

Designers With *New Approaches To*

Kathy Yakal, Assistant Features Editor

If this industry is going to grow up, says software designer John O'Neill, then we've got to be appealing to people who don't even consider using a computer.

And any good designer knows that the best way to get someone deeply into a game is to create an environment that begs to be explored, continues designer Tom Snyder.

Not that all games should be deep, meaningful experiences. We all need light entertainment sometimes. But quite often, a good book or movie gives us insights into ourselves and our world while entertaining us at the same time. Computer software can also do that, and many software designers are turning to that kind of experience. Some of the best have been at it all along.

Long before there were computer games, or home computers for that matter, John O'Neill was formulating a philosophy that would eventually figure prominently in his current role as a game designer. O'Neill, who grew up in England, began painting as a youngster, and went on to study art in college. In his early twenties, he started experimenting with different forms of interactive art and music.

He discovered something very

The majority of videogames have one primary goal: *Beat the opponent, whether it's the computer or another player. But some software designers emphasize other aspects of the game, challenging players to succeed by interacting with each other and with the game's environment.*

important when he exhibited some of his works at a one-man show in London at the age of 23. "The show felt all wrong," says O'Neill. "I felt the people out in the street should be in there, and the people in the gallery were only there because they were friends of mine, friends of the art world, or friends of the gallery. And the galleries were basically just serving the investment world."

His idealism about the way things should be was such that he said, *That's it. I'm going to retire for ten years and come up with a totally new art form, a way for artists to work with people.*

So he explored different philosophies, and eventually came to believe that the only way to create consumer products that would appeal to peoples' inner sensitivities was to work through consumerism, through mass publication and broadcasting.

He formed a company called Admacadium, a half-Latin, half-English word that means *creative catalyst*. The company's purpose was to produce art for the masses. There would be no limited editions of works to impose value, and products would be priced affordably.

"I had a lot of catastrophes," says O'Neill of those early years. He made postcards, board games, decals, cards, little books—anything that might bring *accessible* artistic pleasure to people.

He began lecturing on his theories in art schools. ("I was hated by most traditional artists and very popular with students.") He finally spoke at Stanford with David Thornburg, who told him he had envisioned the computer games of the future, that all he was missing in his material was the computer.

So O'Neill left his native England for Silicon Valley. He worked

A Difference

Computer Games

as a game designer with Ramone Zamora at Childware for a while, and designed the graphics for Atari's *E.T.* game. For the last couple of years, he has been working with a team of designers in the Bay area, producing a series of interactive videogames.

One of the first to be available is *The Dolphin's Rune*, published by Mindscape. The game combines visually pleasing images with intellectual challenge. O'Neill consulted

Dr. John Lilly, a dolphin research specialist, in developing the program.

In *The Dolphin's Rune*, the player assumes the role of a dolphin searching for a nine-stanza poem. The dolphin must locate and negotiate nine different color currents to search for runes. Each rune is part of a special alphabet which unlocks one of the verses, a key to dolphin lore. Along the way, the dolphin must avoid traps like tuna

nets, and remember to come up for air every eight minutes.

O'Neill often uses symbols in his games to represent the search for self-understanding. Sometimes the symbols are obvious. Other times, you may play a game several times before realizing what O'Neill is gently trying to get at.

"I try to put in as many cliches as possible so one can begin to see the cliches in one's life," says O'Neill. "In *Lifespan* (another O'Neill game), you actually *dive* into opportunities, and you can't go back for a missed opportunity. All of these sorts of things will be left in peoples' minds. After the playing of a game, they will begin to see the cliches which they use a lot but have forgotten the meaning of.

"If you give people this kind of chance to interact with themselves, they can be put in the position of looking over their own shoulders at a certain aspect of their lives in an entertaining way."

O'Neill likes to think that people will use this kind of software not only to understand themselves better, but also to understand and improve relationships with others. That people will come home in the evening and instead of asking *What's on cable tonight?*, will play one of his games together. By evening's end, they will have experienced more about each other, like

John O'Neill
The Dolphin's Rune



This exploration of dolphin lore leads the player on a quest to decipher the ancient verse hidden with different seabeds.

after a good conversation or a card game.

"I see a potential in software for people to improve and keep a perspective on their lives," he says. "Also for improving relations with friends and family, and having a smile while you're doing it."

From *Snooper Troops* to the recently released *The Other Side*, Tom Snyder has had that same goal in mind. His educational software, often presented in the form of a game, strongly encourages group interaction and entertainment.

Snyder has such definite feelings about using the computer as an interactive medium that when no software publisher would accept *The Other Side* without a one-play option, Snyder's own production company decided to publish it.

"I don't think we were being precious about it," he says. "We had been working on it for so long that it just didn't make any sense to us to teach kids how to resolve conflict with a computer. We didn't know what that meant. That doesn't sound like a significant step, unless you have a genuinely intriguing artificial intelligence model where the computer is behaving with all the delightful complexities of a person. And we're years from that."

The Other Side is a world diplomacy game, a simulation of a group of world leaders trying to co-exist harmoniously while still surviving individually. It can be played by groups of people across a classroom from each other, or across an ocean: A modem option lets groups play over the phone.

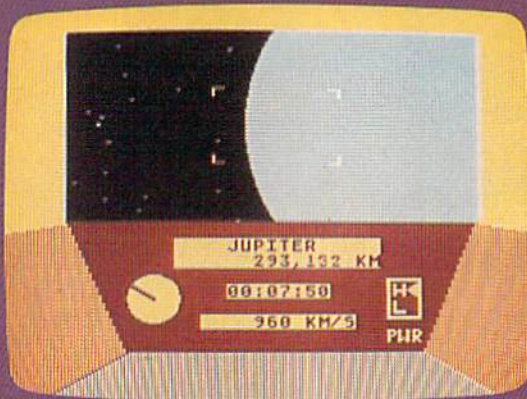
Snyder set up a game between a group of school children in Boston and a group in Geneva, Switzerland. It was the headline story on national television news in Geneva that day.

The program's Hotline feature lets players communicate during the game. "At first, these kids from two different cultures were asking questions like, *Have you guys tried new Coke yet?* and *Do you watch Miami Vice?*" says Snyder. "Slowly, as they got more involved in the game, they would say things like, *Let's make a treaty where we don't go near other peoples' countries.*"

Tom Snyder Productions The Halley Project The Other Side



The Other Side promotes group interaction and negotiation in a world diplomacy setting.



The Halley Project offers a huge environment for players to explore the solar system.

That kind of cross-cultural communication takes *The Other Side* a step beyond a computer simulation. Snyder acknowledges that, but defers to the intricacies of game design and involvement of players.

"A good designer can create a pretty good simulation, but if you provide opportunities for people to have input into the game, it gets 100 percent better.

"I cheat. I let people make my