

Video games enter realm of art at Smithsonian

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Computer gamers play during the gamescom fair in Cologne, western Germany last year. Video games have come a long way since the first simple adventures of Mario and Pac-Man and now enter the realm of art in a major exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington that celebrates gaming's rich creative side and the people behind a medium that's still in full bloom.

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"The Art of Video Games" spans the 40 years since video games moved from amusement arcades into homes around the world, evolving in leaps and bounds with ever-more-sophisticated graphics, interactivity and story-telling.

"While this exhibition is not the first exhibition that actually uses video games, it is the first I believe that actually looks at video games themselves as an art form," curator Chris Melissinos told AFP.

"This is not about the art within video games," said Melissinos, an avid gamer since he was a 10-year-old in his native New York borough of Queens. "This is about video games themselves as an artistic medium."

The exhibition comes nine months after the US Supreme Court said the First Amendment covered video games, in a landmark ruling that put them on a par with books and other forms of artistic expression.

Bathed in red and blue lighting, and appropriately next to a Nam June Paik video installation, "The Art of Video Games" spotlights 80 hit games created for 20 different gaming systems, from the Atari VCS of the 1970s to today's PlayStation 3, that Melissinos calls "the touchstones of their generation."



Young fans play video games during Fan Fair in January in Ontario, Canada. Video games have come a long way since the first simple adventures of Mario and Pac-Man and now enter the realm of art in a major exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington that celebrates gaming's rich creative side and the people behind a medium that's still in full bloom.

Five games -- "Pac-Man," "Super Mario Brothers," "The Secret of Monkey Island," "Myst" and "Flower" -- are booted up with their original joysticks and motion controllers for visitors to play on wall-sized screens.

Long-obsolete consoles like the ColecoVision that powered "Donkey Kong" and the Commodore 64 that made "Attack of the Mutant Camels" possible are encased in Plexiglass display boxes like pharaonic Egyptian artifacts.

"When hardcore gamers come in here, they're going to go, 'Yes, these are the correct games to represent these different eras'," said Chris Kohler, gaming editor of Wired.com and an advisor to the exhibition.

"But when non-gamers come in, I think they're really going to get an education into the [art](#) form that this medium really truly is, and has become, and how it has evolved," he told AFP.

In-gallery videos tackle the past, present and future of gaming through interviews with 20 influential figures in the gaming world; the videos also feature on the exhibition's website (www.americanart.ci.edu).



Shopper looks for video games at a store in Miami, Florida. Video games have come a long way since the first simple adventures of Mario and Pac-Man and

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Notable among the innovators is Jenova Chan, who tells how rural California inspired him to create "Flower," in which the player swooshes through Van Gogh-like fields like the wind, picking up flower petals along the way.

"I grew up in Shanghai... I had never seen a rolling hill," says Chan in the his video interview.

"So when I came to California, I saw these farms, endless green, the windmills. I wanted to capture that because it's so overwhelming. It's like a person that has never seen the ocean going to the beach for the first time."

"Games just aren't about blowing things up," says another interviewee, game developer Jennifer MacLean, who personifies the little-known fact that a big segment of those who create online games today are women over 35.

"I'd love to see them enrich somebody's life by helping them learn to feel more, lean to love more, learn to invest more in the world around them."

A richly illustrated 216-page catalog rounds out the exhibition that opens alongside GameFest!, a weekend of talks, open game playing and game-inspired music, and runs until September 30 before touring 10 other US cities.

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