

## A&E

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## Re-View

### Game On

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*... No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.*

*—Roger Ebert*

The question “Is it art?” has been mostly moot ever since philosopher and *Nation* critic Arthur Danto gave us an institutional definition in the '60s. Art is art if: It is in something that calls itself an art gallery, made by someone who calls himself or herself an artist or proclaimed art by someone connected to the art industry. Still, whenever a new medium arises, some always feel the need to debate its claim to the title.

*Moon dust*, widely considered the first “art video game,” came out for the Commodore 64 in 1983. Yet nearly three decades later, acceptance of the medium’s possibilities beyond empty entertainment has only recently hit the mainstream. Just last year, the National Endowment for the Arts expanded its allowable projects to include “interactive games” and the Supreme Court ruled that video games were protected speech, just like other forms of art.

What’s interesting about “**Punk Arcade**” at Little Berlin, then, is not that this is some sort of bold statement about whether video games qualify as art. There are no manifestoes tacked to the wall among the seven DIY games in the traveling exhibit. “Punk Arcade” seems to start by assuming that particular argument is beside the point.

On to the next step: growing the medium and making it more accessible to potential artists. This is done explicitly via workshops over the exhibit’s run for rookie programmers, but each game also sends a more subtle message of “Hey, this is possible!” just by existing. For the most part, these games run on standard home computers; they’re given the silhouette of traditional arcade games by large housings cut out of cardboard. Co-curators Lee Tusman and Sarah Brin chose the pieces to showcase the range of creative work and background in the DIY video-game community.

Anna Anthropy’s *Keep Me Occupied* requires two players to work together to ascend a building, with each game affecting all those that follow it — it makes perfect sense that the game was created for Occupy Oakland. Anthropy has been creating games for longer than Cassie Creighton, another artist in “Punk Arcade,” has been alive. Last year, when Cassie was 5, she and her dad Ryan (who programmed it, admittedly) teamed up to make *Sissy’s Magical Ponycorn Adventure* from Cassie’s ideas, crayon drawings and voice recordings at a weekend “game jam.”

Some games seem familiar — Jan Willem Nijman’s *Tennes*, projected on a wall, recalls 8-bit tennis matches. Steven Lavelle’s *You Can Jump It 3D* differs from many car-driving games only in that you are jumping over giant pies. Mark Essen’s *Jetpack Basketball* strays from an 8-bit-like two-player basketball game by introducing the element of jetpacks and a psychedelic and ambient noise landscape.

Others are less familiar: Hannah Epstein's *The Immoral Ms. Conduct* is like a choose-your-own-adventure book about a ladies' prison, and Lindsay Grace's *Big Huggin'*, the tour de force of the exhibition, has players hugging a real-life teddy bear to make a bear onscreen jump.

"Is it art?" The more appropriate question here is "Is it *great* art?" The answer to that would be "no" — perhaps because the means of creating the first great video-game work of art do not currently exist. But the answer to the questions "Did you have fun?" and "Did you learn something?" would be a resounding "yes."

*Through Oct. 27, free, [Little Berlin](#), 2430 Coral St. Games are open to the public Saturdays noon-5 p.m. and by appointment by emailing [berlin.little@gmail.com](mailto:berlin.little@gmail.com). Workshop: Sat., Oct. 20., 2-4 p.m.*

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