

Game Stylistics: Playing with Lowbrow

by

Hyein Lee

A thesis supporting paper and exhibition presented to the OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design
in the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design Program

OCADU Graduate Gallery

205 Richmond Street

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

September 6th – September 9th, 2011

© Hyein Lee, August 2011

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize OCAD University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

I further authorize OCAD University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signature _____

Game Stylistics: Playing with Lowbrow

Hyein Lee, Masters of Design, 2011

Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

OCAD University

Abstract

Playing with Lowbrow is an art game development/creation project that explores the application of Lowbrow aesthetics to game graphics. The resulting creation, *Twinkling Stars Above*, is a single-player platform PC game prototype. This paper describes the shared and distinct context of two contemporary art movements important to the creation of *Twinkling Stars Above*: Japan's Superflat and North America's Lowbrow. I propose that, given Superflat's influence on Japan's video game graphics, Lowbrow style could also be applied to video games. Through the theoretical background of the Superflat and Lowbrow movements, and practice-based research, *Playing with Lowbrow* suggests an opportunity to apply the aesthetics of Lowbrow to contemporary digital games in order to blend aesthetics and push against the conventional definitions of high and low art.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ontario College of Art & Design University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support of my graduate research; my principal advisor, Barbara Rauch and my committee (Paula Gardner, Emma Westecott); external advisors (Michael Prokopow, Caroline Langill and Michael Longford) for their great help; the Department of Graduate Studies office (Martha Ladly, Sarah Hildebrandt, Alice Brummell, Gale Allen and Helmut Reichenbacher); and a very special thank you to Dan Lee and Michael Daykin for their technical help and dedication to my project.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Figures	vi
Preface	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Definition of Superflat and Lowbrow	2
1.2 Definition of Independent Games and Art Games.....	6
1.3 Research Questions.....	9
Chapter 2: Literature and Art Review	10
2.1 Independent Games and Art Games	10
2.2 Art and Literature of Superflat	16
2.3 Art of Lowbrow.....	20
2.4 Literature on Lowbrow.....	27
Chapter 3: Body of Thesis	31
3.1 Methodology	31
3.1.1 Reflective Practice and Action Research.....	31
3.1.2 Iterative Design.....	33
3.1.4 The Scrum Method.....	40
3.2 Connections Between Superflat and Lowbrow	42
3.3 Media Convergence	48
3.5 Tactility, Lowbrow and Game Graphics	63
Chapter 4: Conclusion and Contribution to the Field	67
4.1 Conclusion	67
4.2 Contribution to the Field	69
Chapter 5: Recommendations for Future Research.....	71
Works Cited.....	72
Appendix A. Visual Reference	78
Selected Videogame References	82
Appendix B. DVD of Game Prototypes and Play Testing Data.....	85

List of Figures

Figure 2.3.1: *I am Your Piñata*, 2003, Acrylic on Canvas 18X18 inches, Gary Baseman p. 21

Figure 2.3.2: *Felix the Cat*, Screen Capture from *Woos Whoopee*, 1930, animation, Pat Sullivan p.21

Figure 2.3.3: *Dokkaebi Motif from United Shilla (668 to 935AD)*, Scan from book *Dokkaebi*, 1988, Sang-soo Ahn p.23

Figure 2.3.4: *Pieces of the Sun*, 2008, mixed media, Hyein Lee p.26

Figure 3.2.1: Comparison between Lowbrow, Superflat and Video Game, Hyein Lee, 2011 p.44

Figure 3.2.2: Left - *Wishing Toys*, 2 X 3 inches, Friends with You, 2006
Right - *Noby Noby Boy*, Keita Takahashi, Namco, 2010 p.47

Figure 3.4.1: *Toi*, 2009, iPhone toy 480 X 320 pixels, Hyein Lee p.51

Figure 3.4.2: *Eek*, 2010, iPhone toy 480 X 320 pixels, Hyein Lee p.51

Figure 3.4.3: *Loneliness Is I* and *Loneliness Is II*, 2010, interactive digital installations 70 X 50 inches, Hyein Lee p.54

Figure 3.4.4: *Loneness is II*, 2010, interactive digital installations 70X50 inches, Hyein Lee p.54

Figure 3.4.5: *Infection*, 2010, PC video game 900 X 600 pixels, Hyein Lee and Louie Yabut p.57

Figure 3.4.6: *Twinkling Stars Above*, 2011, an excerpt from the opening sequence 1280 X 720 pixels, Hyein Lee p.63

Figure 3.5: *Twinkling Stars Above*, 2011, an excerpt from the opening sequence 1280 X 720 pixels, Hyein Lee p.66

Preface

I have often been asked to discuss how my Korean background effects my work. I have been reluctant to do so because I have felt singled out. On the surface, I am a Korean: I look Korean and have a noticeable accent. However, it is a bit hard to comment as a Korean person living in Canada. I've been educated in Canada since secondary school and my adult sense of thinking only formed within the Canadian education and cultural system. Also, because I grew up in a suburb of Toronto, I was rarely in contact with Koreans outside of my family. I feel more foreign to Korea than to Canada. Given such circumstances, can I comment as a Korean? I do not know. For these reasons, I get defensive when asked about my Korean perspective.

However, I try to be true to myself and let go of defensive emotions. I must look into my background because it plays a vital role in my art. The truth of the matter is that I did live in Korea, watching Japanese anime and reading manga classics such as Astroboy. I did not know at the time that they were Japanese, but some of the visual cues have definitely left imprints in my art style – simplified characters, cute aesthetics, etc. This is not just me: Japanese animations like Astroboy were also aired in North America in the 1960's and 1970's, thus artists in North America must be influenced by them too. This is interesting because Astroboy creator

Osamu Tezuka adapted Disney cartooning in his work (Napier 17). With globalized communication technologies, there is a mix of aesthetics. I believe that is the reason why Superflat and Lowbrow exhibit some similar aesthetics.

Despite a hint of Japanese influence in my work, I get angry inside whenever someone assumes my work is Japanese. I have nothing against individual Japanese people. I just do not feel comfortable being perceived as Japanese. I rarely admit it, but my anger is due to the Japanese colonization of Korea between 1919 and 1931. Here is a personal paradox: I consider myself a Canadian, and not fully Korean, but I care about this history. If I were entirely Canadian, I would not get emotional over such a history. I know how outsiders might think: 'why don't they get along? Why can't Koreans forgive?' It is hard to forget about something that happened less than a hundred years ago. My grandparents went through Japanese colonial rule and told me horrifying stories. Such trauma cannot easily be forgotten for generations to come, even if I spent most of my life in Canada. This is a common dilemma. Because of Japan's proximity and its position as a global economy, Korea and Koreans are heavily influenced by Japanese culture. But because of the colonial history, it is hard for them to admit even a slight part of this influence. What would our grandparents think if we were to forget?

Perhaps this history is ingrained into why I create images as I do. I make cute images – cute aesthetics dominate Japanese culture (Windolf 168) – but I juxtapose the cuteness with grotesqueness. While my art practice reflects my admiration for Japanese culture, at the same time, wants to destroy and ridicule it. Along with Japanese anime, I grew up watching highly polished flat American animations like “Mickey Mouse” and “Felix the Cat.”

My art works also push back against American cultural hegemony. I never considered my work in such a way before my graduate work. However, researching Superflat, and how as a style it both accepts Japan's Westernization and works against it, made me question my Lowbrow practice. Just as Superflat artists ironically appropriate the American-influenced graphics of anime and manga, so I came to realize that my art works push against the slick mass-produced American animations and comics.

Whether I am conscious of it or not in my work, I am jaded by the flat and slick images of American capitalism in commercial art. The cute and simple characters of American animation are constructed for smooth commercialization and mass-production, Disney's relentless merchandising being the most obvious example. I brought their cartoon aesthetics into my practice: abstracted facial expressions depicted by

only a couple of dots and a line; and black outlines around the characters. While using these cartoon aesthetics, I also want to be different than the flat and clean colouring that defines cartoon aesthetics. That is the reason why I use imperfect line drawings, textures and mark-making in my work. Other Lowbrow artists and myself use painterly textures and layers to work against the slick and mass-produced images and characters. In my thesis project, *Playing with Lowbrow* I have tried to introduce these aspects of Lowbrow graphic style into the medium of a digital game.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The *Playing with Lowbrow* was motivated, first and foremost, by my desire to design video games. Video games have always been important to me as entertainment since childhood. This led me to want to create my own. For me, video games are the pre-eminent expressive art form of my generation. In addition, as an illustrator and a Lowbrow artist I see games as an extension of my graphic illustration style. The intention to use games in order to merge media in this way is explained by Henry Jenkins in his analysis of convergent media culture. In *The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence*, he explains that media conglomerates like Viacom publish everything from comic books to video games (36-37). In my practice, I am combining my Lowbrow art style and inspiration taken from Superflat with a video game. Although I am influenced by convergent culture, my project is not convergent project because my video game prototype exists only as a prototype, not as other media such as comic books and movies.

That said, I must concede I am surrounded by convergent culture. For example, *Scott Pilgrim*¹ comic becomes a movie and a video game. Not

¹ Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel series published by Oni Press from 2004 to 2010.

that it's marketed only in that way, but people are happy to consume in different forms. This type of convergence is already established in Japan, where the contemporary art movement called Superflat and video game aesthetics occupy much common territory. Our convergent culture—in which old media frequently collide with new—made me want to evolve my illustration practice and extend it into game-making. In my game design, I wanted to bring Lowbrow aesthetics and video games together.

However, before explaining the result of that exploration, I will first provide the cultural and historical contexts of both the Superflat and Lowbrow movements. In addition, I will establish the characteristics of an independent and art game and present my research questions.

1.1 Definition of Superflat and Lowbrow

These movements are relevant to my research because I am attempting to blend Lowbrow art aesthetics with game graphics, considering the way in which Japan's Superflat movement has influenced Japanese video game graphics. First, however, I must describe these movements, keeping in mind the moments in culture and history in which Superflat and Lowbrow share a common ground and where they diverge. Further

analysis and comparison of these art movements are laid out in Chapter 2: "Literature and Art Review."

Superflat is a contemporary Japanese art movement established by Takashi Murakami in the late 1990s. According to Murakami, the movement's theoretical construct draws from a wide variety of influences, including Japanese flat art of the eighteenth century, manga, anime, Disney animation and video game graphics (Murakami 153-156). The movement encompasses a similarly wide variety of works, including paintings, sculptures, comics, art toys and other merchandising. Superflat occupies a very unique space in the Japanese art world: it reflects the shallow emptiness of consumer culture, while also exploiting that same culture via extensive merchandising. Murakami formed Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. to promote and support the movement². Other Superflat artists include Yoshitomo Nara, Aya Takano and Chiho Aoshima (Murakami 209-236).

Lowbrow art occupies a position very similar to that of Superflat. To summarize the introduction to Matt Dukes Jordan's *Weirdo Deluxe*, Lowbrow art is a subcultural art movement in North America that was started in the 70's and originated from comics, cartoons, tattoo art, video games, sci-fi and street art culture (10-13). It is also known as Pop

² Founded by Murakami, Kaikai Kiki is a product-development and fabrication company for Superflat artists.

Surrealism, but the term “Lowbrow” is more prevalent. Humour, the carnivalesque³ and grotesque and heightened emotions are central features in Lowbrow. Most Lowbrow artists have a commercial art background in animation or illustration. As a result, their art is often figurative. Lowbrow art forms include painting, art toys and sculpture. In *Pop Surrealism: What a Wonderful World*, Alexandra Mazzanti explains the movement as

a paradoxical atmosphere with weird presences that reminds us of a David Lynch film, a multicultural melting pot: street culture, pure pop, bizarre illustration, manga culture, tattoo art. It's everything that comes from videogames, indie music and sci-fi to strange multicoloured skulls celebrating the Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos. (19)

As Mazzanti said, Lowbrow uses its various sources of inspiration to juxtapose different emotions and to rebel against cultural tendencies to stereotype. For example, we do not expect a cute character to act violently. Lowbrow art dashes such expectations. Sweetness can be disturbed with violence and difficult tension can be balanced out with comic relief. Lowbrow art works often juxtapose the cute and the grotesque; the happy and the somber; humour and dark emotions. These juxtapositions vary from subtle to highly exaggerated.

³ To me, carnivalesque is mixture of humour and irony.

By “cute,” I mean a character has exaggerated infantile features such as a big head, big eyes and short limbs to evoke empathy. The exaggerated features make the character helpless and deformed. Such grotesque deformation often goes hand-in-hand with cute. I also show grotesqueness in the narrative. Violence and gore in my work is grotesque. The cuteness in my work is also related to the Japanese word, “Kawaisa,” because I grew up watching popular animes such as Astroboy. Cute character design of Japanese anime influence is present in my work.

While Lowbrow's main artistic and consumer base is in California, its world-wide audience is expanding. Lowbrow work has often been shown in alternative galleries but remains ignored in mainstream galleries and museums, mainly due to a lack of acceptance from the art market. Many key Lowbrow artists are self-taught without having gone through formal training, and they tend to ignore the mainstream art market; they have thus written little about their own work. This results in a dearth of art criticism on the subject, further hindering the movement's exposure. However, magazines such as *HighFructose*, *Juxtapoz*, *Giant Robot* and *Beautiful/Decay* publish Lowbrow works. Prominent Lowbrow artists include Gary Panter, Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, Mark Ryden, Joe Sorren, Audrey Kawasaki, Gary Taxali, Friends With You and Kozyndan (Jordan 9).

1.2 Definition of Independent Games and Art Games

Like Lowbrow artists, indie game developers are also artists. If they wanted to work in bigger companies, they could, but they make their games out of love. They would still sell their games if they could, but selling is not their primary goal. Lowbrow and indie games share the love to create, and I want to work in both areas. Indie digital games have been gaining prominence in recent years due to the rise of low cost, yet state-of-the-art, personal computers. The availability of these new tools has greatly increased the number of designers who can produce and distribute indie games. Those same designers now can also use a variety of platforms, such as web download sites and smartphones, to disseminate their games. But the question remains: just what characterizes a game as "indie?" To answer that, I turn to Eric Zimmerman's *Do Independent Games Exist?* in which he defines the fundamental conditions that make a game "indie."

One can differentiate an indie game from a non-indie game by looking at its economic, technological and cultural qualities. According to Zimmerman, to be an indie game, it must be independently funded, marketed and distributed; it is often shorter in length than its non-indie equivalent and/or produced on a shoestring budget; the idea of independence refers to something slightly vague: "the overall spirit or

culture" of a given project (Zimmerman 2002). Based on what Zimmerman writes, indie game culture is a subculture. Lowbrow and Superflat are subcultural art movements, and they both have their roots in subcultures.

Being interested in all those subcultures, I want to bring them together. I believe Lowbrow aesthetic might be interesting in a video game. Once it is completed outside of an academic setting, *Twinkling Stars Above* will be an indie game because it will have been independently funded; because it will have been created by a small team; and because it experiments with graphic and narrative style. Additionally, it will be independently distributed. However, it has been funded by an academic institution, and it does not have innovative game mechanics. Hence, while *Twinkling Stars Above* has some properties of an indie game, it is more of an art game.

I need to define an art game at this point. In her paper, "Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre," Tiffany Holmes defines art games as following:

[An art game is] an interactive work, usually humorous, by a visual artist that does one or more of the following: challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner. (46)

Considering Holmes' definition, the line between an art game and an indie game seems to be hazy. An indie game can also challenge cultural stereotypes, offer meaningful social critique or tell a story. Art games and

indie games share some common properties, such as an experimental “spirit or culture” (Ibid.) of game aesthetics and/or mechanics. What differentiates art games from indie games is the “intention behind them” (Ploug 2005). Ploug adds to Holmes’ definition that if the developer created the game as art, then it is an art game.

My Work, Twinkling Stars Above is an art game because it is a humorous interactive work. While the feeling of the game is somber and desolate, at the same time, there is Lowbrow humour (See Chapter 3.4). It also challenges cultural stereotypes. We do not usually expect to see cute and grotesque images together, but in *Twinkling Stars Above*, cute characters meet grotesque deaths. This tension between the cute and the grotesque is influenced by Lowbrow aesthetics that challenges cultural stereotypes. Additionally, players usually expect a reward for winning a game. However, *Twinkling Stars Above* dashes this expectation by showing an ambivalent ending when the players win⁴.

In the course of my thesis work, I made Lowbrow illustrations and most recently designed an art game proof-of-concept⁵ as an experiment in

⁴ Please refer to Chapter 3.4 to read about the ambivalent ending in *Twinkling Stars Above*.

⁵ The “Proof-of-Concept” (Pentakalos 2008) for this project consists of a working game demo. It is the first step towards a complete game prototype.

combining art style and video game forms. I will discuss this further in the body of thesis.

1.3 Research Questions

Focusing on the cross-cultural history of Japanese Superflat and North American Lowbrow art, I will ask within the scope of my Master's research:

- 1. What are their respective histories and cultural backgrounds, and what are their connections?**
- 2. How might I apply the findings garnered from this research investigation to the practice component of this study?**
- 3. Why are gaming aesthetics and game design appropriate vehicles for this enquiry of applying Lowbrow aesthetics to video game aesthetics?**

Chapter 2: Literature and Art Review

2.1 Independent Games and Art Games

In this literature review of independent games, I will briefly address some of the main independent and art game developers; what has been written about the current indie game culture; and the debate around whether a video game can be art. Independent game designers Jenova Chen, Jason Rohrer and Jonathan Blow develop innovative gameplay. They recognize that the medium of video games provides abundant opportunity for variety. Jason Rohrer is an independent and art video game designer. In 2007, he developed *Passage*, is a five-minute video game about life, relationship and mortality. Jonathan Blow is an independent video game designer, who developed *Braid* (2006). *Braid* seems like a regular platform video game at first. It seems like the goal is to rescue the princess from the villain. Then the game questions whether the princess wants to be saved at all, and maybe the protagonist is actually the villain. The game also features an innovative game play of reversing time, suggesting multiple universes. One of the most innovative and highly praised recent games is Chen's *Flower*. According to Blow, "if games are ever going to speak to the human condition in a deep way, I think [Chen's game *Flower* is] a good place to start." (2006) I admire *Flower*

because of its sublime gameplay: the player is the wind that pollinates flowers and powers windmills and in a Zen-like manner, hovers and flies around vast grass fields, fulfilling the game objectives with little effort. Chen's goal is to evoke emotions with his graphics in addition to providing entertainment. *Flower* was released for PlayStation in 2009, signaling that the indie game had moved into the mainstream. This is encouraging because it proves that a game with the Zen-like sensibility of *Flower* can appeal to a broad audience. I want to note that Chen and Rohrer are often referred to as artists as well as game designers, blurring the line between indie games and art games (Chen 2010, Fagone 2008).

In my practice, I have been and I am inspired by artists who appropriate elements from existing mainstream games into postmodern art games. For example, Cory Arcangel, who appropriates the imagery of commercial computer games (Licht 84-87). One of Arcangel's art games, *Super Mario Clouds* (2004), exhibits only the floating clouds from the *Super Mario Bros*⁶ game while excluding other environmental elements. Mengbo Feng is another artist who appropriates video games as a source for art. In his 2008 piece, *The Long March: Restart*, Feng used a pixelated 8-bit game graphic aesthetic to reflect and exaggerate Chinese communist propaganda (Tedford 2010).

⁶ According to Nintendo website, *Super Mario Bros.* is a platform video game developed by Nintendo in 1985 (Nintendo 2011).

Joshua Bearman's *New York Times* article, "Can D.I.Y. Supplant the First-Person Shooter?" reports on the current indie and art game subculture (2009). He distinguishes indie and art games from mainstream games by pointing out that most indie and art game developers create because of the love of creating and not just for the financial rewards involved. According to Bearman, this tendency allows the designers to create a diverse set of games, as opposed to the monotony of mainstream first-person shooters (ibid.).

Toronto Ontario, Canada has a burgeoning indie game community with the characteristics Bearman mentions. Funded by the Toronto Arts Council, The Hand Eye Society organizes projects such as TOJam and Artsy Games Incubator. TOJam is a three day indie game development event, and Artsy Games Incubator connects artists and programmers. I have attended some of the group's events to show my digital toys, and once helped one of the members by providing voice-acting. The gaming community in this city led me to believe that the environment and the timing were apt for the development of my game, *Twinkling Stars Above*. The indie game community's passion inspires me to create. I must clarify that although *Twinkling Stars Above* is not an indie game, it is inspired by indie games.

Eric Zimmerman's article, "Do Independent Games Exist?" compares indie games to independent movies. He undertakes an economic, technological and cultural analysis of indie game development. He finds that pop culture is like an ecosystem, with all spheres of culture influencing every other sphere. The culture of video games would thus be a part of that ecosystem, but "it is also a subculture that is twice removed from other, hipper pop media" (2002). Back when the article was written, video games existed in their own subculture, not actively participating in the mixing of different cultures: most specifically, video games had been little influenced by contemporary art in their visual design. Zimmerman's essay revealed much about the subculture of indie games at the time of its publication, but some of his points are now inapplicable because of the explosion of indie games in the years since. I was curious to know Zimmerman's evaluation of indie games today. In a conversation by email, he said that there have been big improvements in diversifying the existing graphic styles today. He also highlighted the contribution the indie game scene has made through its experimentation with alternate styles. According to him, independent games definitely do exist today, and they are mixing different subcultures.

Since I am primarily interested in applying Lowbrow art aesthetics to video game graphics, the debate about whether video games are art or not is beyond the scope of my thesis project. However, it is worth briefly

mentioning the arguments that have been made in regard to video games' place as art because the questions that arise from this discussion are unavoidable. I believe video games can be art. Concerning this matter, I have turned to Eric Zimmerman, Ernest W. Adams, Henry Jenkins, and Brett Martin for analysis and support.

Henry Jenkins' "Games, the New Lively Art" establishes video games as art. He claims that video games are in the same position that film occupied back when films were not considered art. Jenkins repurposes the argument from Gilbert Seldes' *Seven Lively Arts* (1924)—which argued for the status of film as art—to explain the current state of video games. Video games are consumer products and Jenkins argues that because of that commercial aspect, critics dismissed them from consideration as art. Yet their commerciality pushed forward innovation and experimentation. Jenkins argues that popular media like video games and films are not to be disregarded. Instead, it should be understood that they are deeply embedded in daily life and have "captured the vitality of contemporary urban experience." (ibid.)

In "Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games," Zimmerman does not argue video games are necessarily pieces of art, but as a practitioner, has a more introspective approach. Even as an industry expert, he admits that he is conflicted by the question of whether

video games are art. He articulates the economic, technological and cultural challenges that will have to be overcome before games reach the level of acceptance as art. He adds that, even if games address all of the above issues, he cannot predict if games will ever be accepted as art. One thing, however, is sure: nobody can predict what the future of video games will hold. Thus, Zimmerman has an open stance toward the question: as opposed to rigidly categorizing games as "art" or "non-art" objects, he thinks it can be said simply that video games are a new media with a lot of potential.

In "Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form?," Ernest W. Adams argues that computer games will be considered a legitimate art form one day, but there are changes that game developers must make before that can happen (Clarke 255). In "Should Videogames Be Viewed As Art?", Brett Martin argues that video games are a new medium of art form (Clarke 201). As might be assumed, there is much more discussion on this topic than what little is summarized here. I merely wanted to bring the debate in to show my awareness that the debate was going on. My own opinion is that video games can be art because works by artists such as Cory Arcangel and Feng Mengbo define their art video games as art (Harrison 2010). However, the debate does not necessarily influence the questions that I am trying to answer for my project.

Twinkling Stars Above is an art game. It was presented in a gallery as art. However, it blurs the line between art and design. The process of the game development employed design methodologies: iterative and Scrum design methodologies.

2.2 Art and Literature of Superflat

I will now review the cultural histories of different forms of Superflat art, the major artists in the movement and their aesthetics, and I will discuss a tension in Superflat art. In order to understand Superflat, it is important to understand the work of Superflat artists Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Keita Takahashi. They have reinterpreted the flatness of Japanese consumer culture and the manga subculture and integrated those elements into their work. Keita Takahashi's works in convergent media—contemporary art and video games—were especially significant for my research, since I am striving to do something similar with my research by applying Lowbrow aesthetics to video games using convergent media.

The writings of Takashi Murakami, Midori Matsui and Dick Hebdige provided me with an understanding of the cultural context of the Superflat movement. Murakami's book *Little Boy* contains a history of the Superflat movement and a theoretical analysis of Superflat art, as well as the movement's manifesto. In *Little Boy*, he considers the two-

dimensionality of Japanese society, customs, art and culture. Within the context of Superflat, he wants his audience to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture – from the 16th century Edo period to present day anime - fused into one. He also mentions that although the movement has not escaped subculture status in Japan, it has been accepted into the critical discourse of art outside of Japan (Murakami 157).

In *The Age of Micropop*, an art critic, Matsui discusses the social and cultural conditions that accompany Superflat. Matsui's analysis provides a practical backdrop for my comparison between Superflat and Lowbrow.

Murakami traced a genealogy of the Japanese subcultures of *kawaii* (cuteness) and the *otaku*⁷ sensibility represented by anime and manga, which had a precedent in traditional Japanese painting, calling contemporary art with this awareness of the continued cultural inheritance “Superflat” art ... [he] intended to convey a specific Japanese cultural context through a mix of subculture and art. (71)

Matsui's claim is that Superflat expresses a flatness in Japanese art that has deep historical roots⁸ and is continues today in anime and manga.

Matsui also traces connections between Superflat and American Pop Art of the 1960s. In her 2007 exhibition essay, *New Japanese Paintings in 1990s*,

⁷ An obsessive and individualistic fan subculture surrounding manga (Japanese comic) and anime (Japanese animation).

⁸ Japan's 16th century Edo period gave rise to flat woodblock prints (Ford 45)

she writes that the movement captured the anxiety underlying the experience of growing up in a consumer society steeped in a mass culture based on the American model (Matsui 10). While addressing such anxiety, she believes that Superflat artists also criticize the conservative Japanese art schools that adopt consumer-driven foreign trends. She suggests that these attitudes present some resemblances to American Pop art. Matsui says that Superflat artists incorporate the icons of popular culture—such as consumer products, anime and video games—in a way that is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's appropriation of popular culture.

Dick Hebdige supports her position in his 2007 essay, "Flat Boy vs. Skinny: Takashi Murakami and the Battle for 'Japan'." Hebdige compares Murakami's *Kaikai Kiki* operation to Andy Warhol's "Business Art" arguing that Murakami, like Warhol, is flattening "high/low, art/commodity, art-world/fashionista hierarchies" (Hebdige 19 - 20). Murakami's art is printed on anything from soccer balls to Louis Vuitton bags and is available for purchase. According to Hebdige, Murakami is criticizing the shallowness of Japanese consumer society, while exploiting it at the same time by selling branded merchandise. Murakami's critique thus turns on a playful blurring of the boundary between his artistic appropriation of the imagery of commercial pop culture and his own implication in that same culture. The ambiguous relationship of Superflat to consumerism further enriches it, since with their acceptance and embrace of commercialization,

Superflat artists are open to inspiration from many different art forms, from paintings and sculptures to video games. As an illustrator who works in many different art forms, its receptivity to various forms resonates strongly with my approach.

Murakami, Midori and Hebdige suggest important similarities between Superflat and Lowbrow (See Chapter 3.2 for the analysis). However, in order to direct my literature research towards practice, I turned to David Surman's "Notes on Superflat and Its Expression in Videogames" (2008). He argues that the video game *Katamari Damacy*⁹ is an expression of Superflat. *Katamari Damacy*'s creator, Keita Takahashi is a sculptor-turned-game designer. Takahashi's background as a contemporary artist in Japan is apparent in his games. He uses Superflat aesthetics in his video games. He uses characters serialization that Murakami used and fuses his video game with obsessive fan culture. Surman interprets the game through the lens of Superflat, examining the game's reference to the otaku subculture and the history of character art. In "Some Notes on Aesthetics in Japanese Videogames", William Huber also argues that Superflat has influenced Japanese videogame aesthetics and vice versa (211). Their explorations, combined with my new sense of the similarities between Superflat and Lowbrow, have helped me to approach applying Lowbrow sensibilities to a videogame.

⁹ Video game developed by Keita Takahashi, published by Namco, 2004.

2.3 Art of Lowbrow

Like other Lowbrow artists, I draw inspiration from cartoons and comics. The humour, carnivalesque grotesqueness and simplified styles found in Lowbrow art are often indispensable to my own work. To clarify a possible misconception, I must insist that drawing inspiration from cartoons does not necessarily mean that the resulting art works are flat. Characters in Lowbrow art may well have the simplified shape typical of cartoons, but they are often rendered in painterly styles and/or with a rich depth of textures. I think Lowbrow art exploits the tension generated between old and new with its Postmodern hybridization of old and new. Gary Baseman, one of the key figures in the Lowbrow movement, is a good example of such an approach. His paintings are cartoon-like, yet the characters are rendered painterly through deliberate brush stroke textures.

A key characteristic of Lowbrow art is the juxtaposition of emotions. A cartoonish character is performing atrocity and sadness is mixed with humour. In Baseman's *I am Your Piñata* (Figure 2.3.1), a cute character with a friendly smile is beating another character until its gut spills out, while other characters watch with anticipatory smiles. Gut-spilling violence and happy anticipation of piñata candies coexist in Baseman's painting.



Figure 2.3.1: *I am Your Piñata*, 2003, Acrylic on Canvas 18X18 inches, Gary Baseman

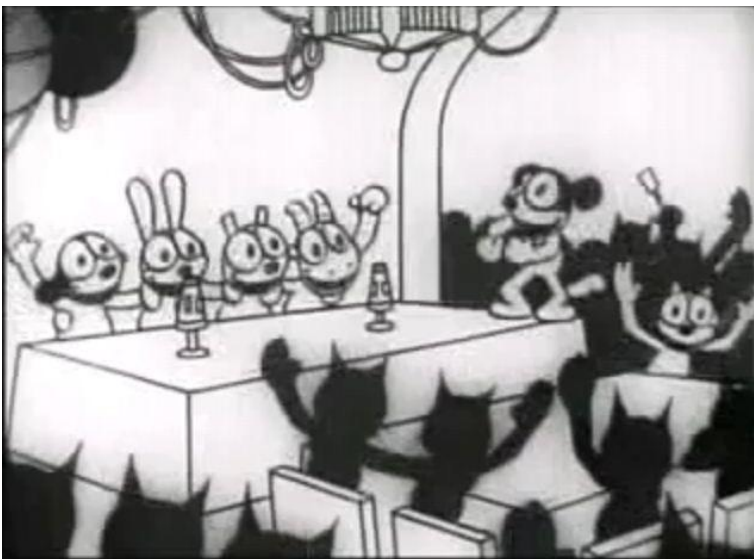


Figure 2.3.2: *Felix the Cat*, Screen Capture from *Woos Whoopee*, 1930, animation, Pat Sullivan

When I create a cute character, I also want to be against its cuteness by juxtaposing it with different emotions. In my thesis project, *Twinkling Stars*

Above, there is a cute furry monster. However, the monster is much larger than the main character, the girl. He also has fangs and claws like a predator. Although the monster and the girl are friends, there is an uneasy uncertainty whether he will suddenly attack her. Positive feelings from the affectionate relationship between the girl and the monster are juxtaposed with the uncertain tension of the monster's predatory appearance.

The Monster in my work is manifestation of myself and human nature. It is a cute and friendly character, but at the same time, has horrific features. We can also exhibit those dual characteristics of being monstrous yet kind. Such characteristics are that of Korean folklore monsters, Dokkaebi (See Figure 2.3.3). In folk stories, Dokkaebi are evil monsters who like to play pranks. Despite of their evil intentions, they are approachable. Their pranks never work quite right, they are easy to fool and sometimes even friendly. The monster in *Twinkling Stars Above* is strongly connected to Dokkaebi.



Figure 2.3.3: Dokkaebi Motif from *United Shilla (668 to 935AD)*, Scan from book *Dokkaebi*, 1988, Sang-soo Ahn

Gary Baseman's *I am Your Piñata* (Figure 2.3.1) is clearly influenced by classic animations, borrowing as it does from works such as the 1930's animation *Felix the Cat* (Figure 2.3.2). In *Felix the Cat*, the animal characters are simplified to a bare minimum, and are represented with reduced shapes like ovals. Another main characteristic found in the earlier work is the disproportionate anatomy of the animals. Eyes and mouths are exaggerated over and above reality; the eyes are large and sad, the mouth is simplified to basic gestures like smiles and grimaces.

Simplistic characters evoke empathy from the audience. In his analysis of the formal language of comics, Scott McCloud found that the more

abstracted or simple the characters' faces are, the easier it is for readers to project themselves onto them (28-59). In comics, the main characters often have simple faces and the villains have more realistically-rendered faces. I had used abstracted or simple faces in my previous works without much comprehension of their effectiveness; McCloud's analysis gave me a better understanding of character design. I then understood that character simplification was my way of generating empathetic responses from the viewer. McCloud bases his theory on his observation of the content and style of comics and their effect on readers, as well as on his own practice. In searching for academic studies on this subject, Rosalind Krauss' reference to Sergei Eisenstein's study of abstraction in cartoons is useful. Eisenstein's work furthered my understanding of my own cartoon abstraction and anthropomorphizing of inanimate objects: "the heartless geometrizing and metaphysics [in Descartes], here give rise to a kind of antithesis, an unexpected rebirth of universal animism" (16). Krauss is saying that abstraction of a character's expression make it even more human-like.

There are also exaggerations in the character design—giant heads, sad eyes, big bellies and short limbs—are very appealing to people. As Daniel Harris writes: "The element of grotesqueness in cuteness is deliberate ... the grotesque is cute because it is pitiable, and pity is the emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic" (Klein 112). The proportions of

these characters are deliberately deformed in a way to make us feel strong emotions towards them. The cute, it seems, is rarely far removed from the grotesque. Baseman pushes this aspect even further by exaggerating the grotesqueness in *I am Your Piñata* with the spilling guts of the dog-like character, while other characters look at the dog-like character with delight, as if he is a piñata and candies are falling out of his body. Just as in Baseman's painting, the cuteness of the characters in *Twinkling Stars Above* is juxtaposed with grotesqueness. In the opening sequence of the game, the furry monster is crushed by the UFO, resulting in splatters of blood. The girl also meets violent deaths if she loses the game. Baseman's approach to the grotesque is coupled with tongue-in-cheek humour. It is comical to see these cute characters performing an atrocious act while the victim is slightly smiling.



Figure 2.3.4: *Pieces of the Sun*, 2008, magazine cover, mixed media 9X12 inches, Hyein Lee

Cuteness and humour, so often found in Lowbrow art, is important to my own work as well. *Pieces of the Sun* contains bunnies on a hill. The bunnies have predictable long ears, but other body parts are simplified or omitted, creating a cartoon-like appearance (the limbs are short and sometimes non-existent and the body is reduced to a round shape). These bunnies

do not seem grotesque at first glance. However, compared to the anatomy of real animals, they are grotesquely deformed. Their deformed bodies evoke subtle feelings of pity. As Harris argues, I have both unconsciously and purposefully deformed my bunny characters so that they will be perceived as cute and cartoon-like. Growing up with animations like *Felix the Cat* (Figure 2.3.2), I have a tendency to simplify my characters. I think I am nostalgic towards cartoon images from my childhood, hence, often use their visual cues. Other Lowbrow artists also use simplified characters.

Lowbrow artists Roman Klonek, Friends with You and Tim Biskup deserve mention for their reinterpretation of old-fashioned cartoon and comic images. Their minimalistic character designs have had some influences on my practice. In *Playing with Lowbrow*, I have undertaken to apply my own Lowbrow graphic style to a video game.

2.4 Literature on Lowbrow

I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero... I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. (Oldenburg 210)

In designing an art game using Lowbrow aesthetics, I wanted to read critical writings about the Lowbrow art movement. As I noted above, Lowbrow art is largely ignored by mainstream art institutions and critics, and as a result, there has been little written about it. The lack of critical attention is compounded by the fact that Lowbrow artists rarely write about their own work. As a scholar, I think the Lowbrow movement should be documented. Japan's Superflat receives scholarly attention, such as that from Murakami and Matsui, who established a theoretical construct for the movement. Such leaders are yet to surface in support of the Lowbrow movement. The lack of internal writing seems to result from the fact that most of the Lowbrow artists emerged from a commercial art background. They are mostly educated in applied arts, and so are trained to focus on a clear surface aesthetic and not the underlying theory behind a work. In addition, some essential Lowbrow artists, like Elizabeth McGrath, are self-taught (Schnabel 2009), and so are not familiar with the institutional system supporting mainstream art.

I was trained as a commercial artist, and thus theoretically contextualizing my practice in writing has been a new challenge. Even prominent artists of the movement seldom write about their own work. To make up for this lack of writing, I turned to Dick Hebdige for his study on subcultures and David Carrier's aesthetic investigations into comics. Hebdige and Carrier do not discuss the Lowbrow art movement specifically, but their writings

can be extrapolated to Lowbrow and are crucial to my understanding of the movement.

Lowbrow art works are exhibited in alternative galleries and discussed in subcultural magazines like *Juxtapoz*¹⁰. The system used by these alternative venues mimics "high" art, but without institutional contexts, such as authorized critiques, reviews and studies. As a result, one could question whether Lowbrow even is art. This question is relevant to me because I made an art game, using Lowbrow style. Borrowing Hebdige's and Carrier's statement, I understand Lowbrow as art. In *Subculture*, Hebdige examines subculture in general terms: his observations in *Subculture* can be applied to today's Lowbrow subculture:

subcultural styles do indeed qualify as art but as art in (and out of) particular contexts; not as timeless objects, judged by the immutable criteria of traditional aesthetics, but as 'appropriations', 'thefts', subversive transformations, as *movement*. (129)

Applying what Hebdige said above, Lowbrow is a subculture style that qualifies as an art movement. David Carrier recognizes comics as a legitimate form of artistic expression. In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, he attempts to legitimate comics as "an art form without the formalist exclusivity of a critic like Greenberg" (95). Carrier states, "standards of comics include inventiveness, originality, and consistency. The best comics

¹⁰ Lowbrow art magazine established in 1994.

really are great art works — great by the intrinsic standards of that art form" (95). His proposition is applicable to the Lowbrow movement because Lowbrow artists are often immersed in comic culture, both as producers and fans. The movement is intrinsically inspired by comics and is also in a marginalized position similar to that of comics. Hebdige and Carrier are saying that however marginalized – not recognized in institution - subcultures can qualify as art.

Non-academic magazines, like *Giant Robot*, *Beautiful Decay* and *Fecal Face*, also deserve mention for their documentation of the Lowbrow movement. Their visual documentations of the Lowbrow movement have allowed me to recognize aforementioned key artists such as Gary Baseman. *Weirdo Deluxe* by Matt Dukes Jordan provides a history of the Lowbrow art movement, defines its essential characteristics and presents some of its leading artists. I have summarized Jordan's writing on Lowbrow in Chapter 1.1. These publications are indispensable to my understanding of Lowbrow, and thus my ability to situate my work in relation to the movement. In addition, my deepened understanding of Lowbrow has allowed me to see a clear connection between Japan's Superflat and North America's Lowbrow art movements.

Chapter 3: Body of Thesis

3.1 Methodology

My research required several different methodologies: reflective practice, action research, iterative design, technical collaborative development and the Scrum¹¹ game design methodology.

3.1.1 Reflective Practice and Action Research

Playing with Lowbrow is a practice-led project that includes reflection on my practice as I synthesize the historical and theoretical context behind this exploration in melding Superflat, Lowbrow and video games. Thus, in this project I took on both a creative and a reflective role. In doing so, I have referred to Donald Schön's writing on the meaning of the reflective practice: "research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action" (308-309). My thesis project came into existence through the creation of a series of digital toys and a game, all of which were experiments with Lowbrow art style. For each toy and game, I reviewed, evaluated, analyzed (See Chapter 3.3) and applied the findings to my

¹¹ See Chapter 3.1.4

final project. In *Playing with Lowbrow*, I have attempted to unite my research and practice.

According to Donald Schön, the reflection and action research process is as following, “[the researcher] reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action.” (Schön 22) While I was working on *Playing with Lowbrow*, I learned by taking actions. For example, one of the main characters used to be a polar bear. The character did not bring much tension that should be present in Lowbrow art. Hence, I re-designed the polar bear character as a monster. The monster has predatory characteristics, which brought tension to the game. To design the monster, I took an action to draw over twenty different monsters because I did not know how the monster should look until I drew it. This is what Schön calls “knowing-by-action.” (ibid.)

“Knowing-by-action” was also applicable while I was generating textures in the background. I intervened in my background painting as I was creating it, and critiqued and solved problems. I tried one medium and if it didn't work, I threw it out and tried a different medium. I coloured the background for *Twinkling Stars Above* several times. For each iteration, I analyzed my feelings towards the background. When I did not get a positive response from my instincts, I painted a new background using

different methods such as acrylic painting, ink washes, block printing and digital painting.

Working with traditional media and transferring them into digital graphics has been important for me because I wanted my video game to have hand-made textures often exhibited in Lowbrow art. The background was painted using acrylic and ink washes, the character animation was drawn traditionally and the environment was made using block printing and paper collage. This hand-made graphic style was achieved through action research.

3.1.2 Iterative Design

I have employed an iterative design methodology. In my work, I used this approach to obtain technical and aesthetic feedback and then to implement it. Eric Zimmerman writes that “iterative design means playtesting” (Laurel 176). The delicate balance between game rules and play is too complex to predict and plan in advance. Therefore, throughout the process of design and development, there were many playtests. Each playtest was followed by analysis and refinement. Iterative processes brought to light existing design problems—such as the level of difficulty and the immersive experience—and helped me to solve them. I

will discuss the playtests of my game project, and what was implemented in response to the playtesting.

There were countless playtests between my programmer and me. Some of the main playtests within the development team included making snow and building a playable wire-frame build. Once the snow was animated and programmed, we tested the speed and aesthetic of the snowfall according to the player's movement. The playtest showed that there was too much snow which made the game graphics distracting. I accordingly adjusted the size of the snowflakes and the frequency.

The second major iteration of playtesting that was done within my working group was after building a wire frame game. By "wire frame", I mean the game play without most graphics implemented. Therefore, the objects in the game look like wire frames. In this iteration, the speed of the character's walking movement was adjusted along with the jumping height.

Once the basic graphics and animations were implemented, I performed an informal playtesting with a couple of acquaintances. I call this stage informal playtesting because there was no formal survey for the two testers to fill out. This informal playtesting served as an iteration before the formal playtesting with questionnaires. The testers found the game too

difficult to win; therefore I implemented a bonus item to slow the game down temporarily. When a player acquires a big snowflake-shaped bonus item, the environment slows down by 80 percent and the main character by 30 percent. This gives enough time for the players to react. The musical score was also implemented at this iteration.

Next, I performed two playtests outside of my game development group. The first playtesting was conducted with six testers. My acquaintances and others participated. The game proof-of-concept was emailed to the testers along with the questionnaire. The testers played *Twinkling Stars Above* at home and sent me the responses via email. The testers were mostly gamers because I thought they would be experienced enough to give me constructive feedback. The main objective of this iteration of playtesting was to find out what the testers thought about the game graphics and the difficulty of the game. I also wanted to see if there were any errors. Everyone gave positive responses about the game graphics. They found the aesthetic inviting and different from what was called a "typical video game."

The first playtesting revealed that the testers also experienced the feelings I sought to convey. They experienced the sensation of cold, solitude, isolation, foreboding, sense of wonder, etc. I wanted to juxtapose different emotions in a way that is often found in Lowbrow art: the positive

emotions that originate from the cute character and the desolate feeling of the environment. Up to this point, the main characters were a girl and a polar bear. It was suggested that the polar bear does not induce enough fear to contrast with the cute girl. Hence for the next iteration, I re-designed the polar bear as a furry monster. As explained, this character creates a tension: its appearance is cute but also possesses predatory features like fangs, horns and red eyes. Additionally, I did not get any feedback about grotesqueness from this playtest. Therefore, to emphasize the Lowbrow grotesqueness, I added splashes of blood when the girl falls to the ground from a certain height.

As for the gameplay, the testers complained about two kinds of disorientation. While they were jumping up the icebergs, they could not tell how much they had progressed and how much more they had to go. To orient the players, I created a progress indication in the next iteration: a caption saying 'you are almost there' appears when the girl climbs up to a height of over 70 percent. Lastly, the testers complained that the girl can walk to both sides of the screen indefinitely and get lost. Recognizing this problem, I added arrows to guide the players where to go.

For the second playtest, participants were recruited using a blog and social network sites. Seven females and eight males aged between 21 and 35 responded to the recruitment. Unlike the first playtest, I was present

while they were playing the game proof-of-concept. While the first playtesters were mainly my acquaintances, the second playtesters were mostly strangers. Even though I did not know the testers for the second playtest, they gave mostly positive responses. I suspect that because I was present, they were reluctant to give strong criticism.

Many mentioned the simplicity of the faces of the characters and that it helped them get into the game. This reaction is consistent with the theories of Scott McCloud and Rosalind Krauss, who posit that simple faces of the characters in comics allow the audience to relate to and identify with the characters. Chapter 2.3 explains McCloud's and Krauss' theories on simple character design. Abstraction gave a more human-like quality to the furry monster and the girl. When the characters meet violent and bloody deaths, it shocked the players and made them feel sad. I wanted the death of the monster to make the players seek revenge. I wanted such user empathy towards characters so that they continue to play and be immersed in the videogame. I wanted to dash their expectations when they win the game. Dashing expectations is a part of Lowbrow narrative.

Eight testers said that the game graphic seemed to be influenced by one or more of cartoons, comics, anime and traditional painting. I was satisfied by the response because my objective was to combine these

influences in my project. Lowbrow and Superflat both draw from cartoons, comics and anime. Some testers mentioned that the game graphic mixes the traditional painting style with contemporary cartoon images. This tension between traditional painting style and contemporary commercial art is often present in Lowbrow.

Some testers found the violent death of the cute monster grotesque. Even though they found it grotesque, they reported that they very much enjoyed the game. Some commented that the death of the monster drove them to play the game in order to seek revenge. The Lowbrow characteristics of cute and grotesque might be appalling, but they made the players more interested in the game. It was also commented that the cartoon-like yet painterly style makes interesting game experience. Based on the playtesters' feedbacks, I want to incorporate more Lowbrow narrative and visuals in future development. I want to make more levels in the future as many testers suggested.

While observing the players, it was interesting to see how they understood the game physics right away. In "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", Henry Jenkins argues that the game world has its own "narrative space" (2004), where the normal rules of the universe do not necessarily apply. *Twinkling Stars Above* implements such a narrative space with its own physical laws; for example, the player can jump on the small ice pieces,

whereas in real life, no one could stand on such a sharp point.

Nevertheless, all the testers jumped on the small ice pieces without explicit instruction. With "redundancy" (ibid.) and trial-and-error, they understood the game space. This shows that games have a special kind of narrative structure, where one has to "explore and unlock secrets." (ibid.)

The length of the game generated contradictory responses in both playtests. Some testers said that they liked that the game was short, while others wanted it longer. Some wanted additional levels. I am planning to design more levels in future development.

The difficulty of the game was rated 7 out of 10 for both playtests, which was the optimal difficulty I hoped. For which I did not want to make the game either too easy, or too hard. I had originally planned to introduce a second bonus item - which would have made the main character jump higher - in order to make the game easier. However, seeing that the difficulty was exactly where I wanted it, I decided not to introduce another bonus item. I might add the new bonus item in future development when I create more than one level.

To create the game proof-of-concept, I got technical help from two individuals. I collaborated technically with my brother, computer scientist Dan Lee, with whom I have worked on previous projects. To begin, the

collaboration remained mostly within the technical realm. However, Lee is also a knowledgeable gamer, so eventually his suggestions on gameplay became beneficial and were often implemented. I define our working relationship as a technical collaboration. This is because although Lee's technical and artistic input influenced small subsets of the game design, they did not affect the overall concept of the game design. Other technical help was provided by musician, Michael Daykin, the composer, for *Twinkling Stars Above*. Daykin used visuals that I provided - working images, animations, character sketches, sprites, and so on - and my description of the game in order to create the score.

3.1.4 The Scrum Method

For the development of *Twinkling Stars Above*, I employed the Scrum methodology. In his article, "Paper Burns: Game Design with Agile Methodologies", Rory McGuire defines the Scrum game design methodology as follows:

One of the principal tenets in Scrum is that everyone on the team is involved in the process. Scrum breaks down production into short work cycles called Sprints. At the beginning of each Sprint, the entire project team meets to create objectives and self-organize into small Scrum teams. The Scrum teams are interdisciplinary, with artists working alongside designers working alongside programmers. Though the goal of each team is determined by project managers, producers and publishers at the planning meetings, the teams ultimately decide the path they will use to achieve their goals for the Sprint. Once into the Sprint, the teams are completely self-managed in their daily planning and execution of tasks (2006).

Following the Scrum methodology, I organized the design process according to the various roles that typically make up a game development team. I took on the roles of designer, artist and manager, while Lee filled the role of programmer. I had daily meetings with Lee to keep me up to date. These meetings were sometimes as brief as ten minutes. For example, Lee might explain the programming he had done so far, or I might show him the character sprites and ask if the frame counts were fit for implementation. As the Scrum methodology advocates, the daily meetings kept us on target, while each person was self-organized.

According to the Scrum methodology, we broke down our tasks into short work cycles. For instance, I broke down scenes in the opening sequence, numbered them and tackled them one at a time. It made what seemed like a daunting task manageable. The entire movement of the main character would have been very difficult to implement all at once. Instead, we focused on one movement at a time. For example, one day we would focus on her running. I would prepare sprites and explain to Dan how I wanted her to move. Over the next few days, he would program the running into the video game. I quickly had a prototype that could be tested. Then we would move on to the next task of making the main character jump.

Lee's programming process employs the Scrum design methodology as well. He breaks a project down into small problems to solve and tackles the smallest problem first, and then ascends toward the larger issues. Once all the problems are solved, quality testing commences. Scrum method has proven a reasonable and effective way to tackle otherwise daunting projects.

The Scrum design methodology was useful because I could see where my production was going, instead of guessing and hoping everything would come together in the end. It also gave me flexibility from iteration to iteration. For example, when I wanted to add bonus items to make the game easier, the bonus items could be easily worked into the schedule.

3.2 Connections Between Superflat and Lowbrow

As Surman indicates in "Notes On Superflat and Its Expression in Videogames," the Superflat art movement has influenced video game graphics in Japan. Learning this, I recognized the parallel between Superflat and North America's Lowbrow. This led me to ponder, "How can I apply Lowbrow aesthetics to game graphics?" Before proceeding to do so, however, I had to first establish the similarities between the Superflat

and Lowbrow movements. Of course, these two movements are not completely alike, but they are similar enough for my purpose. Note that I do not claim that the connections I outline in this chapter constitute a comprehensive cultural and historical analysis. Instead, I have tried to summarize the findings that informed my practice in the development of a video game. In the comparison table (See Figure 3.2.1) I summarize narrative, grotesqueness and form & colour of Lowbrow, Superflat and two dimensional platform video games. Then I compare these conditions and factors with *Twinkling Stars Above*.

	Lowbrow	Superflat	2D Platform video games ¹²	<i>Twinkling Stars Above</i>
Narrative	Humour, dashing of expectations, cartoon-inspired narratives, juxtaposition of emotions	Mocking yet participating in Japanese consumer culture, dashing of expectations, juxtaposition of emotions	Revenge, save-the-day, adventure, puzzle-solving, quest narrative	Humour, dashing of expectations, cartoon-inspired narratives, juxtaposition of emotions, revenge
Grotesqueness	Violence juxtaposed with cute characters	Violence juxtaposed with cute characters, mutation	Violence, subject matter (e.g., zombies)	Violence juxtaposed with cute characters, mutation
Form & Colour	Painterly, comic/cartoon inspired simplified forms, exaggerated features, colour can vary for each artist	Painterly, comic/cartoon/anime inspired simplified forms, exaggerated features, sometimes exhibit flatness, colour can vary for each artist	Varies from hyper-realistic to simplified minimal graphics	Painterly, comic/cartoon/anime inspired simplified forms, exaggerated features, cold and subdued background colours against bright red

Figure 3.2.1: Comparison between Lowbrow, Superflat and Video Game, Hyein Lee, 2011

The comparison chart (See Figure 3.2.1) helped me see the similarities and differences between Lowbrow and Superflat aesthetics and how it's applied to my practice. Both movements play with different emotions, often mixing cute with grotesque. They also exhibit cartoonish characters. Superflat and Lowbrow are both movements inspired by subcultural production, although Superflat has achieved high art status outside of

¹² Games within this genre are usually identified by navigating environments that require timing and jumping in order to reach a destination (Stahl 2005).

Japan. As Hebdige argues, subcultural styles are “regarded as mutations and extensions of existing codes rather than as the ‘pure’ expression of creative drives” (131). Superflat is influenced by manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese cartoons), while Lowbrow is inspired by American comics and cartoons. Thus, both forms find their inspiration in comics and cartoons and then exaggerate and mutate those forms to make a new form. Cartoon-like characters are sometimes mutated to become monsters. Takashi Murakami often paints what looks like Mickey Mouse and adds multiple eyes and ears. A similar process occurred in the development of *Twinkling Stars Above*; the monster character was initially designed as a polar bear but in later stages of the project it mutated into a red-eyed monster with predatory characteristics. Pushing back against the cuteness of a polar bear resulted in the mutation. I think other Lowbrow and Superflat artists tend to mutate their cartoon-like forms for the same reason: they want to twist the cuteness and friendliness of commercial art. Then again, these artists turn their work back into commercial art. Monstrously mutated characters of Murakami have been printed on Louis Vuitton bags. Perhaps because of their close relationship to commercial art, both movements are frank about their commerciality. Both freely merchandise their art works, creating toys, bags, trinkets etc. Hebdige suspects that in Superflat, the discrepancy between theory and commerciality is a paradoxical “joke” that Murakami is playing (Hebdige 18). In the case of Lowbrow, I think the explanation is much less profound.

Many Lowbrow artists have a commercial art background, and so they are receptive to the idea of merchandising and marketing their work; it is simply a part of the culture of commercial art and design. Also with independent games, the developers are open to the idea of selling their games. This does not mean Lowbrow, Superflat and indie game creators have only commercial exploitation in mind, but they are open to it. To paraphrase Matsui, the mass consumption and digitization of information has brought about a rethinking of humanity that has sparked a renewed interest in 1960's American Pop art. She claims that Pop art was formed in "reaction to the untrammelled development of capitalism of the period" (70). Likewise, Superflat revives methods and views of Pop and creates original forms of expression (*Ibid* 70). Lowbrow is also associated with Pop in that it uses images and ideas taken from popular culture. In *Weirdo Deluxe*, Jordan declares that Lowbrow art shares the same concerns as Pop in that it "ironically and coolly reflects and critiques America's commodified cultural environment" (21).

Lowbrow's method of using popular culture as a visual vehicle can be traced back to Sixties Pop. I think art game culture is in a similar position because it takes a highly commercial genre like video games and give it a new twist in contents and/or graphics. I believe art game culture is a push against commerciality of mainstream games, the way Pop artists criticized America's consumer environment.

In addition to their intrinsic connections, Lowbrow and Superflat directly influence and inform each other. In this age of cheap international flights and the internet, information travels faster than ever. The artists in both movements seem jaded at the same time inspired by commercial art such as comics and animations. While participate in the commerciality, they want to rebel at the same time. The result is that in some cases, whether consciously or not, Superflat and Lowbrow have an analogous aesthetic. It is hard to ignore the similarities between Takahashi's latest creation, *Noby Noby Boy* and *Wishing Toys* the work of Lowbrow artists Friends With You. The characters in both works exhibit minimalist facial expressions, rainbow colours and similar physiques (Figure 3.2.2).

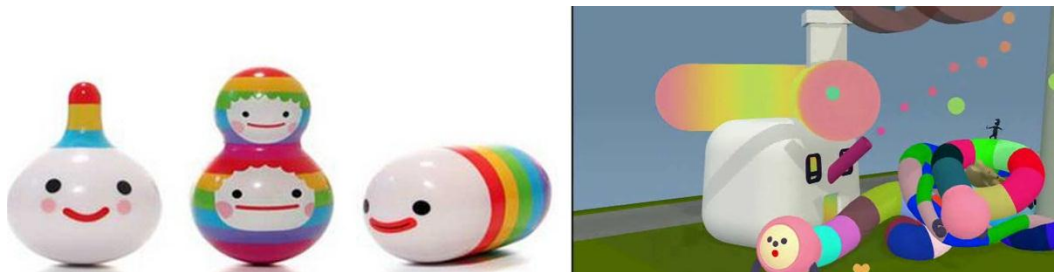


Figure 3.2.2: Left - *Wishing Toys*, 2 X 3 inches, Friends with You, 2006
Right - *Noby Noby Boy*, Keita Takahashi, Namco, 2010

Just as Takahashi's games have incorporated the discourse of Superflat, my game can embrace the world of Lowbrow imagery. This is helped by the fact that Lowbrow is already immersed in a character-obsessed fan culture; its aesthetics are created with the explicit intent to create desire

using abstracting and deforming characters. Such attributes can be easily applied to games.

3.3 Media Convergence

My attempt to use a Lowbrow painting style with inspiration from Superflat as the basis for the graphic style of an art game is not new. Such an approach has already been taken by fine artists such as Cory Arcangel and Mengbo Feng. Each have used video game imagery in making fine art (see Chapter 2.1) Similarly, I want to appropriate Lowbrow art in my game graphic style and narrative. My wish to do so can be explained by use of Jenkins' study on our convergent media culture. He argues, "old Hollywood only focused on cinema." However, new media conglomerates are involved in multiple media: "Viacom, for example, produces films, television, popular music, computer games, websites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines and comics. In turn, media convergence impacts the way we consume media" (Jenkins 34). In other words, modern humans regularly focus on multiple media at the same time. For example, a student might write a paper while chatting with friends, listening to music, writing emails and reading the news. I also produce work in multiple media, such as comics, paintings and animation, and being immersed in this convergent culture, I have an inclination to

merge my art with games. Moreover, as a Lowbrow artist, I want to extend my practice by experimenting with different forms. It is interesting to have the audience interact with my videogame. It is different than audience observing my painting. In *Playing with Lowbrow*, I have attempted to apply my Lowbrow aesthetic style to the creation of video game graphics. However, I did not employ Lowbrow in the game mechanics because my interest for this thesis project lies in the game's aesthetic.

3.4 Playing with Lowbrow

In the *Playing with Lowbrow* thesis project, I attempted to mash Lowbrow, Superflat and a video game together. The thesis project contains an art video game entitled *Twinkling Stars Above* and is a proof-of-concept project utilizing the PC platform. It investigates the possibility of using a Lowbrow aesthetic in video game graphics. This project came into being after I experimented with four works in the first year of my graduate studies and developed a separate game prototype in the first semester of 2010¹³.

Having no relevant experience with game design (except as a player or audience member) prior to my graduate studies, it was necessary to

¹³ In this chapter, I reflect on these works historically and theoretically, then examine their vital contribution to *Playing with Lowbrow*. I will also consider technical reflection, since technology is intrinsically intertwined with game development.

spend the first three quarters of my graduate career experimenting with different platforms and interactive methods. I also focused on designing for “delight” (Laurel 316) and, most importantly, on implementing a Lowbrow sensibility. The first project, *Toi* (Figure 3.4.1) was an iPhone digital toy made according to my tactile paper collage style. Upon reflection, I recognized a “carnavalesque sense of humor” (Jordan 11) with its ridiculously stretching body and comical sound effects. At this point, Jordan's book *Weirdo Deluxe* informed me of the presence of humour in Lowbrow art. I especially wanted to bring out this aspect in my own work. With that in mind, I produced another iPhone toy, *Eek* (Figure 3.4.2). *Eek* displays a monster, again materialized through layers of textures, collage and block printing. The monster comically vomits when a user tilts the phone. The type of grotesque humour found in *Eek* is also present in *Twinkling Stars Above*. At the beginning of *Twinkling Stars Above*, a spaceship lands on one of the characters, producing splatters of blood. In *Twinkling Stars Above*, death is, in typical Lowbrow style, both comical and grotesque.



Figure 3.4.1: *Toi*, 2009, iPhone toy 480 X 320 pixels, Hyein Lee

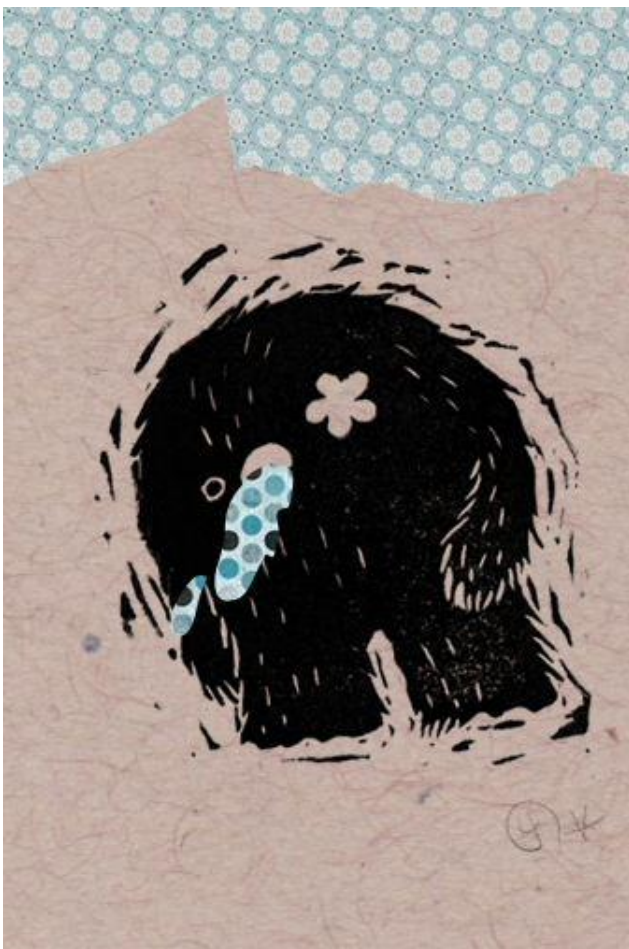


Figure 3.4.2: *Eek*, 2010, iPhone toy 480 X 320 pixels, Hyein Lee

In *Eek*, I tried to play with Lowbrow's juxtaposition of the cute and the grotesque. The act of throwing up is not usually depicted with cute and furry characters. And *Eek* is not only cute, but it is also made with media usually associated with high art such as block printing. It is funny to see a cute monster depicted in a high art medium – block printing for an example, used for preserving ancient texts - and to be caught in such a repulsive act. This is in line with Lowbrow's spirit of intermixing two seemingly opposite emotions. There is a similarity between the *Eek* character and Gary Baseman's cartoonish and cute character spilling guts (Figure 2.3.1), since both play with the mixing of cute and grotesque sensibilities.

Eek makes a slight departure from the conventional phone interactive methods. In the place of *Toi*'s touch screen methods, I used the iPhone's motion sensor. Analyzing this in retrospect, I found this decision interesting for reasons I was not conscious of at the time of creation. This led me to ponder different kinds of interactivity in games. In 2010, Golan Levin was invited to OCADUniversity and I attended his workshop on *Processing*¹⁴. Although my interest lay in video games, I have always admired his work. Inspired by his talk on “new modes of interactive expression”, I learned to

¹⁴ Processing is an open source programming language and environment for people who want to create images, animations, and interactions. (Processing.org 2010)

program and experimented with the Processing language. I was interested in interactivity because I have spent my career making paintings and illustrations which were not interactive. I found it fascinating to use my paintings in a video game, in which a player can make the images I created move. In addition, I was influenced by interactions with the *Wii*¹⁵ console. *Loneliness I* and *II* were created as the result of my experimentation with various game interactive methods. In these games, players could use a red umbrella to interact with the toys projected on the wall. In *Loneliness I*, the raindrops bounce off the player's red umbrella. In *Loneliness II*, a melancholic black cloud follows and pours rain on the player (Figure 3.4.3). For *Loneliness I* and *II*, I wanted the audience to be immersed in and to play with the cartoon-like environment. By doing so, the audience could feel the juxtaposition of emotions – which is often exhibited in Lowbrow art – between the cute characters and the somber rainy environment. The cute facial expression of the rain cloud pulls the audience in. At the same time, the cute black cloud rains on them to work against the positive feeling generated by the cuteness. In cartoons or comics, a character's gloominess is often portrayed with a black cloud following and pouring rain on the character. *Loneliness II* brought this to life.

¹⁵ *Wii* is an intuitive motion sensor console by Nintendo, launched in 2006. (Nintendo 2010)



Figure 3.4.3: *Loneliness Is I* and *Loneliness Is II*, 2010, interactive digital installations 70 X 50 inches, Hyein Lee



Figure 3.4.4: *Loneliness Is II*, 2010, interactive digital installations 70X50 inches, Hyein Lee

During the creation of *Loneliness I* and *II*, I was reading Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. I have summarized McCloud's and Krauss' theory on abstraction in character design in Chapter 2.3. For *Loneliness I* and *II*, I

abstracted my characters down to a bare minimum in order for the audience to project themselves onto the characters. Hence, the installations could be more immersive experiences. The personified raindrops and clouds have minimal geometric shapes, and thus maximal potential to mimic facial expressions. As McCloud and Krauss suggest, geometrizing inanimate objects like raindrops and clouds made them animated¹⁶. Abstraction let me achieve the cuteness of the characters. I juxtaposed it with the gloominess of the virtual rain, but I felt the rain was not enough. I wanted to make something even more grotesque to emphasize the Lowbrow aesthetic.

To try something very grotesque, I moved on to the next project, *Infection*. Up to this point, I had been making playful digital toys. In order to make a video game, I had to apply game rules. The function of game rules is to completely describe the formal system of the game. I turned to Erik Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* to get a grasp of this subject. According to Zimmerman, effective game rules have the following uses and characteristics: rules limit player action; rules are explicit and unambiguous; rules are shared by all players; rules are fixed; rules are binding; and rules are repeatable (Zimmerman 122-123). With this knowledge, I began to develop a video game, *Infection*, with a

¹⁶ See Chapter 2.3

collaborator, Louie Yabut. *Infection* is an art game that applies Lowbrow aesthetics to its graphic style (Figure 3.4.5). The game has a cartoon-inspired aesthetic and design, juxtaposes the cute and the grotesque and uses the dark humour common in Lowbrow art. The game story centers around a bunny who is also a mad scientist. The bunny is working on a biological weapon and is accidentally infected by the deadly Ebola virus. The player controls the bunny, now an Ebola-infected mad scientist. The bunny embarks on an infecting spree to share the virus with as many animals as possible within a limited time.

The dark humour in *Infection* lies in the non-conventionality of a cute and fluffy bunny character being evil. Lowbrow artists, such as Gary Baseman (Figure 2.3.1), often feature cute characters performing evil in this same way. Additionally, games and popular media, movies for example, are often told from the protagonist's point of view. However, in *Infection* the player is the antagonist. As a villain, the player scores points only by being more evil. I think that this role-reversal is quite funny, and that it is in line with the dark humour of Lowbrow. I believe that humour can be a way to deal with dark times. However, the darkness in Lowbrow art does not exist just for comic relief. It also portrays a pessimistic view of the modern world. The cute and flat cartoonish imagery promises positive emotions, but it is only escapism. Simply focusing on attractive images does not make real life problems disappear. They also exist to sell brands or products.

Lowbrow and Superflat artists are pushing back against the empty promises of commercial art using unexpected grotesqueness. *Infection* also has the theme of empty promises. The players can win by infecting other animals, but they die also. They expect reward for winning the game, but the reward is not really reward at all.

Applying Zimmerman's theory on game rules, Louie and I came up with an initial set of game rules:

1. Use the arrow keys to mobilize the main character and contact other animals.
2. Upon contact, the player earns points. Each animal has different score points.
3. If the Man In White character catches the player, points are deducted.
4. The main character cannot go through solids - walls, bushes and trees.
5. If the player acquires over 1000 points in one minute, that player wins.



Figure 3.4.5: *Infection*, 2010, PC video game 900 X 600 pixels, Louie Yabut and Hyein Lee

Inspired by one button games like *Canabalt*¹⁷ (Adam Atomic), we decided to simplify our gameplay. It was deemed unproductive for the audience to learn more complex gameplay. Even complex games such as *World of Warcraft* are successful partially due to its easy usability, which is a kind of simplicity (Laitinen 2005). First, we reduced the interaction to one button gameplay. The background and secondary characters were to be animated while the bunny remained static. A player would only have to operate the space bar to generate a cough cloud, which would hit the secondary characters. The resulting game, however, was too elementary. We wanted to mobilize the main character and give more control to the player. Therefore, the final game control was designed to use the four arrow keys. This worked well with our game because the player could determine the main character's movement, leading to more immersive gameplay. Yet, the gameplay was straightforward enough for the audience to figure it out without a steep learning curve. The playtesting showed that even individuals without any gaming experience could play the game intuitively without any instruction.

During the development of *Infection*, we employed some of the ideas behind Zimmerman's "iterative design process." (Laurel 176-184) We went

¹⁷ *Canabalt* is a one button game by Adam Atomic. It uses only the space bar for the gameplay. The environment automatically scrolls to the left, and the player has to jump over obstacles. Even with its minimalist gameplay, it is an engaging game with a unique design. It was praised by many popular online game journals like Kotaku.com.

through countless cycles of testing the prototype, making revisions and testing again. For even the smallest new development, we played, analyzed and refined. For example, we played multiple times to determine the optimal speed for the main characters to move. This methodology was critical for us to find answers to new and unexpected problems. For example, we noticed that the player could hide behind the bushes without moving much and gain points from randomly generated animals nearby. Examples of some of the major issues discovered in the iterative process involved adjusting the difficulty of the gameplay and striking a balance between the sprite sizes and the gameplay.

Following the development of *Infection*, I was ready to embark on making the final project, *Twinkling Stars Above*. I played with the idea of winning in *Infection*. Typically in games, if you win, there is a reward. However, I wanted to dash the expectations of the players by an ambiguous reward or even negative feelings. A player could win the game by infecting a lot of other animals, but in the end, even if the player won, the main character died. The reward, as it is, to die with other animals instead of to die alone. The reward is not really gratifying at all. This is an aspect of Lowbrow and Superflat aesthetics. Lowbrow and Superflat art attracts audiences with their cartoon-like cuteness. However, there is darkness in these cute characters as in Gary Baseman's *I am Your Pinata* (See Figure 2.3.1). In *Twinkling Stars Above*, I wanted to play with this Lowbrow

aesthetic again. The player destroys the UFO and wins the game. In the final animation, the dying alien crawls out of the UFO and apologizes to the girl for accidentally killing her friend. The alien dies and the girl stands alone in the cold and desolate environment. This winning ending is not the reward game players expect. Instead of a reward for successfully getting revenge, there is only a feeling of emptiness.

Following the development of *Infection*, I was ready to embark on the final project, *Twinkling Stars Above*. *Infection* was programmed using Game Maker, which sometimes posed obstacles to conveying my aesthetics; I wanted to work with painterly style with lots of textures, but Game Maker could not show those details. The types of games it could create were also limited. Hence for *Twinkling Stars Above*, computer scientist Dan Lee took over the programming, using the C programming language.

The gameplay of *Twinkling Stars Above* is loosely inspired by *Tetris*¹⁸, the puzzle video game developed in the former Soviet Union. The play emerged while thinking about the falling blocks in *Tetris*. I thought about putting a character inside of the environment where blocks are falling from the sky. The main character of *Twinkling Stars Above* has to avoid

¹⁸ Tetris was a puzzle video game developed in the Soviet Union in 1984. Various shapes of blocks fall from the top, and the player has to eliminate the blocks before they piled up to the top of the screen.

falling icebergs and jump on top of them in order to face the hovering alien ship. The gameplay is simple; this was done because of my personal nostalgia for simple console games like *Super Mario Bros.*

Twinkling Stars Above came into being while I was making faux fur masks for a Krampus-themed exhibition¹⁹. Making a monster made me think about aforementioned Korean monster, Dokkaebi. The tactility of soft faux fur and the winter theme made me think about an Arctic-like environment with a furry animal character at its centre. I made cartoon-like characters with multiple textures that conveyed the cartoon-inspired aesthetics of Lowbrow. *Twinkling Stars Above* also contains elements of deadpan humour, the grotesque and sci-fi. As stated in the Chapter 1.1, Lowbrow often encompasses cartoon influences, humour, the grotesque and sci-fi. In a nutshell, the narrative concerns a girl and a monster who are best friends and live in an Arctic-like environment with a desolate, bleak and dark sky, many snow storms and endless ice. I see the girl as, in part, myself. I heard a rumor that Canadian indigenous people are mongoloid, who migrated to America. I also heard that mongoloids are shaped to adapt for cold climates. Coming from a smaller and warmer country than Canada, I feel alone in this cold, vast land. The sky is always cold and dark, due to the polar nights. I wanted to keep the exact time in which

¹⁹ Krampus group show at Resistor Gallery, Toronto Ontario, December 2010

the story takes place ambiguous to give the audience a subtle sense of disorientation. It could be the near future or far in the past. The intention was to make a setting in which strange things can happen. And a strange incident does indeed happen: a UFO appears, and lands on top of the monster, perhaps accidentally. Blood then splatters on the white snow. This leads the girl to embark on a journey of revenge. The girl, main character is a reflection of myself. I immigrated to Canada, a massive country with long and cold winters. In the first few years, used to feel alone and desolate. The death of the monster is my way to lament loss of friends with a bit of humour.

The narrative has deadpan humour. I also wanted to play with ambivalence and dashing of expectations. The girl is not a heroine when she wins. Rather, she becomes a villain for solving violence with violence. I am really toying with the players' expectations of reward. The story was deliberately absurd, in accordance with the established characteristics of Lowbrow.



Figure 3.4.6: *Twinkling Stars Above*, 2011, an excerpt from the opening sequence 1280 X 720 pixels, Hyein Lee

I created the graphics of *Twinkling Stars Above* in a textured and layered style typical of Lowbrow art, using block printing, painting, ink and collage. Despite this textural graphic quality, the characters have a cartoon-like exaggerated cuteness and simplified form that are much in line with Lowbrow aesthetics. It was my goal to apply the Lowbrow art style to video game graphics and, in doing so, to explore a diverse range of game graphic styles.

3.5 Tactility, Lowbrow and Game Graphics

There are two main tensions in my work: the tension between the cute

and the grotesque, as is typical of Lowbrow art; and the tension of the utilization of imperfect handmade images in a digital environment.

The furry monster character is cute, yet it is intimidating; it is a predator with sharp teeth and claws. There is thus the tension of fear that it might attack the girl. There is another tension in this character when the UFO lands on it. Its blood splashes everywhere. The girl character also dies with splashes of blood when she falls from a high iceberg. As noted, some playtesters were uncomfortable and shocked by the bloody death of cute characters. They were not expecting the violent death of the cute characters, and they were appalled by it. In Lowbrow art there often is a play between cute and grotesque imagery. I want to play with such juxtaposition of emotions because I want to repel against the cuteness of the main characters. As an illustrator, I often create cute characters for commercial purposes; but as a member of contemporary consumerist society, I feel jaded by constant bombardment by such aesthetic. Those cute characters emit positive emotions, but as a creator, I know that they want to sell me products or ideas. I might consume the products they promote, but the positive feelings they promise dissipate very quickly. That makes it hard to trust the characters, and as a result, I have an urge to destroy them – by killing them with a UFO, for example - or to expose their intents in my video game. The cuteness of the girl and the monster in *Twinkling Stars Above* gives positive feelings, but their sudden violent

deaths offset the cuteness, and dash the expectation of the audience for a simple positive experience.

The graphics of *Twinkling Stars Above* consist of textural and labour-intensive hand-drawn images using layers of paper, block printing, painting, smudges, etc. As shown in Figure 3.5, the background is painted with layers of ink and acrylic washes. The mountains and the ground are composed of paintings, smudges and mark-making. The letters were written with fountain pen. I have applied textural and painterly Lowbrow aesthetics to my video game graphics to play with the counter-intuitive idea of having a handmade aesthetics in a digital environment. I wanted to get away from the slickness of digital graphics. Perhaps I want to get away from working with computers too much altogether. I want tactile aesthetics and imperfections in my video game graphics. Maybe as a person living in a rapidly changing world, where new technology becomes obsolete within a year, I want to bring handmade tactility to digital aesthetics. Nevertheless, there again is a paradox in this feeling. I am still composing my work with the help of a computer and displaying my work in digital media. I simply cannot work without a computer. I cannot completely escape the zeitgeist. To my understanding, today's zeitgeist is technology. Humans have imperfections and to me, an art work without these imperfections seems cold and distant. Although I work within digital media, I still want to leave human imperfections in my art

work. Paint brush textures, ink splatters and smudges are my way of leaving human touches in video game graphics. Hand-made imperfections are intentional. In the article "Hand Made!", designer Kerry Roper states that "when something is created by hand I think it becomes more personal, more unique." (15) Like Roper, I also believe that imperfections add human touch and personality to my game graphics. The combination of hand-made imperfection and digital graphics is a reflection of the tension that is exist in high and low culture in Superflat. Additionally, it is a reflection of the tension between commercial and fine art in Lowbrow.



Figure 3.5: *Twinkling Stars Above*, 2011, an excerpt from the opening sequence 1280 X 720 pixels, Hyein Lee

Chapter 4: Conclusion and Contribution to the Field

4.1 Conclusion

My thesis project, *Playing with Lowbrow*, is the result of my investigation – possibly my immersion - in today's convergent media culture. As Henry Jenkins notes, the convergent culture impacts how a person consumes and produces media:

Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences. Convergence refers to a process, but not an endpoint. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other. (34)

Jenkins says that a person today consumes all kinds of media simultaneously. In turn, media convergence shapes how new media conglomerates produce media. In such a culture, content producers are also compelled to create content using multiple media. Being immersed in the convergent media culture, I have an affinity to, and desire to work within, multiple media. Having worked with motion graphics, comics, magazines and paintings, I wanted to expand my illustration practice by producing a video game.

I also wanted to play with the push and pull between American and Japanese popular culture. I am inspired by popular visual media such as animation, comics, etc. However, I want to juxtapose the cute and flat images typical of popular visual media with ridiculous narration and somber emotions. I also wanted to push against what is conventionally thought of as digital graphics – which are often slick and clean - by using layers of tactile textures. In my game graphics, I have incorporated a lot of textures and imperfections, which I believe adds personality and uniqueness.

Playing with Lowbrow attempts to apply Lowbrow art aesthetics to independent video game graphics. By doing so, I was able to experiment with a broad array of video game graphic styles, as opposed to the conventional, highly realistic style used in mainstream first-person shooter games. First-person shooter games graphics are mainly marketed to a certain population, males aged 13 to 25 (Ray 148). However, as a female gamer, I want to see wider variety of styles. I think that there is an opportunity for expanding the audience for video games by using a wider array of methods. It is good time to carry on this project now, because there is a lot of interest in independent and art video games. Such interest has been revived by the works of game developers such as Jenova Chen and Jason Rohrer. A game style experiment like *Twinkling Stars Above* can potentially lead to advances in merging contemporary art styles with

video games. By doing so, video game graphics can engage with contemporary art movements and display a wider variety of styles as a result.

4.2 Contribution to the Field

Twinkling Stars Above applies Lowbrow aesthetic to video game graphics. It engages with the medium of video games at a time when there is a revitalized interest in independent games. Projects like this give opportunities for us to think expansively about video game graphics while spreading the Lowbrow movement to an even more popular media than those with which it already is associated, namely comics, cartoons and painting.

There is little written on the subject of Lowbrow art. Agreeably, this is due to the lack of writing within the Lowbrow movement. It is a concern to me as a scholar because the movement should be documented or it could be forgotten in time. If the Lowbrow movement acquires a more extensive literature of reflective criticism, it will perhaps be better understood beyond the confines of its own subculture. Maybe Lowbrow artists' way of blurring the boundaries - between high and low art, cute and grotesque, humour and sadness – can tell us something about the age we live in,

when boundaries are blurred. To me, the boundaries between good and evil; commercial and fine art are blurred. This thesis is not exclusively about the Lowbrow movement; however, it can serve as a contribution to the body of writings devoted to Lowbrow.

Additionally, *Twinkling Stars Above* develops a hybrid form, fusing inspirations from Lowbrow and Superflat art with a video game. Its ambivalence lets the players experience Lowbrow art in interactive form. Enjoying Lowbrow aesthetics and narrative is the reward of playing this game. I also want to clarify that the game only contains the visual and narrative of Lowbrow, not game mechanics.

Chapter 5: Recommendations for Future Research

Lowbrow art will require much more internally reflective writing and critique before it is recognized by authorized art institutions and critics. Recognizing the lack of writing on this subject has compelled me to investigate deep into the social, cultural and historical background of the Lowbrow movement. I have also become aware of the effectiveness of self-critical writing on my own practice, for the reason that self-knowledge is important to an artist, just as it is to an art movement.

Expanding my practice to video game development has exposed me to many new artistic and design ideas and possibilities. In the future, I want to experiment with different and more complex game genres, such as adventure games and role playing games. As well, I intend to develop more levels for *Twinkling Stars Above* and eventually extend it to different devices, exposing it to a broader audience.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Kirsten. "Seattlest Interview: Kirsten Anderson, Founder and Owner of Roq La Rue Gallery." Seattlest 2005.
- Bearman, Joshuah. "Can D.I.Y. Supplant the First-Person Shooter?" New York Times November 15, 2009.
- Carrier, David. The Aesthetics of Comics. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.
- Chen, Jenova. "About Jenova Chen." (2010)
<<http://jenovachen.com/flowingames/jenovachen.htm>>.
- Clarke, Andy and Mitchell, Grethe, ed. Videogames and Art. UK: Intellect Books, 2007.
- Fagone, Jason. "The Video-Game Programmer Saving Our 21st-Century Souls." Esquire (November 2008).
- Ford, Barbara Brennan. "The Arts of Japan." The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 45.1, 1987.
- Gouskos, Carrie. "The Depths of the Uncanny Valley." Gamespot, July 8 2006. <<http://www.gamespot.com/features/6153667/index.html>>.
- Gray, Carole, and Julian Malins. Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004.

- Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, eds. Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Vol. 2. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.
- Hebdige, Dick, et al. © MURAKAMI. Illustrated Edition ed. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2007.
- Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. 7th ed. London, England: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1979.
- Hentschel, Martin. "From the Abstract to the Figurative: Philip Guston's Stony Path." <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/G/guston.html>>.
- Holmes, Tiffany. "Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre." (2003)
<<http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Holmes.pdf>>.
- Huber, William. "Some Notes on Aesthetics in Japanese Videogames." Videogames and Art. Ed. Andy Clarke and Mitchell Grethe. UK: Intellect Ltd, 2007. 211.
- Jenkins, Henry. "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence." International Journal of Cultural Studies, 2004. 7(1) .
- . "Games, the New Lively Art." Handbook of Computer Game Studies. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005. 175.
- Jordan, Matt Dukes. Weirdo Deluxe: The Wild World of Pop Surrealism & Lowbrow Art. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2005.
- Klein, Sheri. "The Desire for and Consumption of Cuteness." Art & Laughter. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2007. 111.

Krauss, Rosalind. "The Rock: William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection."

The Sharpest Point: animation at the end of cinema. Toronto: YYZ

Books, 2005

Laitinen, Sauli. "Better Games through Usability Evaluation and Testing."

Gamasutra: The Art & Business of Making Games (2005)

<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2333/better_games_through_usability.php>.

Laurel, Brenda, ed. Design Research: Methods and Perspectives. London, England: The MIT Press, 2003.

Licht, Alan. "Feature: Cory Arcangel." Art Review. London, England, Jan 2008.

Marziani, Alexandra Mazzanti Gianluca. Pop Surrealism: What a Wonderful World. New York: Drago, 2011.

Matsui, Midori. The Age of Micropop: The New Generation of Japanese Artists. Tokyo, Japan: Isamu Ito, 2007.

---. "Toward a Definition of Tokyo Pop: The Classical Transgressions of Takashi Murakami." Takashi Murakami: The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning. New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1999. 20.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1993.

McGuire, Rory. "Paper Burns: Game Design with Agile Methodologies." Gamasutra: The Art & Business of Making Games (2006)

- <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2742/paper_burns_game_design_with_.php>.
- Nintendo. (2011) <<http://www.nintendo.com>>.
- Murakami, Takashi, ed. Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture. New York, NY: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Nakamura, Eric, Wong, Martin, Giant Robot. California, US: Giant Robot, 1994.
- Napier, Susan J. Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation. London: Palgrave, 2000
- Nutt, Christian. "MIGS 2010: World of Goo Dev Tells Publishers to Create Indie Team within." Gamasutra: The Art & Business of Making Games (2010) <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/31432/MIGS_2010_World_Of_Goo_Dev_Tells_Publishers_To_Create_Indie_Team_Within.php>.
- Oldenburg, Claes. "I Am for an Art..." Pop. Ed. Mark Francis and Hal Foster. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005. 211.
- Pentakalos, Odysseas. "Proof-of-Concept Design." Skyscraper (January 2008) <<http://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/cc168618.aspx>>.
- Ploug, Kristine. "Art Games: An Introduction." (2005) <<http://www.artificial.dk/articles/artgamesintro.htm>>.
- Ray, Sheri Graner. Gender Inclusive Game Design; Expanding the Market. 1st ed. the United States of America: Charles River Media, Inc., 2004.

- Roper, Kerry. "Hand Made!" Computer Arts Project. Bath, UK: Future Publishing. February 2007.
- Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman, eds. The Game Design Reader. US: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006.
- Schnabel, J.L. "Elizabeth McGrath @Sloan Fine Art." Fecal Face (2009)
<<http://www.fecalface.com/SF/index.php/opening-photos/1543-elizabeth-mcgrath-sloan-fine-art>>.
- Schön, Donald. Educating the Reflective Practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- Seldes, Gilbert. The 7 Lively Arts. Unabridged edition. New York: Dover Publications, 1957.
- Sheffield, Brandon. "Opinion: Playing God - A Call For New Universe Creation In Games." Gamasutra. (March 25, 2010).
<http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/27391/Opinion_Playing_God_A_Call_For_New_Universe_Creation_In_Games.php>.
- Simons, Iain. Inside Game Design. London, UK: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2007.
- Stahl, Ted. "Video Game Genres." The History of Computing Project, (2008)
<<http://www.esquire.com/features/best-and-brightest-2008/future-of-video-game-design-1208-2>>.
- Surman, David. "Notes on Superflat and its Expression in Videogames."
(May 23rd 2008)

<<http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2008/05/23/notes-on-superflat-and-its-expression-in-videogames-david-surman/>>.

---. "Pokemon 151: Complicating Kawaii." Games of Locality: Gaming in the Asia-Pacific Region. Ed. D. Hjorth Chan L. London: 2009.

Tran, Minh Quang, and Robert Biddle. "Collaboration in Serious Game Development: A Case Study." Future Play '08 Proceedings of the 2008 Conference on Future Play: Research, Play, Share (2008).

Tedford, Matthew Harrison. "From New York: Feng Mengbo." Art Practical. (December 2010).

<http://www.artpractical.com/review/from_new_york_feng_mengbo>.

Williams, Robert, Juxtpoz. California, US: High Speed Productions, 1994.

Windolf, Jim. "Addicted to Cute." Vanity Fair December 2009: 168.

Zimmerman, Eric. "Do Independent Games Exist?" The History and Culture of Videogames (2002)

<<http://www.ericzimmerman.com/texts/indiegames.html>>

---. "Tell Me, what is Not a "Fake" Experience?" Pre-Specifics: Some Comparatistic Investigations on Research in Design and Art. Ed. Vera Buhlmann and Martin Wiedmer. Zurich: JPR Ringier, 2008. 129.

---. "Thinkpiece." Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games (2001)

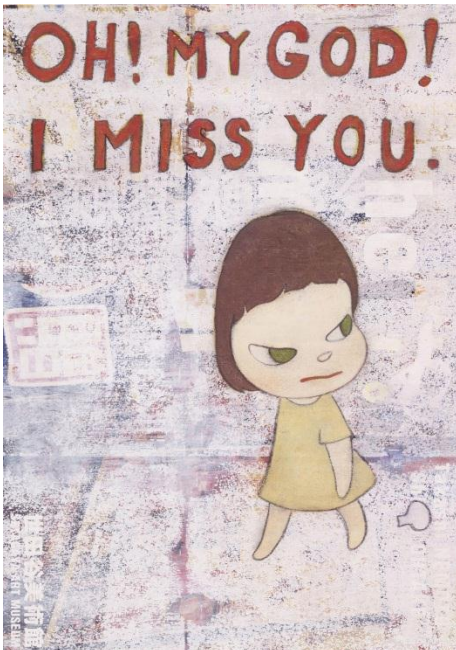
<<http://www.ericzimmerman.com/texts/thinkpiece.html>>.

Appendix A. Visual Reference

Superflat Artists



Takashi Murakami, *And Then And Then And Then And Then*, 1996
Acrylic on canvas mounted on board Two panels 110 x 119 inches
©Murakami, Schimmel, 2007



Yoshitomo Nara, *Oh! My God! I Miss You*, 2001
Acrylic and pencil on printed paper, 20 X 14.25 inches
Yoshitomo Nara: *Nobody's Fool*, Asia Society Museum In Association with Abrams, New York, 2010



Aya Takano, *Land of Sodom and Gomorrah*, 2006
 acrylic on canvas, 71 X 89 inches
 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., Museum Frieder Burda, 2010
<http://www.museum-frieder-burda.de>

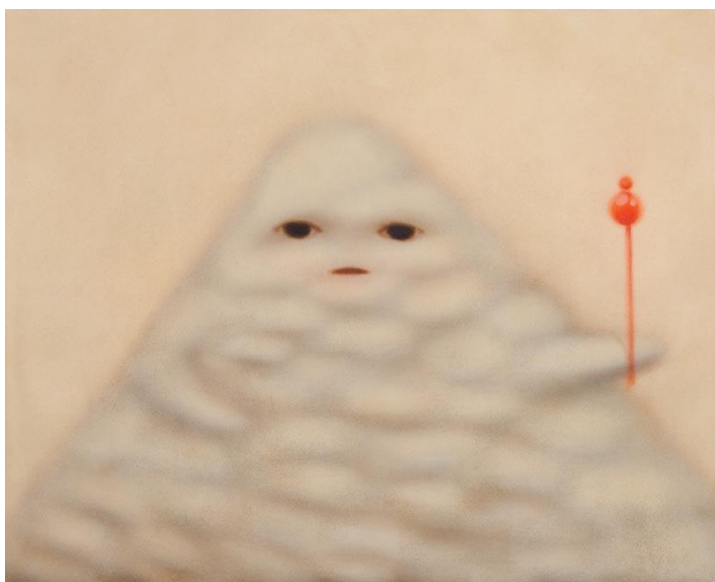


Chiho Aoshima, *City Glow*, 2005
 Digital, Size unlimited
 Chiho Aoshima/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., 2005
<http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp>

Lowbrow Artists



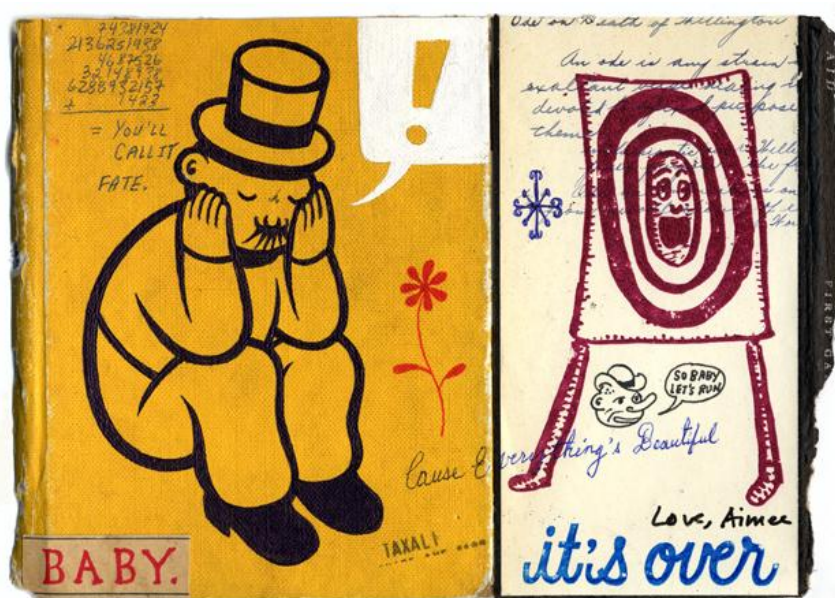
Roman Klonek, *The Gardener*, 2010, Woodcut, 19 X 26 inches
www.klonek.de



Friends With You, *Cloud Being II*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 40 X 40 inches
www.friendswithyou.com

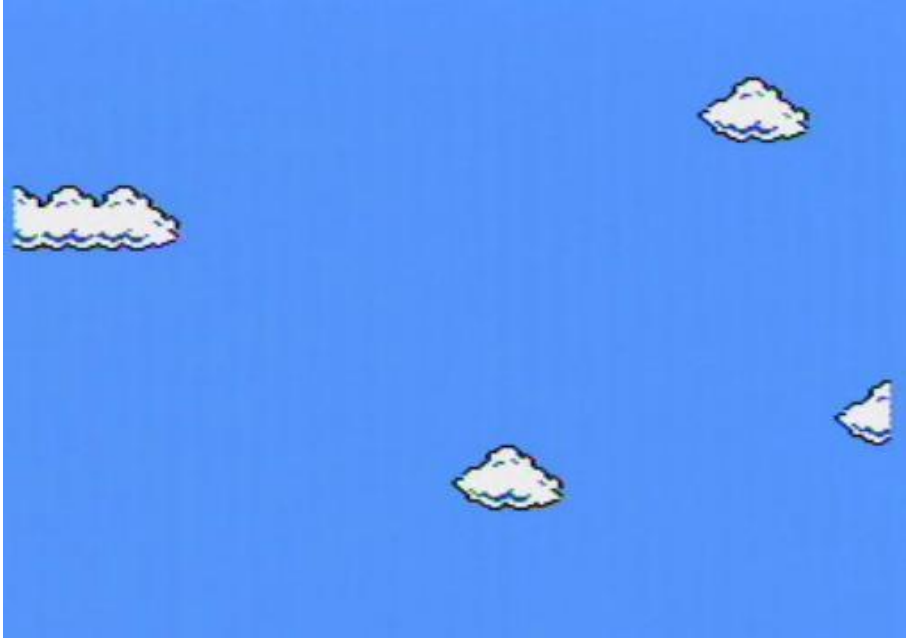


Tim Biskup, #253, 2007, Cel-vinyl acrylic on watercolour paper, 3 X 2.5 inches
www.timbiskup.com



Gary Taxali, Baby, It's Over, Mixed media, 8.5 X 6 inches
www.garytaxali.com

Selected Videogame References



Cory Arcangel, *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002
Digital, Size unlimited
<http://www.coryarcangel.com>



Feng Mengbo, *Long March: Restart*, 2010
Digital, Size unlimited
Photo by Matthew Septimus
Museum of Modern Arts PS1
<http://ps1.org/exhibitions/view/320>



Keita Takahashi, *Katamari Damacy*, 2004

DVD cover, 11 X 17.5 inches

<http://www.uvula.jp> (Keita Takahashi's official website)



Jason Rohrer, *Passage*, 2007

Digital, Size unlimited

<http://hcssoftware.sourceforge.net/passage> (Jason Rohrer's official website)



Jenova Chen, *Flower*, 2009

Digital, Size unlimited

<http://thatgamecompany.com/games/flower> (Jenova Chen's official website)



Jonathan Blow, *Braid*, 2006
Digital, Size unlimited
<http://www.braid-game.com>



Nintendo, *Super Mario Bros.*, 1985
Digital, 256 X 254 pixels
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Mario_Bros.

Appendix B. DVD of Game Prototypes and Play Testing Data

The following accompanying material is available upon request from the Ontario College of Art & Design Library:

1. Twinkling Stars Above (Videogame prototype)
The file name of this game is "twinkling.exe"
2. Infection (Videogame prototype)
The file name of this game is "Infectionv8.exe"
3. Loneliness Is (Video documentation of interactive installations)
The file name of the videos are "Loneliness_Is_1.mov" and "Loneliness_Is_2.mov"
4. Eek (Digital toy)
The file name of this toy is "Barf.exe"
5. Toi (Digital toy)
The file name of this toy is "HelloWorld.exe"
6. Playtesting data (March and July 2011 playtest)
The file names of the data are "numbers.pdf" and "numbers.jpg"

All the game prototypes and digital toys run on PC.

Anyone requesting the material may view it in the OCAD Library or pay to have it copied for personal use.