My game in your gallery? professional game developers as artists

Katharine Neil
Why can’t these game wizards be satisfied with their ingenuity, their $7 billion (and rising) in sales, their capture of a huge chunk of youth around the world? Why must they claim that what they are doing is ‘art’? And should anyone care whether this emerging medium is art or not? The point is, the game designers care. They lust after the title of Artist. (Kroll, 2000)

In 2000, Jack Kroll of Newsweek magazine seized upon Sony’s marketing campaign for the PlayStation 2. His disdainful commentary in Newsweek magazine was written in response to Sony’s claim that the ‘Emotion Engine’ – the central processing unit of the PlayStation 2 – was so powerful and sophisticated that it would generate games containing real emotions. What stands out amid the multi-faceted outrage contained in Kroll’s op-ed piece is this accusatory statement that game designers crave to be recognised as ‘artists’. But do they really? This is the question that this essay will attempt to answer by looking at how game developers perceive themselves and their work.

Significant voices from within the art establishment and the academic community have, in recent years, explicitly acknowledged the game medium as an art form or a potential one. Finding answers from within the game industry itself, however, is far more problematic. Merely asking whether game developers themselves literally and explicitly self-identify as ‘artists’ would limit our sense of the state of artistic consciousness among game developers. The game development scene has evolved almost entirely outside of the conventional arts milieu, and conceiving of and articulating ideas about arts practice in a traditional sense is naturally less current within this subculture. Hence this essay will approach the question via a broad appreciation of the social, professional and ideological world of game development. It will start with game developers in general: how they feel about making games, and the creative environment in which they work, drawing in some of the wider social, cultural and economic factors that shape the game industry. From there, the discussion will move on to look at an example of a contemporary debate within the industry that reveals something about the way game developers view themselves within cultural and artistic traditions. It will conclude with a round up of the most progressive currents within the gaming scene and explore when and where an artistic vanguard in professional game development might emerge.

Being a game developer

There are many definitions of art, and what it means to be an artist. A common theme through all these definitions seems to be the idea of an artist having the desire to create, specifically the motivation to create aesthetic contexts that can mediate various agendas: the inspiration of pleasure, reflection and commentary upon society, the externalising of emotions and philosophical or abstract ideas. So what motivates people to make video games? To discover the answer to this we almost have to imagine what it is like to be a typical professional game developer.

There is a strong popular mythology surrounding game development. One can count on the fact that at any given moment, somewhere in the world, there is a game developer at a dinner party finding themselves obliged to defend their vocation against these popular perceptions: that most game developers make violent games (not true, according to game content researchers at Bond University, Australia), that there’s a lot of money to be made in games (true, and there’s also lot of money in sports shoes but tell that to South-East Asian factory worker), and that game developers ‘get paid to play games’.1
Emphasis is often placed, especially by the mainstream media, on the economic significance of the games industry (game industry turnover compared to Hollywood box office returns is usually the comparison made). This fuels the popular fallacy that as the turnover of the games industry increases so does the money available to be made by individual game developers. While it is true that in the 1980s and 90s, the fortunes of a number of developers were famously made, the phenomenon of the sensationally successful game developer has become less, not more, common with the growth of the industry. (Spector, 2006) The worlds of film and music may be full of obscurity-to-fame success stories (or at least myths), but the common wisdom in game land is that the days of Ferrari driving game designers and millionaire cocaine-snorting game coders (typified by the legendary rise of powerful, elite development studios such as id Software and the notorious excesses of the doomed Ion Storm Dallas in the 1990s) are long gone.

Even if the idea of overnight fame and fortune is now more of an industry in-joke than a plausibly attainable goal, do normal game developers have it over their non-game industry peers in terms of pay and general job satisfaction? Arguably, no. It is no secret (in fact, in recent times it has emerged as a public scandal) that game development is very hard work, for low pay compared to equivalent industries. Excessive working hours, poor management and terrible working conditions have plagued the industry for years, and have compounded with the rapid expansion in the scale of game production. The fact that an average career of a game developer spans only five years, mostly due to a decision to leave game development as a career, is testament to the financial and lifestyle sacrifices required to work as an average developer within the industry. (IDGA, 2005) As Gareth Wilson, developer with Bizarre Creations, says, ‘The industry can take young, green people, put them through the mill and spit them out’. (Wilson, 2006)

It is common to hear game developers, even those who admit to still loving their work, say they ‘can’t afford’ to remain in the games industry, citing the need for a job with less overtime, less stress and better pay as reasons for changing careers. A comment on the private game developer forum The Chaos Engine typifies the feelings of many who have left the industry: ‘The love and passion I used to have for gaming and the gaming industry has almost completely vanished - I don’t know if it’s the thankless work, the overtime hours, or just getting old but I am burned out.’ (Chaos Engine, 2006)

Workers who choose a career in the games industry have clearly not chosen game development as a comfortable lifestyle choice or an easy meal ticket. And yet despite all this, there are many budding developers waiting on the sidelines, eager to take their place. Computer game designer and writer Chris Crawford describes the industry as a big building with lots of exits but with only one entrance, and thousands of eager young kids pushing and shoving to get inside. (Crawford, 2006)

And why are these kids so eager? After all, game development is not a clever way to make money, to have an easy or even an enjoyable job, nor to become famous. The only rational reason left to make games, is a love of making games. For game industry employers this is a decided industrial advantage. Would a boss of a car parts manufacturing plant stay in business for long if he said, ‘do unpaid overtime for the sake of the product’? A game industry employer is able to say ‘do it for the sake of the game’.
Fueled by idealism, and often a fierce sense of creative investment in their work, most game developers have a passionate five years before they disappear from the industry. (IDGA, 2005) Many work on game projects in their spare time. Some mortgage their homes to fund their dream project, well aware of the risks. Many admit to relationships breakups, health problems and ‘having no life’ as the result of their careers, but accept these negative lifestyle effects as simply ‘coming with the territory’ of game development. At worst, this is a manifestation of competitive macho pride, or martyr syndrome. (Hoffman, 2004) On the other hand, this attitude is perhaps comparable with the stereotype of the ‘suffering artist’: a painter or writer going against the wishes of friends and family in rejecting a sensible career in law or commerce and choosing a harsher, penurious existence for the sake of their art.

You can hardly blame people for being depressed. They’ve joined an industry that hires people on the mistaken belief that they will be able to create, and nurture their own ideas ... (Chaos Engine, 2006)

The notable difference here, however, is that while according to the traditional ‘suffering artist’ narrative the artist wins a degree of creative autonomy in exchange for their sacrifices and takes direct part in any success that may result, game developers of the twenty-first century typically make their sacrifices as faceless employees at the mercy of large, complex systems of corporate stakeholders. This didn’t used to be the norm. A decade or two ago it was common to see ‘bedroom coders’ and small teams of friends directly reaping the benefits of their own game creating talents within the mainstream games industry. But rapid, radical changes to the objective conditions within the game industry have progressively constrained the aspirational (and creative) boundaries for game developers.

**How the games business constrains creative consciousness**

It’s not just the artists who are suffering in this scenario; the art is suffering too. Far from progressing along a grand historical path towards aesthetic sublimity, the art (if not the craft) of games is arguably regressing.

This is not to discount the creatively significant work that has been produced by game designers working within mainstream commercial constraints. *Deus Ex*, released in 2000, is a critically acclaimed example of socially challenging game content and innovative game design. (Storm, 2000) In Japan, where the gaming audience is arguably more mature than in the West, game developers are sometimes given scope to create off-the-wall commercial work for the Japanese market. Tetsuya Mizuguchi’s *Rez* and Punchline’s unusual *Rule of Rose* being notable examples of this showing that the potential is there for game developers, given the right conditions, to explore new ideas within a commercial context.

But take these two remarkably similar quotes commenting on the state of artistry in game development. One is written by an influential game designer, the other by an influential media studies academic. The first statement signals an imminent qualitative leap of games to art form status:

*While they have satisfied until now the fantasies of twisted computer-nerd minds, they will soon blossom into a much richer array of fantasies…. Computer games constitute an as–yet untapped art form..... Eventually, games will be recognized as a serious art form.* (Crawford, 1982)
and so does the second:

If games are going to become an art, right now, rather than in some distant future, when all of our technical challenges have been resolved, it may come from game designers who are struggling with the mechanics of motion and emotion, rather than those of story and character. (Jenkins, 2005)

Immediately we can see here that there is at least one significant voice within the commercial games industry that has seen the potential of the game medium within the established artistic tradition. But there is something even more interesting about this pair of comments: they were written twenty years apart. The first in 1982, the second in 2002.

In 1982, successful game designer Chris Crawford published a book called The Art of Computer Game Design from which the first quote above is drawn. While Crawford has since expressed profound cynicism about the current and future state of game development (Computer Games Are Dead), his book was an early articulation of the aspirations of a progressive current within a nascent game development community. (Crawford, n.d.) It shows that a conscious debate around games as a serious art form has been present within the professional game development community for a relatively long time; long before the ‘game art’ trend began to take off in the art world, and the establishment of the academic discipline of Game Studies in 2001.4

Moving forward twenty years to 2002, MIT media studies academic Henry Jenkins pens the second quote above. His comment, also premised on the idea of the games soon becoming art, indirectly reveals a rather disappointing truth: the game medium has still not yet fulfilled its artistic promise. Far from ‘blossoming into a richer array of fantasies’, commercial game development has arguably been taken in quite the opposition direction.

This failure has not gone unnoticed by professional game developers; in fact it has generated frustration and even anger in some parts of the development community. The Scratchware Manifesto, written and published on the Internet by anonymous game developers in 2000, complained that game development was ‘once the most exciting and innovative artistic field on the planet’. (Anon, 2000) The regressive trend towards creative stagnation has been a popular discussion topic among game developers - from radical critical industry elements to influential industry spokespeople - for the last several years. (Morris, 2005) The nature of the games industry business model and the challenges posed by rapidly evolving technology are typically the factors blamed for industry concentration and centralisation and its conservatising influence.5 As Oddworld creator Lorne Lanning puts it:

The reason isn't because the industry is devoid of creative people, the reason is that the barrier to entry is so high, and the price to develop those new tools, as well as a title in the first quarter for release on a new platform, is so risky. (Costikyan, 2006)

The aspect that is most relevant to this discussion, however, is the effects these changes are having on the ‘arts practice’, of the typical professional game developer, especially the scope for creativity in their work. While ‘in film and publishing, plenty of people make decent, middle class livings by catering to niche audiences’ this is not the case in the games industry. (ibid) This notion may have seemed plausible in the 1980s, often remembered affectionately as the ‘golden age’ of game development, when games could be developed by a
hobbyist on a home computer and sold to the local independent game store. Nowadays, however, a game has to have the potential to become a mass market hit in order to become one of the only 200 or so titles allowed on the shelves at a giant game store chain. In turn, producing original content (i.e. content that is not based on an existing intellectual property such as a film or an existing game franchise) has come to be deemed risky by an industry considered by some to be even more risk-averse than Hollywood. (Pfeifer, 2005) Even high profile game designers with impressive track records are now struggling to get their projects funded. The fact that the bottom line in the games business now relies on international hits has led to the emergence of a climate of cultural homogenisation; the inclusion of non-American cultural content in games, for example, is now considered risky. (Clapham, 2006)

Alongside narrowing constraints in game content an evolution of the way games are made has also had an impact on the practical creativity of developers. With the implementation of Taylorist (i.e. McDonald’s style) management practices and role specialisation within large teams (comprising a handful of often multi-skilled developers a decade ago, fifty to one-hundred specialists today) the average developer enjoys a much smaller piece of the creative pie.

My first real gamedev job … we were three guys … Now I work for a big company, doing AAA titles, but I feel bitter, yes there is some excitement, but then the teams are 100-150 people, you got not one platform but 4-5 (old-gen + next-gen), and one of it launch title. It’s a hell ride. (Chaos Engine, 2006)

Meanwhile, perhaps ironically, game designers coming into the industry today are more likely to have received a liberal arts style education, many coming out of university game studies courses that look seriously at the aesthetic and cultural aspects of games. Hence expectations and creative aspirations are being raised within the industry at a time when these aspirations are arguably less likely to be fulfilled.

The practical realities of this industrial environment undoubtedly have a constraining and limiting effect on the creative consciousness of game developers. Seen alongside conventional artistic disciplines, the game development scene could hardly be described as a framework within which the average practitioner would spontaneously feel, or perhaps even ever conceive of feeling, that they are a present or future ‘artist’. Is the idea of producing ‘art’ simply unimaginable in a context in which lesser creative battles are so easily lost?

A game developer’s cultural context
The way a game developer frames the potential of their work is tempered not only by material realities, but also by cultural realities. How do game developers view their role as creators of culture within a social context?

The game medium has a long way to go in terms of audience development, specifically the evolution of an audience actively looking beyond the mainstream for thought-provoking and meaningful experiences from games. The public has had little exposure, let alone access, to non-mainstream game content, and as a result audience expectations are limited, offering little encouragement for game design innovators. In this sense, aspiring film-makers and musicians already have a head start.

While games are receiving increasing amount of attention from wider society,
much of this is negative and based on a commonly held understanding that the video game is not a credible cultural medium of much social worth. This understanding was articulated explicitly in US Judge Limbaugh’s ruling in 2002 that games do not merit First Amendment protection on the basis that they lack ‘conveyance of ideas, expression, or anything else that could possibly amount to speech’. (Au, 2002) That the videogame is seen purely as a low-brow entertainment vehicle with a limited expressive range is a fact that constrains and punishes game designers who wish to feature more serious social content in their games (violence, sex, tragedy, etc). Far from being interpreted as boundary-pushing social realism, this kind of work is viewed by the mainstream as cynical exploitation. And unfortunately as game designer Ernest Adams puts it, the game development community is in part to blame for these narrow perceptions of what games can be:

Our overemphasis on fun—kiddie-style, wheee-type fun—is part of the reason we’re in this mess in the first place. To merely be fun is to be unimportant, irrelevant, and therefore vulnerable. (Adams, 2006)

But why would game developers consciously limit their work to producing ‘mere fun’? Because while they often live and work within a fairly insular subculture, are not immune to society’s dominant ideology as it pertains to games. It would be fair to say that if a one were to dedicate one’s life to creating a culturally defining statement in contemporary society, the videogame would not be a perceived as a propitious medium through which to do it; and game developers have internalised this reality. It is no surprise, therefore, that signs of cultural cringe can be observed within the game industry. Game developers routinely channel their creative aspirations into other activities (e.g. film-making, writing, music), articulating pessimism about the potential of expressing themselves through games. Game development is often seen as a second choice, lesser career by creative professionals, and developers look with yearning at the status and approbation afforded to their peers working in comparable media. As industry veteran Dan Cook recently observed, ‘the game industry is filled with writers who want to author the next great novel, designers who want to direct the next great movie and artists who would be perfectly happy doing character design for a Saturday morning cartoon.’ (Cook, 2006)

But ironically, a progressive cultural status shift for the game medium may even be resisted by many game developers themselves, especially if the game development community does not feel ownership over this process. In the minds of some, residing uneasily alongside a cultural inferiority complex is a feeling of resentment towards the way successful names from other industries have started to turn their attention to games. The veteran game developer greets with jaded cynicism the occasional - but regular - grandiose press releases relating how such-and-such a Hollywood director (for examples the Wachowski Brothers, Stephen Spielberg, Peter Jackson) has vowed to step in and help the game medium cross the final frontier towards becoming a true art form - with the Hollywood magic of storytelling and cinematography.

To date, these collaborations have resulted in no major critical successes and many game developers have expressed finding the notion of their medium being heroically redeemed by outside intervention vaguely offensive. (Lanning, 2006) Some of these outsiders, many suspect, are attracted not out of genuine love for the game medium, but rather out of interest in the rapidly increasing size of game budgets. Complaints and rumours abound of film-makers ruining game projects as a result of unfamiliarity with the medium, second tier Hollywood players mercenarily exploiting the gullibility of over-awed game developers, and lead to a devaluation of the creative work.

So it is almost under siege-like conditions that game creators, alternately pawed at and buffeted by various political and cultural forces, digest the debate around art and games.

*A growing disquiet exists among some gamers about critics and artists who don't play video games deciding whether or not they are art. Others gamers simply don't care.* (Hill, 2006)

While some game developers have reacted by explicitly championing the recognition of their chosen medium as an art form (*Santiago Siri* with his self-explanatorily titled blog *Games Are Art* is one example) other developers have retreated with anger and hostility to the notion that games are an art form. (Adams, 2006) Some sit cautiously in between, much like the group of gamers who got together to produce a T-shirt with the slogan ‘Games Matter’ in 2004 and the book *Difficult Questions About Videogames*. (Simons, 2004) Their publicity was at pains to encourage us all to ‘remember that games are first and foremost fun’, betraying a hint of wary anti-intellectualism.

How can we explain this ‘disquiet’ mentioned above? Perhaps this is best understood as a reaction, a kind of reverse snobbery. A sense of alienation among developers is unsurprising given the still predominantly negative attention and low status afforded to video games by mainstream society, in contrast to the institutional support given to the traditional high-brow arts. But perhaps these feelings could also be arising from an unconscious fear that if society suddenly decides that games are art the game community will be subject to yet more outsider interference: this time from creative colonisation by the cultural elite.

**The auteur solution**

Chicago Sun-Times film critic *Roger Ebert* famously wrote that games could never be a true art form (as compared to film and literature) because their interactive nature prevents a game designer from exerting full authorial control over what the audience experiences. (Ebert, 2006) From a fine art perspective, this argument is easily dismissed. Ebert’s definition would discount all forms of interactive art and art that involves audience participation. Even abstract art, designed to evoke intellectual exploration and interpretive autonomy, would seem to fall afoul of Ebert’s criteria. Celebrated game designer *Will Wright* compares player participation in games to the high degree of subjectivity built into modern art, in which ‘the viewer became part of the artistry; it was kind of shared authorship that I think we’re actually seeing happen to games right now’. (Wright, 2005) Modern art, however, is largely irrelevant in game development circles. Game designers more typically compare their work to the ‘lively arts’ of film, television and modern literary forms – heavily narrative based linear media, and Ebert’s belief that interactivity is incompatible with art is in fact shared by many game developers. (Snyder, 2006)

Ebert’s conclusions aside, by raising the question of authorial control he raises a key meme in game development that has long been present in debates around game design and analysis. One recent manifestation can be seen in the methodological tension between approaches that can be loosely grouped into storytelling on the one hand (strongly narrative-based structures, ‘media convergence’ with film) and open-world play contexts on the other (‘emergent
2.5 My game in your gallery? Professional games developers as artists  Katharine Neil

gameplay’, Will Wright’s ‘doll’s house’ approach). Another manifestation of the authorship meme is in the question of the ‘auteur’, or ‘vision-carrier’. The history of game production is the history of famous development teams as much, or perhaps more, than famous individuals. It has been argued that if games are to be treated as a serious art form, and developers respected as creators, we should imitate the film, music and publishing industries where the cult of the artist is very strong, by fostering the cult of the game ‘auteur’.

The game auteur idea is not merely a PR strategy, however. It aims to elevate the status and power of the creative side of game development above and beyond the power that the ‘money men’ currently wield; even to champion the creative integrity of the project against the polluting forces of increasing team sizes and the tyranny of publishers. It is also proposed as an answer to the problem of creative credit within the game industry. Feelings of frustration have been generated by a situation where the world’s most successful game designers live in relative obscurity compared to their celebrity peers in other creative industries. According to game developer Jason Rubin:

The picture the publishers are painting of game industry is that the Publishers take select franchises and properties, add their valued branding and marketing talent, and then have the videogames developed in factories. (Moledina, 2004)

The idea is that if an individual’s name was promoted on the game box rather than the brand it would change the power relationship between publishers and developers: while publishers may legally be able to control a brand and take a game franchise away from developers who created it (something that happens alarmingly often), they can’t own the name and reputation of individual developers.

God of War designer David Jaffe complains about the reticence of game developers to promote themselves as artists, leaving the credit for their work to the corporations:

I think there’s almost this kind of insecurity vibe that a lot of game makers have, that it’s like ‘you know what? Fuck it, man, take the fucking brass ring; stand up and say I was responsible, with my team, for doing this, and I’m going to reap the benefits: financial, socially, status-wise. (Jaffe, 2006)

This reticence among game developers is not mere self-denial, however.
While the medium of the videogame may now have much in common with other entertainment media, behind the scenes the traditions and values of software development are still very much alive. Game developers share many of the values of the larger software community, a community that sees their culture of great teams and flat(ish) hierarchies as not only practical, but also as a progressive tradition to take pride in. ‘Team’ is not merely a production methodology, it is value-laden and culturally significant within the industry.

**Epic Games’** lead designer, **Cliff Bleszinski**, warns that a designer who singles themselves out as an auteur ‘runs a serious risk of alienating the people who made the game great’, and according to **Deus Ex** designer **Harvey Smith** game development is so collaborative that ‘it just feels wrong to me to have ‘so and so’s such and such’’ on the front of the box (MTV, 2006) Dan Cook takes the auteur debate to the nature of the game medium itself. He posits that unlike with older media forms, the sheer level of aesthetic complexity of games precludes the notion of an auteur:

> If the vast majority of publicly celebrated creative works of the past have been attributed to a single artist, then surely game design must follow the same model? The only problem here is that most games are not created by a single person with genius level skills in a mature craft. They are team activities that involve the creation of complex, new-to-the-world interactive systems. (Cook, 2006)

Whether the auteur model of game development would successfully reclaim rights and creative control for developers or not, this is just one debate that forms part of a wider discourse about the balance of power within commercial game development. Another, more radical, game industry current takes a more materialist approach to regaining creative control: the independent game developers’ movement. They believe a more fundamental change to the game industry’s business model is required in order for game developers to win the creative freedom they need.

**The indie games movement and the developer intelligentsia**

The irony about Jack Kroll’s attack (in Newsweek, quoted above) on the artistic pretensions of game developers is that it is the game development community itself that greets the game industry PR machine’s hype with the most cynicism. The hypocrisy of publishing and console manufacturing executives making grand statements about artistic endeavour does not go unnoticed by game developers, the people in the best position to know the truth behind the hype. ‘Where are the Tarantinos?’ **Electronic Arts**, a publisher often accused of being an anti-creative force within the industry asked. They are working for you but you are suffocating them,’ an angry developer comments in an online industry forum after returning from a game development conference in the UK. (Anon, 2003)

In effect, Jack Kroll was merely participating in a dialogue that was not with game makers but rather with a collection of business executives and marketing men. Game designers themselves are, for the most part, invisible employees who have no voice within public discourse. When it comes to the important questions around the role of games in society posed in major public forums (Newsweek, for instance, as opposed to trade journals), CEOs and PR professionals do most of the talking on our behalf. It is no surprise, therefore, that progressive voices of game developers and gamers striving to advance aesthetic discourse are rarely heard in mainstream society. So much is this
the case, in fact, that cultural critics devote columns to pondering their non-existence (Ralph Klosterman’s infamous article in Esquire asking why there is no serious game criticism, for example, which was taken as an affront by, naturally, serious game critics). They are drowned out by the white noise of the industry’s massive marketing machine. A common complaint amongst game journalists is that they often have no choice but to talk to assigned PR representatives about the games they’re writing about, while individual game developers are legally constrained from discussing their work with their audience or their peers. There is little public support for alternative or non-commercial voices as compared to other popular media (there is no ‘Corporation for Public Gaming’, for instance) and public policy makers give an audience to businessmen and employer groups rather than practicing game developers or gamers.

Within industry forums, however, independent and alternative voices are gaining strength and influence. ‘It is common knowledge among game developers that our industry is in something of a ‘creative crisis’,” says a bill of rights for game developers presented at the Montreal International Game Summit in 2005 and published on the International Game Developers Association website. (Rejeski, 2006) It written by game designer Eric Zimmerman who professed to being motivated by his desire ‘to see computer and video games realize their creative and cultural potential’. (ibid)

This idea drives the consciously ‘indie’ game developer movement. The stated aim of this movement is to grow a sustainable independent game development industry comparable to the independent film and music industries. Some, such as Manifesto Games’ Greg Costikyan, believe that a new path to market made possible by the growth of online distribution can break the publishing and distribution oligopolies that enchain developers, similar to the way this seems to be happening in the music industry. Summed up in MG’s slogan ‘gamers of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our retail chains’; organisations, festivals and business initiatives with the explicit aim of fostering independent game development have sprung up around the world in the last few years. There is now an indie games section in Slamdance, the high profile independent film festival.

Game criticism is also beginning to serve as a force for the recognition of games as an art form within the industry. We are beginning to see the emergence of our own Roger Eberts. The need for game journalists to write serious criticism rather than mere product reviews has been articulated most clearly by writers associated with a movement known as The New Games Journalism. Kieron Gillen, author of the New Games’ Journalism manifesto, talks of a move from an objective to a subjective approach focusing on player engagements rather than polygon counts and scores out of ten. He urges game critics to describe:

\[\text{The place that only exists in the player’s mind …... You are experiencing something that simply doesn’t exist. This is the games-form’s own peculiar magic, and what we have to explain. (Gillen, 2004)}\]

While the manifesto makes no explicit reference to games as ‘art’, Gillen’s description of ‘the place that only exists in the player’s mind’ implicitly strikes at the core of modern aesthetics; the ‘peculiar magic’ being the defining quality of art itself. For Immanuel Kant, arguably the father of modern aesthetics, the key quality of art is to be found not in the object itself, or in the sensation of it, but in the effects it produces in the audience’s imagination through contemplation. (Kant, 1790)
Of course, similar cultural challenges have been overcome in other media. But that is not to say that the cultural prominence of the game art form will emerge through an objective, passive process of evolution, by allowing industry forces to run their course and leaving all social and cultural progress to the mercy of capitalism. If the game is an art form, like all art forms it will be freed and pushed to its potential through the gains of subjective struggle, a fight that cannot be led from above or outside: not by businessmen, film industry veterans, nor even the art establishment. It must emerge from below; from game developers who are prepared to fight for what they believe in: their medium. As Henry Jenkins says, ‘we may be at a vital crossroads in the history of computer and video games’. (Jenkins, 2006) Which road is taken will be decided by this struggle.

Who here is here because, you now, developing games is, like, just a job, doesn't really matter, whatever, it pays the bills. Put up your hand.

And who's here because you love games?

Yeah. (Costikyan, 2005)

Notes
1. Specifically, by the Diverse Worlds Project at Bond University in Australia. See: Brand, Jeffrey (2003) 'Don't criticize the effects of video games on kids, exploit them!'. Bond University ePublications.
2. Games are important because game industry turnover is bigger than that of Hollywood. Sadly, this is usually the line used by mainstream journalists in place of venturing into an intelligent discussion about the medium itself and its relationship to contemporary culture.
3. The blossoming of the ‘casual games’ industry since 2004, however, has seen a minor renaissance of bedroom coding. The casual games space, which took off in 2004 on the web and PC downloads and is now moving onto the consoles. While very simple and derivative games dominate in this space, the market has opened up a renaissance for smaller, developer controlled teams and projects that one day may merge with development for the ‘core’ games market.
4. Espen Aarseth argues that ‘2001 can be seen as the Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field,’ in his editorial for the International Journal of Computer Game Research, Volume 1, Issue 1, July 2001
7. For examples, see the games Escape From Woomera, Super Columbine Massacre RPG, and 911 Survivor.
10. In 2006 David Rejeski proposed that there be state support for games based on the public broadcasting model. See: David Rejeski (2006) ‘Why we need a corporation for public gaming’
11. Cultural coming of age when game developers stood in defiance of the censorshop of Super Columbine Massacre RPG at Slamdance. Consciousness was raised and the double-standard applied to film vs game was exposed.
12. Inspired by the 'The New Journalism' movement of the 1970s.
13. This comparison between games and the cultural elevation of the novel, film, TV and comic forms is often raised in discussions about games as art, but I believe this is simplistic when the differing historical, economic and technological contexts for these media not taken into account. For instance, the novel form was adopted relatively early by the intelligentsia as a rapidly accessible vehicle for serious content while the moral panic around novels was only just beginning; television was rescued in its infancy by state intervention in the form of public broadcasting initiatives; and comics have, arguably, never truly enjoyed mainstream acceptance as an art form by wider society (with the possible exceptions of French and Japanese cultures), despite notable works in the medium.
My game in your gallery? Professional games developers as artists Katharine Neil

References
Adams, Ernest (2006) / 'Revenge of the Highbrow Games'/ GamaSutra
Anonymous game designers (2000) / 'The Scratchware Manifesto'
Askwith, Ivan (2003) / 'A Matrix in every medium'/ Salon.com
Brand, Jefffrey (2003) / 'Don't criticize the effects of video games on kids, exploit them!' / Bond University ePUBLICATIONS
Chaos Engine, 2006
Clapham, Mark (2006) / 'Local Heroes' / GamesIndustry.biz / August 25
Cook, Dan (2006) / 'Ze Story Snobs' / Lost Garden
Costikyan, Greg (2005) / ' Burning Down the House' panel speech / Game Developers' Conference, March
Crawford, Chris (1996) / 'Computer Games are Dead' / Interactive Entertainment Design Vol. 9
Crawford, Chris (n.d.) / 'The Education of a Game Designer'
Ebert, Roger (2005) / RogerEbert.com / November 27
Johnson, Joel (2006) / 'Klosterman: There are no game critics' / Kotaku / June 23
Kant, Immanuel (1790) / The Critique of Judgement / trans. James Creed Meredith
Morris, Chris (2005) / 'Nintendo: Innovation is Dying' / CNNMoney, June 3
MTV Game Makers Roundtable (2006) / MTV Overdrive, May
Lanning, Lorne (2006) / 'Siege Mentality' / GamesIndustry.biz
Rejeski, David (2006) 'Why we need a corporation for public gaming' / Woodrow Wilson Centre / August 25
Shacknews (2006) / 'Uwe Boll Challenges His Critics "To Put Up Or Shut Up!"' / June 13
Waters, Darren (2005) / 'Spielberg takes film magic to EA' / BBC News Online
Waters, Darren (2006) / 'Director Jackson signs Xbox deal' / BBC NEWS Online
Wilson, Gareth (2006) / (cited by Darren Waters) / 'Games industry 'burns out talent'' / BBC News Online
Wright, Will (2005) quoted in Ellie Gibson / 'Thinking Big' / GamesIndustry.biz / September 5

All links: www.swanquake.com/usermanual/KatharineNeil

Biography
Katharine Neil is a New Zealand born game developer, with an academic music background. She has worked in the game industry since 1998 as a sound designer and programmer in Australia and France. Her non-professional activities have included co-founding Australia's annual independent game developers' conference Free Play, and under the pseudonym 'Kipper', initiating and directing the Escape From Woomera project in 2003 - a somewhat notorious collaboration between a journalist and a game development team to create a videogame based on the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia. As an occasional writer, Katharine has aired opinions on the political and cultural aspects of videogames.