

# New video games aim to be deeper than first-person shooters

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Miguel Oliveira is developing a video game in a tiny apartment near the University of Southern California, worlds away from the high-tech studios of Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. He works on a laptop surrounded by folding chairs and red plastic cups. The forgettable surroundings belie his ambition: to design a game that changes the way we play.

In Oliveira's [game](#) "Thralled," set in 18th-century Brazil, players explore jungles and ships to help a runaway slave reconnect with the life that was stolen from her.

The Portugal native grew up on games where guns played the starring role. Now, he wants something more - to create work that has the same cultural resonance as the best in film, literature and music.

"What's blocking interactive media from being considered art is that most video games focus on primitive feelings of aggressiveness and competitiveness," said Oliveira, 23, a lifelong gamer who graduated from USC's interactive media program last spring. "Art is introspective. It makes you see the stuff that makes us human."

"I want to believe I'm in the business of making people better."

Oliveira is among a new generation of designers who are re-imagining the role of video games, injecting a dose of realism - from everyday moral dilemmas and economic struggles - into a medium that's generally

relied on two extremes: save the princess or save the world.

"Papo & Yo" follows a young boy who must tread softly around an abusive monster, a metaphorical father who is struggling with addiction.

"Prison Architect" calls on players to build and manage detention facilities while navigating issues such as race and capital punishment.

"Gone Home" spins a tale out of the feelings of loneliness and banishment that consume a teenage lesbian. "Papers, Please" asks players to imagine life as an underpaid, over-stressed immigration officer in an Eastern Bloc country.

"Games don't have to be a happy, fun thing," said "Paper, Please" designer Lucas Pope, a 36-year-old American now living in Japan. "Our generation grew up with games, and we express ourselves through games. Games once had to be entertaining, but now games are another way to talk to people."

Most of these character-driven games are being developed on shoestring budgets by independent designers. But big video game companies are seeing the potential in tapping a demographic beyond the GameStop crowd.

Ubisoft Montreal, best known for blockbuster brands such as "Assassin's Creed," will release a game later this year called "Watch Dogs." Set in a crime-ridden Chicago, the game deals with government and corporate surveillance, with players grappling with the balance between personal privacy and urban safety. Designer Jonathan Morin said his goal is "to bring a shade of gray to the gaming world."

David Cage of Quantic Dream, a Paris-based company, is making games that turn seemingly small moments - losing track of a child at a mall or feeling uncomfortable at your first high school party - into grand, anxiety-filled set-pieces. "You can do more with this medium than make

toys," he said.

Richard Hofmeier's independently produced "Cart Life" offers a snapshot of what it's like to be poor in America. "Cart Life," which has been downloaded more than 3 million times, puts players in control of various street vendors, such as a Ukrainian immigrant trying to sell newspapers or a single mom who hopes to start a coffee stand.

"Cart Life," with its crude block-style art and blip-and-bloop sound effects, looks straight out of the 1980s. Its thematic maturity, however, is very much of the moment. What the game lacks in technological prowess, it makes up for in character depth.

Melanie Emberley, the game's struggling entrepreneur, is getting divorced and battling for custody of her daughter. Here's a puzzle players are forced to confront: Can Emberley spare the time, financially, to converse with her child? One doesn't necessarily win "Cart Life," since a character such as Emberley is never really out of debt.

It's not just indie games that are getting existential. Sony's 2013 zombie-themed hit "The Last of Us" included a realistic underlying theme: coping with the loss of family members.

"We're in a place where it's OK to fiddle with people's emotions," said Adam Boyes, a vice president at Sony Computer Entertainment. "Video games were always a way out, but nowadays we can have deeper conversations, whether it's around the NSA or our relationships with our parents."

Expanding the game genre is also seen as a way for the industry to keep players buying games long after they've grown tired of narratives built around men with guns.

Nearly two-thirds of video game players are under age 35, and 55 percent of players are male, according to the Entertainment Software Association. The trade group defines video games broadly; it counts avid consumers of more casual titles played on handheld and mobile devices.

Sales data for the most popular games points more forcefully to a younger male demographic. Seven of the top 10 selling video games in 2013 were combat, sports or action titles, according to the NPD Group. "Grand Theft Auto V" and "Call of Duty: Ghosts" claimed the top two spots.

Video games have yet to win broad appeal across age, gender lines in the same way that blockbuster films or top-rated TV shows have.

"The game industry likes to say we make more money than Hollywood, but more people saw 'Toy Story 3' on opening weekend than have played a 'Call of Duty' game," said game designer Warren Spector, whose credits include "Deus Ex," a sci-fi combat game with complex narratives and political overtones. "The movie industry isn't charging \$60 to see its product. We sell a lot of copies, but there are probably 2 million core gamers really into this stuff."

Screenwriter Scott Elder, 44, sits in his family room near San Diego and pulls up the Web page for RedBox. The service offers online games for rent, but nearly half the games listed for adults are violent action titles. Scrolling through the page, Elder is bored.

"More guys. More guys. Killing more people. It's not interesting anymore," Elder said. "I want games to mean more."

Elder has been playing video games most of his life, including the moody and violent "Grand Theft Auto" and "Silent Hill" series. He's still playing, but he said these days he's looking for games that challenge him

intellectually.

Elder is a big fan of "Papers, Please," the game that puts players in the shoes of an Eastern Bloc border control officer who must decide who gets to cross, and who doesn't.

It's tense and requires quick thinking, but Elder calls it "fascinating and engrossing." Characters will beg, lie and throw a fit at the border inspector.

"I like the direction games are going," Elder said. "I'd like to see more games focus on internal character conflicts. I'm hoping that's the next stage. I'm hoping indie games continue to do that and I hope larger games realize they can make money from this."

That's largely unexplored terrain. Portia Sabin, 42, said she was once an avid player but lost interest amid more grown-up concerns.

Sabin, who runs the Portland, Ore.-based independent record label Kill Rock Stars, recently took the video game "Gone Home" for a spin after one of the bands she works with licensed a song for the game. She was pleasantly surprised to find that it addressed feminist issues and homosexuality.

"This is heavier and more important than a lot of video games," she said. "This makes me excited for the future of video games."

And there was this bonus: It could be completed in just a few hours, a godsend for an often-ignored demographic in the [video game](#) world: working parents.

Like summer blockbusters, games will always have a place for high seas adventures with a pirate assassin, but at no other time in gaming history

has there been such a robust alternative to what's stacked at the end of the Best Buy aisles.

Partly that's because the cost of producing content has dwindled. In the mid-'90s, software alone could run tens of thousands of dollars. Today one can design a game for free and sell it, sans intermediaries, via download outlets.

From 2009 to 2012, the percentage of digitally accessed or downloaded video games - including games for smartphones, tablet computers and home consoles - doubled. Discs and cartridges, which once accounted for 80 percent of sales, are now closer to 60 percent of the market, according to the NPD Group. An estimated 1 billion people worldwide buy games, and the fastest-growing sector of the industry is (like the music business) downloadable content.

Chance-taking is rare in the mainstream game industry. Big-budget games typically cost somewhere between \$50 million and \$100 million and three to five years to develop. With that kind of investment, companies expect outsize returns.

Smaller indie games can be made for thousands of dollars or less. Hofmeier created "Cart Life" with free software, so his main expense was his time. "Gone Home," created by the four-person team at the Fullbright Co., was completed for less than \$200,000, included living expenses - the team rented a house where it lived and worked. In half a year, "Gone Home" sold more than 250,000 copies. Lucas Pope designed "Papers, Please" by himself, hoping to sell 20,000 copies. He sold more than 400,000.

But despite these successes, there's still an in-crowd, exclusionary nature to the medium. Video games typically require certain skills, such as mastering a controller with a dozen-plus buttons or attaining the quick

thumb reflexes needed to blast enemy soldiers. Most also require a big investment of time, and not everyone can afford games and game consoles.

That said, the generations who are growing up using smartphones and tablet computers in grade school will benefit from the ease of touch screens and won't need mom and dad to buy an expensive game console, making it easier for game designers to reach them.

That puts the onus on the storytellers. There's an audience out there looking for video games that aren't about fantasy worlds, military action or sports.

Make these games available, the thinking goes, and the audience will be there.

"We've been creating content for ourselves for a long time," said Ruben Farris, designer of the "Papo & Yo" addiction game. "We've been creating content for gamers, for game developers. When there was an explosion of casual games, it was seen as a market that wasn't for real gamers. But I think we have a duty to reach everyone."

"Otherwise," he said, games are doomed to "stay in a cultural ghetto."

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## PLAYING AT A DIFFERENT LEVEL

Forget high-jumping plumbers and gun-toting muscle men, the characters of these independent games, all playable for the PC, are more akin to those found at your local independent cinema.

"Cart Life" (Richard Hofmeier). Play as a Ukrainian immigrant or a

single mom, each in a desperate state to succeed as a street vendor. But selling lots of newspapers from a cart isn't a key to riches in this life simulator, which turns daily anxieties - remembering, for instance, to buy cat food - into tense, playable moments.

"Prison Architect" (Introversion Software). The idea was simple: design a game in which players can build penitentiaries. But the execution has been far from easy, as nearly every aspect of running a penal complex is a hot-button issue. Still in development, "Prison Architect" mixes narrative and simulation elements, touching on issues of race, capital punishment, prison labor and more.

"To the Moon" (Freebird Games). "Can you take me to the moon?" It's a dying man's last wish, and it launches this sci-fi fairy tale in which two doctors are hired to re-arrange the memories of an elderly client to help him die a happier man. Can we love the life we lived, or will our dreams always haunt us? There are no easy answers when grappling with mortality.

"The Novelist" (Orthogonal Games). A marriage on the brink, a father who thinks he's a hack, a mother who has suppressed her desires to be an artist and a bullied child. These are the various tales that the player - a ghost living inside an idyllic home - will uncover and attempt to manipulate. But are the supernatural as helpless as the living?

"The Shiva" (Wadjet Eye Games). There's a murder, and Russell Stone is a suspect. But this is no ordinary whodunit. "The Shiva" is a character study, offering a look at the life of Stone, a down-on-his luck Rabbi. He's bitter, in debt and ready to step away from his life of servitude, but the game's events have him reexamining his relationship with his faith.

"The Stanley Parable" (Galactic Cafe). Stanley's life is a modern tragedy. He's not only stuck in a soul-crushing cubicle job (Stanley is employee



"No. 427"), he's content with going nowhere. But suddenly everything that's normal is not, and Stanley's daily routine is thrown upside down. Can Stanley, frightened of his boss and nervous of losing his job, handle the unexpected?

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