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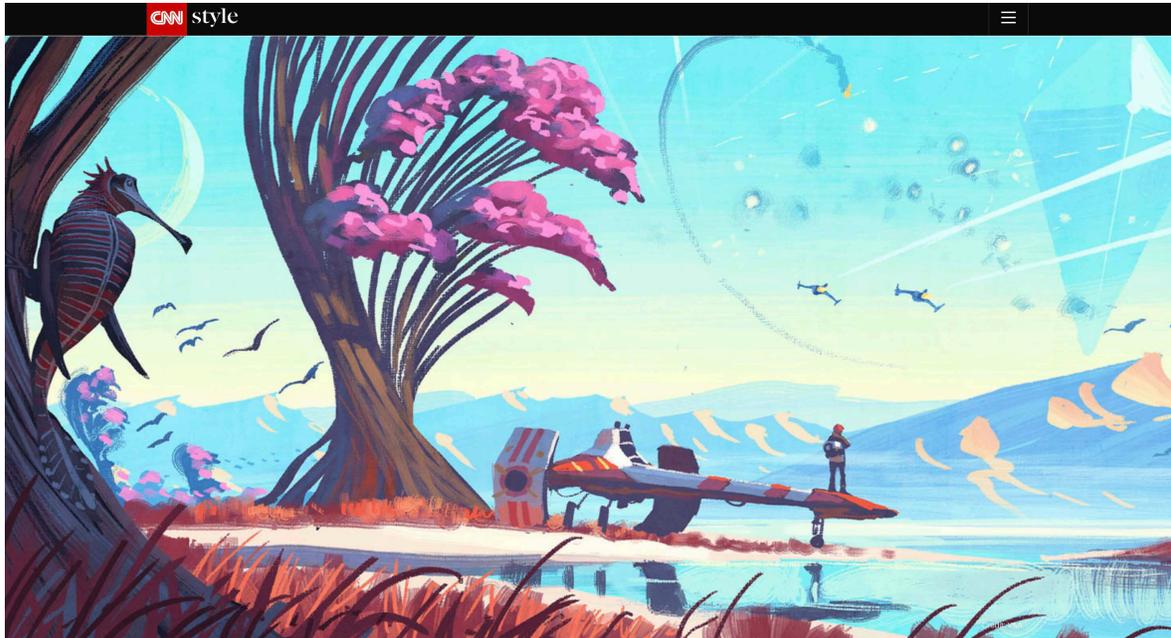
Bold, provocative, inclusive: The new face of game design

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But games have so far struggled to get full recognition as a form of art, finding it easier to be legitimized as digital sports instead. They are, however, a wonderfully complex combination of artwork, music, storytelling and engineering that is increasingly perceived as an important design discipline.

A new exhibition at London's Victoria & Albert museum is surely a push in that direction, showing that video games are welcome in one of the world's leading museums of decorative art and design. As director Tristram Hunt puts it, there's room for both Minecraft and Da Vinci at the V&A.

The humble notebook

Visitors are greeted at the entrance with a quote by Frank Lantz, director of the New York University Game Center: "Making games combines everything that's hard about building a bridge and everything that's hard about composing an opera. Games are operas made out of bridges."

It works as a sort of programmatic declaration about the show, which aims to explore the wide range of influences that converge into contemporary game design -- the focus is on works from the last decade or so, with no crowd-pleasing classics -- although it all seems to start with a rather traditional item.

"The Graveyard" is a black and white game in which the player controls an elderly woman walking through a cemetery to a bench. Credit: V&A

"The exhibition looks at video games through the lens of design, and when you think about design there is nothing more ubiquitous and more widely used than the humble notebook," said curator Marie Foulston.

Notebooks of every shape and size, some still somewhat pristine, others bent and swollen, offer a direct insight into the creative process of popular productions like Sony's "The last of us" -- which has sold 17 million copies -- as well as that of independent designers like Auriea Harvey, who specializes in art games, a sub-genre in which the entertainment value is secondary to the artistic intent. One of her creations, also on exhibit, is "The graveyard," a black and white game in which the player controls an elderly woman walking through a cemetery to a bench.

"The Graveyard" is a black and white game in which the player controls an elderly woman walking through a cemetery to a bench. Credit: V&A

"Every studio and every designer we spoke to, when we asked them to show something critical to their design process, brought up a notebook or a sketchbook," added Foulston. "It provides a unique perspective on the ideas and the modes of thinking and the process that designers are going through and also makes it a bit more human and accessible."

Next to recent blockbusters like "Bloodborne" and "No man's sky," which are the result of years of development, the exhibition showcases a diverse range of small productions, to shine a light on the changes in game design facilitated by increased access to broadband, social media and more accessible development tools.

"The tools to create games are so radically democratized now, for example Twine is a visual text editor that allows people to write an interactive text video game without any knowledge of coding. There are video game jams with people attempting to create games in an hour or so; just as quickly as you can make a movie on your mobile phone, you can create video games in so many different ways," said Foulston.

An image from "How do you do it?" by Nina Freeman. Credit: V&A

More accessible tools also means a wider range of voices and backgrounds coming into game development. "How do you do it?" by Nina Freeman, about a young girl's exploration of sexuality through dolls, is among the playable games as is "Phone story," a satirical game in which players must catch falling workers attempting suicide from a Foxconn-like plant, or make it impossible for laborers mining coltan in the Congo to get rest, bringing attention to the dark side of smartphone production.

Under a banner reading "Why are video games so white?" a video shows interviews and talks exploring the social and political implications of game design and what creators are doing to tackle subjects such as representation, race and sexuality.
A nearby exhibit offers a recreation of Pong, one of the earliest video games, made with a tool that uses a programming language in Arabic. "Every major programming language is based around the roman alphabet, so there's been an inherent barrier to create video games. This points at those hurdles that we still need to surmount and the new voices that we'd love to hear from within video games," said Foulston.
Art or not?
Perhaps the most unexpected object on show is "Le blanc seing," a 1965 Magritte surrealist painting of a woman riding a horse in a forest. It was used as a specific visual reference by the designers of "Kentucky route zero," a 2013 indie game which plays with the user's perception of reality just like the painting does.

"Le blanc seing," by Rene Magritte. Credit: V&A

"It shows how video games are connected to such a broad range of often unexpected artistic influences," said Foulston. That idea is reinforced by the presence of "Line wobbler," a one-dimensional game made up of an LED strip and a door stopper, which was inspired by a 2012 viral video of a cat playing with a doorstop.

That leads inevitably to the old chestnut: are video games art or not? "Not every painting is a piece of art. Equally, when a video game is entertainment there is still a fascinating design story that goes behind it," said Foulston.

"We need to value video games in the same way that we do film and music, and we're at a cultural tipping point where that is beginning to happen."

Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt is at London's Victoria & Albert Museum from Sep. 8 to Feb. 24, 2019.