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GAMES BLOG

Basquiat meets Mario Brothers? Digital poet Jason Nelson on the meaning of art games

Why are artists turning to interactive digital media, and will art games every be respected by gamers? We talk to digital poet and artist Jason Nelson about his controversial works

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Scrape Scraperteeth: an art game about urban development, resembling a very messed up 2D platformer.

The phrase 'art game' means very different things to different people. True, some dismiss the whole idea as pretentious nonsense, the cynical appropriation of a mass entertainment platform by opportunist design students. But we'll ignore those views for now.

For others, it's about the sometimes disturbing experimental games produced by the likes of Jonatan Söderström and Jason Rohrer. Titles such as Clean Asia! and Passage have the trappings of sophisticated
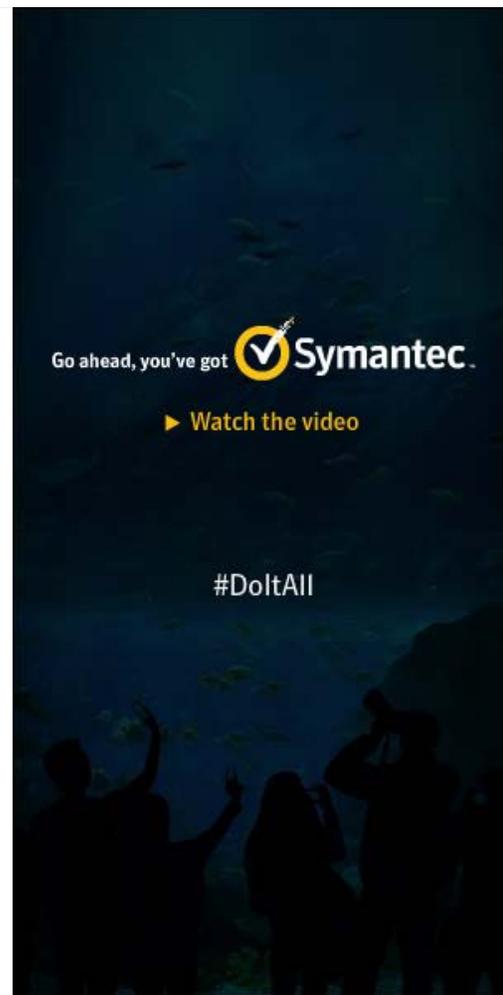
commercial releases, but often comment on the game development process or use game structures to explore much darker themes and ideas.

And then there are the game-inspired experiences produced as non-interactive artworks – like Cory Archangel's Super Mario Clouds and Beat The Champ. Not so much games as meditations on digital culture, channeled through recognisable gaming idioms.

Operating somewhere in between all of those is digital poet and artist Jason Nelson. Born in Oklahoma but now based on the East coast of Australia, Nelson has been producing thought-provoking and anger-baiting interactive works for years, the best known examples being Flash-based titles Game, Game, Game And Again Game and its sequel, I made this. You play this. We are Enemies.

Recently, he has produced two new, and typically messy, strange and unsettling works, Six-Sided Strange and Scrape Scraperteeth, the latter commissioned by the San Francisco Gallery of Modern Art. They bear all of Nelson's trademarks – seemingly stream-of-consciousness text clips, hectic presentation and guarded messaging – and they push at the boundaries of what can be called a game.

Last week, I spoke to Nelson about these works, and the whole idea of art games and their relationship to the mainstream interactive entertainment industry. If you want to know what connects Basquiat with Mario Brothers and James Joyce, come this way...

Six-Sided Strange

Can you tell me some of the ideas and aims behind Six-Sided Strange and Scrape Scraperteeth? The latter certainly seems to be about alienating and belittling urban environments...
Scrape Scraperteeth, a game/poetry/art monstrosity, is inspired by the city of Gold Coast, Australia, where I've lived and been vaguely professorial for the past seven years. The Gold Coast is a jumbled mess of overly priced real estate and investment property hi-rises hugging long tourist-filled beaches. Bike ride a few kilometers inland, past forests of construction cranes and you find cows wandering alongside undeveloped country roads.
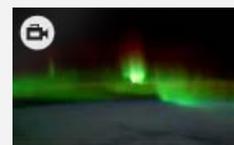
So each of the game's levels are images, sketched and mangled, of the city's skyline. The notion is simple. For a view of other buildings and a slice of ocean, the public is hypnotised into trading their future incomes for small and stacked concrete boxes. The game hovers around this real estate madness. The GFC hasn't really hit Australia, but when it does it will hit here first. Goodness I sound preachy, maybe I should move.

On a brighter note, Scraperteeth was commissioned by the San Francisco Gallery of Modern Art, one the first major galleries to feature net-base indie art. Aside from the happy-wallet making support, it's

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significant because increasingly galleries are supporting net-based artworks, specifically of the game/interactive variety. Major institutions are beginning to realize that even simple platform engines and abstract mark-ups can spread artworks to the vast web-addicted world.

As for Six Sided Strange, I've always been fascinated with the Rubik's cube, the box as societal construct, how we love and hate the Borg (Star Trek) and their super-techno assimilation square-shaped ships. And with SSS I wanted to play with that form and create a series of interactive digital sculptures, strange multi-dimensional story-spaces playing with colour, movement and pixilated monsters. There are even prizes hidden in near impossible combinations. And if you find them, I might send you something fancy all the way from the Southern Hemisphere.

Your background is in Flash-based fiction and poetry – can you tell me how and why you've come to Flash, and the digital environment in general, as a medium?
Sadly Flash has somehow been transformed from a lovely, ever growing, golden coin-dropping oak tree into a one-eyed fungus creature eating the iPads of puppy-holding children. So while I'm now conforming with much angst to the marching HMTL5 mob, I still really love Flash as an artistic/game creating tool. Nearly all of my artworks involve layering of odd poetic content, of coaxing sounds into icons into moving drawings into text triggered by a lurching character. And Flash makes that easy and visually compelling to create. But as with all techno-wonders, obsolescence is just a shareholder's board meeting away. Besides, I have a hard-drive flooded with raw flash files or decompiled game engines ready to be horribly and beautifully (depending on your aesthetic tastes) modified/broken/reborn by my mouse.

My digital beginning is a much longer story involving monster trucks, a heavy set man in a tweed suit and a summer job using GIS (the mapping software). But briefly, I adventured into the digital environment because of my frustration with the limitations of the top-down, flat and static printed page. When writing traditional poetry and prose, composing a line or crafting a metaphor, I wanted to make the words move, to add sounds and write over images, to give the reader/player a stake, to make interaction and playing a way of composing.

Video games and digital interfaces were the languages I grew up with, and multimedia was how I experienced the world through screens. So without knowing there was an Electronic Literature community I started building curious interactive poetic creatures, using the gambit of electronic elements as vital texts with which to compose poems and stories. Most of the art/literary world is dominated by critics and styles, whereas the digital realm is about experimentation and seems accepting of my brand of WTF?!.

Both the pieces below are, of course, game-like. Are you a gamer yourself?
I'm writing this perched on a couch overlooking a four-story atrium filled with escalators. The people rising and falling, pushing and weaving, their conversations and awkward interactions are like a big video game. I so very much want to attach WiFi controllers to the mechanical moving stairs and make this mall into a chaotic real-life game. The world is a game, yes it's a lame analogy, but an entirely true one all the same.

I'm not sure if I'd call myself a gamer, at least not the midnight to sunrise, blood clot in the leg sort of gamer. I love playing emulators of 1980-99 games, anything Atari or Nintendo or Sega. Early text adventures are also a weird sort of fascination of mine, their intricate game play and woven story-lines are still far beyond most current graphics intensive titles.

Additionally, I'm charmed by those games where wandering through the game-scape, randomly exploring for items and areas are not necessarily

relevant to the game's goals. There is an immediate satisfaction to achieving something in a game, but I'd rather be lost within a MOD that allows for infinite lives and uselessly disruptive weapons. I wish someone would create a "Lost in Oklahoma" game. And on those days when I feel sad, I play Ratchet and Clank, it's like having apple pie for breakfast.

Are you more interested in the structure and semiotics of games, then?
That is perhaps the most common criticism of my creations, that I don't toy with structure and game-play enough. Indeed someone sent me an email yesterday calling my work a game abortion, blasting my lack of, well, everything. As you might see in the comments to this article, people tend to have very strong reactions to my work, lots of hate and just enough love to keep me going.

I am enamored with reading about and dissecting the semiotics, and as the MIT professor Nick Montfort calls them, the "twisty little passages" of games. In the same way riots and mob violence are built from intricate intersections and dynamic disruptions, so too are great games forever altering and reacting to the player's keyboard/joystick mashing. I'm not trying to imply videogame cause looting, but rather that altering and recreation of rules is fascinating both in games and in the physical world.

Sadly, what interests me and what I am capable of programming are separated by oceans of IT courses and textbooks. I would love to collaborate with some IT whiz or have a fancy officed games company bring me in as a strange game consultant. Having said that, I'm really happy to continue making small scale net-art creatures that reach into the backs of player's brains. And my creations like 'I made this. you play this. we are enemies' or 'game, game, game and again game' are centrally focused on playing with the semiotics of both games and the games community.

Did Six Sided Strange or Scrape Scraperteeth have any specific game influences? The latter, I guess, works as more of a traditional platformer, but were there key titles that inspired you?
If the abstract artist Basquiat, Mario Brother's creator Miyamoto, and writer James Joyce had a child that grew up in an amusement park and was raised by Steampunk robots, that child would be my art-games. Does that answer your question? No? Yes? Shift-Nine?

Are you interested in the indie and art game scenes in general?
The most innovative game-play, artistically compelling content and experimental creations are coming from the indie/art game scene. With little or no funding small teams of indie producers are creating brilliant experiences that make corporate productions look like embarrassing advertisements for video cards. Some future historian will write about the games currently being built by these creators and label them as THE important art movement of the 21st century.

And not only are they building far reaching and innovative artworks, but they also changing the way we experience and consume art and literature. The traditional gallery space is far less powerful than the web-based or portable device distribution channels that indie game makers use. My games for example, as bafflingly bizarre (or bad) as they are, have had millions of players; I'm reaching those who would never visit a gallery outside a first date or school trip.

What are you working on at the moment?
Heaps. My hard-drive is a mess of files. My current games centered work is tentatively titled 'Nothing you've done deserves such praise'. The game offers the player absurdly dramatic rewards for inconsequential actions and accomplishments. So when you jump over a small block the screen fills with congratulatory messages. Or when you fire a bullet that slowly moves across the screen, videos of me lamely celebrating cover the game-scape. Between those over-blown victories will be long

stretches of boredom, of nothing but moving and crickets and the sound of threatening storms.

I'm also creating a simple top-down meandering game exploring the fictional lives of the characters the player has to kill. When you shoot/stab/shove-to-death an enemy, a tombstone with a rollover biography is placed on the screen. Hopefully for this game I'll get some audience participation with players submitting their pictures or bios, and I will fictionalise/poeticise and use them in the game.

There are others, but the most challenging is an iPhone/Android game I'm creating. I say challenging because it's an entirely new platform with new code and conditions. Scary really. But I hope to become a hundredaire (or even, gulp, a thousandaire) off that one.

Lastly, I recently finished a game that takes one million minutes to play. 'The Loneliest Pilot' is a side-scrolling space shooter, where you are attacked over and over for two years straight, with the option of reading the pilot's daily diary, his frustration and joys of continuously fighting. Not sure if I'll even release it, as few would play it more than ten minutes let alone for months or years. Alas.

Ultimately, what themes, subjects or ideas do you think can be explored through art games that couldn't be explored through other artistic media? What are art games good at saying?
Yesterday, at the Sydney Opera House, ID games launched their new first-person shooter, Rage. They spoke, albeit only in a token way about story and artistic elements. But really the game is just explore and explode. What struck me though, was how games involving controlling a character's movement/actions/disruptions allow the player to inhabit the work/world, how their mind links/connects to the experience. With passive art or even interactive installation art, the audience is not that invested, having a brief watch and think from a distance.

Art games require your attention, require your brain to be consumed by the screen. I imagine that is why I get such dramatic responses. I am asking the audience to inhabit my creations, asking them to play/exist inside a bizarre, messy and at times highly illogical and abstract artscape.

Games also offer a common language. Most those aged forty and under grew up with the games interface as a central part of their childhood development (holy crap I sound academic!). So its like putting a steering wheel on an alien craft, people might be baffled by the gooey tentacle interior, but when they see a circular and spoked wheel, they at least know how to maneuver the ship.

As for the subjects and ideas, that is perhaps the most compelling aspect of art games (and for some the most controversial). You can explore anything, in any way. The layering of ideas and themes creates really unique nuances, and the playlands begging for audiences to jump and run and shoot and move and think and puzzle and listen and watch opens up multi-dimensional/linear/temporal possibilities. No other artform, other than actual life, can offer the artist such happy making, heart crushing, eye twinkling, chaos reeling complexity.

If you were to work in the 'conventional' games industry, is there a company/designer/series you'd be interested in?
Luckily I actually make a living being a Digital Poet. I realize the title Digital Poet sounds forever pretentious, but there is an ever growing audience for such work and besides, I'm a Lecturer of Digital Art and Writing at Griffith University here in Australia so that brings in enough money for laptops and canned soup.

But if I were to be hired, however temporarily, I would love to design hidden areas and secret areas in big budget console games. Imagine racing in Gran Tourismo, crashing through a wall and finding your car

hurtling through a strange landscape of hand-drawn oddities, muddy text hitting your windshield and with every turn the clouds change shape. Or while playing a zombie game you find a mind reading device that triggers thought bubbles showing the zombie's half formed abstract thoughts, the decay of memory masked by hungry aggression. And to win you have to weave through the most poetic of the undead. So if there's a games company crazy enough to do that, I just might play along...

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