

THE ART SIDE OF VIDEO GAMES

The Wave of the Future

By Mary Claire Blakeman

Video games have been accused of many things: They're called everything from educational toys for the computer age to time-wasting tools of the devil. And now it looks as though they have earned a new label: Art.

Not only has the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., held an exhibit of games called ARTcade, but manufacturers are increasingly turning to artists, musicians and performers for inspiration. Dragon's Lair used the classic animation artistry of Don Bluth Studios, while professional actors provided the voices for characters in Bega's Battle.

This new direction for video games is seen most vividly in the work of two California designers, John O'Neill and Jaran Lanier. The home cartridges Lifespan, by O'Neill, and Moondust, by Lanier, represent a shift away from the idea that new technology alone will create breakthroughs in the game world. Instead, they show that artistic expression can provide fresh perceptions about video game entertainment.

While playability features are intrinsic to the games, the goal in each is not to rack up points or kill aliens. Rather, they appeal to a level of the player's experience which is beyond hand-eye coordination. They offer exercises in creativity, visual or auditory gratification, and sometimes, personal insights. Also, these games are truly interactive in that the player determines the outcome and payoff which is different each time.

"Most of the games on the market are variations on the same game," says Lanier. "But John (O'Neill) and I are making games that live by their creativity rather than by a paranoid world

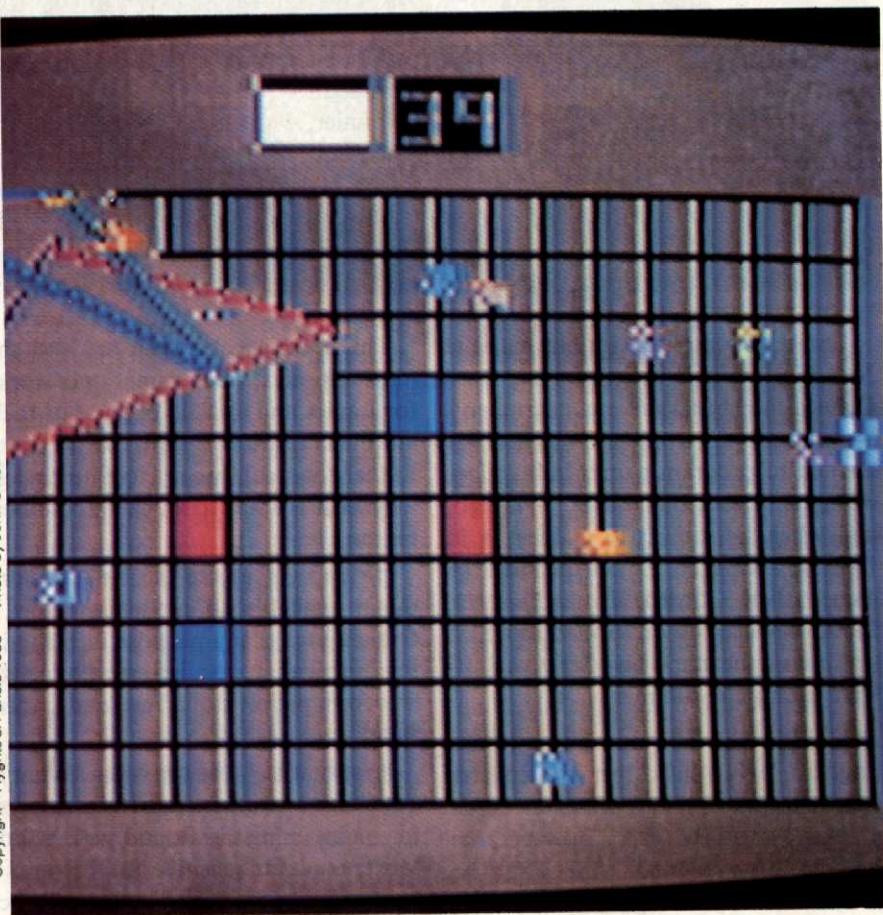


Photo by John O'Neill
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Scene from Lifespan: Pt #4 Situations and Conversations.

view where the player is being attacked, or given simulated authority, or where the goal is to just prolong your survival. Our games work on a different level, with John's being more philosophical and mine being, perhaps, more evocative."

Briefly, Lifespan is a trip through all the stages of living from childhood through death. The player creates the kind of life they will lead by collecting various aspects of character in childhood and then travels through Opportunity Gates, Situation and Conversa-

tions, and the Experience Corridor before arriving at the Payoff, an intricate, colorful sound and light display. The Payoff, which changes in every game, depends on how the player maneuvered through life. Unlike computer text games, Lifespan uses standard looking play features such as a maze-like grid for the Situations and Conversations sequence and a bombardment of obstacles in the Experience Corridor.

In Moondust, a Spacewalker travels around the screen with several ships passing over a central energy field. The

player pushes a button so the Space-walker can drop a square "seed," and then maneuvers the ships to pass over the seed. When that happens, a digital pattern appears and the player must move the pattern to the middle of the screen to score a bullseye. The player actually creates musical harmonies by moving the joystick and the multi-hued digital pattern corresponds to a new sound sequence after every round of play. (For details on the games see related articles)

Significantly, both games have an "art mode" in which there are no points or challenges, and the player can simply watch the graphics or enjoy the music. John O'Neill envisions some people using the Lifespan art sequence on a big screen television set. "They could put it on during dinner and have a beautiful computer art display in the living room," he says. All of his games will have this feature, O'Neill adds.

Lanier and O'Neill can create these kinds of games because they break the mold of game designers as "engineers turned programmers."

Lanier, a composer, studied music at New Mexico State University and Bard College and he plays several instruments including flutes from 20 countries. He learned to program games in a college computer class about three years ago, and when he moved to California in 1982, he worked for Epyx to produce the game Alien Garden. In early 1983, Lanier began work on Moondust which was put on the market by Creative Software during the summer.

O'Neill, who was born in Northern England, began his career as a painter and participated in the popular art scene of the 1960s. By 1971, however, he became disenchanted with what he called the "self indulgence" of the art world and so he turned his attention to mass art through postcards, decals and playing cards. In 1980, he met Stuart Rosen, who was at that time a product manager with Atari, and O'Neill discovered that video games were the perfect setting to express his artistic ideas and reach the general public at the same time. Rosen and O'Neill joined forces to form Flyghts of Fancie in 1982 and Lifespan was marketed through the Chicago-based Roklan Corporation.

O'Neill sees his work as part of a larger trend in the games market. "This industry is setting up opportunities for

all sorts of artists, musicians and playwrights," he says. "Most of the games so far have been done by computer people. There's nothing wrong with programmers writing games but printers aren't the ones who write the books."

The designers both see the need for artistic and creative input into the game industry if it is to survive and grow. "There is the cynical attitude about games as the 'electronic hula hoop' or passing fad and I think that can be true if they stay cliched," Lanier says. "Video games have to achieve the same degree of variety as books and records in order to survive. The business interests have to have the courage to invest in creativity because in a couple of years the public will be sick of the standard video game paradigm."

Lanier, who enjoys Qix, Q*bert and Quantum, echoes the sentiments of other players who wonder why companies rely so heavily on sequels and copies. "It amazes me how much people copy a success instead of creating a new one," he says.

This marriage between art and the mass appeal of video games only works for Lanier and O'Neill because of their attitudes toward creative expression. Rather than confine art to elite circles, they see it as a way to touch the common person.

"Video games are the best medium that's available to an artist today," O'Neill says. "My purpose in being in this business is to re-align art with society in a form people can afford and understand."

"So, that begs the question, 'What is art?'" he continues. "Art is a catalyst for maintaining vision and perception. Most people are sensitive but they are so busy and they get dulled by the daily activities of life. The artists job is to be a catalyst and re-awaken them. The artist is really a taxi driver to get a person from where they are to where they could be."

Games are particularly suited to this approach, O'Neill says, because they operate on several senses at once: "The medium offers a multi-dimensional approach to the senses of a human being. It's going in through the eyes, the ears, through storytelling and through an adrenalin rush in the body."

In addition to sensory stimulation, video games also require action rather than passivity such as in television view-

ing. This interactive quality was especially appealing to Lanier, who says he always wanted to find a medium for music that could be affected by the people listening to it.

"In composing, you spend an enormous amount of time choosing notes, but in interactive music it can always change and always be different with each new person," he says.

"A whole new sort of industry will arise between the record industry and video games," Lanier predicts. "And that industry will be interactive music."

In the immediate future, Lanier is continuing to work on projects involving interactive music, while O'Neill is developing new art video games. Slated for a December release O'Neill's game MORL again takes up life-like themes.

"MORL stands for Middle of the Road Lizard who's a cross between a person trying to live in the middle of the road and a lounge lizard," O'Neill says.

The MORL character, who has a girlfriend named MORLINA, tries to maintain a position in the center of play while maneuvering through the game. If he leans too far to the right, he moves so fast he gets a heart attack; and if he favors the left side, he slows down so much he drops out of life. When he gets wounded, however, MORL can get patched up with kisses. A unique feature of the game is the player's ability to view colorful squares in MORL's brain to see how he is operating. Ultimately, MORL's desire to grow transforms him into a greater being and O'Neill promises a fantastic flying sequence as the finale of the game.

Another game on the boards, DAY, is described as "four-dimensional tic-tac-toe" in which the player aims to have as rich and rewarding a day as possible. Competing with others on the screen for use of the day, the player zooms up and down over the landscape getting different perspectives on activities.

"In DAY, the player's dreams lead into intentions," O'Neill explains. "Then the intentions lead to action, action leads into memories and memory decays into dreams again."

While MORL and DAY are among O'Neill's immediate concerns, he and Stuart Rosen have big plans for Flyghts and Fancie. Already the company is pursuing a cable television deal with Time-Life and is making plans for video discs

Lifespan

Playing Through the Stages of Living

Lifespan begins as a glowing spiral of light accompanied by futuristic music. Five bits of light evolve into colorful shapes which then bounce around a square block, or the "playpen" of the Childhood sequence. In this brief period, the player attempts to trap as many characters as possible.

"The more aspects of character you trap, the more years in your life," says Lifespan's designer, John O'Neill. "If you get all four, you start out in life as a precious little bugger."

As childhood ends, the screen gets darker and the player heads into the "cold, dark of adult life." The adult encounters choices in the Opportunity gates where the character shape is in the middle of a screen traveling through outer space. Using the game controller, the player zooms through space looking for opportunities and pulling back hard on the joystick when appropriate ones are found. As the opportunity grows, a pinpoint of light expands to reveal an opening or "gate" through which the player enters the next phase.

"As in life, you are looking for the best opportunities, but there are tradeoffs," O'Neill says. "You can't go back for missed opportunities and if you wait too long for the perfect opportunity, you may miss it."

The next phase, Situations and Conversations, puts the player on a grid in which aspects of character are important to success. The objective is to become interesting to the "inhabitants" so the player can be accepted into a conversation. With a depth of character, the player has to touch fewer "common interest" blocks on the grid in order to become a glittering object. Once the player glitters, he stands a chance of getting into a conversation among other dot-like "inhabitants" of the grid. But if the player is run over by one of the dots, his progress is greatly reduced.

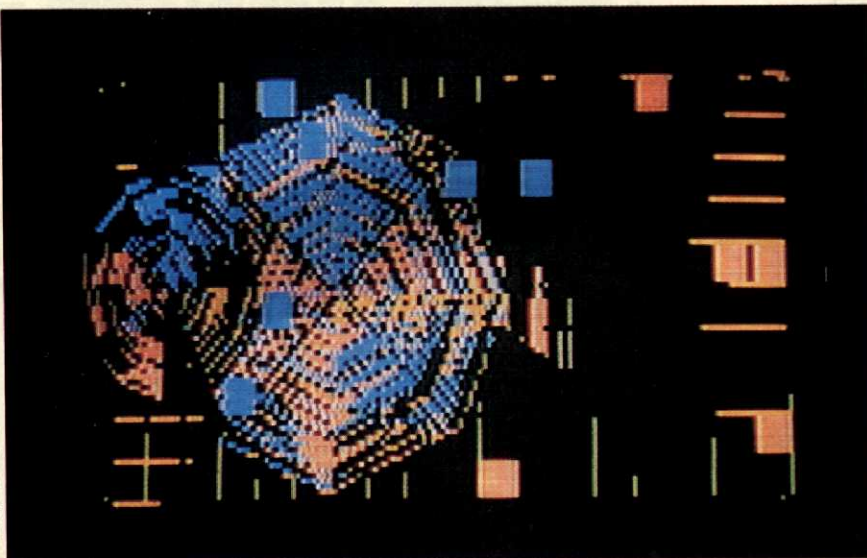


Photo by John O'Neill

"You have to get into a conversation that is big enough and remain in it long enough for them to take notice of you," O'Neill explains. "Otherwise you may stand around all glittering with no one to talk to."

Once a player successfully enters a conversation, however, all the other "inhabitants" of the grid focus full attention on the player's character, the screen lights up and the soundtrack provides amiable electronic beeps of discourse.

No sooner does the player get out of the Situations and Conversations than he is thrown into the Experience Corridor. Speeding bits of light, representing worries, fears and doubts, bombard the player who can only survive by touching white dots of hope. Occasionally, night time approaches and the screen goes black, leaving the player to fend off problems in the dark.

In the Experience Corridor, and throughout the game, a health gauge also restricts the players movement. For example, in the Opportunity Gates, the player has to avoid the walls around the opening. "I can't play selfishly," O'Neill says. "I have to consider my environment because if I don't I'll damage my health."

Similarly, in going through Experi-

ences, the player has to survive with his health intact. Once that segment has been successfully completed, the player returns to the Opportunity Gates with a second character type or shape.

Eventually, the player acquires more character types and once all five are collected, the entire life flashes on the screen in an intricate and colorful light and sound show. This Payoff sequence is different each time the game is played and it reflects how well the player has done with his Lifespan. A standard numerical score showing the number of years left to live after negotiating the entire game also flashes on the screen. The artistic Payoff can also be punched up on the screen without playing the game.

"My purpose in doing the games is really art, so I wanted people to be able to enjoy the Payoff sequence whether they play or not," O'Neill says. "But for those who do play, Lifespan can give them an insight into their lives. It is a chance for a person to step back and look over their own shoulder for a little while."

Lifespan is manufactured by the Roklan Corporation of Chicago and is available for the Atari Home Computer and the Commodore 64.

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and international satellite networking.

O'Neill predicts that video games will lead to sophisticated sensory entertainment and stimulated environments in the distant future. "By the 21st Century, we will have software creators, playwrights, who will take you on imaginary journeys," he says. "The video games we have now are really the Stone Age compared to that."

Whether that scenario turns out to be accurate or not, O'Neill says that now is

the best time for artists to be involved in video games. In the development of any art form, he says, there is a honeymoon period when limitations can actually spur greater creativity.

"Restrictions help define purpose and while that exists all sorts of things are possible," O'Neill says. "In the lives of any great artist, there was a period of time when they were just feeling their way toward what they would do and they go through a period of rebellion. If

they can stay stupid long enough and child-like long enough, they eventually discover this new thing. But then they get so used to it and so clever that they just start to embroider on it."

"When you're breaking new ground, that's when it's totally exciting," says O'Neill as he compares the current period to the early days of movie making. "In my opinion," he says, "We're heading into the Golden Age of video games." ▲

Moondust

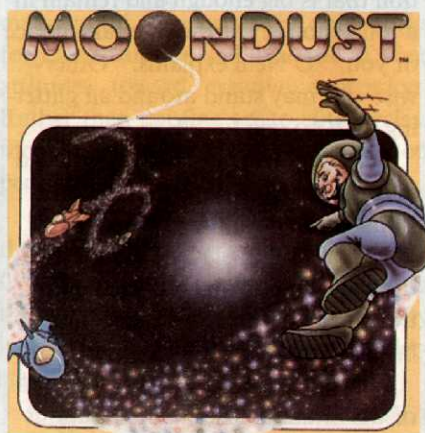
Music of Your Own Making

Moondust offers for play styles including Beginner, Evasive, Freestyle and Spinsanity. While each segment offers different challenges, the fundamental motions of Moondust are fluid and curving rather than abrupt and sharp as in most video space games. And, unlike other such games the object of Moondust is not to destroy aliens, but rather to spread moonjuice over a bullseye in the center of the screen. In the process of doing that, the player creates colorful digital patterns of light which in turn program a musical sequence of notes which change with every round of play.

A white-suited Spacewalker, who game designer Jaran Lanier calls "Jose," travels around the screen within a pattern of several moondrop ships. (Lanier says the Spacewalker is named for Jose Scriabin, a Russian composer who wrote music for all five senses.) To master Moondust the player must realize that the Spacewalker is not the central focus of the game, but rather a part of the whole scene.

In game action, the player uses the Spacewalker to drop a seed square and then moves the ships with the joystick, getting them to pass over the square. The ships then "smear" the square across the screen forming a digital pattern and pleasant musical harmonies. The object is to get the pattern to the center of the screen to score a bullseye before it runs out of moonjuice. Once the bullseye is hit, the energy field will move in a dance-

like motion and the number of points earned on the seed will appear at the top of the screen. The player can get some points even if the bullseye is missed and that score also appears after each seed, along with a running total score at the bottom of the screen. The player gets three "seeds"



per game and can earn "bonus seeds" for each bullseye.

Occasionally, the Spacewalker will get hit on the head by one of the moondrop ships and when too many of those occur, the Spacewalker is "knocked out" and the player scores no points for that seed.

In the Evasive mode, the seed square does not remain in place for the ships to "smear" it, rather, it rushes to the edge of the screen and the player has to catch it before it disappears. In Freestyle the ships do not directly follow the joystick movement, but the Spacewalker does. Lanier admits that he even has a hard time with the most difficult mode, Spinsanity. In this segment, the ships

move in a spiral pattern and it is difficult to maneuver them over the seed square.

"In regular Moondust, everyone is going clockwise and if you press the button, you can switch the ships to a counter-clockwise motion," Lanier reveals. "In Spinsanity if you press the button over and over, you can make the ships go in a straight line, but that only works in that segment."

Lanier also advises players to turn up the color controls on the television set to get the most out of the game. After he designed Alien Garden for Epyx, Lanier says he was disappointed to learn that some people thought the game was done in black and white simply because they did not adjust the color knobs on their game sets. The colors are important to Moondust since much of the payoff is in its visual effects.

The player also has the ability to create music with the game each time it is played. "It's interactive because it changes each time and if you don't move the joystick at all, the music stays the same," Lanier says.

Since the game appeals to a more subtle level of experience, players may have to relax their concentration to get the most out of it. "You simply can't use your conscious mind because it can't keep track of eight things at once," Lanier says.

Because it departs so much from standard video games Moondust may seem geared to adults. But Lanier says children like it, too.

Marketed through Creative Software of Sunnyvale, Ca., Moondust is available for the Commodore 64.

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