

# Art Form for the Digital Age

By Henry Jenkins

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- *Video games shape our culture. It's time we took them seriously*

Last year, Americans bought over 215 million computer and video games. That's more than two games per household. The video game industry made almost as much money from gross domestic income as [Hollywood](#).

So are video games a massive drain on our income, time and energy? A new form of "[cultural pollution](#)," as one U.S. senator described them? The "nightmare before Christmas," in the words of another? Are games teaching our children to kill, as countless op-ed pieces have warned?

No. Computer games are art—a popular art, an emerging art, a largely unrecognized art, but art nevertheless.



Over the past 25 years, [games have progressed](#) from the primitive two-paddles-and-a-ball [Pong](#) to the sophistication of Final Fantasy, a participatory story with cinema-quality graphics that unfolds over nearly 100 hours of play. The computer game has been a killer app for the home PC, increasing consumer demand for vivid graphics, rapid processing, greater memory and better sound. The release this fall of the Sony Playstation 2, coupled with the announcement of [next-generation consoles](#) by Nintendo and Microsoft, signals a dramatic increase in the resources available to game designers.

Games increasingly influence contemporary cinema, helping to define the frenetic pace and model the multi-directional plotting of [Run Lola Run](#), providing the role-playing metaphor for [Being John Malkovich](#) and encouraging a fascination with the slippery line between reality and digital illusion in [The Matrix](#). At high schools and colleges across the country, students discuss games with the same passions with which earlier generations debated the merits of the New American Cinema. Media studies programs report a [growing number of their students want to be game](#)

This web page  
was designed  
and created by  
[Anne Kapler](#).

[designers](#) rather than filmmakers. [Find video game chats.](#)

The time has come to take games seriously as an important new popular art shaping the aesthetic sensibility of the 21st century. I will admit that discussing the art of



video games conjures up comic images: tuxedo-clad and jewel-bedecked patrons admiring the latest Streetfighter, middle-aged academics pontificating on the impact of Cubism on Tetris, bleeps and zaps disrupting our silent contemplation at the Guggenheim. Such images tell us more about our contemporary notion of art—as arid and stuffy, as

the property of an educated and economic elite, as cut off from everyday experience—than they tell us about games.

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New York's Whitney Museum found itself at the center of controversy about [digital art](#) when it recently included Web artists in its prestigious biannual show. Critics didn't believe the computer could adequately express the human spirit. But they're misguided.

The computer is simply a tool, one that offers artists new resources and opportunities for reaching the public; it is human creativity that makes art. Still, one can only imagine how the critics would have responded to the idea that something as playful, unpretentious and widely popular as a computer game might be considered art.

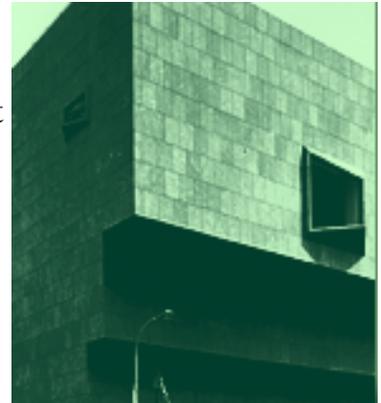


photo courtesy of witney.org

**The Whitney Museum  
in New York City**

In 1925, leading literary and arts critic Gilbert Seldes took a radical approach to the aesthetics of popular culture in a treatise titled *The Seven Lively Arts*. Adopting what was then a controversial position, Seldes argued that America's primary contributions to artistic expression had come through emerging forms of popular culture such as jazz, the Broadway musical, the Hollywood cinema and the comic strip. While these arts have gained cultural respectability over the past 75 years, each was disreputable when Seldes staked out his position.

Readers then were skeptical of Seldes' claims about cinema in particular for many of the same reasons that contemporary critics dismiss games—they were suspicious of cinema's commercial motivations and technological origins, concerned about Hollywood's appeals to violence and eroticism, and insistent that cinema had not

yet produced works of lasting value. Seldes, on the other hand, argued that cinema's popularity demanded that we reassess its aesthetic qualities.

Cinema and other popular arts were to be celebrated, Seldes said, because they were so deeply imbedded in everyday life, because they were democratic arts embraced by average citizens. Through streamlined styling and syncopated rhythms, they captured the vitality of contemporary urban experience. They took the very machinery of the industrial age, which many felt dehumanizing, and found within it the resources for expressing individual visions, for reasserting basic human needs, desires and fantasies. And these new forms were still open to experimentation and discovery. They were, in Seldes' words, "lively arts."

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Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible. And games have been embraced by a public that has otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art. Much as the salon arts of the 1920s seemed sterile alongside the vitality and inventiveness of popular culture, contemporary efforts to create interactive narrative through modernist hypertext or avant-garde installation art seem lifeless and pretentious alongside the creativity that [game designers](#) bring to their craft.

Much of what Seldes told us about the silent cinema seems remarkably apt for thinking about games. Silent cinema, he argued, was an art of expressive movement. He valued the speed and dynamism of D.W. Griffith's last-minute races to the rescue, the physical grace of Chaplin's pratfalls and the ingenuity of Buster Keaton's engineering feats. Games also depend upon an art of expressive movement, with characters defined through their distinctive ways of propelling themselves through space, and successful products structured around a succession of spectacular stunts and predicaments. Will future generations look back on Lara Croft doing battle with a pack of snarling wolves as the 21st-century equivalent of Lillian Gish making her way across the ice floes in *Way Down East*? The art of silent cinema was also an art of atmospheric design. To watch a silent masterpiece like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* is to be drawn into a world where meaning is carried by the placement of shadows, the movement of machinery and the organization of space. If anything, game designers have pushed beyond cinema in terms of developing [expressive and fantastic environments](#) that convey a powerful sense of mood, provoke our curiosity and amusement, and motivate us to explore.

Seldes wrote at a moment when cinema was maturing as an expressive medium and



graphic courtesy  
of [Lara Croft  
Gallery](#)

filmmakers were striving to enhance the emotional experience of going to the movies—making a move from mere spectacle towards character and consequence. It remains to be seen whether games can make a similar transition. Contemporary games can pump us full of adrenaline, they can make us laugh, but they have not yet provoked us to tears. And many have argued that, since games don't have characters of human complexity or stories that stress the consequences of our actions, they cannot achieve the status of true art. Here, we must be careful not to confuse the current transitional state of an emerging medium with its full potential. As I visit game companies, I see some of the industry's best minds struggling with this question and see strong evidence that the [games released over the next few years](#) will bring us closer and closer to the quality of characterization we have come to expect from other forms of popular narrative.

**Lara Croft, the heroine of Tomb Raider** In the March 6 issue of *Newsweek*, senior editor Jack Kroll argued that audiences will probably never be able to care as deeply about pixels on the computer screen as they care about characters in films: “Moviemakers don't have to simulate human beings; they are right there, to be recorded and orchestrated.... The top-heavy titillation of Tomb Raider's Lara Croft falls flat next to the face of Sharon Stone.... Any player who's moved to tumescence by digibimbo Lara is in big trouble.” Yet countless viewers cry when Bambi's mother dies, and World War II veterans can tell you they felt real lust for *Esquire's* Vargas girls. We have learned to care as much about creatures of pigment as we care about images of real people. Why should pixels be different?

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In the end, games may not take the same path as cinema. Game designers will almost certainly develop their own aesthetic principles as they confront the challenge of balancing our competing desires for storytelling and interactivity. It remains to be seen whether games can provide players the freedom they want and still provide an emotionally satisfying and thematically meaningful shape to the experience. Some of the best games—[Tetris](#) comes to mind—have nothing to do with storytelling. For all we know, the future art of games may look more like architecture or dance than cinema.

Such questions warrant close and passionate engagement not only within the game industry or academia, but also by the press and around the dinner table. Even Kroll's grumpy dismissal of games has sparked heated discussion and forced designers to refine their own grasp of the medium's distinctive features. Imagine what a more robust form of criticism could contribute. We need critics who know games the way Pauline Kael knew movies and who write about them with an equal degree of wit and wisdom.

When *The Seven Lively Arts* was published, silent cinema was still an experimental form, each work stretching the medium in new directions. Early film critics played vital functions in documenting innovations and speculating about their potential. Computer games are in a similar phase. We have not had time to codify what experienced game designers know, and we have certainly not yet established a canon of great works that might serve as exemplars. There have been real creative accomplishments in games, but we haven't really sorted out what they are and why they matter.

But games *do* matter, because they spark the imaginations of our children, taking them on epic quests to strange new worlds. Games matter because our [children no](#)

longer have access to real-world play spaces at a time when we've paved over the vacant lots to make room for more condos and the streets make parents nervous. If children are going to have opportunities for exploratory play, play that encourages cognitive development and fosters problem-solving skills, they will do so in the virtual environments of games. Multi-player games create opportunities for leadership, competition, teamwork and collaboration—for nerdy kids, not just for high-school football players. Games matter because they form the digital equivalent of the Head Start program, getting kids excited about what computers can do. Which kids are playing these games?



photo courtesy of  
viewimages.com

The problem with most contemporary games isn't that they are violent but that they are banal, formulaic and predictable. Thoughtful criticism can marshal support for innovation and experimentation in the industry, much as good film criticism helps focus attention on neglected independent films. Thoughtful criticism could even contribute to our debates about game violence. So far, the censors and culture warriors have gotten more or less a free ride because we almost take for granted that games are culturally worthless. We should instead look at games as an emerging art form—one that does not simply simulate violence but increasingly offers new ways to understand violence—and talk about how to strike a balance between this form of expression and social responsibility. Moreover, game criticism may provide a means of holding the game industry more accountable for its choices. In the wake of the Columbine shootings, game designers are struggling with their ethical responsibilities as never before, searching for ways of appealing to empowerment fantasies that don't require exploding heads and gushing organs. A serious public discussion of this medium might constructively influence these debates, helping identify and evaluate alternatives as they emerge.

As the art of games matures, progress will be driven by the most creative and forward-thinking minds in the industry, those who know that games can be more than they have been, those who recognize the potential of reaching a broader public, of having a greater cultural impact, of generating more diverse and ethically responsible content and of creating richer and more emotionally engaging stories. But without the support of an informed public and the perspective of thoughtful critics, game developers may never realize that potential.

Henry Jenkins is director of the Program in Comparative Media Studies at MIT.

<http://www.techreview.com/articles/oct00/viewpoint.htm>



**Hear the other side**

# From Tetris to Final Fantasy

By Anne Kapler

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This page should include a story that expands on the progression/development of video games of the last 25 years. The story should go into detail about characteristics of early, later and the most recent video games. It should analyze how and why the style of games have changed and how this effects who is playing the games.

This is a page that could include lots of graphics – tables, lists, timelines, etc.

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# The Real Problem with Video Games

By Anne Kapler

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This article should explain why games are banal, formulaic, and predictable. What are the formulas? Give us examples of games that use these formulas. Discuss the typical video game scenerio and what's wrong with it.

How does playing these kinds of games negatively affect kids? Why is this a greater concern than violence?

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# Violence In A New Light

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I am curious what the author means here by new ways to understand violence. So I would like this page to further explain this.

What are the old ways that kids understood violence from computer games? What are other ways that they can understand violence? What are the video games teaching them and what should the video games be teaching them?

The writer should consult psychologists who are experts in this field to get professional opinions. As well as game designers who can explain how could create a game that would give us new ways to understand violence.

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# Changing Face of Child's Play

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I know I've seen articles about this on the past, but I couldn't find any when I searched the web. So this could either be a new story to be written especially for this site, or it could be a place where we go to one of the parenting magazines or psychology journals that aren't posted on the web and ask for permission to "reprint" their piece.

What I would like is an article discussing how children's play has changed over the years. Children today are spending less time playing creatively – playing pretend, etc. – and more time sitting in front of televisions and video games. They have become more passive and less active players. Furthermore, it's been speculated (maybe proven, I can't remember) that this negatively affects their development.

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# Designers in Training

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This page should include profiling school(s) with programs in game design (if there are any) and the students who are taking game design courses there. What is the program like? How long has it been there? What kind of courses does it include? What does it take to become a game designer?

The article should also find out the student's motivations in studying game design – why do they want to do it? is there a "typical" person studying game design? what kind of aspirations and plans do they have for future games?

Also, talk to experts in the field – why do they think there is a growing number of aspiring game-designers? What do they think of the trend (are they excited, worried, irritated?)

There should be several pictures in this page – of students, of professionals. The story should be divided into sections with subheads for each section to make it easier for the reader to get through the piece. Each section should include a sidebar with a quick summary of the section or maybe a really good quote that gets the point of that section across.

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# 10 People To Watch

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This page should include profiles the top 5 or 10 " most creative and forward-thinking minds in the industry." Who are these people? Why are they considered the most creative and forward-thinking people? Why should we be paying attention to what they do? How are they going to change the industry?

Talk to them, talk to their colleagues and friends. The profile should focus mainly on their professional life, but should also include more personal information – where do they live? do they have a family? what kind of hobbies do they have outside of games? etc. People find this stuff interesting.

And find out how much money these guys and gals make a year.

The page should include some good photographs of each person profiled.

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# The Future of Video Games

By Anne Kapler

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This page should include a story looking ahead to future video games – talk to industry insiders. What do they have planned for upcoming games? How are they different than games that are out now? What kind of graphics and storylines do they have in store? What will be the most unique thing about these new games? What should people be looking forward to? Who is the intended audience of these new games? And if it's not the traditional market (teenage boys), why are they developing more games for this crowd?

Also – what platforms will these games be on, what type of machine should video-game players be investing in? How much will these games cost? And if the price is raising, will the price be worth it?

This page should include a table with names and dates of future releases. And maybe another table that briefly lists qualities to expect in upcoming video games.

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# Video Games Are Not Art

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The video game piece is mainly an opinion piece that says that video games should be considered art. This page should contain an article expressing the opposite point of view – why video games should not be considered art.

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## Some Video Game Chat sites

- [Gaming Update](#) – video game chat, message board, and news
- [Gamer's Universe](#) – chat or play games online
- [Video Game Chat Network](#) – "the ultimate video game chatting site"
- [Video Game Strategies at About.com](#) – get and give advice to other gamers in the chat or post gaming questions and comments in the discussion section
- [Video Games Trend Chat](#) – chat about video games and trends in the industry

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