

COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING

Video games are an art form BY EMILY DUNNAN

I am not a gamer, but I am an artist. “What is art?” is an important question to me. The fine-art world’s answer has been expanding rapidly since the 1860s with the controversial advent of Impressionism in painting.

The debate only intensified with art surrounding the World Wars. Is a Picasso painting art? Is a urinal displayed in a museum art? Is film art?

Are video games art, for that matter? Both video games and film are digital media that a creator skillfully uses to affect an audience.

Ted Brown, a local indie game developer, points out parallels between the history of film and that of games. He says both media were considered merely entertainment at first. But filmmakers pushed boundaries and produced thought-provoking pieces like *Citizen Kane*.

Game developers are doing the same thing today.

“Art is communication from one heart to another; to touch another person in a way that changes or impacts them,” Brown says. “Art changes people.”

He says games affect people in a unique way, unlike any other medium, because “they are an intersection of all that came before: story, visuals, architecture, psychology.” A well-crafted game, like an excellent movie, utilizes each of these to produce an experience for the gamer, making it art by Brown’s definition.

Amber Cecil is a senior at University of Oregon and president of the UO Think.Play club, a group that discusses the philosophical underpinnings of games and, of course, plays them. Cecil’s explanation of games as art emphasizes the teamwork involved to fashion the narrative and graphics of a game.

Why does Cecil play games? “It’s one of the best forms of storytelling there is. It’s completely interactive by nature, which is a type of storytelling there isn’t anywhere else,” she says.

Movies are a form of storytelling. Video games take it a level further: collaborative storytelling. Interactive art.

Brown says, “Games can give you agency from a point of view that you would never otherwise have.” He adds that games provide a wakeup call for people (including himself) living in entitled luxury.



BRIT BRADY, FOUNDER OF COWBOY COLOR

For example, in the indie game “Night in the Woods” you play as a sassy cat with a mysterious past and a mental illness. This exploratory game delves into generation gaps, faltering small-town economics and crippling anxiety.

Pauses in the game’s main narrative allow gamers to contemplate what has transpired, and what it’s like to live with mental illness.

The image of a contemplative gamer was foreign to me. The biggest hurdle I had to overcome before considering games to be art was the stereotype of gamers as lazy teenage guys eating leftover pizza and playing “Call of Duty” for weeks on end.

This stereotype was debunked by everyone I interviewed. Many gamers are women; there is actually a lot of skill involved in playing some games; and plenty of games have more depth than “shoot-‘em-up.”

There is a division between movies meant for pure entertainment (the James Bond series) and movies made to touch us on a deeper level (*Schindler’s List*). This same division expresses itself within gaming: think “Pong” vs. “Night in the Woods.”

Britt Brady, founder of the local game development company Cowboy Color, says that the purpose of entertainment does not diminish a game’s status as art; someone still spent hundreds of creative hours to make and deliver “Call of Duty” to you.

Brady finds building games “the ultimate creative outlet” because it combines different artistic expressions. He says, “I don’t get burned out because I can switch from [visual] art to music.”

Brady especially enjoys designing pixel art games due to the challenging limitations inherent in using only square building blocks. He says it’s like super-refined pointillism: you’re conveying an image, not actually making it. If he wants realism, he looks out the window.

I’ve come away from these interviews with a much greater appreciation for games and the artists who construct them. Ultimately, will Vincent van Gogh’s swirling sky and Jackson Pollock’s splatter paint keep company with “Halo” and “Legend of Zelda” in the annals of art history?

Stay tuned for the next hundred years. ■



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