

## Electroplankton revisited: A Meta-Review

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»Electroplankton is not a game in any sense of the word. It is art, plain and simple.«  
(Sellers, 2006)

This is an untypical review. It does not highlight specifics of a game but instead focuses on aspects surrounding it. I believe that two years after a game was released, a review can and should reflect the game as well as its wider implications. In this case the game marks a turning point in console history. Not so much because the game was itself so remarkable, but because it was among the first games to break the dominance of hardcore games on game consoles. The game in question is Electroplankton, the first art game for the Nintendo DS.

Can games be works of art? While this question is currently a focus of discussion concerning mainstream games, there are niche games so explicitly artful that no one is able to deny them the status of artworks. They are shown at exhibitions, presented in books, and generally reviewed as valuable contributions to culture. The games I am talking about are usually referred to as art games or Game Art (see Bittani 2006 for definitions of these two genres). Popular examples include fur's PainStation, Julian Oliver's Fijuu, and Cory Arcangel's (2006) Super Mario Clouds (more examples are discussed in Pichlmair, 2006). PainStation is a twisted reinterpretation of the game Pong. Fijuu is a music game and an electronic instrument. Super Mario Clouds is the appropriation of the original Nintendo Super Mario game based on a hacked Nintendo Entertainment System cartridge. These three are perfect examples of what Game Art is about: Altering the view on video game culture, liberating digital games from solely being a form competitive entertainment, and creating a unique experience opposing or at least complementing the plethora of mass-manufactured entertainment products. While Fijuu is software-only, the other two examples feature specialised hardware and are thus sui generis art pieces (though Super Mario Cloud comes with a handout that explains step-by-step how to build your own version of the art piece, see Arcangel 2006). Game Art is a rather new genre of Media Art, which itself is a young genre of art. Game Art pieces push the boundaries of their medium just like any media art piece does.

While the recent years brought a flood of art games, some artists produced them long before it was popular. Maybe because of their playful attitude towards media art and technology in general, maybe for other (cultural) reasons, Japan stands out as the origin of a great deal of art games. There, a lot of traditional media artists comprehend games as yet another medium to express themselves. Toshio Iwai is one of them. His work meanders between building instruments, toys, and traditional interactive video art. While his early pieces remind of Nam Jun Paik's manipulations of television and video devices - TV-Ring and Man-Machine No. 1-8 (both from 1989)

are based on interacting with TV sets - another line of work he puts forth is digital games. Iwai's first game was the music-based shooter game *Otocky*, produced with ASCII Corporation for the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1987. *Otocky* is often regarded as one of the precursors of *Rez*, Tetsuya Mizuguchi's disturbing techno-music shooter. Nine years after *Otocky*, Toshio Iwai published his second music-game, *SimTunes*, with Maxis Software. *SimTunes* introduces so-called musical insects - small creatures that crawl on the playing board and produce sounds reacting to their environment. *SimTunes* is as much a composition tool as it is a game and a musical instrument. Some might refer to it as Active Score Music software (Pichlmair and Kayali, 2007). Another nine years later his latest music game arrived: *Electroplankton*, published by Nintendo for the Nintendo DS handheld console in April 2005. *Electroplankton* is a software conversion of some of Toshio Iwai's media art pieces, like *Composition on the Table* (from 1998/99). It is a collection of ten musical toys, of ten musical instruments. All of them are based on plankton, small creatures acting as Sound Agents (Pichlmair and Kayali, 2007). The player interacts with the plankton differently for every instrument:

»Tracy — Trace lines through the water. The plankton swim along the lines to create mysterious music.

Hanenbow — The plankton launch towards the leaves. They make noise as they bounce. Toy with the angles of the leaves.

Luminaria — Lightly touch the arrows to change their direction. The plankton follows the arrows.

Sun-Animalcule — Use the stylus to place plankton eggs. These plankton emit light and sound as they grow.

Rec-Rec — These plankton feed on sound. Tap them to change their colour, and then speak when they flash.

Nanocarp — Clap your hands near the microphone to make the plankton form shapes. They also respond to your voice.

Lumiloop — Slide your stylus around the bodies of these plankton to make them shine and emit strange noises.

Marine-Snow — These plankton look like snow crystals. They make sounds when you touch them. Move them around and stir them up.

Beatnes — These plankton remember melodies you tap out on their heads and bodies.

Volvoice — Touch this plankton and speak to fill its body with your voice. Change its shape to change its voice.« (Iwai, 2006, pp. 15-53)

Nintendo published *Electroplankton* at a time when the Nintendo DS was mostly regarded as a game console. A month later, *Brain Age*, the non-game that changed the whole picture, emerged and altered the perception of the Nintendo DS. Suddenly it was normal for a game to feature a different kind of goal than to fight through to the end. A wave of playful applications abolished customary conventions of games.

Electroplankton was among the first of them. The game world, and especially the game press, was not prepared for this development. They still discussed these non-games as games. Traditional game-related media were quick to criticize Electroplankton for not living up to the standards of games. While it received high marks from game magazines and web sites (e.g. 8 out of 10 in Joystique, 8.5 out of 10 in Nintendo Power, and 78% in the official Nintendo Magazine) there were two reoccurring points of critique: The lack of saving functionality and the fact that the game is much more a piece of art than a game. The following statements shed some light on the second point:

»Electroplankton is an interesting experiment in both music and game design, but its reliance on the novelty of something different limits its lasting value.« (Davis 2006)

»It's audiovisual art. That's the game's intention and it does it well. For the experience, though, the designer missed a few good opportunities, like save functionality and multi-system support.« (Harris, 2006)

»Visually, the game has an eclectic style that hasn't been done before—mostly because nobody's had to. Considering creator Iwai's background (a well-known media artist), it's not hard to see why. If Electroplankton were running as an installation piece in a New York gallery, nobody would question its artistic value. Videogames this ain't. Art it might be. But what is it? Electroplankton is. And that's all it sets out to be.« (Stone, 2006)

The line of thought surfacing in these statements is that Electroplankton is in fact a piece of art. Art is someone else's business. The game might even be a good art piece. But as an art piece it cannot be a game. Thus it cannot be evaluated and quantified on the percent scale that all other games so nicely fit to.

The lack of a function to save the game may originate from Toshio Iwai's exhibition practice. Also, most musical interface don't feature saving. Even a lot of electronic instruments don't. Since there is no specific goal to reach, beside the act of playing in itself, save games would most likely not intensify the experience anyway. Much more, the lack of being able to save a configuration highlights the playfulness of the game. Since playfulness is the only feature the game offers, playing it is the only way to experience it.

At the same time, Electroplankton should be regarded as an art game by all standards, if only because it is a game designed by an artist. Gamecritics.com (above) states that it would be a good art piece to show at a New York gallery (much rather than on the DS). But why is an art piece inappropriate on a game console? After all, video games are longing for being taken serious as pieces of art for quite a long time. Even the original Gameboy was already used as a musical instrument (via the homebrew tracker software Nanoloop). A mobile device with superior graphics and audio capabilities sounds like the perfect match for a media art piece. All in all the reception of Electroplankton in the game press seems to talk more about games criticism than about this particular game. Maybe games are to broad a medium nowadays to be pressed into the narrow schemes of the game press. With the introduction of the Nintendo Wii, browser games, and the new positioning of the Nintendo DS, gaming finally transgressed the borders to mass culture. And art was always an important part of culture.

The world of games has changed a lot in recent years. Since Electroplankton's release a plethora of artful games has arrived. Their reception changed from the initial astonishment avant-garde triggers to an open, though circumspect, embrace. This change of attitude can be seen clearly in a more recent example of a game frequently discussed as an art piece; Jenova Chen's *Flow*, which was released for the PS3 as one of the first downloadable titles for this console. *Flow* is a meditative experience modeled after Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's phenomenology of the "flow experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In *Flow*, the player commands a snake-like underwater creature in an abstract wet environment. The creature has to eat microorganisms to grow and evolve while it is hunted by foes like jellyfishes and mantas. The snake can dive deeper and deeper into the ocean, where she encounters ever bigger and more hostile enemies and the scenery gradually darkens. In the PS3-version, the game continues after reaching the bottom of the ocean, giving the player the chance to start the game all over again in a shape reminding of one of its former enemies. *Flow* was exhibited along *Katamari Damacy* and a couple of other commercial games at the GAMEWORLDS (Laboral, 2007) exhibition this spring in Gijon, Spain. The same exhibition featured numerous classical Game Art pieces, from *PainStation* to *Pong-Mechanik*. At the same time, there were some art pieces reflecting the wider cultural implications of video games. And last but not least, the exhibition showed the ten "must-play" games of the ›Digital Game Canon‹ assembled by Matteo Bittanti, Christopher Grant, Henry Lowood, Steve Meretzky, and Warren Spector and presented at the Game Developers Conference 2007. If this exhibition achieved anything, then that it brought all the pieces together for the first time: the avant-garde of Game Art, the heritage of classic video games, the culture of gaming, and the art of mainstream games. We can only hope that an *Electroplankton* released today would face an altered landscape of gaming. Its playfulness and accessibility would be more favourably received and persuade game critics not to casually remark on its background in art as a side note.

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