



## John O'Neill: The Dali of Computer Gaming

By TRACIE FORMAN

If Leonardo da Vinci was alive today," says artist John O'Neill, designer of Roklan's *Lifespan*, "Electronic Games would be reviewing his work." The soft-spoken, sophisticated Englishman must know what he's talking about, having spent most of his life honing his skills as an artist — first as a painter at Bath Academy, where he received an honors degree, then at London's Chelsea School of Art.

"I used to exhibit as an artist," he explains, "but art and people got separated. Art got very esoteric, and most people were alienated by it." Disillusioned with what he perceived as a wall between the art "establish-

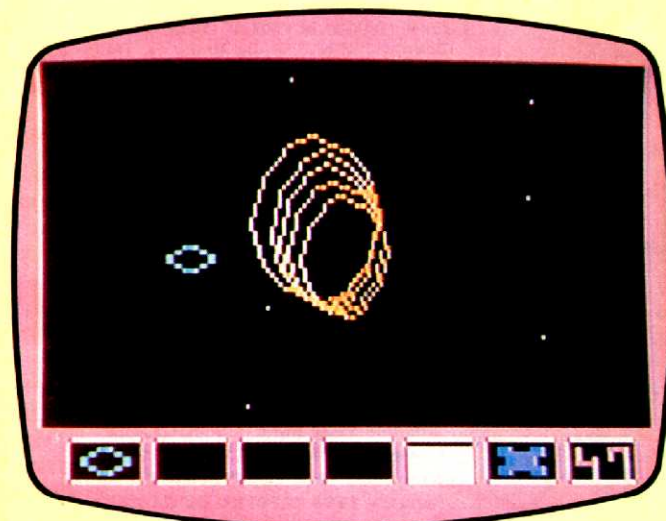
ment" and average people, O'Neill began exploring a variety of experimental art forms, all the while lecturing to keep creditors away.

His search for a way to give art usefulness in people's lives led to the formation of his first company, Admacadium. The word is a half-Latin, half-English phrase he coined, meaning "something that gets you involved with it, then takes you on to something else." The fledgling company designed postcards, playing cards, and games-as-art. During Admacadium's seven-year life, O'Neill "learned to take criticism as a guideline instead of an insult." Admacadium also in-

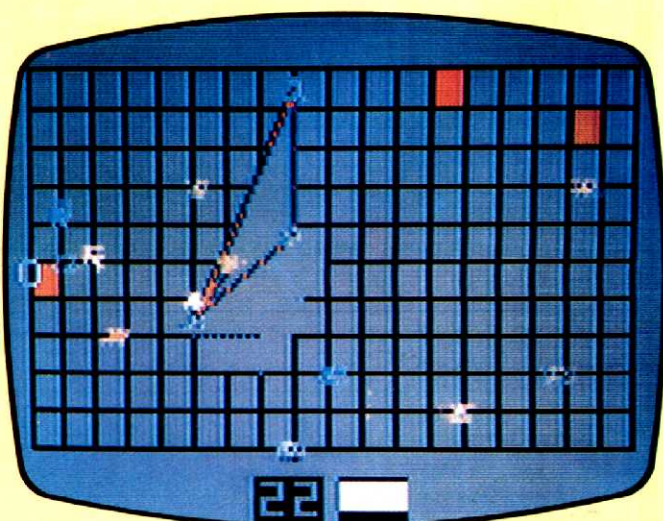
advertently led to O'Neill's involvement in the computer industry.

It was in California, while lecturing on Admacadium, that O'Neill first met up with David Thornberg, who introduced him to the ultimate canvas — the computer. His imagination caught fire, and it didn't take much prodding from Thornberg for John O'Neill to pick up stakes, move to California, and begin a new company named Flyghts of Fancie.

"Artists should work in the medium of their times," he says. "Videogames have so much potential for stimulation, more so than paintings! The games come at you through at least

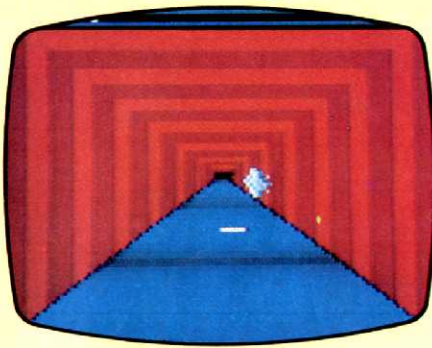


Opportunities abound during *Lifespan*'s opportunity corridor



"Situations & Conversations" Developing common interests





*Lifespan's* experience corridor: Hope prevails

three different art forms at the same time: visual, audio, and literary. With a videogame, you can take someone on an all-consuming trip."

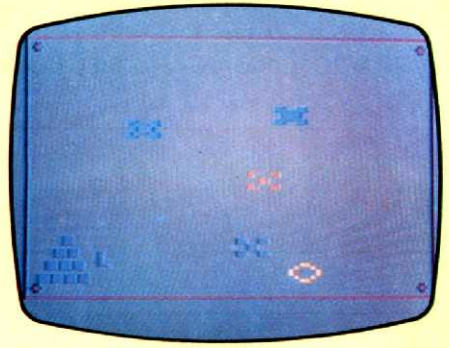
*Lifespan*, which O'Neill designed, made even the most jaded software critics sit up and take notice. The game's play mechanic was designed order to make people examine their own lives — developing personality traits from earliest childhood, trying to find common interests with their peers, grasping opportunities, and taking the hard knocks of anxiety and doubt — and the uplift of hope — in the experience corridor.

But *Lifespan* is just the beginning for O'Neill's *Flyghts of Fancie*, which independently develops games for software manufacturers. "Every game we put out will push the (videogame) barrier back a little further," he promises.

The company's second effort, also from Roklan, is called *M.O.R.L.* (it stands for Middle of the Road Lizard) and involves "looking inside the brain of a being." Also due soon is *Day* (released by Reston Software), about a day in a person's life. *Day's* action progresses from dreams to aspirations to actions to memories, and then reverts back to dreams again. Reston will also release *Flyghts of Fancie's* *The Dolphin's Pearl*, a game about inter-species communication.

The unusual subjects O'Neill favors reflect his own disdain for typical kill-and-eat games. Though he enjoys a good game of *Tempest*, O'Neill prefers games with content, particularly those that are analogies of life.

He's currently collaborating with cartoonist Gahan Wilson on *Gahan Wilson's House of Horrors*, a title already snapped up by Electronic Arts.



Developing a personality in "*Childhood*"

With a series of download computer games on the way for Time-Life's cable-videogame system, as well as plans to make the most of the new laserdisk technology, the artist is finally realizing his dream of making art accessible to the masses.

"The potential impact on people's lives is astounding," he says with a definite gleam in his eye. "The industrial revolution led to the development of the natural resources around us. But the computer revolution is leading to a new development... of the natural resources *within* us."

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Game designer John O'Neill's work is known for its striking, symbolic visuals and play mechanics.

