Photo of the Day | Student Life



Students study outside the William Benton Museum of Art at UConn in Storrs, Connecticut. The Benton officially opened as an art museum in 1967.
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VIDEO GAME STUDIOS ERASE ARTISTS BEHIND THE ART

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Who made your favorite video game? There's a good chance you don't know the director, but you probably know the studio behind it. That's exactly how video game production companies like it. They have a direct monetary interest in deemphasizing the artists behind the product.

It's clear how prominent this issue is when compared to other media, such as the film, TV, theater and book industries. All have prominent auteurs behind many of the works they produce. TV has the Duffer brothers, the creators of "Stranger Things." Theater has Andrew Lloyd Webber of "Cats" and "The Phantom of the Opera" fame. Books are widely known and sought after by author, yet video game directors still don't get the credit they deserve. Compare one of the biggest movies to release this year and one of the biggest video games. Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey" was met with critical acclaim when it released this summer and was discussed not just as an adaptation of an epic poem, but also in the context of Nolan's other films. His directorial style is inseparable from his work. On the other hand, the name most associated with Grand Theft Auto VI isn't its head of development, Rob Nelson, but its publishing company: Rockstar Games.

The state of the video game industry and its artists is very similar to the early film industry, in which films were produced and distributed primarily as products to make money for film studios, rather than art pieces. The industry operated under the hyper-capitalistic studio system, in which studios owned their own theaters, and everybody involved with a film was signed to work for the studio itself, rather than to a specific project. This meant that directors didn't work on movies for their artistic appeal, instead directing simply to draw out good enough performances for producers. The studio system deemphasizing the workers behind its products also prevented studios from poaching each other's employees for their artistic talent. This style of filmmaking fell by the 1950s after film companies owning their own studios was deemed monopolistic by the Supreme Court of the United States. At the same time, unions for film workers began forming across America. The Screen Actors Guild was founded in 1933, the Screen Writers Guild in 1933 and the Directors Guild of America in 1938.

The video game industry has historically functioned very similarly to the Hollywood studio system. Production companies, especially early in the history of video games, have made their own consoles for which they release exclusive games. Developers are contracted to work for specific studios. Additionally, early video games rarely credited the people who made them. Famously, the 1980 Atari game Adventure contains one of the earliest easter eggs — the name of its creator, Warren Robinett, as a way to secretly credit himself. However, unlike the 1930s and 40s, we live in a time where unions are looked down upon and discouraged by the federal government. The first video game union in North America only formed in 2021.

Despite this, some major creatives in video games have emerged over the years, mostly coming from Japan. These include Shigeru Miyamoto (creator of Mario and The Legend of Zelda), Masahiro Sakurai (Kirby and Super Smash Bros.), Satoshi Tajiri (Pokémon) and Hideo Kojima (Metal Gear and Death Stranding). However, all of these names are associated with some of the biggest video game franchises ever made, and each of them come from pioneering game companies in the 1980s or 90s. Miyamoto, Sakurai and Tajiri are each associated with Nintendo, while Kojima created Metal Gear for Konami. I would liken them more to artists famous for pioneering the medium of film, like Georges Méliès and Louis Lumière, than film auteurs like Alfred Hitchcock and Jordan Peele.

The other way video game creators become well known is the exact opposite of my previously listed examples: modern independent games. Currently, one of the most prominent names in indie gaming is Toby Fox, the creator and composer of his 2015 project Undertale and the currently-releasing Deltarune. His vision is inseparable from every aspect of his games, so much so that he specifically cited his inability to control the exact wording of dialogue in languages he doesn't understand as the main reason why he can't release an official Spanish translation of his games any time soon. Other well-known names in indie gaming include Notch, the creator of Minecraft, Scott Cawthon (Five Nights at Freddy's) and ConcernedApe (Stardew Valley). All of these creators began working on their games as solo developers.

Artists like these can only become so well-known because they can apply personal artistic vision to their projects rather than following what a supervisor tells them to do as their name is hidden behind a company logo. Production companies don't view their employees as artists with visions. To a company, an employee is a means to an end, eight hours — often much more — of labor a day towards finishing a product. Creativity doesn't matter unless innovations increase profit margins. When the art doesn't matter, neither does the artist. If an artist were to become known for the art they made, they might not rely on the company for work and might even leave.

Indie games work around this system by decentralizing power in the industry. Profits go directly to the developers, proportional to the game's success. Artistry and creative innovation are rewarded by fans.

Corporations kill creativity. Independent developers are the future of video games as an artform.



Japanese video game designer and producer Shigeru Miyamoto (middle) speaks at a convention. Miyamoto created the widely-popular games Mario and The Legend of Zelda.

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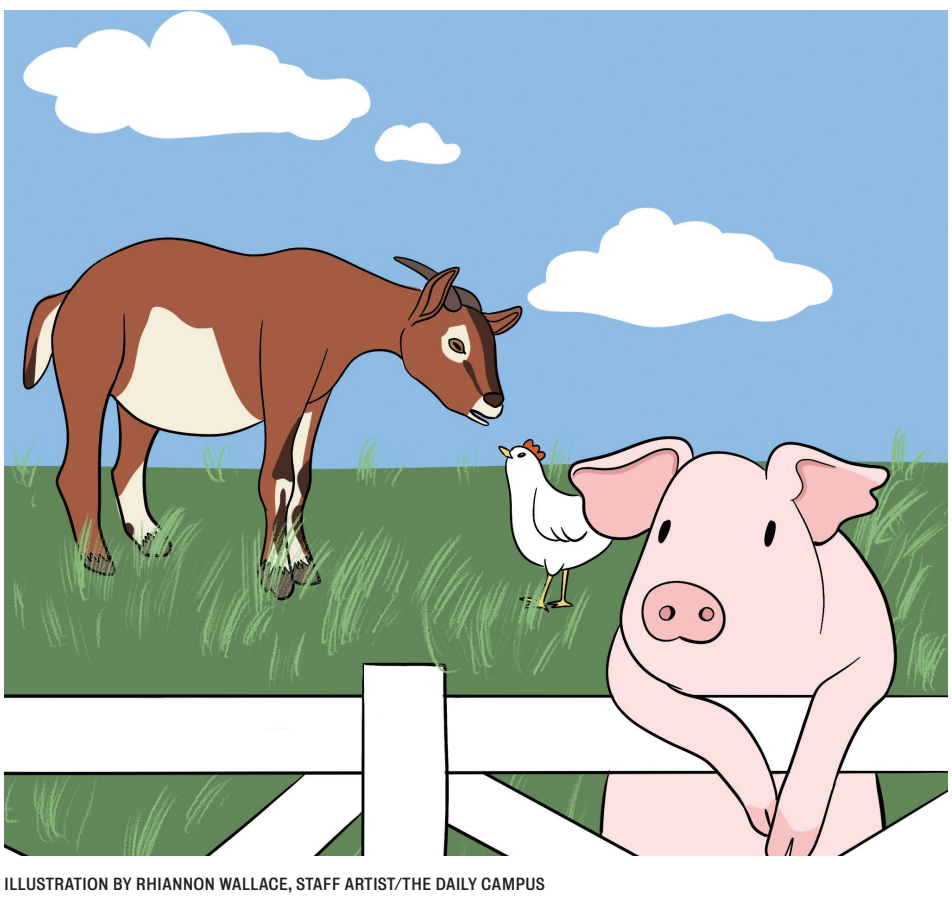


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