

Putting video games on gallery walls



Chaz Evans, director of exhibitions and programs for Video Game Art Gallery, explains the gallery's purpose and its current exhibit on Oct. 31, 2017, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

[By Steve Johnson](#) [Contact Reporter](#) **Chicago Tribune**

If you're like most people I know, you think of video games as the thing you try to keep your kids from playing so much — and then you muddle the message at gift-giving time by delivering the latest edition of "NBA 2K" or "Call of Duty."

But you are also aware that a whole game-playing culture has sprung up, that millions of well-adjusted people play video games even after they start paying taxes, having kids of their own, etc.

I've never caught the bug, so I was especially curious to see two current Chicago museum shows that not only acknowledge the rise of gaming culture but try to push it a step further by putting games and the artwork therein onto gallery walls.

"Hey! Play! Games in Modern Culture" at the Chicago Design Museum collects a range of video games, from a more conventional multiplayer move-the-ball-around game to an avant-garde text-based exploration of the gaming system as god (you literally kneel before the controller).

"Savior" at the Video Game Art Gallery displays artwork from the titular game under development by independent Cuban gamemakers and lets you sample the game. As arresting as the sort of ruin-culture imagery is, the game plays itself: You progress through the levels, and the game seemingly starts to break down, with strings of code revealing themselves on screen.

And, yes, you read that right: Video Game Art Gallery. The not-for-profit has been mounting pop-up shows that display stills and such from video games around town since 2014, but just this August, it opened its first permanent space in a small gallery on the Northwest Side.

The funding model is contemporary almost to the point of self-parody. There've been Kickstarter campaigns. The landlord in the artist-and-gallery-focused building is one of the founders. And about two-thirds of the rent is paid by offering VGA Gallery as a room to let on Airbnb.

There, it's a "Hip and Spacious Bucktown Studio" with a five-star rating and an average rate of \$99 a night. If you visit during regular gallery hours, Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings, you might notice the rectangular structure on the wall next to the front desk (where you can also buy prints). It is indeed a Murphy bed, vintage technology in service to the contemporary.



Brian Schrank, co-curator of the exhibit, "Hey! Play! Games in Modern Culture," describes its purpose at the Chicago Design Museum in Block 37, 108 N. State St., on Oct. 31, 2017, in Chicago. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

A common link between these two locals is Brian Schrank, an associate professor in game development, theory, design at DePaul University. In addition to being on the VGA Gallery board, Schrank co-curated "Hey! Play!" calling on his connections in the indie gaming world to show "a very inclusive approach to games where it isn't just one niche celebrating itself," he said.

Typically, Schrank said, there has been a division between people who approach games as art — and have managed to get some attention from the academy and museums — and those who make games for people to play.

"There's often some animosity from the games people toward the art people, who sort of dabble in games and get all the publicity," Schrank said, explaining a common sentiment.

This attempt to bridge the gap — and introduce contemporary gaming to people who might wander in while waiting for a movie at the museum's location in the Block 37 mall — is captivating. As the wall text explains, games range from "digital to analog, introspective to social, curated to collaborative, sedentary to sweaty, serious to silly."

There's a VR game that visualizes the noises the headset wearer makes into a microphone. "It's done very much in earnest," Schrank said. "The artists wanted to make a game that would fit in at Burning Man."

And in place but suffering some technical issues at last check was an immersive game from Chinese artist Feng Mengbo called "Long March: Restart." I look forward to returning to experience its commentary on Chinese cultural history, in which Coke cans are a weapon and enemies simply disappear.

At VGA Gallery, meanwhile, "Savior" will be up through Nov. 19 and will be followed, beginning Dec. 1, by "The Ears Have Walls: A Survey of Sound Games."

The latter show is co-curated by Chaz Evans, one of the VGA Gallery founders and a lecturer in the Radio/Television/Film Department at Northwestern. "It's all about video games that experiment with sound in novel and interesting ways," he said. "You think the screen is kind of the primary output, and the sound is kind of a support structure. We're trying to find games that invert that structure."

Bigger picture, he said, the gallery hopes to foster growth in the medium and give Chicago the kind of gathering space for the culture that some other cities already have. "For a discipline to really grow and to have people take risks, I think you need public spaces," Evans said.

You also need discussion. Toward that end, VGA Gallery, in a spinoff project, is about to launch a new annual publication, a peer-reviewed journal called Video Game Art Reader.

“Our mission is not only to advocate for video games as art, but also engage in a meaningful art criticism of games,” editor-in-chief Tiffany Funk writes in the inaugural issue, which launches with a party Sunday.

sajohnson@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @StevenKJohnson

When: Through Feb. 17, 2018 and through Nov. 19, respectively

Where: Chicago Design Museum, Block 37, 108 N. State St., 3rd floor; Video Game Art Gallery, 2418 W. Bloomingdale Ave.

Tickets: Free at both venues