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The art of play

By Raphael Abraham

Four decades after 'Pong' laid the foundation of a new industry, video games are gaining cultural cachet



PlayStation 3 game 'Flower' released in 2009

In September 1972 two computer engineers went to a bar in California where they were regulars. They had with them a rudimentary electronic tennis game they had been developing. It consisted of a black and white Hitachi television set, a few circuit boards and two “paddle” controllers, and required 25 cents to be played. The alien apparatus found its home in a corner of the bar beside the jukebox and a pinball table. A few days later, they returned to check on the machine, only to find that it had malfunctioned. On closer inspection the source of the fault became apparent – the machine had been stuffed to the gills with quarters.

The game was *Pong* and would become the first commercial hit for its maker, Atari (then three



months old). It would in time also come to be recognised as the progenitor of a new entertainment ecosystem. Flash forward 40 years and the video-game industry is a global business that was worth \$74bn last year, dwarfing the film industry.



People playing 'Pong' in the 1970s

But it's a different story when it comes to cultural cachet. Video games are often dismissed as toys, the preserve of children and nerdy, mostly male adults. Whereas other popular innovations have eventually won the critical respect accorded to more established forms – does anyone now consider cinema inferior to theatre? – games have made little headway.

That irks many in the industry. They point out that technological advances are allowing games to become increasingly sophisticated, with narrative arcs comparable to movies, richly, even wittily detailed settings, specially composed soundtracks and A-list actors providing voices and motion-captured performances. There are signs that the arts establishment has started to take notice. In Washington, the Smithsonian American Art Museum is holding an exhibition that explores the history of video games “as an artistic medium”. The British Academy for Film and Television now hands out gongs for games, as does New York's Tribeca Film Festival. Even the venerable Louvre recently announced a joint venture with Nintendo. Has the time come to take games more seriously?

Certainly, things have changed during the past four decades – not least the profile of gamers. Today, the average gamer's age is 37 and the largest group playing online is women over 35. This maturing demographic, some say, is bringing with it a maturing in the content and diversity of games themselves. Earlier this year, Thatgamecompany released *Journey*, a PlayStation 3 game that places the player in an ethereal desert landscape stripped of many of the usual trappings: there is no shooting, no point-scoring, no expositional “cut-scenes” – only runic symbols and communication via an arcane tonal language. The result is unusual: the game is mournful, enigmatic and strangely beautiful.

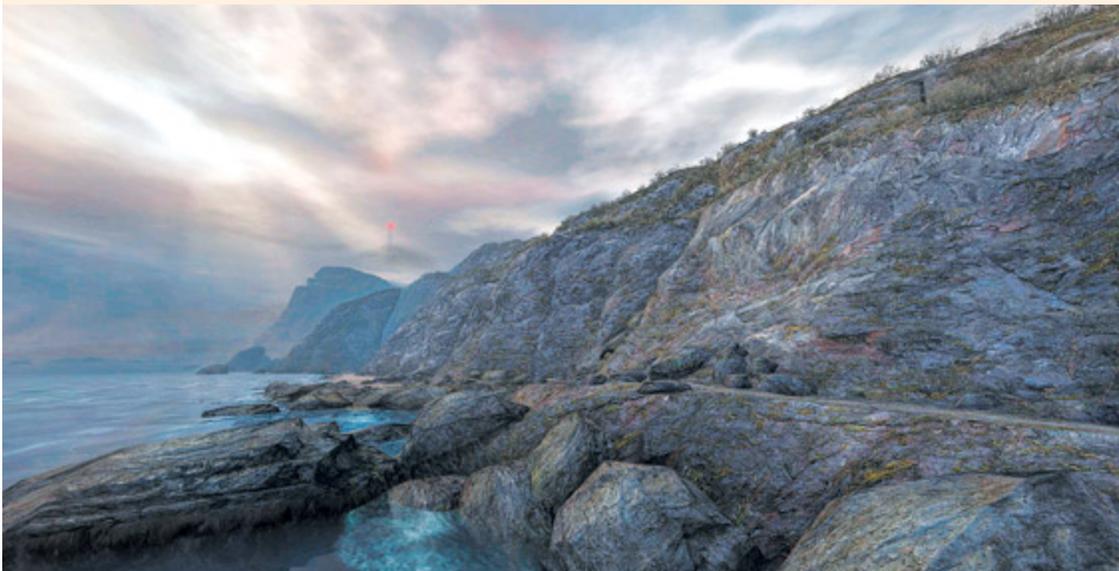
Kellee Santiago, co-founder of Thatgamecompany, says her group had set out to challenge the status quo precisely by emphasising the experiential and emotional. “Currently, genres are divided into feature sets like they're software products. So you have the mechanics of the games represented in their genres – sports, racing, first-person shooter – as opposed to genres that reflect the kinds of emotions or experience they express, as in movies. That's an important component that's missing in the dialogue around games as we look at them as

art.”

Journey challenged players’ expectations by subverting familiar tropes, but other developers are pushing subject matter into more surprising areas. Molleindustria makes satirical games that challenge the player’s conscience as well as their gaming skills. In the provocatively titled *McDonald’s Videogame* the player takes charge of various tiers of a fast-food corporation – farm, outlet, corporate headquarters – and finds themselves placed in situations that require compromising decisions on factors such as safety, health and the commoditisation of food. Unusually for a game, the experience is unsettling as well as addictive – much like fast food itself.

Paolo Pedercini, founder of Molleindustria, believes this kind of game is essential to the development of the form. “If a medium is not able to address current issues, it’s not a mature medium,” he says. “Now there is an expansion of scope happening with games for non-entertainment uses. That’s a sign that it’s becoming a medium rather than an electronic toy. That’s encouraging.”

Part of the reason for this is that digital distribution has lowered costs, allowing smaller developers to find a voice where big games studios once dominated. “There are a lot of small independent companies that are actually making money out of very strange or experimental games that would never be accepted by the big studios’ producers,” says Pedercini. “That’s the case with *Journey*, which is a fairly bold and innovative game, and *Dear Esther*, which was a big success despite the fact that it is arguably not even a game.” Heavy on atmosphere but low on interactivity, the sombre *Dear Esther* has the player roaming a desolate Hebridian island piecing together a fragmented narrative. The rise of such games has led some game designers and critics to talk of the emergence of the “arthouse video game”.





'Dear Esther' (2010)

To those struggling in other creative industries, commercial success coupled with creative freedom might well sound like an ideal situation. So why the need to win recognition from established cultural quarters?

Pedercini perceives an inherent inferiority complex. "Video games have been to some extent underdogs and so every time there is even the minimum recognition or validation from high culture there is a lot of excitement in the gaming community," he says. "They were always considered a little bit childish, immature and less noble ... actually, they pretty much are immature. But that doesn't mean there is no potential or possibility of development."

Oddly, games may be the victims of their own success. Miltos Manetas, an artist who incorporates video games into his work, suggests that games' very playability counts against them. "When you look at a Miró, it's not user-friendly – it just shows you three drops of colour and it doesn't want to tolerate your ignorance and tell you what these three drops actually mean. It doesn't give you what you thought you were looking for. Entertainment gives you what you were looking for ... but art gives you something that you were not asking for, something maybe even the creator of the art was not asking for."

For Chris Melissinos, curator of the Smithsonian's *The Art of Video Games*, which charts the history and evolution of the medium, what was lacking until recently was an adequate voice. "We started playing when we were kids and we never really stopped. We always knew that video games were bigger or meant more than what we could describe; we just didn't have the mature vocabulary to describe what it is we were feeling."

Melissinos says the opportunity to place games in an august environment like the Smithsonian is the ideal way of reaching non-gaming audiences. "By and large, people [who visit the exhibition] say: 'I had no idea video games were this engaging, this provocative, this emotive.' That has been the most rewarding: helping to elevate the argument about what video games can mean to society at large."

When it comes to winning recognition as an art form, he is mindful of not overstating the case. "You can't just come into the room shouting 'art' – you have to lead and open the discussion, present it in a way that affords people who have never considered it the ability to examine."

Or perhaps there is no case to overstate. The artist Dinos Chapman, though a gamer himself, says: "I'm not sure why anyone would want to make a comparison between art and

computer games ... I don't think I would be very likely to mistake one for the other ... I did once climb out of my dune buggy in *Half-Life 2* to watch a particularly pretty sunset but at no point did I forget I was playing a game, not looking at art." His brother and collaborator Jake Chapman doubts if such comparisons are even desirable: "It's about as relevant as considering bricklaying as poetry or trainspotting as philosophy. Bricklaying, trainspotting and video games don't necessarily gain anything by being promoted to the realm of 'art'."

But Thatgamecompany's Santiago thinks the growing ubiquity of games will shift the terms of the debate. Whether it's bottom-numbing sessions of *Grand Theft Auto* or a quick train-journey blast of *Angry Birds*, games are everywhere. "A lot of people now will have some games on their mobile phones. They're very likely playing games but they still don't view themselves as gamers," Santiago says. "Moving the dialogue into places where people who don't view themselves as gamers are listening helps to bridge that gap."

'The Art of Video Games', Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, until September 30, www.si.edu

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