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# Why Nintendo Won't Grow Up

**Shigeru Miyamoto invented the modern videogame. Now the industry he founded is moving from kid stuff to cultural force. Can the Disney of the game world connect with his inner adult?**

By Zev Borow

The annual pyrotechnic floor show known as E3 - the Electronic Entertainment Expo - is the videogame industry's Super Bowl and Cannes Film Festival combined, a glittering excuse for the people who make and market games to splash about in a pool of unchecked hype and ballooning profits. In the past couple of years, the atmosphere at LA's Staples Center has become downright Roman - a celebration of staggering retail conquests (videogame revenue is fast approaching that of movies and music) and golden future. Booth babes in the garb of various games roam the crowded show floor. Giant screens broadcast footage of the latest releases, highlights of bloody combat between sinewy animated characters. Speakers blare the sounds of explosions, vehicular thunder, and exhortations to prepare oneself to be *blown away*.

Removed from the mayhem, in a makeshift meeting room at the back of Nintendo's sprawling booth, Shigeru Miyamoto, a slight, soft-spoken presence, leans forward in his chair. Miyamoto, the designer who more than any other single person has led gaming to its current perch, talks, incongruously enough, about the essence of polite society. "Every game has rules," he says. "So I think about them often. I talk to my children about them. For instance, the trains in Japan all have a few seats reserved for pregnant women or the elderly. The rules regarding those seats are that if an elderly person or pregnant woman steps on the train, you should let them sit. I also tell them to think about the results of their actions, to not do things like throw a cigarette out the window. You never know what the result of throwing that might be."

As the E3 circus behind him glows with digitally rendered violence, Miyamoto seems strangely removed from the industry he practically founded.

In a business where a one-hit wonder can be considered an unqualified success, Miyamoto has created not only a tall stack of videogame hits but a handful of global pop-culture franchises. Beginning in 1981 with the coin-op arcade game *Donkey Kong*, and continuing with *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda* - one version of which *Shift* magazine called the "*Citizen Kane* of videogames" - Miyamoto has built Nintendo into a powerhouse. He's responsible for six of the top ten best-selling console games of all time, moving 300 million-plus units and generating \$10 billion in revenue. The *Mario* series alone

has racked up more than \$7 billion (compared with \$3.5 billion at the box office for the *Star Wars* movies). Last year's *Super Mario Sunshine* promptly set a record by selling 350,000 copies in its first 10 days on the US market.

At 50, Miyamoto is one of the most successful artists of the past century. And his success hasn't been merely financial. He has created the game industry's only instantly recognizable aesthetic - colorful, cartoonish, whimsical. He also pioneered a slew of features, from 3-D to nonlinear gameplay to original music, that serve as a kind of DNA for today's titles. That has earned him the respect, and often awe, of fellow designers. Says Toshihiro Nagoshi, creator of *Super Monkey Ball*, "To me, Miyamoto is like God."

His path to Olympus has been paved with games that appeal unabashedly, if not exclusively, to children. Miyamoto's characters are simple, and their predicaments can be readily grasped and negotiated using a single button and control stick. The Miyamoto formula: Devise controls that are intuitively engaging, puzzles that make players feel as though they're discovering solutions rather than being led to them, and characters that are disarmingly cute. Walk to bank. Cash check. Refine. Repeat.

This recipe has served Miyamoto, Nintendo, and even its competitors well. But the industry that sprang up in Miyamoto's wake is ready to move on. The need to attract new audiences is transforming gaming from a niche market to mainstream entertainment, and that means more grown-up fare. Today, videogames are poised to advance - technically, artistically, commercially - in ways that could make them to the present century what films were to the last: emotionally engrossing, visually stunning, socially influential expressions that capture and inform the spirit of the times.

Miyamoto's work has largely defined the medium, and thus created this enormous potential. Yet his cartoonish aesthetic has nothing to do with the darker, more complex and ambiguous flavor of contemporary existence. That's a spice Miyamoto seems to have little use for. As the industry tests the boundaries of its traditional concerns and audience, many of Miyamoto's peers have begun to wonder whether, for all his mastery, he can lead the videogame medium into the future, or whether he's destined to loom only over its past.

At E3, Miyamoto cuts a starkly different figure than most of his colleagues. He's 5' 6", with a humble manner, a goofy smile, and a shaggy haircut that could be an homage to Paul McCartney. While other game designers collect Ferraris or wraparound sunglasses, Miyamoto's pastimes are gardening and playing the banjo.

He's in Los Angeles to introduce the Nintendo GameCube's fall lineup. The console has been out for a year, but this is its first batch of heavy-hitting software. "If you look at the history of gaming," he says, "there have been instances when nongamers were drawn in and their interest piqued, usually when there was some kind of breakout phenomenon-type game." This year's bids include two updates of venerable Miyamoto franchises - *Super Mario Sunshine* and *The Legend of Zelda* - and several releases from other designers.

Nintendo, which began 113 years ago as a manufacturer of playing cards, has been relying on Miyamoto's creativity since shortly after he joined the staff in 1977. Fresh out of the Kanazawa College of Art in Kyoto, he showed up for his job interview with a set of designs for animal-headed children's clothes hangers.

The company had only recently turned its attention to the burgeoning field of coin-operated arcade games. Capitalizing on the success of *Space Invaders*, in 1978 Nintendo released a clone called *Radarscope*. It was a dismal failure. Designing new cabinets was Miyamoto's original assignment, but the company soon found itself stuck with thousands of *Radarscope* cabinets

desperately in need of innards. The task of filling them fell to Miyamoto.

He came up with *Donkey Kong*, released in 1981. The game stars Mario - a chubby, mustachioed Japanese fantasy of an Italian plumber - whose pet gorilla has fallen in love with his girlfriend, kidnapped her, and escaped to a large construction zone. Mario must try to get her back by racing up a series of sloped girders while jumping over, or smashing, barrels thrown at him by the gorilla. Push a joystick either left or right and Mario moves horizontally. The game's single button makes Mario jump; if he jumps directly beneath a mallet, he grabs it and commences pounding.

It's a ridiculously simple premise, with even simpler controls and characters whose crudely drawn looks were governed by utility. (Mario's mustache and baggy pants give his mouth and legs definition using a minimum number of pixels, while his red cap, Miyamoto explains, "is so you can see his head.") But somehow it all added up to a transcendently addictive game. Sixty-seven thousand cabinets were sold over the next two years, collecting untold numbers of quarters.

*Donkey Kong's* massive success persuaded Nintendo to dive into the home market. From the moment Nintendo launched the NES console in 1985, its business model depended on Miyamoto: People would buy hardware to play his games, starting with *Super Mario Bros.*

*Super Mario Bros.* was the first game to present a world so complex and extensive it had to be mapped to be understood. The musical score - a first in gaming - gave areas within the gamespace a distinct atmosphere, eerie in one place, jaunty in another. The title has since sold more than 40 million copies, nearly as many as Michael Jackson's album *Thriller*. Including sequels, the number jumps to 160 million.

In 1996, 2-D became 3-D with *Mario 64*. It was a transition akin to film's progression from silents to talkies, and Miyamoto had to invent a new set of navigation controls, most of which are now conventional. But today's top gamemakers regard *Mario 64* as a watershed for more subtle reasons. "Miyamoto was one of the first to get *emergence*," explains Will Wright, who worked with the Japanese designer on the NES version of *SimCity*. Emergence, Wright explains, occurs when a simple set of rules gives rise to a complex, lifelike system. "Using maybe 10 simple elements - the way Mario hops, bounces on blocks, and so on - Miyamoto was able to build a huge number of levels, all of which pose different challenges," he says.

More telling are raves from Miyamoto's fans. I ask a friend who enjoys Miyamoto's games what he recalls about *Mario 64*. His reply shows how cleverly the designer guided players over the conceptual hurdle of situating themselves in 3-D space.

"The best detail comes at the beginning of the game," he begins. "A little guy comes flying in with a camera on a stick and says he'll be your cameraman. He says he'll try to pick an ideal camera position. Then the point of view merges with that of the cameraman, making him invisible. You do see him once more, late in the game, reflected in a hall of mirrors. If you turn around and try to look directly at him, he'll swing around out of your field of view. Soon you realize that you can see a painting in the mirror that isn't normally visible in the hall. If you go to the spot where it ought to be hung, you find a hidden warp to another level! The 'aha!' moment feels like a personal achievement. The clues are so well integrated with the gameplay that you don't even notice them being dropped."

I'm afraid to follow up with a question about *The Legend of Zelda*.

In fall 2001, Nintendo's GameCube became the third entry in a hotly contested console battle that includes Sony's PlayStation 2 and Microsoft's Xbox. Currently, Sony has a commanding lead, with 40 million units sold, while Nintendo and Microsoft struggle for a distant second place with 6 million units

each. Many believe there simply aren't enough gamers on the planet for all three consoles to survive. Having saturated the youth demographic, the console makers are aggressively targeting 18-and-up.

This state of affairs doesn't exactly play to Nintendo's strengths. Its core customers are children, who have bought a mindboggling 140 million Game Boys since the handheld player's debut in 1989, and who propel Game Boy versions of Miyamoto's old hits to the top of best-seller lists. Moreover, while Sony and Microsoft harbor grand plans to use their consoles as a wedge to control the living rooms of the future, Nintendo has no such strategy.

Nintendo has always insisted that its market spans the age spectrum. Indeed, two non-Miyamoto titles introduced at E3 - the bloody *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* and the alien shoot-out *Metroid Prime* - are a far cry from *Zelda*. But none of Nintendo's new offerings have generated a buzz equal to the one that greeted *Grand Theft Auto 3*.

The third iteration of a title first issued by Rockstar Games in 1997, *GTA3* became a global sensation immediately upon its release in 2001. Players roam through a fully realized world of mobsters, hookers, drug runners, and crooked cops. Unlike most games, it's hip and humorous, clearly designed to counter the widely held notion that the the game industry is run by, and caters to, pasty-faced sci-fi geeks and fantasy nerds. In the two years since its release, *GTA3* has sold 8 million copies worldwide, surpassing any other videogame during the same period.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series - including the latest installment, *Vice City* - has attracted more newcomers to gaming than any title since *Doom* and *Quake* drew in older players with violent content. Only sports-simulation games - led by the wildly successful *Madden NFL* - bring in so many noncore gamers. To many observers, *GTA* represents the industry's transformation from inconsequential diversion to cultural force. To Miyamoto's critics, it represents his limits.

"He is *not* helping things," says Seamus Blackley, the former head of Microsoft's Xbox team who now runs the Capital Entertainment Group, an independent production company. Blackley is in Makuhari, Japan, on the final day of September's Tokyo Games Show. He speaks for many game designers raised on Miyamoto's innovations - developers who admire the master's work but are desperate for something new.

"At this point," Blackley continues, "Miyamoto is making games for his fans. Granted, there are millions of them, and it's smart business, but most are kids. He's not opening up adult audiences. He's reinforcing stereotypes about games, not pushing them to a place where they can become something different and truly awesome."

What especially frustrates Blackley is the sense that Miyamoto could take gaming to the next level: "There isn't anyone on the planet better at lasering into the lizard brain, that eye-attached-to-your-hand-attached-to-your-brain thing that makes it impossible to stop playing. *GTA3* is good, but it's not revolutionary. What Miyamoto could bring to a game like that would be incredible."

But Miyamoto's interests and inspirations lie elsewhere. While *GTA3* draws heavily on gangster films like *Goodfellas* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, Miyamoto cites the French production *Amelie* and a Chinese film whose title translates to something like *The Postman in the Mountains*. "Most of what you see is beautiful nature scenery," he says. "I was very moved."

Miyamoto's most recent attempt to engage adults was as brilliantly quirky as anything he has done. In 2001's *Pikmin*, you're stranded on a planet with nothing but a race of sentient carrots to help you find the missing pieces of your spaceship. You have to plant carrots, harvest them, and either herd them together or keep them separate. It's dexterity-intensive, intellectually stimulating, emotionally

involving, and it has a gentle learning curve. It was a critical hit. But it didn't sell well.

"It was an amazing game," says Lorne Lanning, creator of the *Oddworld* series. "But it was about cute little carrots." He's quick to add that he finds Miyamoto's games inspiring as a designer. "But I don't play them for the same reason I don't watch *Powerpuff Girls*."

Like any wizard worth his salt, Miyamoto spends most of his time hidden in a fortress on the outskirts of a mystical city near the sea. The city is Kyoto, home of Nintendo headquarters. Long the nation's spiritual capital, Kyoto is Tokyo's pious older sister, having specialized in Zen temples for centuries before Tokyo countered with sensory overload.

The day before the Tokyo Game Show opens, I visit Miyamoto at his hideaway. In a corporate version of a traditional Japanese tea room - an empty space hastily outfitted with tatami mats, pillows, cardboard-box tables, and several cup-and-pot setups - Miyamoto, a translator, and I sit on the floor while a woman in a kimono serves tea.

"Whether we need to focus more on the adult audience is a topic I've been thinking about for several years now," he explains. Nintendo is preparing several titles that will appeal to adults, he says, although he didn't design any of them.

Despite his unfailing politesse, he bristles at the suggestion that his own creations might be holding back the industry. "People often talk about *Grand Theft Auto*. But I am not sure whether that sort of extreme subject matter is always appropriate. They also talk about the future of games being a kind of virtual reality. But I am not convinced that being more realistic makes better games."

In his view, it is the urge to imitate cinema - not his own unwillingness to compromise - that impedes the industry's evolution. "Videogames do not have any competitive edge over movies as an entertainment form. We have to pursue something that movies cannot do." Just what that is, however, is hard for him to articulate. "The most important thing is for games to be fun," he says. "I cannot tell you exactly what that means. It is something you feel, I think."

Ultimately, the question of whether Miyamoto can make the transition from child-friendly whimsy to a grown-up aesthetic may be moot. Even if his games never appeal to adults, they're reaching a much more valuable audience: other designers. Shinji Mikami, creator of the hit horror series *Resident Evil*, cites Miyamoto as a direct influence on the control mechanics of his game. "When you press the button to shoot a zombie, you're pressing the button to make Mario jump," he says. "It's that simple."

Even *GTA3* would be unthinkable without Miyamoto, according to American McGee, one of the brains behind *Quake* and creator of *Alice*, a wild, adult recasting of *Alice in Wonderland*. "It doesn't matter whether it's a bloody facade or a cute facade," he says. "*Grand Theft Auto* is basically a rip-off of *Zelda*, because *Zelda* invented massive-world games that let players explore freely, rather than following a linear path. Miyamoto innovates, so he's pushing the form. End of story."

And if that isn't quite the end - if Miyamoto finds some wondrous new direction that, once again, prompts the industry to follow his lead - nobody should be surprised. "It is important to remember," he says "that games are a relatively young form." He isn't so old, either. "I feel very energetic, and I don't feel like I'm running into walls."

He sips his tea.

"I have always wanted to create some kind of entertainment that has mystery. For instance, I have a dog and I am training him, but really I should say that he is training me. It is a kind of paradigm

shift."

Miyamoto has trained the industry, but there are certain lessons - about the value of subtlety and imagination, about the art of emergence - that it has yet to learn. Likewise, the industry has not yet trained him. And probably never will.

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