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WEEK IN REVIEW DESK

IDEAS & TRENDS: PIXEL CANVAS; The Gamer as Artiste

By JOHN LELAND (NYT) 1452 words

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LAST week, I spent several days living -- and dying -- inside the new Xbox 360 console, with four popular games pegged as particularly cinematic. I entered as a curious novice, less concerned with breaking the games than with exploring the worlds they opened, and the worlds you die in.

I died as a princess in a green miniskirt, as a space warrior, a World War II soldier named Vasili and a humorless F.B.I. agent tracking a sadistic killer. My deaths, rendered in state-of-the-art detail, were not illustrious or mourned. They consisted of the limited repertoire of gestures assigned to death by the game makers. In the virtual world of games, players get to invent their own unique lives, but when they die, even the greats cede control to their maker.

The release of the Xbox 360 game console last month, with its sharper graphics, is likely to renew debates about whether games are too violent or too mindless, or whether children should be outside running around.

But as video play occupies more and more of American imaginative life, the games themselves raise other provocative questions: Can games be something more than games? In other words, can they move people emotionally or intellectually in the manner of great art?

Steven Spielberg last year offered one model for the medium to follow: cinema. In an address to students learning to be game developers at the University of Southern California, Mr. Spielberg, who has since contracted to create three games, challenged the industry to improve the storytelling, character development and emotional content in the same way it has enhanced the images and action. The medium will come of age, he said, "when somebody confesses that they cried at Level 17."

But movies are just one model for games to emulate. Henry Jenkins, director of the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggested that they are equally close to dance, as a medium of performance, or architecture, as a medium of creating unique spaces.

Museum exhibitions, academic conferences and university curriculums have examined games as art. A 2004 conference at Stanford University called "Story Engines" looked at game play as a way of creating narratives, at a time when the audiences for established story vehicles like books, newspapers, movies and network television are in decline.

As games gain attention as an art form, it remains to be determined just what sort of art they can or

should be. Are they like movies, projecting the vision of an auteur like Mr. Spielberg or Peter Jackson, who recently collaborated in "Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie"? Or are they more like the song "Frankie and Johnny," which is performed in different ways by many people, and in which the art lies in the sum of performances?

In a \$10 billion industry, the stakes are high. Like the television set before it, the game console is now colonizing American living rooms and the lives therein. Americans spend more money on video games and consoles than on movies; nearly half the country plays. Thirty-three years after Pong, video games have become "the major cultural activity of the generation 30 or 35 and below, the way movies and literature were for earlier generations," said James Paul Gee, a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and author of "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy."

Even among children who don't grasp the lessons taught in their schools, Professor Gee said, they "can all discuss the stories in video games at a very sophisticated level."

Like previous new game consoles, the Xbox 360 allows games to look more like movies. Walls have textures; battle scenes show remarkably detailed characters moving independently. Such advanced technology, made possible by increased processing power, also raises the cost of developing games, which now run budgets of up to \$25 million, including the expenses of licensing characters and music. This in turn influences the type of games that are produced: Of the 10 top-selling games of last year, all were sequels to successful games, tie-ins to hit movies or both.

This emphasis on realism, in what is inherently an artificial medium, misreads what is special about the game experience, said Douglas Rushkoff, author of "Playing the Future: What We Can Learn From Digital Kids." Video games, he said, should be less like movies, not more.

"This is an age-old thing going back to Pong," said Mr. Rushkoff, who describes himself as an enthusiastic gamer. "What made Pong so exciting was not its accurate depiction of Ping-Pong or its relationship to reality. It was the ability to move pixels around on the screen, and an appreciation for the way the game designer is working in metaphor. "

The relationship between the movie and game industries has always been bumpy. Though there have been lucrative crossovers between the two media, movies based on hit games are often duds, like the recent "Doom," as are games based on hit movies.

"The press treats Spielberg's announcement as the second coming," said Professor Jenkins of M.I.T. "But game designers remember how the game based on 'E.T.' nearly killed Atari, and is considered the biggest failure in game history."

In its emphasis on filling games with scenes and dialogue to establish character, Professor Jenkins said, "Hollywood puts its effort into things gamers don't care about."

He compared the video game industry to Hollywood of the 1930's, when studios created standards for their products but also imposed formulas for the movies they churned out, with rising budgets and diminishing creative risk-taking.

"What you need now is a garage band aesthetic, or independent film aesthetic for games," he said. "You're building the world from scratch. Why does it have to look like the world we live in?"

In fact, an indie aesthetic is starting to develop, cultivated by academia, online journals and a movement toward low-budget, "casual" games that stress simple images but complex game play. Eric Zimmerman of gameLab, which created a casual game called Diner Dash, said that the big companies were afflicted with "cinema envy." The impulse to make people cry, he said, was a "misguided idea of what emotional depiction is." He said, "Games are by nature incredibly emotionally engaging. Look at poker. There's emotional engagement, strategy and a Zen-level involvement. Games are dynamic, participatory systems. That's a level of storytelling that a film can't do."

So what can video games do that movies can't? For starters, it is a mistake to overlook the raw experience of play. But beyond the blockbusters that dominate the industry, some developers are taking advantage of the unique properties of games to tell stories. Professor Gee of Wisconsin cited a game being developed to help children sort through traumatic divorces, or an online game called Second Life that allows users to invent their own simulated environments, which other players can visit.

"If all we're doing is making the 17th version of a movie you've already seen, our culture isn't going to look very good," he said. "We haven't begun to scratch the surface of what games we could make without somebody shooting someone."

Though games may not produce Mr. Spielberg's tears, they are the one medium that allows users to experience guilt, because they make the player responsible for the actions of a character on screen, Professor Jenkins said. "If you do something despicable, you have yourself to answer for."

Few games exploit this potential, but there is nothing preventing future developers from doing so, he said.

But my own experience inside the box raises a different narrative possibility. In a culture that is squeamish about death, games are the first major medium that makes one's own mortality a central element in the experience. In many games, to reach the last level alive is to put the game behind you.

A challenge for game makers, then, is not to make users cry at the death of another, but to find meaning in their own. This is, after all, the one universal human condition. To which games add the one antidote: the ability to press restart.

Photos: But Is It Art? -- Three different approaches to game design: Doom 3 has cinematic feel; Diner Dash emphasizes game play over graphics, and the original minimalist game, Pong. (Photo by AP Photo/Courtesy Id Software via Activision); (Photo by Atari)(pg. 4); (Illustration by Jennifer Daniel; image left, Activision; image right, Electronic Arts)(pg. 1)

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