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WHITE PAPER

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**The cultural life of
computer and video games:
a cross industry study**

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THE CULTURAL LIFE OF COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES: A CROSS INDUSTRY STUDY

Introduction

In the 1960s, when Mick Jagger was offending middle England with his hips and lips, it would have been impossible to imagine rock and roll as a cosy fixture of the cultural life of the UK. But here we are in 2003 and Honky Tonk Woman is the staple of Radio 2, the bastion of easy listening for the middle-aged. In the summer Jagger turned 60, thereby qualifying for a bus pass and a winter fuel allowance.

A similar transformation is underway for video and computer games. The children who grew up in arcades playing Pac Man and Asteroids are now in their thirties and forties. The kids who embraced Sonic and Mario with such fervour are now twentysomethings.

Over the last 15 years entertainment software has emerged as the dominant youth pastime. The market has grown exponentially in value and in terms of its cultural significance.

Like rock and roll in its early days, gaming has captivated youngsters and baffled their parents. And because most of us are biased towards what we grow up with, a lot of adults favour reading and TV but just don't "get" games.

This will change. The vilification occasionally aimed at video gaming has been slowly evaporating over time. And not just because the PlayStation generation will one day be grandparents. Put simply, gaming is changing the way we see the world.

Already, there is ample evidence that the influence of electronic gaming is everywhere. You can see it in movies and music – even in digital TV with its interactive menus and options.

Yet, for all this sophistication, games also tap into traditions that are as old as mankind. Great games take the player on a voyage of discovery into fantastic, perilous new worlds. Is that so different from *The Secret Garden*? *Alice In Wonderland*? *The Iliad*?

This White Paper will show how games are driving cultural life in Britain and the world. Specifically it will focus on:

- The size and structure of the business compared with other entertainment forms
- The impact of gaming on other forms of entertainment – and vice versa
- The language and aesthetics of gaming
- The potential of gaming to be the dominant cultural form of the 21st century



Games compared with music, video and film

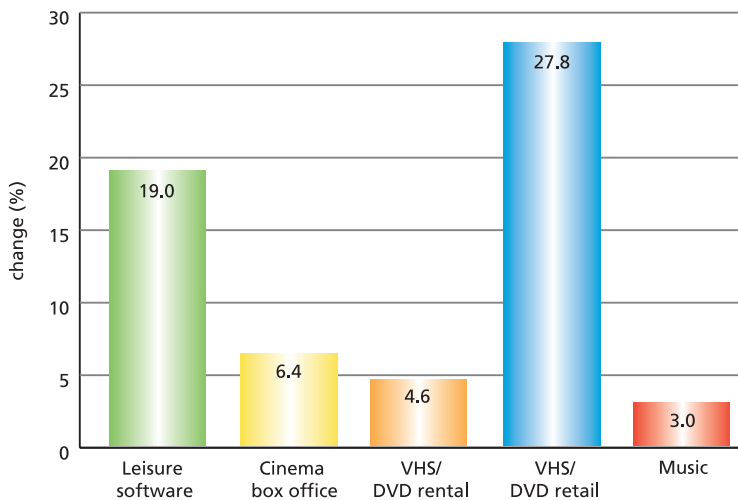
The scale of the games market

Although games have been sold as a consumer item since the late 70s, demand for them ebbed and flowed as new machines came and went. This boom/bust cycle ended with the introduction of PlayStation in 1995. Sony launched the PlayStation 2 in the UK in 2000 but it continued to market the first machine as a cheaper platform aimed at younger and more casual users. It worked. The dip in sales which usually accompanies the period between hardware launches never really materialised. Today, PSone (as it is known) continues to sell healthily.

It was during this period that gaming exploded into the public consciousness and began earning sums to match the revenues posted by other home entertainment industries in the UK.

The chart below reveals the extraordinary extent of its growth across these years.

Comparative average annualised growth in market spending 1997-2002¹



Since 1995 the games market has matured to the point where it outgrosses video rental and cinema. It's not far behind music and video retail either. It's now a £1bn a year business in the UK. While it's true that unit sales of games do not yet come close to those of video and music, this gap is also closing. In previous years the year's top selling game would shift around 300,000, while a music CD could sell three or four million. In 2002, the biggest game Grand Theft Auto: Vice City sold over a million in the eight weeks leading up to Christmas – the same quantity as the music number one, Robbie Williams' Escapology.

The structure of the games industry

Publisher consolidation

The increase in budgets and timescales, the globalisation of the market, the need to pay out for licences and franchises – these are the factors that have caused the games industry to consolidate over the last 10 years.

The trade's largest publishers have merged, acquired and sought public flotations in order to attain the scale and financial backing to fund expensive games development and market the resulting products all over the world.

In this the market is following the path taken by Hollywood and the record industry.

In the UK, the big five record companies Universal, Sony, Bertelsmann, Warner and EMI account for 70 per cent of all sales. In video, the big six Universal, Warner, Columbia Tri-Star, Paramount, Buena Vista, 20th Century Fox, also take 70 per cent.

The games industry is not quite at this level – but it's getting there. The top 10 now control around 65 per cent of the market.

Major publishers, sub labels

The industry is also mimicking the hierarchy of its counterparts in music and film. For example, small specialist music labels are commonly bought by the majors after which they continue to be marketed as independents but benefit from the cash and clout of their new owner. Well, that's the theory.

Today, it's the case that virtually all well-known specialist independents work this way. In hip-hop Def Jam is owned by Universal. In jazz, Blue Note is a part of Warner/EMI.

Increasingly so in games too. The biggest selling PC franchise of all time is now The Sims, developed by Maxis, the quirky San Francisco company which made its name with Sim City in the early 90s. But Maxis is actually owned by the industry's biggest publisher Electronic Arts.

The cultural impact of games

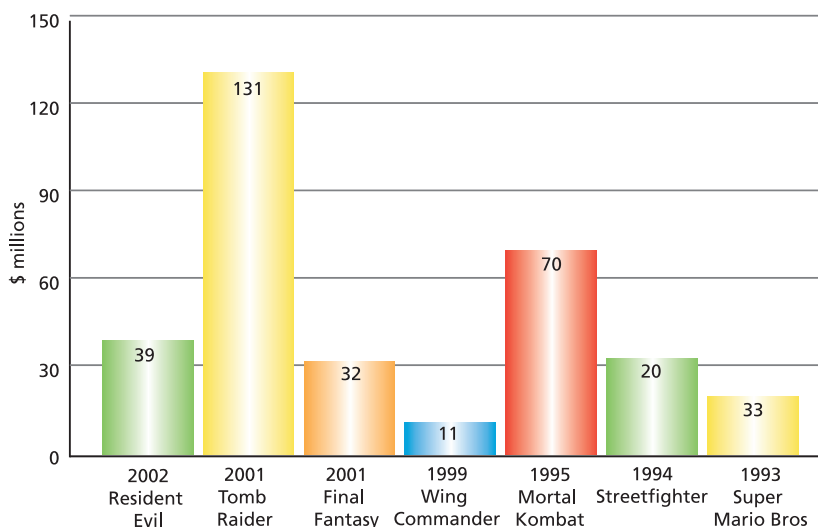
Interactive movies and films based on games

It's undoubtedly true that games are becoming more cinematic looking. Developers spend huge sums creating filmed sequences that introduce and set the scene for their games. Indeed, Ubi Soft this year announced the creation of a development studio specifically to generate cinematics for games. And, of course, the sophistication of hardware technology means that the graphics are ever more photo-realistic. Water shimmers, fire flickers, hair sways in the breeze. It's all very different from the blocky pixellated action of the Nintendo/Sega era just 10 years ago.

However, this is not to say that games are becoming more movie-like in their structure. For a while, shortly after the introduction of CD-ROM, there was some excitement about the idea of interactive movies. A few were made. They featured "live" actors in filmed sequences and offered players the chance to choose different sequences in order to solve a mystery. Under A Killing Moon, for example, was based on the classic gumshoe detective movie genre and featured Margot Kidder (aka Lois Lane in the first Superman movie). Like the others, it never really took off. Players saw these titles as a limited gimmick, perhaps because they lacked true interactivity.

Conversely, Hollywood has made many attempts at turning games into films. Mostly, they have not fared well – perhaps because the immersion and interactivity gamers love simply cannot exist in a passive medium like film. Having said that, there have been successes. Tomb Raider is the obvious one. And its popularity reflects the ubiquity of a games franchise created in Derbyshire in 1996.

Films based on games – US grosses²



Movies take on the language of games

There's an argument that movies are becoming more like games. Firstly, there's a close correlation between the set-pieces in blockbuster movies and entertainment software. The exploding helicopters, shoot outs and chases that defined the action films of the eighties and nineties correspond pretty closely to scenes from shoot-em-up games like Doom.



And the martial arts expertise of film stars like Steven Seagal and Jean Claude Van Damme differs little from that of game characters in Mortal Kombat, Tekken and Streetfighter (the movie of which starred Van Damme).



Street Fighter game shot

More recently the similarities between movies and games have expanded beyond visuals. It's possible to argue that films such as The Matrix, Terminator II and T3 are structured like video games, each with plots that feature levels of increasing difficulty. The hero battles past one set of

enemies to win entry to a new world and another set of foes. Waiting at the end is an uber-villain who's extremely hard to dispatch. Not that different from any given action game. In fact, as the licensing of film titles for re-invention as games becomes ever more important, some movies appear to have been written with a view to how they will "play" when they emerge as a PS2, Xbox, GameCube or PC game. Jurassic Park 3 is just one example among many.

Then there are the movies which play around with time, space and logic. In the German film Run Lola Run the heroine has 20 minutes to pay off a gangster and save her boyfriend's life. The movie shows the same sequence three times but each time, thanks to tiny differences in the action, the outcome is entirely different.

In Time Code a story unfolds through the dialogue of four characters on a split screen. The viewer has to concentrate hard – they often speak at the same time – but eventually a coherent narrative emerges.

Would either movie have been possible without the pervasive influence of video games? It's possible. But there's little doubt that those familiar with the dynamics of gaming would have the least trouble "processing" the information.

Games and music: Orchestral scores to play by

Music has always been an important part of the games playing experience. It provides a pulse for the action and increases the adrenaline flow. In the early days soundtracks consisted of tinny electronic ditties. Today, the storage space allowed by new games systems makes it possible to record symphonic epics.

Examples of this abound. Barrington Pheloung, the composer best known for his work on TV's Inspector Morse, provided the soundtrack for Broken Sword, an adventure game from Yorkshire studio Revolution. At this year's inaugural Edinburgh International Games Festival, Barrington was heard to say that video games are the "true 21st century art form".

The score for the new Tomb Raider game Angel Of Darkness was recorded by the London Sympony Orchestra. And Richard Jacques, an award-winning composer whose video game credits include Sega's Jet Set Radio and Headhunter, recorded the music for Headhunter 2 at the Abbey Road Studios with the London Session Orchestra. It was then performed by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra at Gewandhaus in Germany as part of the 2003 GC – Games Convention.

The orchestral soundtracks that accompany epic adventure games are now regularly turned into CDs and released. But, of course, the usual soundtrack for gaming is contemporary rock or dance. It's common for famous tracks to be licensed for use in games. For example, the album Grand Theft Auto Volume 1 – V Rock featured acts like Judas Priest, Motley Crue and Iron Maiden. It sold well as the game itself raced to one million sales in the UK.

Indeed, many record companies now use games to promote forthcoming artists and bands. A recent survey by marketer ElectricArtists found that up to 40 per cent of hardcore gamers say they buy CDs by bands they have heard on games soundtracks. Among the artists to have benefited from this development are UK act Good Charlotte who recently broke into the UK chart.



Games and music: Creating sounds on a PlayStation

Clearly gaming sounds better now. But it's not the only music change brought about by the PlayStation generation. Today's games platforms are also creating music. In 2000 Warwickshire-based Codemasters released Music 2000, a PlayStation game which invited players to create their own dance tracks based on 99 samples using an easy-to-use sound editor.

During the promotion of the game, Codemasters persuaded many of the UK's best DJs to have a go. Music 2000 was very successful and spawned a whole new genre. Many similar products were later released, among them a title produced by the "super club" Ministry of Sound.

Gaming and art: Recognising designers' talent

It's taken a while but games artists are now finally being recognised as just that – artists. The hugely successful Game On exhibition held at the Barbican last year exhibited some of the drawings upon which hit games are based. It also revealed the stylistic differences between games designed in the UK, France, Japan and the US.

This year saw a spate of game related art and design exhibitions, including Primal Art - Portrait Of The Artist As A Video Gamer at London's Institute of Contemporary Art for which Sony Computer Entertainment invited university students to submit work to win the PlayStation 2 Creative Award; the inclusion of Rockstar Games (GTA: Vice City) in the Design Museum's nominations for the Designer Of The Year award; and "Pockets", an exhibition created by Nintendo to celebrate everything pocket-related including history, technology, film and fashion.



The art that inspires games

Of course, games do not exist in a vacuum. Their looks are inspired by a range of contemporary factors. The Manga art of Japan is one. Dystopian sci-fi movies like *Bladerunner* are another. Sometimes “conventional” painters get personally involved.

The best example of this may well be the *Dark Seed* series launched in the early 90s on PC. They were inspired by the macabre art of the Swiss surrealist Giger whose art book, *Necronomicon*, led to the design of the alien creatures in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* movie. Giger agreed to lend his artwork to the developers and the result was a uniquely eerie and atmospheric game.



Illustration by H. R. Giger

Just telling stories: The age-old inspiration for games

Arguably, the first game to contain a narrative was Nintendo’s *Donkey Kong* in 1981. Previously, games had been all about shooting (*Space Invaders* et al) but this one featured a harmless gorilla kidnapping a princess.

Donkey Kong was created by Sigeru Miyamoto, the designer widely considered the most important games developer ever, who arrived at Nintendo determined to prove that games could draw on his own favourite myths and legends – *King Kong*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Macbeth*.

Later he added *Alice in Wonderland* and *Star Trek* to the list of influences when he made the first *Mario* game. Central to the idea was the notion of travelling and discovering. In the book *Game Over* he describes how he wanted to recreate his childhood excitement. He said: “When I was a child I went hiking and found a lake. It was quite a surprise for me to stumble on it. When I travelled round the country without a map, stumbling on amazing things, I realised how it felt to go on an adventure like this.”

From single player to multiple viewpoints

The first era of gaming was the single player game. A series such as Tomb Raider exemplifies this perfectly. It's you (as Lara) against the computer, disappearing into the labyrinth like the Theseus of Greek myth. But as games systems evolved it became possible to have multi-play (in which participants take a controller each and compete with each other).

Game theorists argue this is the more natural way to play. After all, how many games in human history can be played alone? Solitaire? Patience? It's hard to think of many more. Certainly, video gamers love multi-play. The thrill of driving against three friends is much more exciting than doing so against the machine. And the advent of online multi-player gaming means players don't even need to be in the same country, let alone in the same room.

The apotheosis of this development is undoubtedly the massively multi-player role playing game such as EverQuest, Asheron's Call and Ultima Online. Here participants take on the role of a character in a virtual world on the Internet. There's no story as such. Players just become part of the community and take part in adventures which evolve collectively. It's hard to explain. But well over 450,000 pay a monthly subscription to be part of EverQuest alone.



EverQuest

Gaming – the dominant medium of the age?

Every medium has its day. In pre-history there was the campfire oral tradition, then the Greek tragedy, later the theatre tradition, then novels and opera. For most of the 20th Century TV and film cast a huge shadow.

Now the world is in thrall to the computer network.

It's hard to argue with the contention that computer networks are the dominant medium of the age. Video games and the World Wide Web – these are the entities changing the way we experience the world. Their impact will be as great as the printing press. Future generations will look back on this era as a time of major change.

People in the 21st century have a compelling and impatient desire to interact with their environment. Look at the TV remote. It's a means to interact and control the essentially passive medium of TV. But games go further. They allow players to participate in the fantasy. **They're visceral. Personal.**

As interaction with computers and games machines becomes more natural (with voice, hand gestures etc rather than a joypad or a keyboard), lingering resistance to it will fall away. This is already happening. One of summer 2003's biggest hits was Sony's EyeToy. This comprises a pack of simple games and a camera. The camera films the player who appears on screen and interacts with the game. There's no controller, no wire, no manual. Anyone can play – and it's better when the whole family joins in.

This is just the beginning. As creators and consumers lose their fixation on the technology, new and powerful story-telling forms will emerge. The adrenaline-fuelled fun of gaming will be joined by projects that deliver emotion too.



EyeToy pictures courtesy of Sony

Conclusion

Like film and music, the video game is commercially powerful but also an art form in its own right. History has seen nothing like it before. And yet the best games draw on many “traditional” arts from classical music composition to painting to film directing.

In their stories games offer players an unprecedented level of participation. But again, they do so within time-honoured narrative traditions – the hero going on a journey, rags to riches, the quest for hidden treasure and so on.

All these factors mean one thing: games are here to stay. Games machines are already on the road to mass acceptance. All today’s consoles feature hi-fi sound and offer DVD playback. They’ve made the journey from bedroom to living room. New ways to interact with games (away from joysticks and controllers) are bringing in new players above and beyond the traditionally young and male demographic.

Indeed, there’s a strong argument that interactive entertainment could take on the mantle of TV and become the medium that will dominate the age.

Sources:

¹ Screen Digest/ELSPA report 2003

² The Numbers (www.the-numbers.com)

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