



Pippin Barr *All's Well that Ends Well* 2011, Video Game. Image courtesy of the artist.



Molleindustria *Faith Fighter* (detail) 2008, Video Game. Image courtesy of the artist.

THE GAMES OF ART

ARTISTS

Ana Anthropy
Pippin Barr
Matteo Bittanti
Joseph DeLappe
Mary Flanagan
Bennett Foddy
Cameron Kunzelman
Alan Kwan
Danny Ledonne

Molleindustria
Jason Nelson
Baden Pailthorpe
Jason Rohrer
Anita Sarkeesian
Kent Sheely
Eddo Stern
Tale of Tales
Bill Viola and USC Game Innovation Lab

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QUT creative industries
precinct



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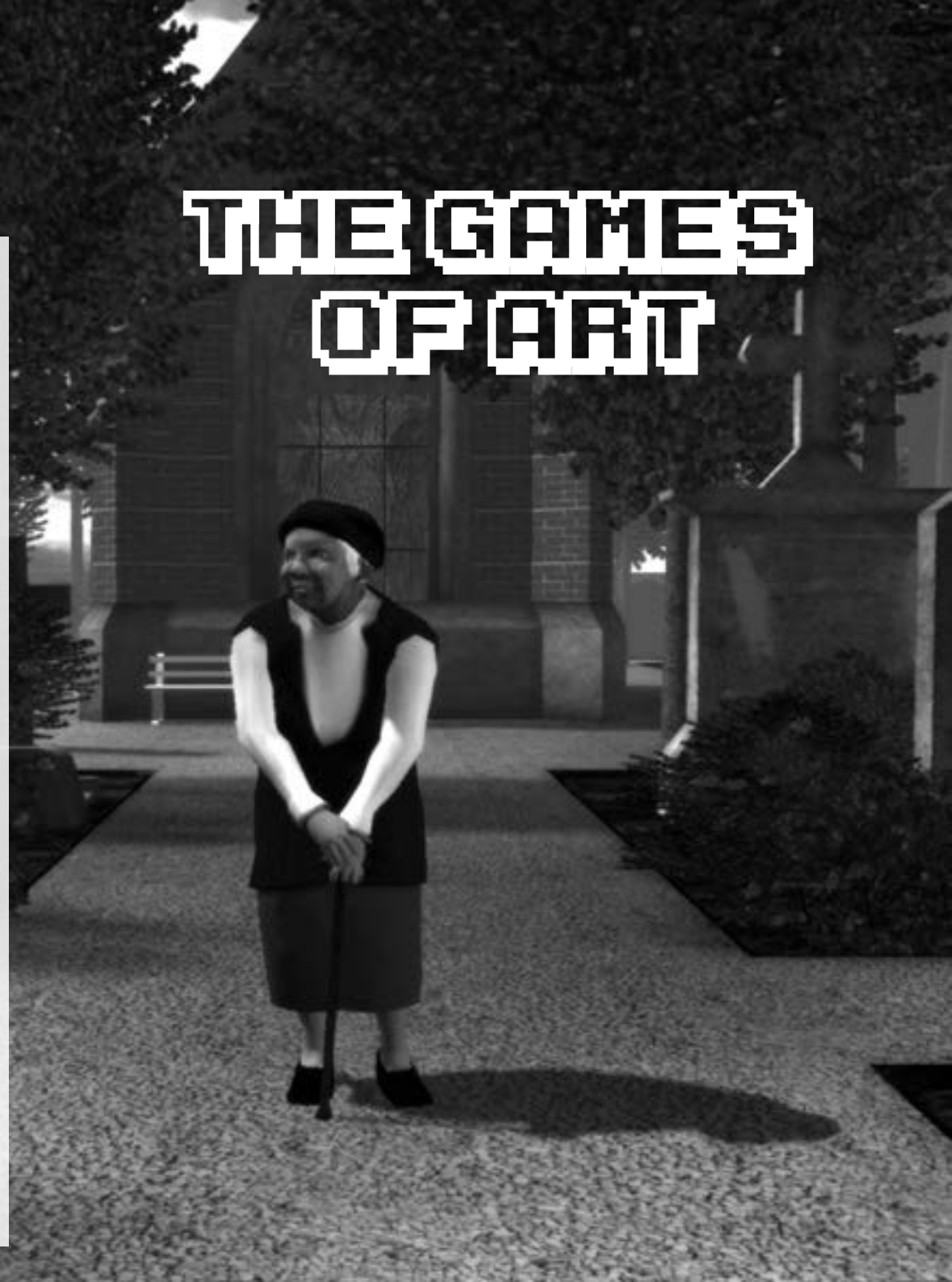
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Cover: **Tale and Tales** *The Graveyard* 2008, Video Game. Image courtesy of the artist.



THE GAMES OF ART

QUT Creative Industries Precinct and Truna; the cofounder of the Brisbane chapter of the International Game Developers Association, have been building community hubs and supporting the game playing and making community since the inaugural *Game On* public program in June 2007.

In this same year we introduced the *48 Hour Game Making Challenge*; facilitated by the Next Level Festival, this first challenge saw four teams locked in at the Precinct to make a playable prototype in just 48 hours based on the revealed super secret theme words: Lizard, Boat and Robot. The first winning team included Luke Muscat of *Fruit Ninja* fame and now Chief Creative Officer at Halfbrick Studio. In the subsequent five years this event has exploded with 20+ teams competing at both indie and pro league level; 120 game makers, fighting sleep deprivation and battling it out for the much coveted 48hr mug and jellybeans. 2012 also saw the introduction of the *Game On Symposium*, a two-day event that included talks, game presentations, play testing and soapbox style idea presentations.

Over the years we have been watching games expand to play an important role in the cultural landscape. Games' importance has far exceeded the boundaries of entertainment to become a powerful medium for the expression of critical ideas within cultural practice. We have not been alone in our observations. Major institutional events such as MoMA's *Critical Play – The Game as an Art Form* symposium and the Smithsonian's *Art of Video Games* exhibition, along with critical publications such as Kill Screen, are all paying attention to these evident shifts and are instigating dialogues around gaming as an artistic medium that contributes critically to cultural production. *The Games of Art* aims to continue this line of thought and investigate what happens when games become more than entertainment, and begin to engage with the cultural framework in a similar way to art?

Lubi Thomas and Rachael Parsons, QUT Creative Industries Precinct

Since scientists first used primitive oscilloscopes to replicate the paddle and ball game *Tennis*, as a culture we have become obsessed with imprinting game rules into digital memory. From *Pong* to *Pac-Man*, *Dungeons & Dragons* to *Dragon Age*, and *Chess* to *StarCraft*, the complexity of videogames is exponentially increasing, contributing to an industry worth more than \$87 billion worldwide. Nearly two thirds of Australians play videogames regularly—from young children pawing at iPad screens with drool covered mitts, to teens playing at army and karaoke, and everyone else sharing *Words With Friends*. This is a stereotype, of course, but it's a near-truth. Videogames have established their own heritage, tropes, and culture. *Angry Birds* is as recognisable an icon as Coca-Cola in the developed world, following closely in the footsteps of their blocky 28-year-old ancestor, the princess hunting plumber Mario. But games have done more than infiltrate popular culture through iconography—they have begun to alter the way we think about “play” and have blurred the lines between “leisure” and “work”. Once thought to be mere children's toys, videogames are now accused of inducing addictions and compulsive behaviours, of encouraging sex and violence, and have without doubt become that which Fox Media fears most: an incredibly powerful vehicle for considered thought, questions, ethics, politics, philosophy and learning.

Videogames are argued to operate within a “magic circle”—a virtual space governed by the programmed rules and fixed systems to which we willingly submit. We perform play by interacting with this system and often in pursuit of the ever elusive “win” state, achieved by accruing the most points or killing the most people. Sometimes, we win by reaching the conclusion of a narrative arch. And, sometimes, there is no end at all such as in massively multiplayer online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* in which the objective is to become stronger to play to become stronger to ad nauseam.

As games succeed in permeating our culture so too have they begun to shape our perception of reality. Michael Thomsen, writing for The New Enquiry, argues that to submit to videogames' invisible system is to accept the hierarchal ruling of government authority and without question. This is in opposition to traditional games whereby two players agree to a set of rules or alter them as they play, for example in a game of eight-ball when two players agree to call the black before potting it to win. Says Thomsen:

“The insistence that games require hierarchical rules is an intimate mirror of our time and place, where money creates moral possibility, and access to wealth is a reflection of work ethic, an act of fealty to the authority that distributed money as an organising unit of social good, something that creates the impression of freedom while still allowing central authority to control the win-condition. In the same way that a game can say you must kill the end boss but you're free to kill him in any manner you choose, we say you're free to get money in any way you choose, but you're not a success until you have enough money to sustain yourself...”

The world through a gamers' scope begs experiences to be collected, quantified and codified, often with the understanding that somebody can and will win. Will you log in to Foursquare to become Mayor of Starbucks, and to what end will you maintain this prestige for the sake of discounts? Gamification, as this modern phenomenon is sometimes referred to, challenges the fundamentals of play, which should satisfy through the pleasure of the act, but instead emphasise the pursuit of reward.

Yet, the rules of games establish a language set aside from spoken variants like English, French, Spanish and Hindi. Gaming's magic circle might be the modern Tower of Babel. Players learn the subtleties of the unspoken language through experience, absorbing ideas from action. *The Games of Art* presents a selection of games which use rules and systems as vehicles for complex ideas, challenging concepts of life and love, death and work, war and murder, psychology and society, and, well, the culture surrounding games themselves. Are these games of art, or, the art of experience?

Jason Rohers semi-autobiographical *Passage* distills the experience of a single life into five heavily-pixelated minutes. We perform the life of a young man on a journey from the left of a long, horizontal screen to the right of the screen, finding solitude and death. Life is represented by a scattered maze littered with treasure chests and every step accrues points. Companionship may be found along the way, with her step matching ours and doubling the points earned, while simultaneously restricting our ability to move and access treasure chests. No matter our decisions, however, the end is always the same—we die alone. Rohers questions the value of life, companionship, achievement and adventure by presenting a single life, his life, as a five-minute synopsis, which may succeed in eliciting your tears.

Where *Passage* distills a life into a single statement, others use the complex intertextuality of modern videogames to present alternative perspectives and narratives, which pierce the socio-cultural fabric to prod what lies beneath.

Danne Ledonne throws us headily into the heavy combat boots of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold who, on 20 April 1999, entered their high school armed with guns and grenades and killed twelve students and a teacher before committing suicide. *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (SCMRPG!) appropriates the cutesy art style of Japanese role-playing videogames, inspired by the golden years of the toy Super Nintendo Entertainment System, to explore the complex web of social and cultural influence which propelled Harris and Klebold to murder. For Ledonne, examining the Columbine shootings, which contributed to the rampant paranoia of the United States in years to come, without media exaggeration and political posturing, could only be achieved in earnest from the perspective of the children who planned to massacre and then achieved it:

“The game had to be told from the perspective of the shooting's greatest enigmas of all: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They left behind many of their thoughts—some frightening, some deplorable, some comical, and some deeply enraged. I collected all of them and assembled them into a role-playing game aesthetically reminiscent of those I would play in my own youth. It only made sense, I thought, to make this game feel like a combination of reading, playing, and thinking.”

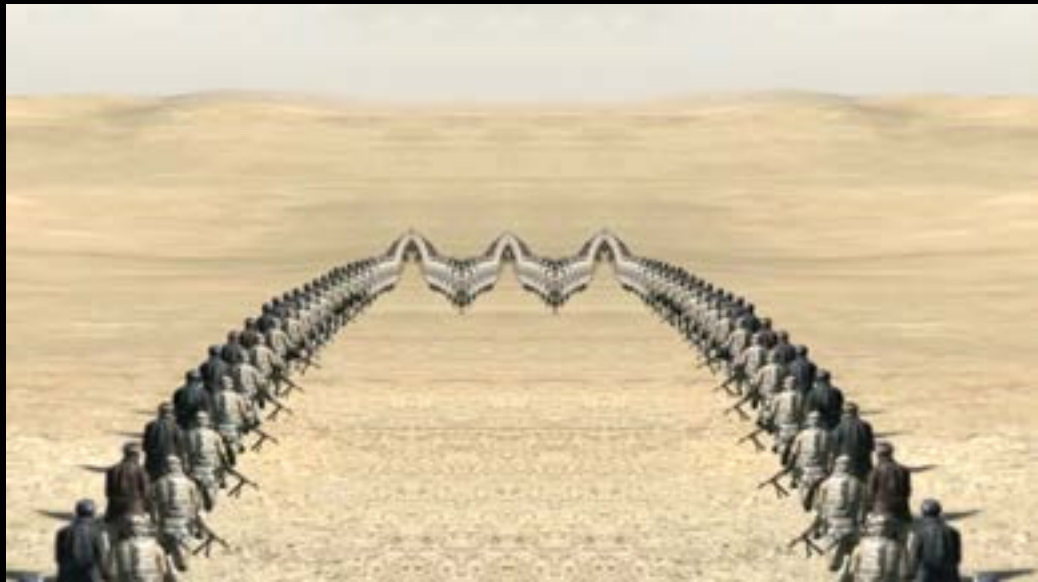
Since the release of *SCMRPG!* in 2005, it has been hailed by many of the industry's luminaries as a pivotal moment in videogaming history—it is at once a videogame, fashioned as a toy, and also fodder for serious adult musings. As championed by critic and serious-game designer Ian Bogost, *SCMRPG!* “is disturbing because it is meant to be... This game is not fun, it is challenging, and difficult to play—not technically difficult, but conceptually difficult. We need more of that.”

And, this is just a sample of the ingenuity employed by games designers and artists to explore complex socio-cultural issues. Joseph DeLappe hijacks the American military's most successful recruitment tool, the videogame *America's Army*, to stand in memorial for those soldiers who lost their lives in Iraq and protest to those playing at war. Feminist Frequency's Anita Sarkeesian uses satire to highlight the near-complete lack of strong female characters amongst the testosterone-hyped militaristic jingoist male ensemble by cutting clips from more than fifty games to the tune of Flight of the Concorde's 'Too Many Dicks on the Dance Floor'. And, *Bad Trip* serves as the virtual memory for all of Alan Kwan's life experiences, recorded through an eye-glasses mounted camera and remembered via an Xbox 360 controller.

Videogames have established a rich cultural tapestry in such a short time that the word “games” barely caters to the depth of experiences created. There are games designed to eat time in thirty-second blocks and hundreds of hours of adventures drawing thousands of players to experience the same world as one. Some games star the greatest Hollywood talent and others train pilots, doctors and soldiers. Games provoke us to think about our own personal experiences while others distract us from work-a-day and impoverished realities with hero-centric escapist fantasies.

The experiences and artworks born of videogame culture presented in *The Games of Art* reframe the purpose of this complex magic circle—it has become a fabricated sanctuary born of fixed systems from which we might safely examine our world and question its realities through the pleasure of “play”.

Daniel Purvis, June 2013



Baden Pailthorpe *Formation VI* 2012. Production still. HD Video 16:9, colour, sound. 8 mins 36 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.



Bill Viola and USC Game Innovation Lab *The Night Journey*, work in progress, Video Game. Image courtesy of USC Game Innovation Lab.