



## Beyond White Walls

Think of art galleries, and you may instinctively conjure up a mental image of an immaculate but sterile environment, of white walls and collections of abstract paintings hung on them, the scene peppered with a few visitors gesturing and muttering the occasional "hmm"s and "oooh"s at the artworks. It's a sight that seems to have largely stayed the same over the past few decades. Even with the advent of the internet, the way we consume and experience art hasn't evolved alongside other creative works such as movies, music, and games. That is, unlike specific platforms created for these mediums — Netflix for movies, Spotify for music, and Steam for games, to name a few — there hasn't been an equivalent one for discovering new art just yet.

Yarden Yaroshevski, the founder of London-based games studio StikiPixels, wants this changed.

"We live in a golden age of culture, we have more access to music, movies, games on any platform, in any business model than any time in history. We never had it so good — except for art, it's still kind of stuck in the

renaissance, you know, the way we display it." This is why the StikiPixels team has created the free art MMO and simulation game, *Occupy White Walls*, in which players can build and curate their very own art gallery, filling it up with artworks from famous, traditional painters to emerging, contemporary artists — all across the annals of art history. What also gave Yaroshevski the impetus to develop the game came from his realisation that there hasn't been a game made about art, aside from "some shitty CD-ROM games that are about quizzes" on famous '90s artworks.

"Now what makes art kind of cool and special and interesting is that art is always about politics, but not in the sense of left and right, Tories or Labour, but in the sense of who gets to see what, [...] who gets access to places. You see, it's like layers and layers and layers of gatekeepers," elaborates Yaroshevski. To him, discoverability and accessibility are some of the biggest challenges facing the art world right now. He describes *Occupy White Walls* as a "sort of a hipster Minecraft", where players can curate not just their

galleries, but design and construct the building and architecture that would house these works out of some basic building blocks. Several tools for customising your gallery are all at your disposal, including a dizzying variety of at least 6,500 assets such as furniture, walls and even frames for the artwork; one of the most impressive galleries I've seen is an improbable structure with steps etched into their concrete, akin to a sprawling terrace farm that spans several stories high.

Then there are the artworks, of course; helping players to discover art that they can display in their galleries is the in-game AI called Daisy, which would recommend pieces based on their preferences — based on which paintings they have already purchased or wishlistied within the game. "The more people use it, the better the AI is at pitching it to the right people," says Yaroshevski. The ability to recommend pieces based on the player's preference is of utmost importance to him; Yaroshevski is reluctant to "spam art" because "most art would be boring to you or me".

But StikiPixels isn't the only studio to explore how they can showcase art through games. Sometimes Monastery, a Hong Kong-based developer, is also showcasing a collection of Chinese contemporary art through *Forgetter*, a first-person game about scrubbing clean the traumatic experiences of deceased artists. This is so that their creativity can be commoditised, repackaged and sold to wealthy parents, who want their newborns to imbibe this rich, but supposedly untainted fountain of ingenuity. The artwork you'll come across in *Forgetter* — displayed as paintings and contained in canvases that will quite literally be smashed by you with a sledgehammer — belong to Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei, Yang Fudong, and Gu Dexin, but these pieces also have a thematic connection to the game's storyline.

"I am the one who writes the story, so a big part of the writing involves linking the artwork to the storyline," says Allison Yang Jing, the game designer and writer for *Forgetter*. "For instance, in the first level, the protagonist is a Chinese artist who was born in the 1980s. A lot of things that happened to him echo themes in Chinese contemporary art, like family relationship, transformation into market economy."

Therefore I selected artworks that express feelings or critiques around these topics." Not only does this draw players closer to the

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game, but it can also leave an indelible impression of these artworks on them — a sort of symbiotic relationship between the game and the artwork it puts on display. Most of all, Yang wanted both the game and the artwork to bring across a "striking visual/audio impression". "Many works we included are imbued with strong personal feelings and historical cues. We want to pass these intuitive elements to the players."

The same concerns encircling the arts market — issues around discoverability and accessibility — that Yaroshevski brings up also rings true for Yang. "As a curator, I noticed how online exhibitions were (and still are) challenged by connectivity and forms of representation," she explains. At the same time, video games have also proven to be an effective new approach to showcasing this art. More than just passively seeing a piece of artwork, as you would in most physical art galleries, games can provide a much more interactive — and memorable — way for players to be intimately acquainted with these pieces. "[Video games] offer the possibility to transform players' relationship to artworks and art spaces. Besides 'seeing' the art, players get to interact with the artworks — finding them, manipulating them, putting them together, or, in our case, destroying them," suggests Yang.

Then there is Cuccchi, an exploration game set in the paintings of the Italian painter Enzo Cucchi, who's one of the pioneers of the Italian Transavantgarde movement — in other words, Italy's answer to Neo-expressionism. Cuccchi — the 3's in the title stand for "Cucchi Comes to Consoles", as explained to me by his son, Alessandro Cucchi — serves as a playable archive of Enzo Cucchi's artworks. The crux of the game is about discovering a hidden object, represented by a floating eye, while navigating its game's diorama-like dreamscapes. The more eyes you collect, the more paintings of Cucchi's you can later unlock in its virtual gallery. Adding a layer of resistance to your journey is the presence of a bunch of skulls that lurk around corners, as they sought to raze a path towards you and ravage your hard-earned stash of eyes.

That said, Cuccchi isn't particularly challenging, nor does the game feel like it's meant to be a test of your reflexes and dexterity. Like *Forgetter*, it looks to be a game chiefly about immersing its players within the rich, and sometimes turbulent paintings of Enzo Cucchi.

"Translating classic art — canvas and sculptures and drawings — into video games, it's the way a memory survives: putting the documents in the most used cultural form, [which is] the video game, is to preserve," explains Alessandro. But "archiving is boring", according to him. Instead, he wants to leverage the interactivity of the games medium that would allow Cucchi's works to reach a new audience. "If we think of a way to archive

through a game, the archive can be resuscitated, and the memory of the artworks is transferred to the younger generations," he says. Cucchi's vivid paintings also feel like a good fit for video games, which is why Alessandro decided to reach out to Fantastico Studio, an Italian games developer, to translate his father's works into this virtual space.

Intertwined in these conversations about art and games is the topic of preservation, a subject that's close to the team behind Cuccchi. To that end, Andrea Valesini, the creative director of Fantastico Studio, didn't want Cuccchi to simply exist as a web or browser game; instead, he wanted to bring the game to key games platforms. Not only is Cuccchi available on Steam, but it's also now playable via itch.io and across major consoles: the Nintendo Switch, Xbox, and PlayStation 4. "The first task for an archive is to preserve the memory. To preserve the memory, you need a big base of documents which you should spread widely. Today, the best distribution cultural net existent is the world of gaming: consoles, PCs, [and] mobile apps," Valesini elaborates.

Preservation has yet to become one of gaming's many perennial discussions, but to Yang, art preservation through games is a step that seems fraught with technological obstacles, but would likely be worth it in the long run. "Preservation [needs some] technology savvy, and requires a very sophisticated knowledge-base. Digitalisation of artworks seems to be easy, but it never was easy. It requires a lot of human productivity and financial resources," Yang says. "I am not sure how effective this solution is, but I am sure the result is quite powerful — it unlocks art from whiteboxes from somewhere afar, and presents it to more people."

When it comes to *Occupy White Walls*, however, Yaroshevski had loftier plans; he wants the game to disrupt the rigid and cloistered status quo within the arts scene, and eventually assist artists in selling their works to buyers directly on the platform. "The art world is very different to, say, the games world. In games, in theory, you could have a small indie game from a bunch of guys, somewhere in Siberia, and he goes on Steam, and it kinda grows, and everybody gets excited about this," he explains. "Art doesn't work like this. The actual art world, the art market, all these art fairs, and whatever, it's a super closed community of maybe 20,000 people. They're all billionaires, [...] they treat this like luxury. They don't even see us, you know?" On a heartening note, such sales are already happening beyond the virtual spaces of *Occupy White Walls*; Yaroshevski had heard of interested buyers approaching the artists themselves directly on Instagram, whose links can be accessed through the game.

At the same time, this can only happen when the game is more widely adopted among both players and artists. During our chat online, Yaroshevski showed me a profile of such an artist named Michael Archibald, a Toronto-based painter with a modest Instagram following of 262 followers. By most accounts, this may seem like an unremarkable portfolio — but his artist profile on Kultura, the website that houses the stats and comments associated with the artworks uploaded to *Occupy White Walls*, tells a markedly different story. Archibald's paintings garner an average of 1,000 likes each — and this figure has only risen for his latest works.

"Michael, like most emerging artists, is spending a lot of his time going to galleries and saying, 'Can I have an exhibition?' And these galleries — they are some of the nastiest people in the world, they say 'Who the fuck are you? I never heard of you.' Now Michael, unlike Van Gogh, can pull out his phone and show his Kultura page, and suddenly he's an artist with stats. Stats, and comments, and like, real people. This is a huge deal. Huge huge huge deal," shares Yaroshevski. It is also why Yaroshevski believes artists love being hosted on the *Occupy White Walls* platform; it offers them the exposure that they usually cannot get due to the restrictive, unspoken rules of the modern arts market.

"It's a weird thing for artists; you can only sell your artwork once, and in theory they're supposed to sell it for a lot of money, too. But for most emerging artists that's not the case," he says. "If anything they can't really sell anything because they can't really go to galleries, [and] if they do sell it it's for a very low price. It's very frustrating. But being on our platforms it's saying, 'You know what, there are 1,200 people, thousands of people that like this artwork, put it in their gallery, and they could visit and see what they write about it.' Even without selling anything, psychologically, this is a very massive, very powerful sense of affirmation — something that many artists crave."

In the same vein, Yang has also found that the artists featured in *Forgetter* appreciate the exposure from having their pieces featured in the game. This has opened up more opportunities for future collaborations. "I've been invited to one of the most famous Chinese contemporary artists, Zhang Huan's studio, because he wanted to meet me and discuss future collaboration after he played the game."

Amidst all these conversations about art and their digital counterparts in games, it'll probably be remiss not to address the mammoth elephant in the room: NFTs, and the often-repeated axiom by crypto evangelists of NFTs' capacity to help struggling artists make a handsome profit off their works online. Yaroshevski immediately disavows these efforts. "I'd like to think that the main problem with art is actually discovery — getting your artwork in front of the people, which is what we do. I think NFTs are really just a distraction," he says. Yang, too, is wary of this scheme as well, believing that NFTs seem to only largely benefit artists who are already immensely popular and well-known. "I am still at the sceptical stage, but I'd love to be proved wrong. What I see is that the most sought-after NFT works are still those of the big names — Damien Hirst just sold some NFT for the year of the tiger. Most artists are still facing precarity." On the other hand, Alessandro Cucchi sees NFTs as a new way of copyrighting artistic works. "Intellectual property, never like today, could be a source of income. In the crypto universe, NFT's are like gold, or a piece of art — [the] economic stabilisers of the new currency."

When we speak of art in games — and art as games — we often refer to this medium for its potential to evoke deep-seated emotions that are beyond the purview of words alone, and its capacity to deliver intangible emotive or conceptual expressions. Less has been said, however, about the intertextuality of art and games; or how art can be used to shape the experiences of games, and vice versa. But in these art games, it becomes easier to appreciate the potency and potential of these two creative works. It's in these games that we see how they perfectly complement each other to form a splendid tapestry of artistic expressions, to better showcase and preserve art, and to refine the unparalleled interactivity of games.