at launch across Japan, North America, and Europe. A product of a particular time and location (or rather, set of locations), those Dreamcasts have to be viewed in terms of contemporary gaming in those regions. The Dreamcasts of different regions, which were differentiated by region-locking and marketing, had varying libraries of games, technological add-ons and service offerings, as well as their own cultural imaginaries and receptions.

There is also the Dreamcast that was the next in the line of Sega's consoles, following the less than successful Saturn but still building off the marketing and promotion of the overall Sega brand, which with the Genesis had been a successful challenger to Nintendo's dominance of the game console industry. And today we have our own Dreamcast, a system more than a decade old. That system, one of the newest "classic" or "oldschool" consoles, is a historical artifact, a platform for indie developers, a retro system for players, and the receptacle for all postmortems of what happened to the Dreamcast that led to its untimely demise. The current Dreamcast is also re-imagined in terms of the games that we play or have played on it — there are now unique Dreamcast games that might not have been seen as such at launch. There are games that never

would have been released as well as games that were intended for release but were not. All these Dreamcasts come together to exist, sometimes uneasily, alongside one another as "the" Dreamcast system.

To what extent were these Dreamcasts (and particularly the early ones) open to the creation of avant-garde software? Was Sega consciously taking great risks to push forward our conceptualization of what games could be? What was their strategy in designing the Dreamcast, and in lining up developers and games for players to purchase? In the next section we explore Sega's strategies and business practices, which fostered the eclectic mix of Dreamcast games we now strongly associate with the console.

Distributing Power to the Studios

In development decisions relating to the Dreamcast, Sega was playing the game that was typical of large publishers, confirms Kathy Schoback, former vice president and director of external publishing and development at Sega of America. They wanted a high-powered, well-spec'ed machine that would be competitively differentiated in some way from the consoles released by Sony, Nintendo, and (on the horizon) Microsoft. While the company couldn't beat the Playstation 2 in raw processing power, and was aware of this, they felt that online connectivity and the creation of SegaNet would be their unique selling point. The choice to use Windows CE as one of the Dreamcast's standard operating systems confirms that desire, as it was supposed to allow game developers a somewhat familiar coding platform and would also more easily enable online capabilities.

The Dreamcast at its launch was a system that Sega hoped would return it to the sort of success it had in the Genesis. The 1989 console had challenged Nintendo's dominance in the videogame console industry, with Genesis prevailing over the Super Nintendo Entertainment System in some markets (the U.S.) as Nintendo took the top place in others (Japan). Certainly, Sega's marketing of the Genesis began stratifying the videogame market. Sega pushed the Genesis as edgier and more appropriate for older players (ones in their late teens, for instance) than Nintendo's "kiddie console." Advertising campaigns proclaimed that Sega did what "Nintendon't." That encompassed Sega's decision to port over all of the original blood and gore in the fighting game *Mortal Kombat*, a contrast to Nintendo's toned-down version of the game. Media attention and outrage about the violence in this and other Sega games led to the establishment of a voluntary ratings system for the industry, but it also helped position Sega's systems as for older audiences.

However, Sega's successes diminished with its subsequent release of the Saturn, which was more expensive than other consoles in its generation and was not extensively supported by the company. Many gamers felt that Sega then tried to dump the Saturn with the early announcement of the Dreamcast, and wondered if the same thing might happen again. The company at that point was also incurring large debts thanks to the development costs of the Dreamcast and the failed promise of the Saturn. Thus, analysts were hesitant in predicting success for the Dreamcast.

Yet as Schoback relates, Sega did everything they could to regain dominance in the console market (personal communication). That included "betting the farm" on online connectivity as the key to success. Unfortunately, many of Sega's own studios in Japan had "zero experience" with creating online games, and thus internal resources never aligned to exploit that feature. Instead, there were only four games available for the Dreamcast's release in Japan in 1998, making it no surprise that the system didn't do well there. By contrast, the console had a strong launch on the (catchy) release date of 9/9/99 in the United States. There were 18 games and a \$100 million marketing campaign featuring television ads ending with the catchphrase "it's thinking."

Sales in Europe were also impressive, although North America, the biggest market, was definitely critical for the success of the system. One problem was that the Dreamcast launched without the support of major third party developer EA Games. There are varying accounts of why EA chose not to support the Dreamcast, with Bernie Stolar, former President of Sega of America, stating it was because EA demanded to be the sole developer for sports games on the Dreamcast just after Stolar had paid \$10 million to acquire Visual Concepts, the makers of 2k Sports (personal communication). Ultimately it's unclear whether EA's absence hurt the console or by how much. Overall, the North American launch was considered successful; it was only later that the Dreamcast began to slip in sales and the public imagination.

Alongside 2K's sports titles there were a variety of games available for the Dreamcast at launch, although Sega's strategy for producing games internally could be considered somewhat idiosyncratic. Sega had recently spun off its internal game development studios into almost a dozen separate units, with the groups being given "tremendous amounts" of funding and autonomy. As Schoback relates, the studios "could do whatever they wanted" because Sega knew the future of the company depended on them, particularly if the hardware division failed. And Sega fueled that mindset elsewhere, exploiting its influence as a publisher and thus a distribution channel for retailers, telling them if they wanted the latest AAA sports game produced by Sega for its console, for example, they would also need to carry lesser-known titles. Sega's developers could also easily engage in "skunkworks" projects of their own, often justifying a project based on the vague assertion that it could "sell half a million units in Japan." This meant that even outrageously odd titles such as *SGGG* could be given a funding and time for creation (personal communication).

Such accounts help to explain how game developers could indeed take more chances with their games, as the justification process at Sega was much less stringent than at rivals such as Sony and Nintendo (Schoback, 2010 [interview]). But while such risks did offer games with edgier designs to be created, they did not literally pay off. Aside from core early adopters of the console, the wider gaming public was still suspicious of the Dreamcast and of Sega. Many gamers still wondered how well Sega would support this system, and whether it was worthwhile to invest in it now rather than waiting to buy a Playstation 2.

Outwardly, Sega was portrayed as a company trying a variety of innovative, or perhaps desperate, strategies to promote its system. While earlier game consoles had been strongly focused on game-playing, the Dreamcast was definitely intended to do more. With its modem and web browser, it was positioned as a networked device, which would allow for online gameplay as well as general Internet connectivity. The Dreamcast was well ahead of Microsoft

and its Xbox Live service, which didn't appear until three years later in late 2002 and which has now grown to include 20 million users. Sega tried various strategies to promote its online service, SegaNet, including the creation of a new subsidiary, Sega.com, devoted to online games and Internet service while giving away Dreamcast consoles as part of a signup package. Sega also set up a system that allowed players (in Japan) to download time-limited versions of games, much like the demos one can download for today's systems. Sega also tried creating peripherals that would extend the system beyond its gameplay functions, including the Dreameye which was a digital camera that could be hooked up to the system — designed to serve as a webcam for video chat as well as a digital camera. Sega hoped developers would use this peripheral in their game designs, much as they later did with Sony's Eye Toy (Hong, 2000a). The publisher also investigated systems that would allow users to make telephone calls via their Dreamcast (prefiguring Vonage and Skype) and even talked with Motorola about developing an Internet-enabled cell phone that would use technology from the console to allow fast downloads of games, images and other data (Hong 2000b, 2000c).

Yet after only a short time period, it was clear to Sega that it could not win the console war with Sony. The company regrouped, focusing instead on software production, and went after third party games not for exclusives, but as a "second SKU" system, one that would be easy to port a title to so that an existing development effort could be further leveraged to produce and sell some additional stock-keeping units. The Dreamcast had varying levels of success in different regions — it was more popular in Japan than in North America or Europe — but ultimately the company had too much debt and too much competition to continue supporting the system. Yet its initial approach to software production within its company and the ease of third party development certainly helped to foster the creation of more unusual games.

We sought out five games that players themselves noticed as being different from traditional, triple-A, major console releases. In considering each of the following games, we have gathered, analyzed and studied the following sources of information. We have examined reviews of and discussions about these games, looking to pinpoint players' own discomforts with these games when trying to fit them into mainstream categories and identifying the ways in which they sought to characterize such titles as different, unique, disturbing or meaningful in some way. To those discussions we add our own analyses of what we feel are the unique properties of each of the games chosen: how do they break from established conventions, either via story or gameplay, or through their overall design or production context. In doing so we do not claim to provide an exhaustive review or discussion of each game — each is certainly worthy of its own article. Rather, we try to pinpoint linkages and articulations across games. In doing so, we make a larger argument concerning how certain games created for the Dreamcast system (with these five serving as convenient exemplars) worked as part of an avant-garde for a console, one that has not yet been replicated.

Jet Grind Radio

Japan 29 June 2000; North America 1 November 2000; Europe 24 November 2000.

"Graffiti is art" is the first thing the U.S. version of *Jet Grind Radio* proclaims. The message continues "However, graffiti as an act of vandalism is a crime," serving to disclaim Sega's responsibility for any real-world vandalism inspired by the game. But this opening message

suggests something interesting: that the game's attitude is one of respect for graffiti painting as an artistic practice. And, the presence of the message at the beginning of the game suggests that there may be at least some link between in-game activities and those in the outside world.

Another hint to this effect is that for the North American launch of *Jet Grind Radio*, Sega brought five award-winning graffiti artists to San Francisco, over the initial objections of Mayor Willie Brown, to compete for a \$5000 prize by painting on canvases. This "Graffiti is Art" contest was a publicity stunt, to be sure, but one that highlighted the existence of street artists across the country and the nature of street art as an aesthetic practice (Satterfield, 2000).

Jet Grind Radio's reviewers, writing before and after the discontinuation of the Dreamcast, often compared the title to another skating game, *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2*¹. But the reviewers on *GameFAQs* made it clear that *Jet Grind Radio* was different; one of them even wrote "This is not Tony Hawk 2" seven times in a detailed review of the game, arguing that although *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2* was praiseworthy, "this game is nothing like Tony Hawk 2. And to tell you the truth. That's not such a bad thing." Another wrote "at first glance, it looks like a Tony Hawk clone on some sort of weird crack, but it's not!" Only one reviewer complains that the game wasn't really original. While reviewers generally praised the graphics, some loved and some hated the soundtrack. Only a few remarked on the framing story of the game. Whatever one thinks of such elements and their combination, a graphics technique was the remarkable innovation of *Jet Grind Radio*, and that technique was the main focus of the reviews. This was cel-shading, a way of making graphics look hand-drawn or hand-painted, which the developers of the game, Smilebit, called "Manga Dimension."

The application of the cel-shading technique left some reviewers at a loss for words. One wrote "the most impressive thing about cel-shading animation, though, is the abstraction looks so realistic. That sentence really probably does not make a lot of sense, but I really can think of no better way to say what I mean." Other reviewers made reference to painting and innovative fine art. For example, one thought that early screen shots "looked more like a hand-drawn painting than a 3D videogame. After studying them for some time they still didn't look like anything I've seen before." Another review, Showtime1080, wrote "the levels look life-like but play as if the gamer is in a dream. Somebody from *Jet Grind Radio*'s staff must have taken art classes from Pablo Picasso himself due to the abstract, but recognizable colors."

The graphical style and music of *Jet Grind Radio* are interesting in that they are both clearly influenced by the game/story world. The soundtrack does not seem to be diegetic in the usual way, but it sounds like what the DJ in the frame story, Professor K, might be playing on his pirate radio station (There is one character, Combo, who skates around with a giant boom box and could plausibly be listening to Professor K's broadcast as the soundtrack plays). The cel-shading style, while it certainly refers to manga, also makes the game look much more like a piece of spray-painted street art, although such creativity does not impact gameplay mechanics in any meaningful way. The player is also given the ability to create original graffiti within the game. In both graphics and music, the game breaks down some of the conventional barriers between style and content, between what is being represented for players to interact with and how it is being represented.

Procedurally, playing through *Jet Grind Radio* involves resistance to authority, production of street art that overwrites advertising, conflict with rival gangs who turn out to be not so bad after all, and the defeat of a super-wealthy corporate overload. There is certainly a reading of this story that is aligned with the project of the avant-garde. However, one could as easily argue that *Jet Grind Radio* offers a self-contained, one-player substitute to engaging with one's own urban spaces by being a street artist or even by simply walking around and enjoying the street art that people in one's community have done — that is, that it encourages engagement with a fake urban space rather than a real one. The question of whether *Jet Grind Radio* truly celebrates street art or whether it co-opts and neutralizes it is not one with a clear answer. In any case, *Jet Grind Radio* did show an interesting new alternative to pure realism (the Manga Dimension) as it suggested that a game's artistic style could connect to in-game subcultural activities that the player undertakes.

Space Channel 5

Japan 16 December 1999; North America 4 June 2000; Europe 6 October 2000.

A *Wired* article about Tetsuya Mizuguchi explains that "Mizuguchi's first console game, *Space Channel 5*, set the tone for his later work. It was a rhythm game drenched in avant-garde stylistic graphics" (Kohler, 2008). The autre visuals are, if not unquestionably avant-garde, at least unconventional. The fashion in *Space Channel 5* clearly takes its cue from *The Fifth Element*, but the cubist costume Hugo Ball wore at the Cabaret Voltaire wouldn't look out of place alongside the game's outfits.

There is a story that frames the imitative rhythm gameplay of *Space Channel 5*: Ulala, rescued from space as a child, is now a reporter who pursues the story of an alien invasion that is also a dance craze. As in *Jet Grind Radio* (which was released later) there is a pirate broadcaster and corporate evil. There are seeming opponents who turn out to be allies. Hegemony is overthrown by colorful diversity in the form of a huge, impromptu dance troupe. While reviewers represented on *GameFAQs* write about the style and gameplay much more often than they mention the story, it is one that aligns in some ways with avant-garde projects, politically and in terms of its approach to art. One reviewer² mentions another connection to *Jet Grind Radio*: Mizuguchi's first Dreamcast game achieved, through color choices among other means, "a graphical and stylistic identity" of the sort that was accomplished with cel-shading in the later game.

While Mizuguchi's next Dreamcast game, *Rez*, is by far his most celebrated, he found interesting ways to draw connections between gameplay, story themes, graphics and music in *Space Channel 5* and to break down conventional barriers. Mizuguchi's idea of total art didn't seem to come from Wagner; it also didn't come entirely from the 20th-century avant-garde. He told *Wired*, "When I first watched MTV, I said wow — this is a new expression. Not only music, but story, dance, drama, expression." He specifically cited *Stomp* as an inspiration for *Space Channel 5*. At the same time, Mizuguchi isn't only interested in and inspired by popular media. He has recently done an Xbox 360 game inspired by *Rashomon*. And, his next Dreamcast game, while drawing direct inspiration from the experience of techno clubs, is dedicated "to the incredible creative soul of Kandinsky."

Rez

Japan 21 November 2001; Europe 11 January 2002.

Start *Rez* and you'll see a figure in the center of a rotating chamber, a polygonal twist on the Venus de Milo: Her arms and hands are there, and she's holding her face, but her lower legs are missing. The scene shifts and an outlined avatar is shown for a bit; then, back in the circular space, a black column forms around the figure, Eden — an overwhelmed artificial intelligence who is the princess of this experience, the one the player must rescue.

Formally, *Rez* is a rail shooter similar to *Panzer Dragoon*, a game originally released as a launch title for the Sega Saturn. The player does not control the path taken by the avatar, a being that pulses to the beat and assumes different forms as the player gains support items or is hit by enemy fire. By holding down the button, however, the player can sweep a cursor over enemies to target them, selecting as many as eight at once. On the release of the button, one or more shots are fired at targeted enemies in sync to the electronic music that accompanies each of the game's levels, or areas. This makes the sound effects of *Rez* easily heard as part of the music. There is no dialogue delivered by voice actors; messages are presented textually either in status displays or, late in the game, in a few phrases that are embedded in the environment. That means that except for the voice that announces the area being selected, the only ones heard are also part of the soundtrack.

Rez was produced by a Dreamcast studio (United Game Artists), headed by the producer behind *Space Channel 5*. The production team was told very late in development that the game would need to run on two systems — the PS2 and the Dreamcast — instead of being the Dreamcast exclusive Mizuguchi originally envisioned (Hawkins, 2005). The game was, indeed, ultimately released simultaneously for Dreamcast and Playstation 2. For this reason, and because in North America it was a Playstation 2 exclusive, some are under the impression that *Rez* is not a Dreamcast game — an untenable perspective if the production of games is being considered at all.

Reviewers on *GameFAQs*³ called *Rez* "organic, dynamic, funkadelic, trippy," "more than a game ... a religious experience," "an endorphin machine, releasing the essence of trance through futuristic sound, visuals and vibrations," and "a work of visual and aural work of art with a certain amount of game-play added, if only as an afterthought." One of them thought the game was "what William Gibson must have envisioned when writing *Neuromancer*." These and other reviewers constructed *Rez* as something quite different from a standard videogame. They did so not only by using unusual terms to describe the game, but also by writing in strange styles and by discussing aspects of *Rez* that would not have been covered in a standard game review.

Mizuguchi himself, referring to the experience of a dance club, said he sought in *Rez* to create an experience that went beyond the audiovisual: "I wanted to make kind of a sensory experience, with not only visuals and sounds. The vibration and the stimulation is very important. If you go to a club, you see the light, and you feel the music pound" (Nutt & Sheffield, 2008). This idea was promoted in the *Rez* manual and in promotional materials for the game as "synesthesia," a term that abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky used for work that engaged multiple senses as well as other types of cognition. On the Dreamcast, one way that the experience went beyond sight

and sound was by using the Jump Pack, which provided haptic feedback. The way such feedback was supported on the Playstation 2 was more remarkable, though: via a special peripheral called the Trance Vibrator, included in some editions of the game, which could be used more flexibly to provide stimulation.

The visuals of *Rez* present an abstract cyberspace but make a few noticeable references. The landmark 1982 film *Tron* is certainly an inspiration for the game, as can be seen both in its general style and because of some specifics. Sark's carrier, the large shiplike vessel that floats through *Tron*, seems to be the basis for the oblong enemies that appear near the beginning of area 2; both enemies and the carrier end up being "de-rezzed" in a similar way. The columnar boss of area 2, defended by whirling plates, also bears more than a passing resemblance to *Tron's* boss, the MCP (Master Control Program). Beyond that, the first four areas also refer to different traditions of Eastern (Chinese, Japanese, and Indian) and Western (Egyptian) classical art. And there are other unusual cultural influences. One *Rez* developer has said that the first sound designer on the project was Ebizoo-san, a Tokyo DJ who was influenced by African tribal music and call and response, which he had gone to Africa to research.

The politics of *Rez*, or at least those that are explicitly signaled, are also highly abstract. It's hard to see any strong political message in a player' transforming, pulsing avatar flying through a secured system, seeking to rescue a trapped AI. One disapproving reviewer, Showtime1080, did see *Rez* as having a political valence because of its style, speculating that perhaps "the arty, colorful backgrounds were made with the intention to appeal to left-wingers."⁴ If the realism and firearms of the *Call of Duty* series and *Big Buck Hunter* are right-wing, perhaps the alternative that *Rez* offers is indeed somehow leftist. Although targeting and destroying enemies is part of the game, Jeffrey Fleming (2006 [web]) has argued that *Rez* is "not really about shooting things," but "presents a chaotic loom of information and requires players to rapidly identify and organize the rush of sensory data pouring into their cortex, separating meaning from noise. It is a uniquely computer age experience."

The relationship of *Rez* to computing may be one of the most compelling aspects of it. *Rez* breaks down barriers between sight and sound, vibratory touch and the kinesthesia of the rocking-out, game-playing body. The game shows that a flight through cyberspace can be both "on rails" and interactive as it lets fine art, classical artistic styles, film, tribal music traditions, and techo music all inspire and infect an experience. It shows that organizing information can be multi-sensory and ecstatic. For those, like Eden, who are oppressed by the weight of the hegemonic network, *Rez* offers an alternative and an escape.

Seaman

Japan 29 July 1999; North America 8 August 2000.

Seaman was "possibly the console's first bonafide smash hit in Japan" (Eidolon, 1999-2000). The game was created by Yoot Saito's company aptly named Vivarium. In the game, originally called "Project: Seaman," the player was to raise a fish/human hybrid called a Seaman from birth through maturity in real time, checking in each day over a period of about five weeks on the creature's development. Gameplay centers on keeping the Seaman fed and its tank warm, but the title's most highly touted feature was the ability to interact with the creature via a microphone and voice-recognition technology. As with the Tamagotchi and most other virtual pets, there is

no real game, just the opportunity to raise the creature, who will die if neglected. What makes raising a Seaman difficult is not any particularly onerous task that is required of the caregiver. The main challenge is that the creature is a jerk with a disturbing appearance.

The Seaman is a fish with a human head that asks impertinent questions of its caretaker. The game's environment is a simple tank. Sophie Cheshire (2004), reviewing the game, describes how a Seaman comes to live there:

First you drop the egg in the water, when it has warmed up enough it will split into several sperm shaped creatures. ... these are in fact floating eye-balls with tails. ... Next you must tap on the glass on the tank to draw the swimming eyeballs towards the Nautilus. Soon the Nautilus will come out of its shell and begin to eat the floaty eyeballs. Once it has eaten at least four it will begin to spasm. It will go into really violent spasms and thrash around the tank for about five minutes, blood starts coming out of it and it thrashes itself out of the shell. It's quite horrible actually. Finally the poor thing expires and several little baby Seamen will come exploding out of its dead body.

(Cheshire, 2004 [web])

The pet, or perhaps anti-pet, that develops from this point is ugly and frequently described as such by reviewers. Seaman's ugliness is central to the construction of the Seaman, a human-fish hybrid. Such a fusion explains how the creature can speak with its caretaker, but also why its conversation is unsettling. The Seaman can ask questions that a caretaker may not feel comfortable answering. The Seaman is also noticeably cranky and can be annoying and abusive, sometimes ejecting excrement toward the player. The creature challenges conventional notions of pet simulators and their unquestioned use of cute creatures who can undertake only innocuous activities. Saito created an object that did not obey traditional norms, asking individuals to respond positively to an expression of ugliness, to move beyond an aesthetics of beauty to respond to a broader ethic of care.

The acknowledgement of Seaman as ugly in appearance and behavior, coupled with the game's lack of clear goals or gameplay mechanics led reviewers to write that *Seaman* is not a game or, in one case, to write that it "is more than a game, it is an experience."⁵ Reviewers definitely felt that the experience was not akin to normal conceptions of what a videogame is or has been, at least at the time of the game's release. Several made the connection between raising the humanoid fish to Tamagotchi-like pet simulators, but then also noted the differences between those systems and Seaman.

Leonard Nimoy's narration prods players to check in regularly, but not too regularly — the game chides players for multiple logins during a day. *Seaman* is about brief bursts of regular activity, and not sustained attention. And during each session the activity is minimal, with talk being the central feature. This is clearly not a game featuring spectacle, rhythm, or action. Cheshire (2004) suggests an approach to the system: "perhaps it is best to think of Seaman as something to boot up after a frenetic session of some other DC game. A fifteen-minute wind-down before you turn the console off altogether for the night. That way raising Seaman won't seem like a chore."

Saito's games continue to be unconventional and to disturb. His 2009 caveman simulator, *Gabo*, was one of the first famous iPhone apps to be rejected by Apple.

SGGG

Japan 29 March 2001.

"Games are nothing more than mere products!" exclaims a member of Sega's management team. "You examine popular market trends, churn out nearly identical titles, and then you rake in the dough! Imitate our competitor's top-sellers: that's the golden rule! Throw away your emotions and become a mindless machine. This is how you make successful games." "But I want to make totally innovative games that nobody has ever seen before," your character pleads. "Innovation? How foolish! Who will take responsibility if the game flops?" "But if we do it your way, we'll never attract new customers. Surely it's worth giving a shot?" "You know nothing about the business, boy! I'll teach you the harsh reality of the corporate world!"

("The Story of Sega's...", 2008, p. 1)

When Tez Okano first proposed this "Sega Simulation" - a game in which the player fights in the near future against a Sony-like company to restore Sega's market share - everyone in the meeting had a good laugh. Then, Okano told them that he was serious. Sega's president eventually agreed to let Okano pursue the project, giving him a small budget. Okano worked for two years in secrecy, fearing that the project might be cancelled at any time. The game was released right after the cancellation of the Dreamcast was announced, and was given a marketing budget equivalent to only a few hundred dollars. Okano spent most of that on a custom wrestling mask which he wore as he went around promoting the game in person. Although odd and low-budget, *SGGG* is a full-featured 3D RPG with voice acting and cel animation cutscenes done by the studio Toei. The player controls one of two teenagers who wander through the Sega offices trying to recruit a team to develop innovative games to defeat Dogma, a Sony-like corporation. Doing so requires that the player prevail in combat against classic Sega characters.

While the game clearly supplied many in-jokes and references to please die-hard Sega fans, it offered more than fanservice. Okano conceived of the game as metafictional and as a response to huge projects such as *Shenmue*, a significant Dreamcast game which is not considered here because it does not embody avant-garde qualities ("The Story of Sega's...", 2008, p. 3). *SGGG* offers jabs at a rival company, but also a critique of the dominant way in which videogames are made. And its combat sequences involve a wider range of characters even more unusually juxtaposed than in *Kingdom Hearts*, which was released a year later and included Disney characters alongside ones from *Final Fantasy*. While the latter game might be seen as an odd form of cross-promotion, *SGGG* seemed to be a wider-ranging collage.

Openings for Attack

Having argued that these five are avant-garde videogames, there remains to consider what type of avant-garde appeared on the Dreamcast and, since the system appears to be a bellwether for these types of console games, what directions of avant-garde exploration and attack have been tried and remain to be tried. Diana Crane (1989) provides a useful list of the important aspects of artistic movements: their aesthetic approach to artworks, their social engagement through art, and their production and distribution of art. Within each category, she identifies three hallmarks that can lead to a movement being considered avant-garde.

"An art movement may be considered avant-garde in its approach to the aesthetic content of its artworks if it does any of the following: (1) redefines artistic conventions ... (2) utilizes new artistic tools and techniques ... (3) redefines the nature of the art object, including the range of objects that can be considered as artworks. ...

An art movement may be considered avant-garde in its approach to the social content of artworks if it does any of the following: (1) incorporates in its artworks social or political values that are critical of or different from the majority culture ... (2) redefines the relationship between high and popular culture ... (3) adopts a critical attitude toward artistic institutions ...

Finally, an art movement may be considered avant-garde in its approach to the production and distribution of art if it does any of the following: (1) redefines the social context for the production of art, in terms of the appropriate critics, role models, and audience; (2) redefines the organizational context for the production, display, and distribution of art ... (3) redefines the nature of the artistic role, or the extent to which the artist participates in other social institutions ..."

(Crane, 1989, pp. 14-15)

By considering these nine specific ways and three general categories of extending the possibilities of practice, we can see in which ways Dreamcast games most significantly innovated. Note again that we are now considering standard videogame aesthetics, production, distribution and play as they parallel the aesthetics, production, distribution, and reception of art. So we are not concerned with whether Dreamcast developers took a "critical attitude toward artistic institutions," but whether they took a critical attitude toward *videogame* institutions.

With regard to aesthetic content, it is evident from our discussion that Dreamcast games strongly innovated along these lines. For instance, *Rez* and *Jet Grind Radio* certainly both redefined conventions and introduced new tools and techniques, while *Seaman* "redefines the nature of the [videogame] object" both by putting a virtual pet on a console system and by suggesting that a rude human-headed fish can inspire feelings of loyalty and care in a game player, who is refigured as a caretaker. *SGGG*'s bizarre patchwork of videogame properties was created using a new technique, too. And, there were innovations in *Space Channel 5* as well, even though this game was the most highly referential and has gameplay based on imitation. It combined a distinctive visual style with a subversive plot and allowed players to fall into a pleasant groove.

Aesthetic innovation (and innovation in the visual, sonic, and interactive experience of play) was a great strength of Dreamcast games and is seen particularly in these five titles.

With regard to social content, the case is less clear. Yes, contrary political views can be glimpsed in *Jet Grind Radio. Rez*, a game that is inspired by techno clubs and Kandinsky, does reach out toward high and low culture. *SGGG* does adopt something of a critical attitude toward videogame institutions. But it is hard to see the console videogaming avant-garde as accomplishing as much as it did aesthetically when it comes to social content and political dimensions. Dreamcast games certainly hint that this is possible, but did not seem to drive this type of innovation as far as they did with aesthetic innovation.

When turning to production and distribution, it seems hard to make much of a case at all for Dreamcast's progress on this front. Perhaps, admittedly, this is because we have chosen to look at specific console games that were published in the usual fashion. There are some challenges to the notions of audience — *Rez* can be played for people dancing in a club; *Seaman* makes the player into a caretaker and the game system somewhat environmental. In terms of reorganizing videogame production, Sega did that in one way by adopting an independent studio model which did turn out to be innovative. But this category of production and distribution is clearly not the major one in which Dreamcast innovation occurred.

This analysis is not meant to temper or argue against our earlier assessment of these games; Crane is clear that meeting *any* of these nine criteria can lead to an "avant-garde" designation, and these games clearly deserve such. But, following Dick Higgins, it is the case that a person or group of people can be more or less avant-garde. Dreamcast games showed that the industry can innovate aesthetically. But even on this extreme platform, we did not see how a videogame developer might radically change the social context for gaming or participate in social institutions differently. These directions have been left open for other console videogaming avant-gardes to take.

Next Steps

What did the Dreamcast engender? Certainly not a successor Sega console. Perhaps a dead-end system is the most suitable to compare to 20th-century innovative art movements, as Lawrence Rainey (2009), focusing on Futurism, suggests:

"Modernism, together with its intense vehicle the historical avant-garde, was not a form of cultural production that could be sustained for more than evanescent moments. It offered not a history of beginnings and developments, but a protracted series of endings, innovations that swiftly exhausted themselves, corridors that always had "no exit" written irrevocably on the farthest wall."

(Rainey, 2009, p. 47)

Did the innovations of the Dreamcast remain trapped in a maze or, as one might hope after playing *Chu-Chu Rocket*, blast off to a new world? Although the Dreamcast does not have a

direct, simple legacy, the games we have discussed certainly showed new possibilities for gaming and fired the imagination of players and developers, perhaps fostering more radical, unusual videogame designs and developments to follow. Long defunct as a commercial platform, today's Dreamcast is a technology open to individual developers, letting us re-envision the system's contemporary role. With the concomitant rise of indie game development more generally, even the Dreamcast itself remains as a potential weapon in the avant-garde's arsenal. Its well-remembered crop of innovative games also shows the lasting value of developers who take risks and work independently.

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¹ The first four *Jet Grind Radio* reviewers quoted, whose reviews can be found on *GameFAQs*, are Ohio_State, Uncle Fuz, matt91486, and miffo.

² hangedman

³ The reviewers quoted are Cassing, Alpha5099, Omega Black, Enzo, and Alphonso BiscuitRake

⁴ Interestingly, this reviewer appreciated *Jet Grind Radio*, giving it an 8/10 rating despite its much more overt "pinko" politics.

⁵ Magicmanst.