

GAMES



THE BEAUTIFUL

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You are walking through a dark monochrome forest. The trees are blurred and form strange after-images as you pass. Shapes shimmer in the distance. Some resolve into more trees, some into human figures. They are carrying something: a coffin? But they vanish as you approach. You pause to reflect and see dream images: an owl; legs treading water; birds, doves possibly, rising into the air; a broken-down old hut. Then you move onwards.

You see a light in the distance. You move towards it and find yourself walking under water. Finally, you surface. The light is coming from an abandoned camper van. You approach and sink into a dream, a strange reverie. Then, darkness: you are asleep. You wake in a different place. Your journey restarts.

This is *The Night Journey*, a meditation that has become a computer game. It is by Bill Viola, the great video artist. Since its launch in 2007, it has only been seen as an exhibit in museums and galleries. This frustrated players. You need days, if not weeks, to think your way into this thing. Now it has been released as a download for Mac, PC and PlayStation (in the US) for \$19.99, dirt cheap for the significant work of art that *The Night Journey* undoubtedly is.

The game is mesmeric, disorientating. You move, at first, alarmingly slowly. "We decided the slower you walk, the more you would discover," says Kira Perov, Viola's wife and collaborator.

The immediate effect is so intense that an early plan to put it into virtual-reality headsets had to be abandoned. "The game's basic aesthetic is blur and disorientation," says Tracy Fullerton, the University of Southern California (USC) gaming professor who led the

team that engineered it. "Very early on, we put it in a headset, and it was too much, too much uncertainty. Because of the blur, people became extremely overwhelmed."

Just on my laptop, it came across as heavy stuff. Quitting my first journey, I saw the screen flip back to my usual desktop and found myself believing I was still in the game, that I was still plodding unsteadily towards enlightenment.

This has never happened to me before, because, to put my cards on the table, I hate computer games. Back in the 1990s, I heartily agreed with the mathematician Michael Atiyah when he said: "I find it an odd reflection on our society that some of the most sophisticated technology, resting on the contributions of our greatest intellects, finds its ultimate destiny in computer games." In 2004, I was introduced by some young geeks to the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. I was disgusted and bored by its futility and gleeful violence. In 2013, attending a games convention in LA was like being imprisoned in a cinema inhabited by psychotics and forced to watch all the terrible films I never wanted to see in the first place.

Through all this, I was told that these games were "cultural events", that the violence was "ironic", that the games industry was bigger than the movies and so on. I do know that the dumb shoot-ups are only one part of this vast industry. But even the most imaginative non-violent games had something missing. I agreed with Steven Spielberg when he said games

would only become a proper storytelling art form "when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17".

Part of the problem was that, as the writer Steven Poole noted, many of these games did not feel like art or play: they felt like work, full of dumb repetitive tasks, of goals attained that just led to more goals. The games companies, he wrote, "hire us for imaginary, meaningless jobs that replicate the structures of real-world employment".

The games involved graft and expertise; you had to put in the hard yards to understand them. But you don't have to put in any yards to be struck dumb by the beauty and truth of Hamlet, Venice, Don Giovanni or *Las Meninas*. It's just there in front of you. You can put in the work later, but it's not compulsory. Such is great art, a realm not yet attained by the game.

"The very evolution of the game form is imperilled by its limited cultural status," Fullerton writes in an essay accompanying the launch.

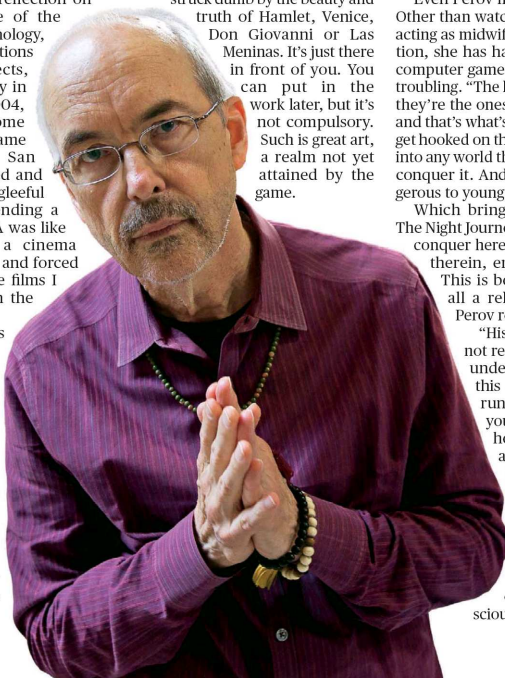
Then there was the queasy link – starting with the shootings at Columbine High School, Colorado, in 1999 – between computer games and mass killings. Were they warping the minds of the young? The latest moral panic is being caused by Fortnite, a cartoonish shoot-'em-up that seems to have rendered young boys insensible to the outside world. No worries for now, of course: we have treatment for game addiction offered on the NHS.

Even Perov finds it all a bit creepy. Other than watching her son play and acting as midwife to Viola's latest creation, she has had nothing to do with computer games. Now she finds them troubling. "The kids are the avatar, and they're the ones who feel in control – and that's what's so fascinating. People get hooked on that because they can go into any world they want, and they can conquer it. And that's what's so dangerous to young children's psyches."

Which brings me neatly back to *The Night Journey*. There's no world to conquer here, only to explore, and, therein, enlightenment to find. This is because Viola is above all a religious artist, a term Perov resists.

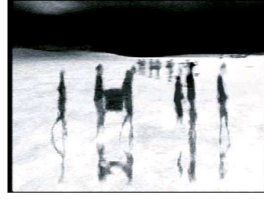
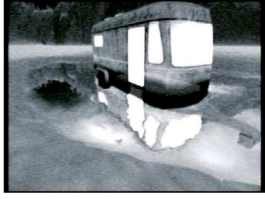
"His work is spiritual, he is not religious," she tells me. I understand why she says this – such simple labels run the risk of engaging you in culture wars – but her husband's work is always and only about the last things (birth, enlightenment and death), and that, to me, is religion.

Also, *The Night Journey* has two clear religious antecedents, one perhaps unconscious. The conscious one is



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GAME

The Night Journey is a revolution in the world of gaming. Why is the great video artist Bill Viola offering his meditation to the world?

the 16th-century St John of the Cross, a quote from whom appears after the credits. The huts, including that camper van, that are crucial to the game are references to John's torture and imprisonment in a tiny cell where, miraculously, he continued to write poetry. "God is a dark night to man in this life," John said. That is why this is a night journey.

The apparently unconscious antecedent comes from Islam. For Muslims, the Night Journey refers to the Prophet's ascent into heaven from the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He speaks to God and the earlier prophets before returning to earth. I have no idea whether this was in Viola's mind, but it would seem consistent with the theme of the game; and it is notable that the game starts with you slowly descending, as if from Heaven, into the landscape.

What is the theme, though? First of all, the game is open, like Minecraft, for example. This means you can do what you like. Fullerton and her team at USC tested the game with two sets of people: lovers of games and lovers of Viola's work. Some of the latter did nothing but sit under the tree that is the centre of The Night Journey world.

"They would enjoy that for a long time," Fullerton says, "and I was

Games without frontiers Bill Viola, below left. Above, stills from The Night Journey

worried, because they were not going out into the game. Bill said, 'No, they're seeing it all, they're seeing just what they want to see.' That made me relax. People were going to find different pleasures, different beauties."

Second, the game's engineering is almost entirely original in that it involves multiple intrusions, as if from another world. This can be seen as a world of thought, rather than action. If you press the space bar on your computer – God knows what you press on the PlayStation – you pause for reflection and see a wholly different world. This is composed of video clips taken from Viola's vast archive.

"You are literally giving up control in the world," Fullerton says, "and that world will bleed through this other world that is lying under the surface of it. You choose a moment to release control and allow the world of the game to express something new to you."

Similarly, the visions when you reach a hut suggest highly specific stories, memories or symbols that are not quite within your grasp. This is a layered world, full of signs and wonders.

The third aspect of the game's theme is uncertainty. This, again, is a revolution in game technology. Most game engineers strive for ever higher definition in the images. They are in pursuit of hyperrealism in their storytelling, as if to display the increasing power of their machines or to enhance their highly unrealistic stories.

The Night Journey is anti-high-def. Nothing is sharp or realistic in the ways demanded by mainstream gamers. For much of the time, most of your field of view is uncertain, ambiguous. You do make progress (one tip: the more you hit that space bar and reflect, the faster you can move and the longer the descent of full night is put off), but where that progress leads is unclear.

This, paradoxically, makes The Night Journey the most genuinely realistic game ever made. It is like life: puzzling, difficult, uncertain, unclear, always

seen, in St Paul's words, through a glass darkly. But can such things sell? Can they make a mark on the vast games industry? Fullerton shrugs.

"I thought about that a lot, and whether or not I care. I want to sell one to everyone who would understand it, everyone who would care about it. If that's 10 people, then I'm ecstatic that those 10 people can have it. I'm only interested in giving it to the people who are really willing to dive deep into it – and that's not going to be your typical games-player, for sure."

She has, however, slipped in a little insurance policy. Seasoned gamers will find, deep in the engineering, familiar things, gamesterish cues and clues that make things happen faster. This should get the costs covered. None of that, however, will be of the slightest significance to the wiser players who share St John of the Cross's insight: "To arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing." ■

The Night Journey is available as a direct download for Windows and Mac at gameinnovationlab.itch.io/nightjourney

GAMES WITHOUT GUNS

Gone Home

The player is 21-year-old Katie, who returns to an empty house and has to seek clues to find her family.

Tacoma

On an apparently deserted space station in 2088, Amy must use her augmented-reality device to hear and see the crew, and find them.

Firewatch

Henry, a fire lookout in Wyoming in 1989, is the player who has to solve a mystery about missing teenagers.

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

The inhabitants of a small English village have disappeared. The player must find clues to where they went.

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