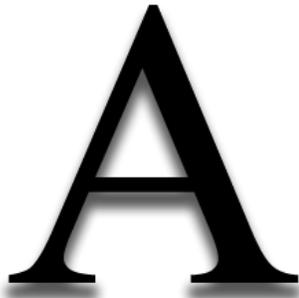# Arteroids, Poetry and the Flaw

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Arteroids, Poetry and the Flaw

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[rteroids](#) is a literary shoot-em-up for the Web, a work of software art and various odd literary devices. You use the arrow keys to drive your blood-red id-entity word 'poetry' or 'desire' (or whatever word you choose) around the full screen and use the 'x' key to shoot blue and green texts that assail you at various velocities and densities as you play. It is the battle of poetry against itself and the forces of dullness.

The piece contains a 'play mode' and a 'game mode'. In 'play mode', players/wreaders have more control over the situation. They can be 'deathless', in which case the texts cannot hurt them; they can compose/save/retrieve the opposing texts (and their own id-entity text) in 'Word for Weirdos'; they can change the velocity and density of the opposing texts; and they can adjust the amount of fictive 'friction' they experience while driving the id-entity.

In 'game mode', however, if one of the opposing texts touches the player's id-entity, the player explodes in a circular spray of letters. You play with what you're dealt in 'game mode' and *cannot* advance among the game's 216 levels without successfully maxing out the 'meanometer', which is done by polishing off sufficiently many of the opposing texts. Scores are saved in 'game mode' but not in 'play mode'. Scores in 'game mode' are based on the speed and accuracy of the player's performance. In 'game mode' the velocity of the texts gradually increases over 216 levels, making the game more difficult. Other parameters, such as density and friction, are adjusted also.

Initially, I wrote two 'cantos', experienced separately. But as the development of the game progressed, I came to see that, instead, the game needed a 'play mode' and a 'game mode'. Some of the features I wanted to implement involved a competitive situation; other features required a situation in which the player was not primarily concerned about survival and could explore with impunity. Many computer games have something like 'play mode' and 'game mode' as when you can create 'skins' or become 'deathless', for instance. People don't want to simply experience the action of the game; they want to compose aspects of the narrative and creatively explore the range and form of the game's structure; films about the making of games are another aspect of a type of 'play mode' in which the game is examined as a collaborative process. Multiple perspectives permit people to find/create its relevance to their own lives and aspirations. The process of playing a game is only one of many we engage in related to the game. There are critical and creative activities/processes we engage in that situate the game in the world

and in our lives. In reading this essay you are, in part, I presume, seeking to situate Arteroids in relation to art and poetry.

To some extent, Arteroids came to be 'about' the differences and similarities between 'game' and 'art', which find their intersection in the notion of 'play'. When we 'play', we are creatively engaged in guiding processes. The processes themselves guide our activity, but we are also guiding the processes, perhaps adjusting them or departing from them in ways that make the play more meaningful to us and, if we are trying to make art, meaningful to independent observers (who may be other players).

When the velocity of the texts in Arteroids is relatively high and the player can be had by the opposing texts, there is little time to read the texts; the player is challenged to 'stay alive', to keep the process going by skillful eye-hand coordination and strategy. They are challenged to 'play to win'. When the velocity of the texts is low or when the player is 'deathless' in 'play mode', they are free to read the texts and/or play with the Arteroids program as a kind of visual/kinetic poetry display/composition device.

In this way, Arteroids situates itself between entertainment and art, between popular culture and art. Games are largely associated with entertainment rather than art. What is the difference between entertainment and art? Both often involve the fictitious, the 'pretend', the simulation, the play. Both often involve story, or narrative. Both often are deeply involved in matters of art and/or design etc. The difference would seem to key on the degree to which the work confronts the problematical issues it raises; the degree to which it questions the assumptions of the world it creates or simulates; the intensity of its engagement with the world, and with language, and the shades of gray it is capable of distinguishing; the intensity and consequence of the human drama it reveals; the vision of the social and individual it draws; these are all factors that we consider in the distinction between art and entertainment. Art can be 'fun' too; but the nature of the 'fun' opens the wreader into the world and their own drama, into confrontation, not isolating fantasy.

My background is primarily that of a writer of poetry and criticism. But for many years now I have been publishing my work primarily on the Web at vispo.com. I am also a programmer, audio guy, and mathematician. So the work I've been creating for about eight years now has involved a synthesis of media, arts, and programming. I drag poetry into this mess as I may. Arteroids is quite an aggressive piece in relation to art and poetry. You shoot things. They explode. There's a 'game mode' in which you play to win whereas—let us be clear— poetry is not a game somebody wins. Though you might wonder with all the competitions and jockeying for position and the special animosities artists reserve for each other. Nobody can hate a poet like another poet.

So part of the 'confrontation' of Arteroids is between poetry and new media, poetry and entertainment, poetry and popular culture, poetry and programming, poetry and visual art, art and game. Writers realize, in their confrontation with the page and with language, that they need to understand their medium or it will have its way with them. When writers move to the Web and/or the Net (which includes email etc), they often do not acknowledge that the change in media has consequences for their work, how it is distributed, read, contextualized, and understood. What I have been trying to do for about thirteen years is develop as a writer in the multimedia soup that is computer-mediated writing. Arteroids rises from the bog and hunkers toward poetry.

Actually, I remain ambivalent about the conflict Arteroids poses between poetry and game. Poetry is not a game somebody wins. Also, I do not wish to glorify the gun and killing things. The pen is mightier than the sword, though is much slower in its assignations, like justice itself. Justice is slow but we don't have anything else, and it requires wise words.

I'm hoping my continuing ambivalence about the piece indicates that Arteroids does have an unresolvable dynamic which is a source of continuing energy, ie, the conflict between game and art, entertainment and art, popular culture and art. I took an approach of attempting to explore these conflicts by making a 'real' computer game, not a 'faux art' game, so that the conflicts would be experienced dramatically. I tried to take the notion of the game and the notion of the work of art seriously and take poetry where it hasn't been before, make poor old loved poetry suffer as never before.

But, you know, whatever we do in making art, it never seems enough, never goes as far as we would like it to go, always remains a deeply flawed artifact. At best, deeply flawed, like ourselves. But human.