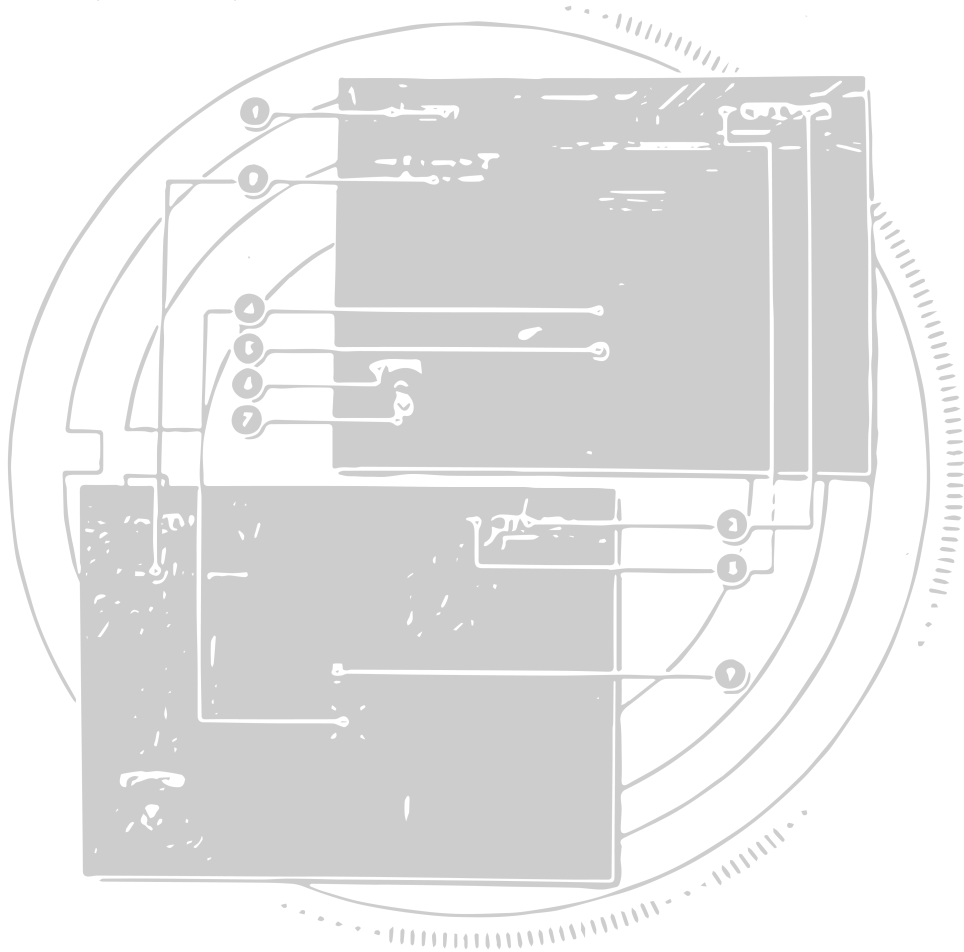


RYKER C. WOODWARD

PAINTING

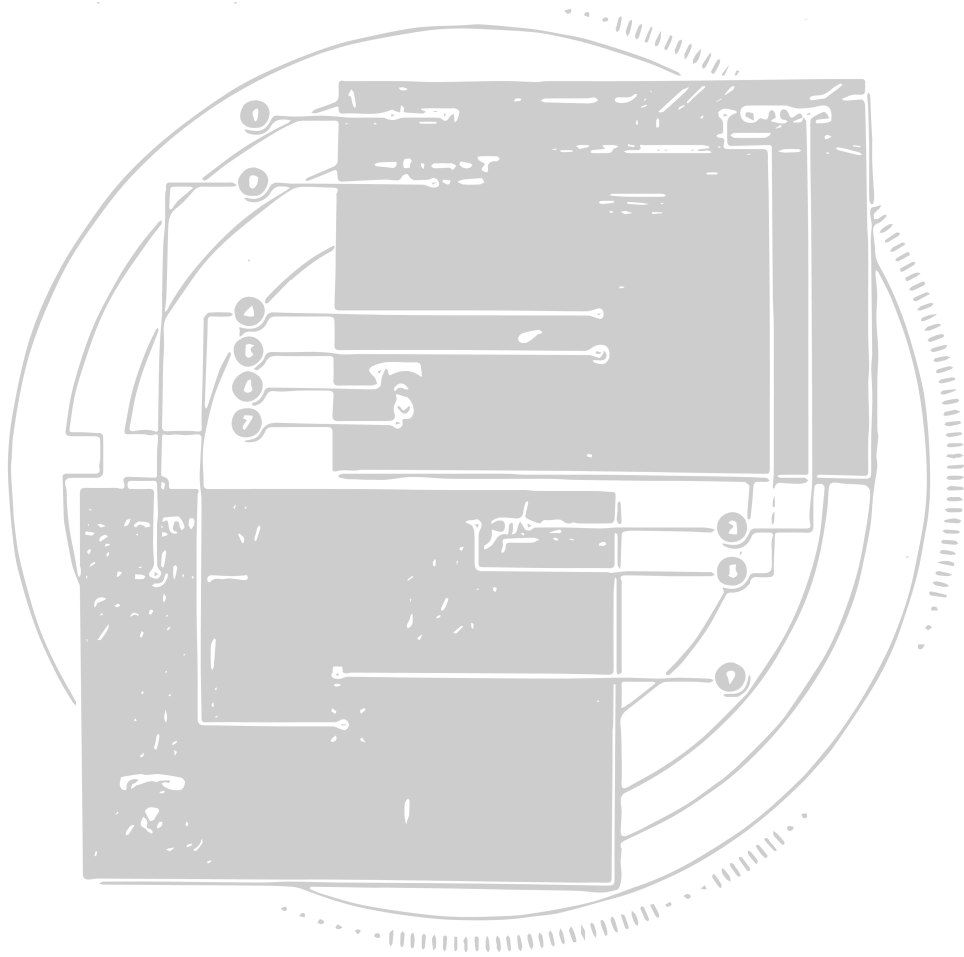
"MULTIPLAYER"

SPRING 2022



RACHEL WOLF

ARTIST STATEMENT.

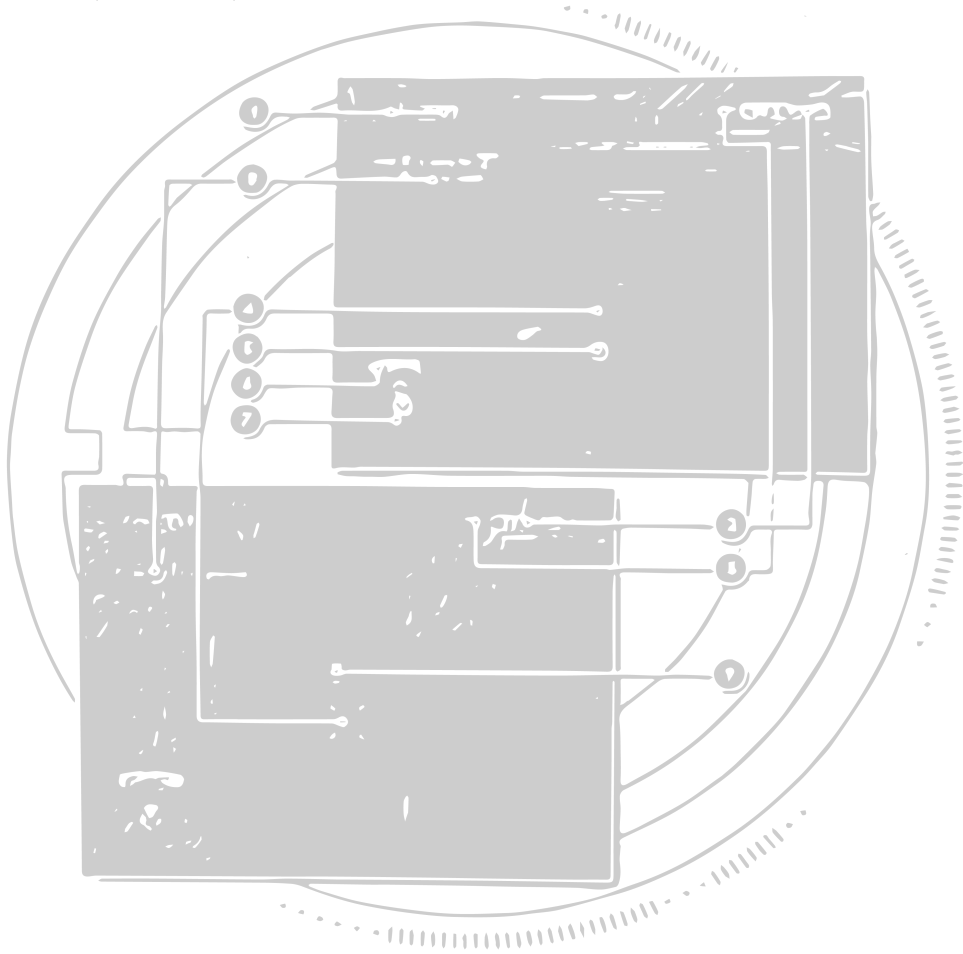


RYKER WOODWARD

Artist statement

My paintings show the importance of video games to art and culture. Through nostalgia and video game iconography I document the era of early online console gaming. Painting these games in oil paint on canvas brings them into a fine art context which connects gamers and non-gamers as viewers of art. When I bring the digital constructions of the games into a physical medium, you get a better sense of the artistry within them. My painting process is heavily focused on research and development through research of art history and traditional painting studies while also playing with my own style that is shaped by my history in abstract art.

PROPOSAL



RYKER WOODWARD

Thesis Proposal

Multiplayer

Where would I be without video games? I find that I reflect on this question a lot more as I grow older. Connecting with like minded people playing games I love is how I've met some of the closest friends I have. How I have learned to connect with people is shaped so much by the games that I grew up playing.

This theme is significant to me because of the social and collaborative aspect of video games that has created many of the most important connections in my life. I believe that showing this medium in such a close and personal way will allow the material to reach a wider audience. In working with games that are very memorable to me I will be able to reach my peers in new ways as well.

My vision for the project will be gallery style showing of video game paintings. I will be depicting multiplayer moments on canvases ranging in sizes. The diversity of size and scale is important because it communicates various levels of importance and consistency for which motifs I use. For example: there will be a painting composed of four smaller canvases emulating split-screen multiplayer of days past. While on display, this piece will show four players together on a multiplayer map, the position of each player will tell a different side of the same story.

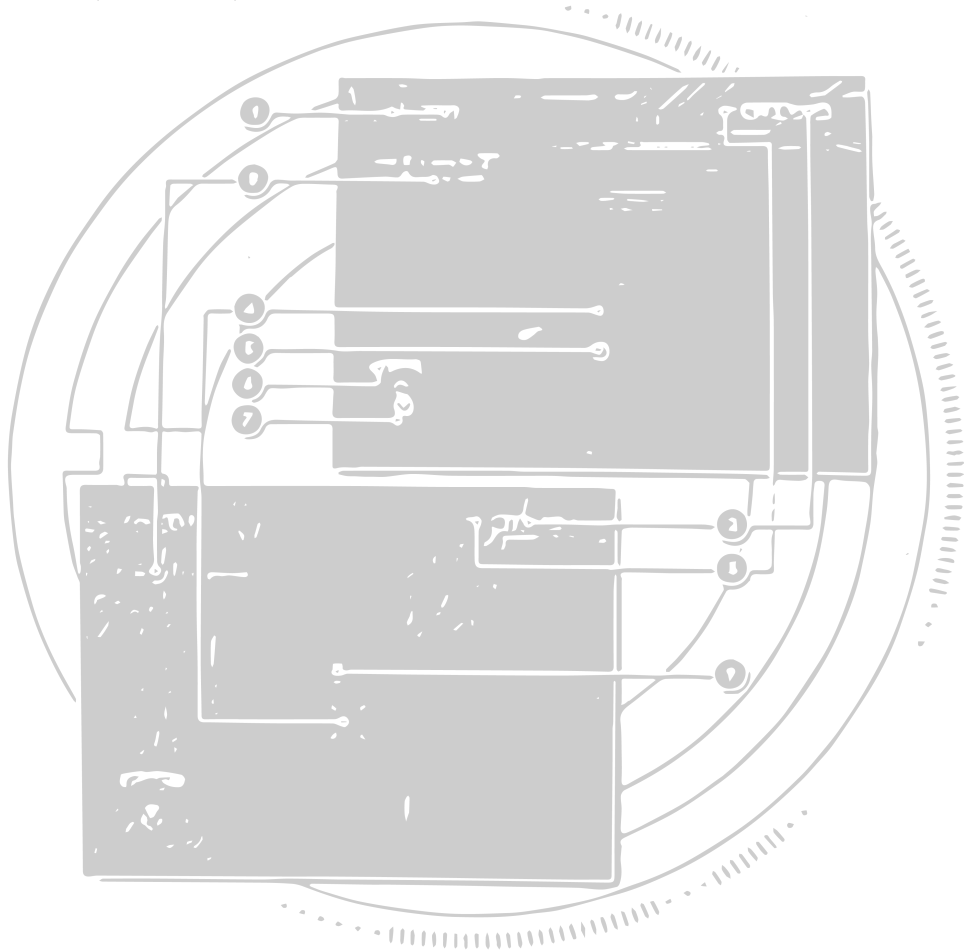
The medium I will be using to paint these pieces will be oils, the medium with the most prestige in the fine art world. It's important to me to connect the historical canon of fine art to video game culture through such a well known medium because video games are seen as low brow. Painting an iconic character from video game culture in oil paints instantly challenges what should be represented in painting and it puts gaming in the same historical context.

The images I will paint will be sourced from actual matches I have played online or with friends. It is important to me to preserve accuracy of the experience one gets while engaging with friends in a game. Another series of paintings of popular multiplayer maps. These pieces will be painted directly from the images used during a loading screen before a match since this is the most recognizable image of the maps.

My painting process is heavily focused on research and development. Ludology, game theory, and traditional painting studies are the main topics of research I'm using to develop this project. Various Youtube videos and online journals are a tool I'm using as well to find new ideas about video games and art.

To keep it brief, I have found something that I am happy creating. I will be taking inspiration from video games that have shaped me in positive ways to create paintings. The scope of this project is new and exciting and I feel confident in my skills as an artist to create a unique gallery experience. The medium of oil paint is still being explored as a valid means of creative expression and I think it is still relevant as ever. Making the canonical connection between videogames and high art, as well as the emotional depth one can have with the medium is the through line here. I'm charting new territory here for myself and for art as a whole.

THESES ABSTRACT.

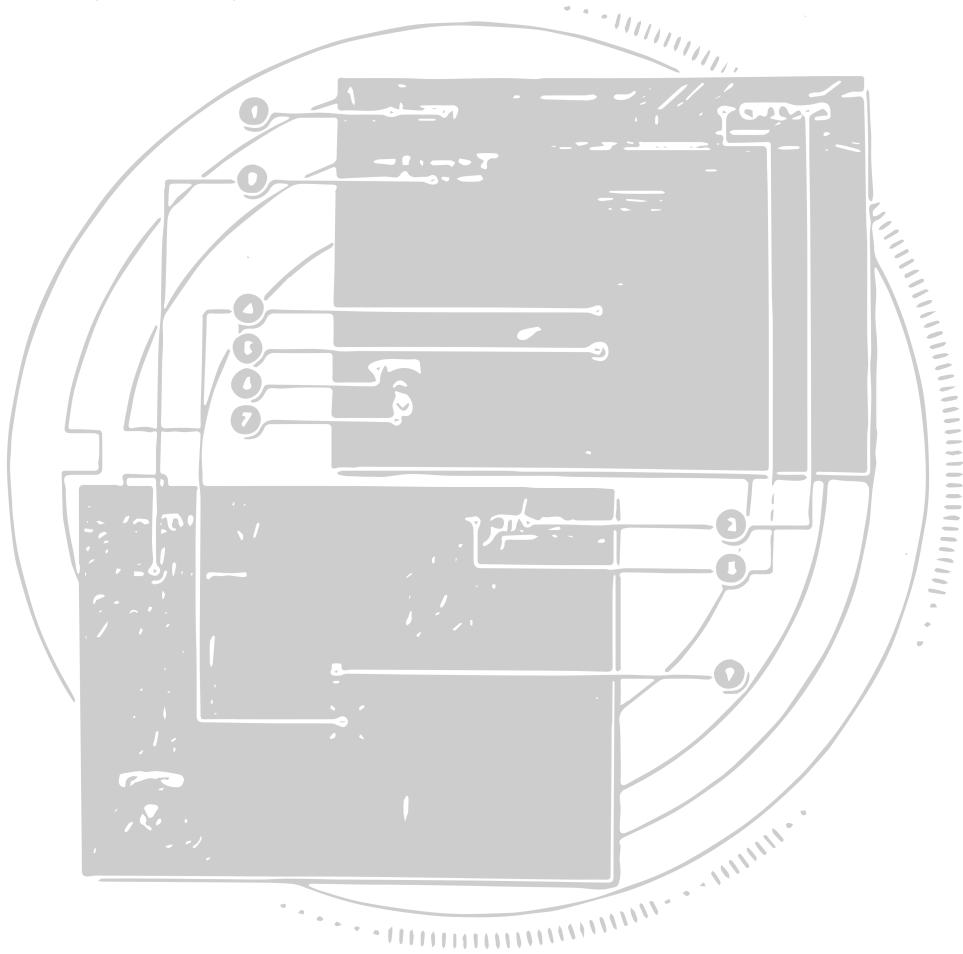


RYKER WOODWARD

Abstract

For the past 14 weeks I've worked on defining what it means to me to be both: An artist and a gamer. The work I've produced during this time calls into question where games exist in the art world and where the setting of the white wall gallery is headed. In an ever evolving landscape full of new digital technologies and experiences curated for art, I have tasked myself with moving oil painting forward into the next wave of video game art as well as pushing new avenues for the discussion of games as art. By working with traditional analogue mediums and settings, I'm materializing in paintings the digital images that I see while playing games, where they can be read and critically analyzed through the painting lense. My rejection of the contemporary digital space in art is rooted in my questioning of new art technology and reflecting on oil painting's importance by playing with the hierarchy of artistic mediums, subject matter, and my sense of community around gaming where I've built my deepest interpersonal relationships.

ORAL DEFENSE.



RYKER WOODWARD

Thesis Oral Presentation Script: v3.43 (5-8-2022)

Ryker Woodward. BFA (PA/DR).

Rachel Wolf, Mentor.

Part One:

Hello everyone and welcome to my thesis defense. Thank you all for coming today, special thanks to the panel here today as well as my family, friends, and everyone else who made it to my presentation. For the past 14 weeks I've worked on defining what it means to me to be both: An artist and a gamer. The work I've produced during this time calls into question where games exist in the art world and where the setting of the white wall gallery is headed. In an ever evolving landscape full of new digital technologies and experiences curated for art, I have tasked myself with moving oil painting forward into the next wave of video game art as well as pushing new avenues for the discussion of games as art. By working with traditional analogue mediums and settings, I'm materializing in paintings the digital images that I see while playing games, where they can be read and critically analyzed through the painting lense. My rejection of the contemporary digital space in art is rooted in my questioning of new art technology and reflecting on oil painting's importance by playing with the hierarchy of artistic mediums, subject matter, and my sense of community around gaming where I've built my deepest interpersonal relationships.

This need for community is universal and by displaying the games I love connected to the group of people that support me, this shifts the preconceived notions of gaming as an isolated experience. My focus on this project was really clear to me coming off of the proposal semester. Everything was solid and defined, but the variance within the subject matter that I set my focus

on left opportunity for play and discovery to unfold throughout this semester. At the beginning of the 14 weeks, I was working on painting landscapes from games of iconic maps and locations. This was a rejection of the tradition of painting “en plein air” by composing and painting landscapes directly from a game indoors. In-game, I walk around the maps by myself, reflecting on composition, game design, and recognizable views of the map that anyone who has played the game would immediately recognize. In turn, I would take screenshots and crop them afterwards to fit the aspect ratio of the canvas I had prepared for painting. Working from these screenshots presented its own set of challenges. Because a 2d image can feel flat or unsatisfying, it gives me the ability to craft the picture into the final image that I feel would work best.

Part Two:

This exhibition is composed of over twenty paintings, one sculpture, a sound collage, and my gaming setup. This exhibition expands past painting into a multimedia experience that creates an immersive world for the audience to look into my own library, drawing upon the games that I grew up with that become my sources for inspiration. All of these games were accessible for me to work with and experiment in the studio. I helped create an environment in the studio where art and gaming can be fluidly picked up and engaged with. Both my studio mate and I removed the wall between us to open up the space to create a larger hub for us to collaborate and interact together with our art practice in an open studio. Through our time in the studio, we developed an educational web of ideas where we could share ideas and easily go back and forth between sharing our projects. This sense of cooperation helped establish my role in the studio as an artist and collaborator. This ease of collaboration made room for each of us to share

our projects openly but also refine our own vision on our own time for the final product that we each produced.

The through line in the work is community and my role in the games that I play. I do not physically appear in almost all of the work here except for one painting, however, my presence is still there in each artwork. I'm present in the characters that I play as, the brushstrokes in the paintings, and the physical objects here that I use to play the games. The gaming setup here is my own. It's the most direct way I could think of to bring my passion for gaming to my audience. Long before I was a senior in thesis, I would joke with my friends that I would bring a setup into a gallery and play video games for the entirety of my thesis. Instead I did it for an entire semester in my studio. This air of humor and rejection of what was expected of me would come to be the basis for my entire project.

Here, in these red chairs with a controller in hand, I've spent countless hours with my friends playing video games together over the course of my entire time here at PNCA. This is where we forged our strongest bonds and raged the most intense battles. The game console is mine and it's the same console that I used to bring to Smash club that I hosted here at PNCA in the library. I started the club as a way to introduce my friends to the game I love, as well as find new competition. the setup is a connection point for new people to meet and play Smash together, just like it was with my friends. Early on, while thinking of ways to integrate gaming into the exhibition, I felt that having someone come up to me and say: "We should get together and play games sometime" would've been a missed opportunity to connect. So here it is today for all of us to meet, connect, and play together.

The orange controller displayed on the podium is also an extension of the gaming setup. It's not just any controller you can go out and buy; however, it's my controller. This controller is

used to hone my skills as a player and competitor. It's assisted in producing amazing combos, devastating losses and lasting tournament victories. Now it is the last remaining piece here that is still a living work in progress. Its final day is unknown. Within the controller there are thousands of hours of focused efforts to learn and improve at games as well as the history of support and friendship from my friends and peers from tournaments. Here in the exhibition it is presented as the art object, but outside of these walls and off the podium, it is my controller where Its orange shell signals imminent doom. Much like this project I've put together around you, There's an innocence to its design that is a reminder to play and to have fun.

One of my favorite paintings that I've created this semester is *Blood Gulch*. *Blood Gulch* is a first person perspective of the Halo multiplayer map. The viewer is put into the painting overlooking the curious gorge from a cliff's edge. I chose this particular location because of its view of the blue team's base and it's also where the sniper spawns on the map shown through the weapon the player is holding. Not only is it a landscape, it also puts anyone viewing the piece into the role of the gamer. The small details of the heads up display showing the life bar and ammo reserves, remind the viewer that this is a game and that there is an assumed presence of other players through the small base shown off in the distance but here the player is left alone in a map suited for 8 or more players. In an arena designed for action and team combat, what is left when it's just you pondering the natural geography of the location and the silent wind blowing across the trees? After the creation of this piece, my friends wanted to visit the location within the game together to see where the piece was made, changing the function of the map once again into a place to experience art and my own art making process.

A standout pairing of artworks are the three pieces that tie together the themes of my personal community around Super Smash Bros into paintings. On the wall in the top left is the

piece titled: *Two Gamers* which depicts my friend Connor and I mid match in super smash bros with the wires of the controllers that lead off the canvas. It guides the eye down to the two animal crossing villagers fighting in smash. This is an homage to my early days of playing smash seriously with my friend, Chris in San Diego. We both loved using the same character, Villager, to play vs each other on the same map. This also operates as a double reference to the early days of playing Smash with Connor. Starting out as friends and playing the same two characters of villager again. Immediately next to this piece is *Cloud and Donkey Kong, a piece* which is another representation of Connor and I, but larger scale signifying friendship growth and skill growth. In this piece we see Cloud Strife of *Final Fantasy VII* coming down with a heavy attack on an unknowing Donkey Kong, who is about to be hit for massive damage.

Part Three:

This exhibition is a complete experience with each artwork here functioning as a contact point for my own gaming world. I'm asking a lot of the audience to come up and participate with the games here to play. The sound piece is here to serve as a reference point to what it's like to be in the middle of all of these games as well as the actual feeling of what it's like being at a tournament with multiple games being run at the same time. I sourced the sounds you hear from the games shown on the walls as well as matches I actually played, tying in the physicality of the game and controller once again. It also functions as an abstract timeline of where I started as a young gamer on the Nintendo Gameboy and how my path has evolved and changed as I grew older and started to branch out into the competitive scene.

My journey as a competitive gamer started around the same time I started seriously focusing on art. I was young and willing to play versus the best that were out there. Gaming

taught me to be relentless with the pursuit of improving my skills and it also taught me to pursue challenges outside of my comfort zone. I've entered tournaments and placed dead last more times than I can count, but the fire to come back every day to move up the rankings keeps me inspired. My passion to play a game at the highest level I can achieve keeps me focused and the same can be said for my passion for painting.

The vision of this project developed from me wanting to subvert what was expected of me. Being an abstract artist primarily before this year, I wanted a project that would challenge me and push me in a new direction with my art. My paintings before this were composed with darker and moodier palettes with complex shapes and forms. The subject matter of games opened me up to working traditionally with figurative content and more saturated color palettes. My plan was to find a theme or subject that would keep my attention for an entire semester. I have never worked on a large scale project like this before so I wanted the whole semester's worth of painting to be a time where I can create artwork that I love and make work that I have always wanted to see. So why video games? Over the years I've created artworks based on games here and there as jokes. They were always something that I thought were funny and ridiculous. Why on earth would I waste time and paint making a painting of that? It throws all of the importance and prestige of oil painting out the window... or does it? See here I am thinking that games aren't worth painting when exactly the opposite is true. Games have been in my life forever and they have led me to the closest relationships that I have in my life.

Part Four:

The artists that are at the forefront of the genres, new media and game art, base their work on the games they grew up playing. The past generation of game artists is defined by the

low resolution graphics of early limited hardware. These artists have laid the groundwork of introducing the concept to art as well as starting the conversation about games and art. Today I am part of the new wave of artists defined by online console gaming and improved 3d graphics. Growing up with a controller in hand and a headset on talking to people across the world was my multiplayer gaming experience and it introduced me to the social aspect of engaging with other people that share the same passion for the games that I do. What's exciting now is gaming and esports have a history that's being documented by artists like me that are doing this with a passion to push the field of art and culture that we are now entering into as adults.

The artist, Feng Mengbo, uses the game *Quake 3* as the source for some of his most famous new media game artworks. By modifying the files in the game he places himself into the role of the main character and documents the work through lenticular paintings and experimental video montages. I look up to his own tournament that he hosted in order to find players better than him and if anyone who beat him during the events won massive prizes. This integration of competition and player persona is super influential to me and is one of the touchstones for my own paintings of competition and it serves as one of the major inspirations for the inclusion of the game setup here.

The inclusion of the ready-made artworks of my controller and game setup is an homage to one of my favorite artists, Marcel Duchamp. His idea of the pre existing manufactured object defined as art by an artist is referenced in the sculptural pieces here, except it is pushed further by the history that each object holds. There are objective ways to track the time I've invested in each piece through in-game clocks that track the time I've been playing the games on the console as well as the controller I've used. Duchamp is also a known gamer. During the later part of his

life, he quit art to play chess full time. His love of the game led him to an obsession with mastery and often he would muse about the beauty of the game of chess and its intricacies.

My research this semester was really focused on painting technique and what has been established with how video games are being used in the art sphere. I looked at artists like Kristopher Zetterstrand, Emma Stern, and Jesse Morsberger primarily for how their technique and process is creating images similar to what I was looking to make. These artists I would classify as my contemporaries, their work is obviously leading the field in some shape or form. I even reached out to Jesse to talk about paint techniques and he gave a lot of really useful information for painting on color interaction, blending, and layering paint. The notes that he sent me were a point of reference for me whenever I got stuck. There's a few airbrush artists as well, Gao Hang and Chris Renger also use the forms and figures from games to handle their medium successfully.

My role within this project is the painter, gamer, and curator of content. I chose to select a pool of games to draw inspiration from that represented my experience through gaming as a community and means of expression. The games I painted have served as a connection point between my friends and they are still games I play today. Several drawings and sketches were made beforehand to format myself for the final piece. It's traditional and every step of the process is carefully considered. Once I was comfortable with working from the digital image to create paintings, I started to work with the video editing capabilities in the software to go back after playing a few matches and create dynamic compositions that capture the energy of what it's like to play the game.

From the very beginning of the project, this body of work was created with the final destination of all of these paintings appearing in a gallery setting. My goal was to use the prestige of the medium of oil paint to elevate the world of gaming into a new art setting where it can be seen as something different than its usual context of being seen on a screen. This work exists in the new territory of “video game art”. This genre has emerged in response to the impact that games have had on mainstream culture. The difference between the art that I make and the concept art that goes into producing games is my work is in response to the effects that the games I’ve played have had on culture and my life. Expressing my passion through this body of work has continued the process of connecting me to other people who I had no idea were gamers. Exposing this work to online communities as well has also created a sort of legitimacy within myself and what I do. I get messages from people who have never considered the games they love as art and now their perception is changed and influenced by my paintings.

The genres of pop art and fanart are two very common genres that one can fit this work into. While I do not see myself under this definition of art, this rejection of formal representation works in line and the embrace of modern mainstream culture with the pop-art movement. I also don’t align with the definition of fan art as the singular defining term for these works. My intent within defining these boundaries establishes a floor in which this work can be discussed. There are existing ceilings that shape the discourse of video games and the role they currently play in contemporary art and I want to push the conversation forward. Because of my intention to present the paintings in a fine art context I think this gives me the ability to define the work as “video game painting”.

Using the vocabulary of video games I am speaking to gamers directly in a way that is layered. Through the medium of oil painting I’m also speaking directly to the history of fine art

and poking fun at the seriousness of oil painting. My work is for gamers and painters alike, presented in a language that they understand, but offered in a setting and context that brings new ideas into both worlds. Both viewers will see inside jokes and references that will add a new layer to the viewing experience of the exhibition. My goal is also to speak to the audience that isn't familiar with painting or gaming and to shift preconceived notions of these worlds that I coinhabit. For me games and painting are not isolating or worthless time wastes. They are artistic, community based worlds that offer a space for anyone to express themselves, learn how to be your best self, and to keep fighting even when you're knocked down the hardest.

Each game has its own unique art style that presented me with its own challenge to translate into the medium of oil painting. The cartoony and friendly world of Pokemon has to be treated differently than the Multiplayer maps of Halo. There are several stylistic shifts that I had to adhere to. When painting games from earlier years there were graphic limitations that the games themselves had as well that I wanted to accurately work into a piece. I wanted to remain true to the image that I see on screen as well as respect the history of the painted image and the history of composition and form that goes into making an image "correct". This attention to detail and references could only be achieved through my years of studying art history and painting. My own immersion and knowledge of gaming culture is also an invaluable tool here, enabling me to define the almost esoteric language used in the gaming communities I'm painting and that I am a part of. I wanted these paintings to be tied exclusively to my personal library of games for authenticity of what it is I'm trying to express here.

I aimed to include paintings that touched on my competitive journey as a gamer depicting the environments of tournaments for the game Super Smash Bros. I didn't find the right piece to capture the same energy that I felt when I was going to tournaments. I am now two years out

from being an active member in the smash community because of the global pandemic of 2020. Because so much time is between then and now, I think that played a large part in my feelings toward creating those works.

Part Five:

This project challenged my habit of keeping my worlds of art making and gaming separate for so long. I couldn't keep the two separate and expect this project to be generative. Once I decided that the two should merge, it shifted how I play games and how I paint permanently. I was playing games to create art and the games became an extension of my studio practice. I already spend so much time in the studio playing games as it is so why not use it as a tool.

In the past, I've struggled with consistency in the studio. My work sometimes felt close to being resolved but never quite there. I was mainly operating with the intention of only getting good at painting without letting myself explore the fun. There's a quick path to burnout that occurs when I'm only searching for the next step to improve. I wasn't taking time to enjoy the journey in my past studio practice, it was a case of making something good or not making anything at all. My mentality wasn't working and I only escaped it by applying the lessons of improvement that I was given through the gaming community. The wisdom passed down from each generation of the top players taught me how to dive into my own limitations and readjust what my own mentality can do to help me learn and grow.

There's an emotional responsibility that one has to take in order to move into the highest level of whatever it is you want to do and In this sense, gaming and painting are one in the same. They both offer me a series of high-skill, high-reward situations that challenge my current

experience to see if I am able to perform. In order to prepare myself for this semester, I treated painting and the artmaking process as I would any serious tournament or match that I would prepare for. Practice is a crucial part of the early stages of a piece and refining that practice to produce the right image with the respect for my materials and subject matter was integral for this exhibition to work.

This project also taught me to embrace the cringe that is associated with gaming culture. There is no work-around for what people will think when you say “I’m making video game artwork”. Their idea of what I’m doing is probably along the lines of doritos and mountain dew fueled chaos. I knew it was an uphill battle from the very beginning, so I leaned all the way in and embraced the gaming culture. If I was doubtful of myself in my art because of someone else's opinion of what I’m doing, none of this would work. I have the utmost confidence that these artworks are the best I’ve ever made and I’ve never been more proud to say that I am a gamer. From waiting in line for a midnight launch, road tripping across the Mojave desert to visit a location from Fallout New Vegas in real life, and staying up all night with my girlfriend playing Gauntlet Legends, video games have provided me with important relationships, the best times of my life.

This semester has taught me a lot about myself and what I want to do as an artist moving forward. My own evolution has made me analyze myself and get to the core of what legacy I want to leave behind. This project is a form of self preservation through my own history in gaming and this is a body of work that I can continue to produce and refine moving forward in my art career. There are still several paintings and ideas that I want to include in the show that I didn't have the time to make. At the start of this semester I brainstormed on what games I wanted to paint from and there are still hundreds of drawings and sketches leftover that will serve as

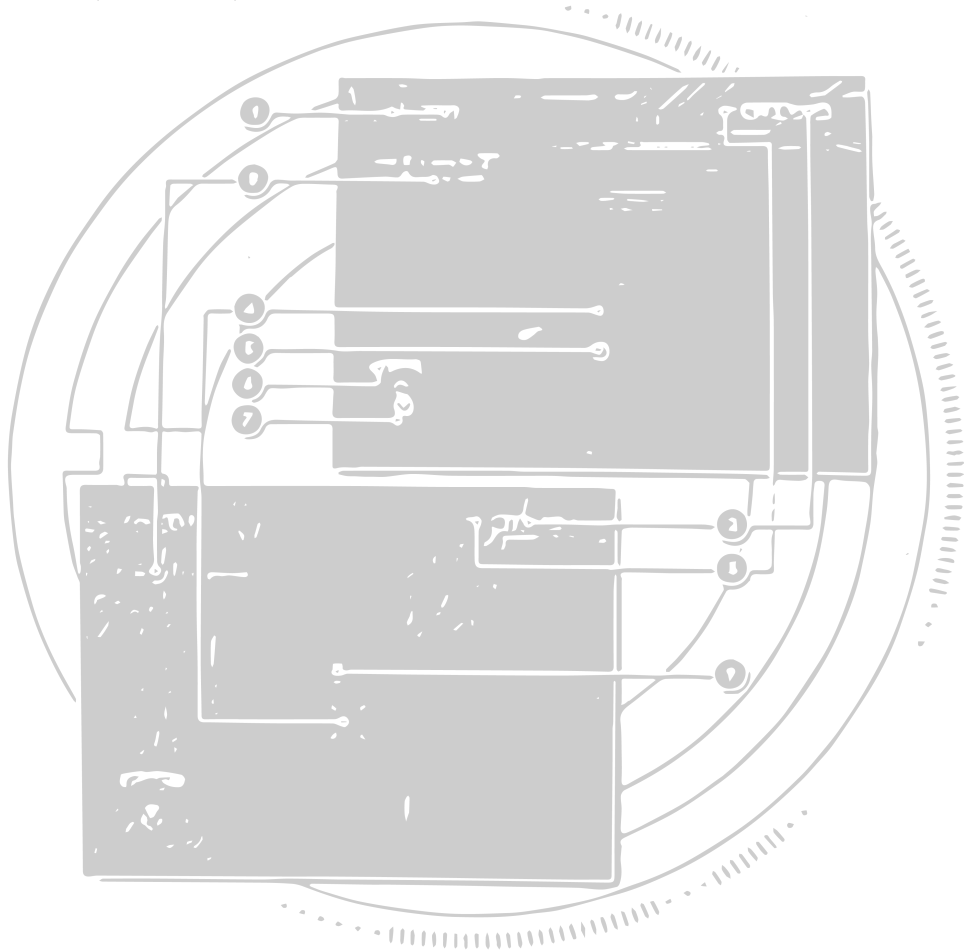
starting points once again moving forward after this semester. This process of painting is rewarding and there's been an incredible response to it all from my peers and from random people online. I hope to pivot from being a known competitor in my scene to being an artist.

This art process also helps overcome my own artist block by working through it on the search for subject matter, with games being the center piece. This level of introspection connected to my personal passions has opened up new ideas of using games as forms of art making tools as an avenue of artistic expression. Diving into the code of games, as well as altering what is seen or not seen, creates an unnatural quality while playing video games that further abstracts the experience into digital artistic expression. Controlling the layering process and creating from compositions that I've modified through code, could tap into my history of collage and abstraction.

Thank you for giving me your time and attention today. I'm super proud of all the work I've done this semester. I couldn't have finished the fight without the support of all of you. So thank you again.

I will now be taking questions...

BIBLIOGRAPHY.



RYKER WOODWARD

Bibliography

- Bayles, David, and Ted Orland. *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. Image Continuum Press, 1993.
- Bohm, David Joseph. *On Dialogue: David Bohm*. Routledge, 1996.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1977.
- Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1999.
- Elkins, James. *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Hiler, Hilaire. *Notes on the Technique of Painting*. New York: Watson-Guption, 1969.
- Lynch, David. *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*. TarcherPerigee, 2016.
- Thorpe, Patrick. *The Art of Halo Infinite*. Dark Horse Books, 2020.

Video Games

Atari Games, Midway Games. *Gauntlet Legends*. Atari Games, Midway Games. Sega Dreamcast. 1998.

Bandai Namco Studios, Sora ltd. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*. Nintendo. Switch. 2018

Bungie. *Halo: Combat evolved*. Microsoft. Xbox, 2001.

Bungie. *Halo 2*. Microsoft. Xbox. 2004.

Bungie. *Halo 3*. Microsoft. Xbox. 2007.

Facepunch Studios. *Garry's Mod*. Valve. PC. 2006.

Game Freak. *Pokemon Silver*. Nintendo. Gameboy Advance. 2000.

Game Freak. *Pokemon Ruby*. Nintendo. Gameboy Advance. 2003.

Game Freak. *Pokemon LeafGreen*. Nintendo. Gameboy Advance. 2004.

HAL Laboratory. *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. Nintendo. GameCube. 2001.

Id Software. *Quake*. PC. 1996.

Infinity Ward. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. Activision. Xbox 360. 2009.

Mojang. *Minecraft*. Microsoft. Xbox One, Switch, PC. 2011.

Soggy Science. *Inside My Mind*. Ooze inc. PC. 2022.

Valve. *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*. Valve. PC. 2012.

