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## PROFILES

# MASTER OF PLAY

*The many worlds of a video-game artist.*

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

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Shigeru Miyamoto has always tried to re-create his childhood wonderment. He's the closest thing there is to an autobiographical game creator, and shuns focus groups: "As long as I can enjoy something, other people can enjoy it, too."

**W**hen Shigeru Miyamoto was a child, he didn't really have any toys, so he made his own, out of wood and string. He put on performances with homemade puppets and made cartoon flip-books. He pretended that there were magical realms hidden behind the sliding shoji screens in his family's little

house. There was no television. His parents were of modest means but hardly poor. This was in the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties, in the rural village of Sonobe, about thirty miles northwest of Kyoto, in a river valley surrounded by wooded mountains. As he got older, he wandered farther afield, on foot or by bike. He explored a bamboo forest behind the town's ancient Shinto shrine and bushwhacked through the cedars and pines on a small mountain near the junior high school. One day, when he was seven or eight, he came across a hole in the ground. He peered inside and saw nothing but darkness. He came back the next day with a lantern and shimmied through the hole and found himself in a small cavern. He could see that passageways led to other chambers. Over the summer, he kept returning to the cave to marvel at the dance of the shadows on the walls.

Miyamoto has told variations on the cave story a few times over the years, in order to emphasize the extent to which he was surrounded by nature, as a child, and also to claim his youthful explorations as a source of his aptitude and enthusiasm for inventing and designing video games. The cave has become a misty but indispensable part of his legend, to Miyamoto what the cherry tree was to George Washington, or what LSD is to Steve Jobs. It is also a prototype, an

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analogue, and an apology—an illuminating and propitious way to consider his games, or, for that matter, anyone else’s. It flatters a vacant-eyed kid with a joystick (to say nothing of the grownups who have bought it for him or sold it to him) to think of himself, spiritually, as an intrepid spelunker. The cave, certainly, is an occasion for easy irony: the man who has perhaps done more than any other person to entice generations of children to spend their playtime indoors, in front of a video screen, happened to develop his peculiar talent while playing outdoors, at whatever amusements or mischief he could muster. Of course, no one in the first wave of video-game designers could have learned the craft by playing video games, since video games didn’t exist until people like Miyamoto invented them. Still, there may be no starker example of the conversion of primitive improvisations into structured, commodified, and stationary technological simulation than that of Miyamoto, the rural explorer turned ludic mastermind.

In his games, Miyamoto has always tried to re-create his childhood wonderment, if not always the actual experiences that gave rise to it, since the experiences themselves may be harder to come by in a paved and partitioned world. “I can still recall the kind of sensation I had when I was in a small river, and I was searching with my hands beneath a rock, and something hit my finger, and I noticed it was a fish,” he told me one day. “That’s something that I just can’t express in words. It’s such an unusual situation. I wish that children nowadays could have similar experiences, but it’s not very easy.”

**F**ishermen have a saying, in reference to the addictive sensation of a fish hitting your line: “The tug is the drug.” Gamers, as video-game players are known, thrill to “the pull,” that mysterious ability that good games have of making you want to play them, and keep playing them. The pull used to extract quarters from your pockets. Then it became a force that pinned you to a couch. Later, it got your entire family to shadowbox in the living room. Whatever the interface, a great game invites and rewards obsession, and Miyamoto’s games are widely considered to be among the greatest. He has been called the father of modern video games. The best known, and most



influential, is Super Mario Bros., which debuted a quarter of a century ago and, depending on your point of view, created an industry or resuscitated a comatose one. It spawned dozens of sequels and spinoffs. Miyamoto has designed or overseen the development of many other blockbusters, among them the Legend of Zelda series, Star Fox, and Pikmin. Their success, in both commercial and cultural terms, suggests that he has a peerless feel for the pull, that he is a master of play—of its components and poetics—in the way that Walt Disney, to whom he is often compared, was of sentiment and wonder. Certainly, in Mario, the squat Italian plumber who bops around the Mushroom Kingdom in a quest to rescue Princess Toadstool, Miyamoto created a folk hero—

gaming's first—with as great a reach as Mickey Mouse's.

What he hasn't created is a company in his own name, or a vast fortune to go along with it. He is a salaryman. Miyamoto's business card says that he is the senior managing director and the general manager of the entertainment-analysis and -development division at Nintendo Company Ltd., the video-game giant. What it does not say is that he is Nintendo's guiding spirit, its meal ticket, and its playful public face. Miyamoto has said that his main job at Nintendo is *ningen kougaku*—human engineering. He has been at the company since 1977 and has worked for no other. (He prizes Nintendo's financial and creative support for his work: “There's a big difference between the money you receive personally from the company and the money you can use in your job.”) He has never been the company's (or his own) boss, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that Nintendo might not exist without him. He designed the games and invented the franchises that caused people to buy the consoles. He also helped design the consoles.

In the gaming world, the creators of the games are not always widely known, much less venerated; the structure of the business, in which engineers and artists do their work for hire, and in which, increasingly, they do it in greater numbers, owing to the more complex technology of the games, consigns them to relative anonymity. Part of it, too, is that games are typically considered to be commercial products, rather than creative works; consider the fact that game titles, unlike the names of, say, movies or songs, appear in most newspapers and magazines, including this one, unitalicized and without quotes. There aren't very many video-game auteurs, but Miyamoto is one.

The original Super Mario Bros. was the best-selling video game of all time, until Wii Sports surpassed it, two years ago—and Miyamoto was one of the leaders of the team that came up with the Wii. The Super Mario Bros. franchise has sold more than two hundred and forty million units, and that's not including Mario Kart, Mario Party, and other offshoots, which have sold tens of millions more. Yet it is for the nature of his games, rather than for their commercial success, that Miyamoto is so widely revered. In a poll last year of nine thousand video-game developers, who were asked to name their “ultimate development hero,” Miyamoto was the runaway winner. “At the end of the day, most of the designers out there now grew up playing his games,” Will Wright, the creator of the Sims and Spore, and the developer who came in third in that poll, told me. “He approaches the games playfully, which seems kind of obvious, but most people don't. And he approaches things from the players' point of view, which is part of his magic.”

**S**ecuring an audience with Miyamoto in Japan is a little like trying to rescue Princess Toadstool. You must pass through a series of stages and contend with various obstacles and delights. The Japanese, by and large, aren't accustomed to the way of an American reporter; it is unusual for them even to invite friends over for dinner, to say nothing of a *gaijin* with a tape recorder and a notebook. (An old Japan hand warned me, “Japanese people don't generally ask questions directly about one another.”) The corporate ethos in Japan, and especially at Nintendo, is self-effacing; the humility that has kept Miyamoto at the company for three decades, rather than in, say, Silicon Valley, seeking his billions, also governs the apportionment of credit. Miyamoto has been a

superstar in the gaming world for more than two decades, but neither he nor the company seems inclined to exploit his stardom. They contend that the development of a game or a game console is a collaborative effort—that it is indecorous to single out any one contributor, to the exclusion of the others. Miyamoto is also guarded about his private life. The fact that anyone would be curious about it baffles him.

The first time I saw Miyamoto in person was in Los Angeles last June, at the E3 Expo, the video-game industry's annual American convention. It's a huge affair, befitting a sixty-billion-dollar global industry. Nintendo, for its presentation, rented out the Nokia Theatre and filled it with nearly four thousand gaming enthusiasts, journalists, and executives. Early in the program, Miyamoto appeared on a giant video screen to demonstrate *Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, the fourteenth installment in the *Zelda* series, which he created in 1986, and which involves the adventures of an avatar named Link, who roams a fantasy world in an attempt to rescue a princess, *Zelda*. Miyamoto's explanation of how to deploy the controls was dubbed with an English translation. (His father was an English teacher, and Miyamoto understands some English, but he can't speak it well, and he insists on doing interviews and public appearances in Japanese.) With a zap, Miyamoto's image suddenly disappeared from the video screen and reappeared below it on a scrim of white curtain, and then Miyamoto himself burst out through the curtain and onto the stage, to riotous applause. Grinning broadly, dressed in a white *Zelda* T-shirt, an untucked and unbuttoned dress shirt, and jeans, he wielded the Wii's two controllers—the Wii Remote and the Nunchuk—as a sword and a shield. At fifty-eight, he is trim and agile, with a boyish mop of black hair and an easy smile. In public, Miyamoto often strikes a lighthearted crouching pose, a proto-Wii stance that seems to owe a little to the gunslingers of the first video game he ever played, *Western Gun*, and a little to Yosemite Sam.

As Nintendo's creative taskmaster, Miyamoto had a hand in most facets of the development and design of the Wii, introduced in 2006. Internally code-named *Revolution*, it was the first wireless motion-capture gaming console; sensors allow players to dictate the movements of their onscreen avatars. The simplicity and dynamism of the controller, which Miyamoto conceived and helped design, attracted several new constituencies of what are called "casual" (as opposed to "hard-core") gamers to video games—the *Wii Bowlers* and *Guitar Heroes* to whom the name *Zelda* may have still summoned up Mrs. Fitzgerald. (Miyamoto, in fact, named his *Zelda* for her.) "Our goal was to come up with a machine that moms would want," he has said. The Wii has less processing power and graphic sophistication than rival machines from Sony and Microsoft, but it has outsold them by a wide margin, owing to its ease, sociability, and accessibility, and also perhaps to the misconception that, say, *Wii Tennis* is a form of exercise.

Wright told me, "Miyamoto starts from the kinesthetics of the controller. What is this thing going to feel like in my hands? Will I feel like I'm instinctively connected to this world? As opposed to, I've got sixteen buttons, and I'm trying to figure out which button does the super-thrust power-up, in which case it's very cerebral, kind of like learning to play the piano. Rather than, you know, just picking up a shovel and starting to dig. He's had an amazing impact not just on software

and games but on the hardware as well.”

At E3, Miyamoto said a few words in English but then went on in Japanese—a translator stood beside him—as he turned toward the giant video screen and demonstrated the new *Zelda* game. He guided Link through a landscape of cheerful menace, slashing at quasi-comical enemies. “Let’s take a look at these mushrooms,” the translator said, without affect. “Here we see the Deku Babas, popped up here.” Onscreen, giant carnivorous flytrap plants bobbed and weaved, and Miyamoto vanquished them with swipes of his sword. “You can let loose sword beams,” the translator went on. “If you look at the Bokoblins, you’ll notice that they are protecting themselves with their swords and they’re trying to block my attacks.” The Bokoblins, ratty sword-wielding soldiers, made an alluring squashing sound when Miyamoto killed them.

The sincerity with which everyone considered the Bokoblins or the Deku Babas, amid the pomp of a corporate showcase, was bewildering; it brought to mind some combination of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the N.F.L. draft. I am not a gamer. I took a few whacks at *Super Mario*, when it came out, in the mid-eighties, but mostly my video-game experience predated the Nintendo invasion and the unabating craze for home systems. I played arcade games, and I played them poorly; my quarters never went far. I usually wound up watching friends play, muttering over their shoulders in vain attempts to persuade them to play street hockey or Nerf football instead. The games were *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, *Missile Command*, *Pac-Man*, *Robotron*, *Tempest*, *Centipede*, *Defender*, *Joust*, and *Galaga*, which I did become passably proficient at and which, if I see it now, in a pizzeria or an airport, still inspires me to hunt for change. There was also *Donkey Kong*, which was unlike any of these others: it had a sense of humor, a narrative context, and beguilingly goofy graphics.

Although I missed out on all of it—not only on the brothers *Mario* and the Nintendo games but on *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft*, *SimCity*, and *Halo*—I saw legions get sucked in, and so I formed the not uncommon opinion that video games, like motorcycles or heroin, were irresistibly seductive and profoundly insidious. I had decided to avoid them completely, and, when I had kids, to keep them away from video games as best I could. This I have mostly done, but for the purpose of this assignment I’ve had a loaner at home—a *Wii*, with all the fixin’s. It will be hard for us to bid it goodbye.

**N**intendo has been in the business of play since 1889. Its founder, Fusajiro Yamauchi, made playing cards, or *karuta*. Well into the next century, the company’s main product was *hanafuda*—cards made from crushed mulberry bark and lavishly illustrated with symbols such as animals and flowers—which replaced the painted seashells that the Japanese had traditionally used and which became widespread in Japan for gambling. As it happens, fortune and luck are intrinsic to the company’s name. Made up of the three kanji characters *nin*, *ten*, and *do*, the name has been said to mean “Leave luck to heaven,” or “Work hard, but in the end it is in heaven’s hands,” as the journalist David Sheff rendered it, in his 1993 portrait of the company, “Game Over: How Nintendo Zapped an American Industry, Captured Your Dollars, and Enslaved Your Children.” (Sheff decided to write the book, which in spite of the title is generally admiring, after watching his

young son Nic get hooked on Super Mario; Nic's addiction, years later, to methamphetamine became fodder for another book.)

In 1949, Yamauchi's headstrong and debonair great-grandson Hiroshi Yamauchi, aged twenty-two, took over Nintendo and began restlessly casting about for ways to extend its reach. He secured a licensing agreement with the Walt Disney Company and scored a big hit with American-style playing cards adorned with the image of Mickey Mouse. Other entrepreneurial gambits—instant rice, a taxi fleet—fared poorly. In the mid-nineteen-sixties, Yamauchi hired an engineer named Gunpei Yokoi and a crew of young tinkerers to think about making toys and games, and their experiments helped foster a culture of whimsy and risk amid Nintendo's rigid corporate structure. As one of them told Sheff, years later, "Here were these very serious men thinking about the content of play."

The very serious men turned out a succession of silly gizmos. There was the Ultra Hand, a device with a gripping hand at the end of it; the Love Tester, a primitive electronic contrivance that purported to measure the level of ardor between a boy and a girl; the Beam Gun, which used a ray of light to hit simulated targets. (Nintendo converted abandoned bowling alleys into "shooting ranges," where you could fire at simulations of clay pigeons.) Across the ocean, a company called Atari, based in California, had created Pong, the first hit video game. Pong, originally an arcade game, was turned into a home version in 1975. Inspired by Atari, and by the craze for a new arcade game called Space Invaders, Yamauchi, who told Sheff that he had never played a video game, led Nintendo into the arcade business, and also pushed for the development of a home console like Atari's, an apparatus that would come to be called the Family Computer, or Famicom.

In 1976, Miyamoto, then age twenty-four, was a recent art-college graduate, with a degree in industrial design and an enduring fascination with the Japanese comic strips called manga. He liked to draw and paint, make toys, and play bluegrass on the banjo and the guitar, and wasn't sure how any of this was going to translate into earning a living. He had a vague idea that he'd create some kind of mass-market object. His father got him an interview with Yamauchi, through a mutual friend. Miyamoto showed the company some toys he'd made, two wooden clothes hangers for kids in the shape of crows and elephants. Yamauchi hired him to be an apprentice in the planning department.

What Miyamoto became, however, was Nintendo's first artist. He started out by designing the console for a car-racing game, and then by conceiving the look of the attackers for a knockoff of Space Invaders called Space Fever. His breakthrough came after an arcade game called Radar Scope, which Nintendo had hoped would be a hit in America, failed, leaving the company with an inventory in the United States of two thousand unsold Radar Scope cabinets. Yamauchi tapped Miyamoto to design a new game to replace Radar Scope in those cabinets.

The game he came up with was Donkey Kong. He had in mind a scenario based on Popeye, but Nintendo was unable to secure the rights, so he invented a new set of characters. The hero, the player's avatar, was a carpenter named Jumpman. (Miyamoto had initially called him Mr. Video, with the intention of using him in every game, much in the way that, he said, Hitchcock appears in

many of his own films.) Jumpman's pet gorilla had kidnapped his girlfriend, Pauline, and escaped with her to the top of a construction site. The object of the game was to climb up through the girders while dodging the gorilla's projectiles, and then vanquish the gorilla and rescue the girl. The goal, in other words, was to get to the end of the game, not just to pile up points. ("Donkey" was the word Miyamoto found in a Japanese-English dictionary for "stubborn" or "goofy." "Kong" was a word for gorilla.) Prior to Donkey Kong, games had been developed by engineers and programmers with little or no regard for narrative or graphical playfulness. Donkey Kong, which debuted in 1981, had a story, a sense of humor, funny music (which Miyamoto helped write), and an ingenious game logic. It had four distinct screens, like a manga panel. This was also a new and soon-to-be-ubiquitous genre: what Miyamoto has called a running/jumping/climbing game, otherwise known as a platform game. At first, the Nintendo executives in America thought that Donkey Kong, as both a name and a game, was doomed. Looking for a better name for Jumpman, they settled on Mario, because of his resemblance to their landlord. To their surprise, the game was a huge hit.

Mario, of course, went on to bigger things. When Nintendo released the Famicom in the United States, in 1985 (it was rechristened the Nintendo Entertainment System, or N.E.S.), Super Mario Bros. was the game that sold the machine and in turn laid claim to the eyes, and the thumbs, of the world. The market for home games had crashed, and several companies went under or got out. Super Mario represented a re-start. Again, the object was the rescue of a maiden, who has been kidnapped by Bowser, or King Koopa, an evil turtle. Mario, now a plumber, and joined by a lanky brother named Luigi, bounced through the Mushroom Kingdom, dodging or bopping enemies in the form of turtles, beetles, and squid, while seeking out magic mushrooms, coins, and hidden stars. When you set down these elements in ink, they sound ridiculous, but there is something in this scenario that is utterly and peerlessly captivating. There were eight worlds, with four levels each, which meant that you had to pass through thirty-two stages to get to the princess. You travelled through these worlds left to right, on what's called a side-scrolling screen. It wasn't the first side-scroll game, but it was the most charming and complex. What's more, the complexity was subtle. Yokoi, Miyamoto's mentor, and the inventor of the Game Boy device, had urged him to simplify his approach. The game had just fifteen or twenty dynamics in it—how the mushrooms work, how the blocks react when you hit them—yet they combined in such a way to produce a seemingly limitless array of experiences and moves, and to provide opportunities for an alternative, idiosyncratic style of play, which brings to mind nothing so much as chess. Will Wright cited the theory of emergence—the idea that complex systems arise out of the interaction of several simple things. "The hardware wasn't much better than Atari's," he said. "The polish and the depth of the games were. Super Mario was so approachable, so simple, so addictive, and yet so deep." The game's musical score, an entrancing suite by the Nintendo composer Koji Kondo, may be to one generation what "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" was to another.

Jamin Brophy-Warren, who publishes a video-game arts and culture magazine called *Kill Screen*, told me that there is something in the amplitude and dynamic of Mario's jumps—just



enough supernatural lift yet also just enough gravitational resistance—that makes the act of performing that jump, over and over, deeply satisfying. He also cited the archetypal quality of Mario’s task, that vague feeling of longing and disappointment which undergirds his desperate and recurring quest for the girl. “It’s a story of desire,” Brophy-Warren said.

There are generally two approaches to thinking about games: narratology and ludology. The first emphasizes story, the second play. The next time I played Super Mario, on the Wii (you can order all the vintage games), I found myself in a narratological mode. Mario reminded me of K. and his pursuit of the barmaid Frieda, in Kafka’s “The Castle,” and of the kind of lost-loved-one dreams that “The Castle” both mimics and instigates. But then a Koopa Troopa got me, and I had the distinct thrill of starting over with the press of a button—quarters hoarded now only for parking meters. If the game was anything, it was unpretentious, and it was better to approach it that way. As Wright had said, “When you play his games, you feel like you’re a kid and you’re out in the back yard playing in the dirt.”

A year after the debut of Super Mario Bros., Nintendo released Miyamoto’s Legend of Zelda. Unlike Mario, which was linear, Zelda let you venture in all directions, exploring worlds within worlds, with an array of choice and depth never seen before in a video game. The ingenuity of the coding made the game’s imaginary world, called Hyrule, seem boundless. The game was hard to figure out: more puzzle than plaything.

Hyrule, of course, was in many ways based on Miyamoto’s childhood adventures. Miyamoto told Sheff not only about the cave but about dares among his friends to make forays into neighbors’ basements and yards, or about a neighbor’s bulldog that would charge him each time he passed by, jerking on its chain, or about getting stuck high in a tree or wondering what was at the bottom of manholes. He filled his games with his childlike interpretation of the world as a carnival of quirky perils and hidden delights. Hyrule, he once said, is “a miniature garden that you can put into a drawer and revisit anytime you like.”

Nintendo is insistent that it’s in the entertainment business, presumably because entertainment implies accessibility and ease—greater commercial reach. The term “entertainment” also suggests passivity, and so Nintendo’s emphasis on it does a disservice to video games—the good ones, anyway. You take in entertainment but take part in play. One you watch, the other you do. You might say that video games are both diminished and enriched by the fact that we have to play them in order to enjoy them. “Many video games ask for a lot in order to be played, so it is not surprising that some people do not play video games,” the Danish ludologist Jesper Juul has written. “Video games ask for much more than other art forms.”

Entertainment can put on airs; it might, over time, turn into something else, like art, literature, or a department at Brown. Novels, as we’re often told, were once deemed frivolous, much in the way that video games are now. “Video games are bad for you?” Miyamoto once said. “That’s what they said about rock and roll!” Certainly, video games have their highbrow evangelists and critical apologists, who may consider them to be cultural artifacts, coded texts, mythopoetic fictions, or political paradigms. In this respect, they may have more in common with opera than with

hopscotch or cribbage. And yet they are first and foremost games, and games, regardless of how much we may love them, are by definition trivial and superfluous. For whatever reason, everyone deems some games worthier or more virtuous than others (except for those outliers who have no interest in any kind of game at all). You may think that bridge is noble, and that blackjack is dumb; that football is courageous, while squash is for wimps, or else that football is idiotic and squash refined. Often, the judgments have to do with ancillary benefits: Athletics enhance fitness and character but take time away from your studies or the festival of foreign films. Chess stimulates the mind but can crimp your love life. Video games, no matter how many people love them, rarely fare well in these matchups. The best analogue for their combined disreputability and ubiquity may be masturbation.

And yet the success of this “casual revolution,” as Juul has called the spread of easier, more accessible video games, like the Finnish sensation *Angry Birds*, has engendered the idea that games should be more widely integrated into everything we do—that we are insufficiently engaged unless we are passing simultaneously through a real world and a simulated one. The answer is more games, not less, according to Jane McGonigal, a game designer and the author of the forthcoming book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Her dream, as she put it in a speech last spring, is “to make it as easy to save the world in real life as it is to save the world in online games.” We try harder when we play. “In game worlds, I believe that many of us become the best version of ourselves,” she went on.

The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, in his classic 1938 study “*Homo Ludens*” (“*Man the Player*”), argued that play was one of the essential components of culture—that it in fact predates culture, because even animals play. His definition of play is instructive. One, play is free—it must be voluntary. Prisoners of war forced to play Russian roulette are not at play. Two, it is separate; it takes place outside the realm of ordinary life and is unserious, in terms of its consequences. A game of chess has no bearing on your survival (unless the opponent is Death). Three, it is unproductive; nothing comes of it—nothing of material value, anyway. Plastic trophies, plush stuffed animals, and bragging rights cannot be monetized. Four, it follows an established set of parameters and rules, and requires some artificial boundary of time and space. Tennis requires lines and a net and the agreement of its participants to abide by the conceit that those boundaries matter. Five, it is uncertain; the outcome is unknown, and uncertainty can create opportunities for discretion and improvisation. In Hyrule, you may or may not get past the Deku Babas, and you can slay them with your own particular panache.

The French intellectual Roger Caillois, in a 1958 response to Huizinga entitled “*Man, Play and Games*,” called play “an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money.” Therein lies its utility, as a simulation that exists outside regular life. Caillois divides play into four categories: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo). Super Mario has all four. You are competing against the game, trying to predict the seemingly random flurry of impediments it sets in your way, and pretending to be a bouncy Italian plumber in a realm of mushrooms and bricks. As for vertigo, what Caillois has in mind is the

surrender of stability and the embrace of panic, such as you might experience while skiing. Mario's dizzying rate of passage through whatever world he's in—the onslaught of enemies and options—confers a kind of vertigo on the gaming experience. Like skiing, it requires a certain degree of mastery, a countervailing ability to contend with the panic and reassert a measure of stability. In short, the game requires participation, and so you can call it play.

Caillois also introduces the idea that games range along a continuum between two modes: ludus, “the taste for gratuitous difficulty,” and paidia, “the power of improvisation and joy.” A crossword puzzle is ludus. Kill the Carrier is paidia (unless you're the carrier). Super Mario and Zelda seem to be perched right between the two.

**M**onths after seeing Miyamoto in Los Angeles, I was invited to meet with him in Japan. This stage was tricky. The convolutions of the Japanese transit system—various private and public railways stacked atop one another, each with its own fare regimen—were like the early subterranean screens of a Super Mario game. Repetition improved performance; the efficient conversion of yen coins into ticket stubs and the confident stride to the proper track gave rise, like the successful navigation through Mario's sewers and the ingestion of Fire Flowers and Starmen, to a pleasurable sense of competence and grace.

Miyamoto recognizes that there is pleasure in difficulty but also in ease, in mastery, in performing a familiar act with aplomb, whether that be catching a baseball, dancing a tango, doing Sudoku, or steering Mario through the Mushroom Kingdom, jumping on Goombas and Koopa Troopas. His games strike this magical balance between the excitement that comes from facing new problems and the swagger from facing down old ones. The consequent sensation of confidence is useful, in dealing with a game's more challenging stages, but also a worthy aim in itself. “A lot of the so-called ‘action games’ are not made that way,” Miyamoto told me. “All the time, players are forced to do their utmost. If they are challenged to the limit, is it really fun for them?” In his own games, Miyamoto said, “You are constantly providing the players with a new challenge, but at the same time providing them with some stages or some occasions where they can simply, repeatedly, do something again and again. And that itself can be a joy.”

Our conversation took place at Nintendo's headquarters, in an industrial neighborhood south of Kyoto's central train station. Across the street was an electrical switching station and, beyond that, an elevated segment of superhighway, still under construction, ending abruptly in the air. The Nintendo building is a giant white cube, seven stories tall, surrounded by a plaza of white cobblestone and beyond that a white brick wall. From the upper floors, a programmer could see, in the distance, the pagoda roof of the main hall of Tofuku-ji, an eight-hundred-year-old Zen temple, rising over the trees at the edge of town. The Nintendo building is just ten years old, but, for video-game fans, who sometimes wait outside the gates for a glimpse of Miyamoto, it is already something like the Kaaba, in Mecca. He generally does not consent to autograph requests, for fear of being inundated. He is more often recognized, or at least approached, by foreign tourists than by Japanese, occasionally while he is out walking his dog. His first thought is that the tourists are

looking for directions. To preserve his anonymity, he makes it a point not to appear on Japanese TV programs.

The front lobby was vast and unadorned. A young assistant led me down the hall and into a conference room and instructed me to sit facing the door: traditionally a seat of honor for a guest. Someone had arranged some Super Mario plush toys on a windowsill. I had repeatedly asked for, and been denied, a tour of the offices or any opportunity to see Miyamoto outside this room. When I asked the assistant who'd shown me to the conference room where Miyamoto was, he replied, "Mr. Miyamoto is the person who is very difficult to find. In Nintendo, everyone wants to find him." Five of the building's seven floors are occupied by game developers, half of them artists and half of them engineers.

Miyamoto appeared a moment later, accompanied by Yasuhiro Minagawa, a Nintendo spokesman who would act as Miyamoto's translator. Amid small talk about a recent heat wave in Japan, Minagawa, tall and tousled, said, "I use the term 'murderous.'" Miyamoto, dressed in a striped button-down shirt and black pants, regarded me with a wide smile. Up close, I could see that he had freckles and a few gray hairs. His upper lip sticks out a bit, like that of a character in a Matt Groening comic strip. He was carrying a beat-up and bulging old leather diary with a painted, hand-tooled relief of a horse on its cover. A friend had made it for him. It was where he jotted down thoughts and ideas. He said he was very busy: there was a deadline looming for the release of a new handheld device with a 3-D display that requires no 3-D glasses. Also, it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of Super Mario, and he was judging a competition in which thousands of players had used a Nintendo program to make and submit their own Mario animations. Miyamoto himself was to narrow these down to fifty finalists.

As Minagawa translated each of my questions, Miyamoto often buried his face in his hands or rubbed his eyes and frowned, as though Minagawa had misheard me and, instead of asking Miyamoto to parse the differences between entertainment and play, was telling him he'd gone broke. But it became clear, once he began talking, animatedly, with extravagant hand gestures and giggles of delight, that the apparent anguish was merely an expression of deep thought, a counterpoint to his ebullience in answering. Miyamoto spoke in paragraphs, with Minagawa taking notes on sheets of paper, which he tossed aside as we went. (Minagawa's translations were necessarily hasty. In places, I have cleaned up his English.)

I mentioned the quote in David Sheff's book about the very serious men who devised the company's early games, and asked Miyamoto what he and these serious men understood.

"It's about enjoying something," he said. "I used to draw cartoons. I'd just show them to some of my friends, expecting that they were going to appreciate them, that they were going to enjoy reading them. And I haven't changed a bit about that. When I'm making video games today, I want people to be entertained. I am always thinking, How are people going to enjoy playing the games we are making today? And as long as I can enjoy something other people can enjoy it, too.

"Nowadays, my main focus is on trying to find some new, unprecedented experiences that people can get deeply into, deeply absorbed in. But some of my job involves something completely

different—when there is a game that is not yet interesting, I have to think about how I can change it or adjust it so that people can be entertained.” In fixing games, he relies on his taste and intuition. And then he asks family and friends to play them. Nintendo doesn’t use focus groups. “I always remind myself, when it comes to a game I’m developing, that I am the perfect, skillful player. I can manipulate all this controller stuff. So sometimes I ask the younger game creators to try playing the games they are making by switching their left and right hands. In that way, they can understand how inexperienced the first-timer is.

“What we demand in development is sharing the common feeling.” Minagawa interjected that Miyamoto had used the term *kyokan*: “*Kyo* is the sharing and *kan* is the emotional feeling.”

“Suppose someone is talking about his children,” Miyamoto continued. “If I am a father, I can understand personally what he’s talking about. We have *kyokan*.” The term *kyokan* was used by the primatologist Masao Kawai to describe his empathic approach to studying monkeys; Kawai would befriend them and insinuate himself into their lives, so that he could better observe their behavior. Miyamoto said he wants the game players and the developers to have *kyokan*: for the players to feel about the game what the developers felt themselves. The developers are the primatologists, the players the monkeys.

One method for achieving understanding is the doling out of information, about what to do when, in just the right doses. “We always use the term ‘difficulty’ when we talk about gameplay,” he said. “If a game is too difficult, people may not want to play it again. With the appropriate level of difficulty, people may feel like challenging it again and again. As they repeat it, the amount of information they can acquire naturally increases. . . . I always try to be conscious about that kind of gradual improvement.

“Sometimes the test players complain that there are too many enemies in one stage. And when I approach the designer of that scene with that kind of complaint sometimes he or she says, ‘Oh, maybe they couldn’t find the stars at the beginning. As soon as they find out that the star makes you invincible, it’s more joy.’ And the developer insists that hiding the star in the beginning is going to be great. But if game players don’t understand this, and they can’t find the star, then the game doesn’t make sense at all.”

He compared the craft of luring players forward in a game to writing a good detective novel. “To what extent are you going to hide the secrets?” he said. “In order for a mystery or a joke to work, we have to provide the necessary amount of information. Not too much, not too little, but the perfect balance, so that in the end people can feel, How come I didn’t realize that? The difficulty with video games, unlike movies or novels, where the authors themselves can lead the audience to the end, is that in games it’s the players who have to find their own road to the end.”

Earlier, Miyamoto, a bluegrass fanatic, had suggested that learning to play a game is like learning to play a musical instrument. “Take the guitar,” he said. “Some people, when they stumble over how to accurately place their fingers in an F chord, they actually give it up. But once you learn how to play an F chord you become more deeply absorbed in playing the guitar.” The F chord, as he sees it, is a kind of bridge between indifference and pleasure. “If the bridge is too easy

to pass by, it's called 'entertainment.' If it's rather difficult, it can be called 'hobby.' ”

Miyamoto often listens to music on his way to work. (He used to walk or ride a bicycle, but now Nintendo makes him drive, for his safety and its peace of mind.) “If I find that a certain musical phrase is very nice, probably the first thing I am going to do in my office is I am going to pick up the guitar and try to imitate that phrase until I can get it right,” he said. He uses a program on a Nintendo DSi handheld device to slow down the phrases, to unpack and understand them.

This urge to improve is a key ingredient in the formula, if there is one, for what keeps people playing a game. Miyamoto has become an aficionado of absorption. He has observed, for example, that some of his friends at his swimming club—he swims to stay in shape—have become obsessed with their technique and its contribution to speed and faster times. He also has friends who collect various things, and he studies the seriousness with which they tend to their collections.

He also studies himself. Miyamoto is the closest thing there is to an autobiographical game creator. His experience with his family's pet Shetland sheepdog, and, more to the point, with other dog owners, gave him the idea for *Nintendogs*, a popular game in which you create a simulation of a pet and look after it on the DSi. And *Pikmin*, a game featuring tiny creatures that have stalks protruding from their heads and that live and travel in pods called Onions, arose out of his time puttering in the garden. When he turned forty, he decided to give up cigarettes and pachinko and get in shape. He took up swimming and jogging, and began weighing himself every day on a digital scale. He hung graphs of the data, down to the gram, on the bathroom wall. “Once the graphs I'd recorded started to pile up, I started to feel a strange fondness for them—regardless of whether I was gaining weight or losing weight,” he said a few years ago, in a Q. & A. with Nintendo's president, Satoru Iwata. All this became, for his wife and his daughter, a source of curiosity and amusement, and an idea occurred to him. “This could be a nice trigger for conversation,” he told me. “If I could make it into a game, it could probably help isolated fathers get more association with their daughters.” He brought the notion to the team of designers developing games for the Wii. They were skeptical, but eventually they came out with *Wii Fit*, a fitness game, which has since sold thirty-seven million copies worldwide. It suits his view, and the industry's, that introducing an element of play to a transaction or a task can get people to do things they might not normally do. In the commercial sphere, this is called “gamification,” or, more gratefully, “funware”: make something a game, in a supermarket or on a social network, and *Homo ludens* will play it. “It's a shame if we narrowly limit the definition of video games,” he said.

This tendency for his personal fixations to become platinum-selling video games has given rise to an obsession, among gamers, with whatever Miyamoto says he's up to. When I asked him, to that end, what he did for pleasure these days, he said, “I like changing the interiors of the house, or sometimes even the exterior of the house. Sometimes I'm called the Sunday carpenter. Even at midnight or at some early hour in the morning, I will change the location of the sofa in the living room. That's me. Something tells me that by changing it my life is going to be more enjoyable. At least it's going to give me some fresh feeling.” (Rearranging the furniture: this game came along years ago, and it was called *The Sims*.) In terms of non-video games, he prefers games of luck, in

which a weaker player has a chance of winning, such as *hanafuda*, to games of skill, like go and *shogi*. “I’m not as good at so-called ‘strategic games’ at all.”

The Japanese word for play is *asobi*. In “Homo Ludens,” in a chapter summarizing various languages’ expression of the “play-concept,” Johan Huizinga notes that *asobi* can mean “play in general, recreation, relaxation, amusement, passing the time or pastime, a trip or jaunt, dissipation, gambling, idling, lying idle, being unemployed.” The opposite of *asobi* might be *majime*, which can mean “seriousness, sobriety, gravity, honesty, solemnity, stateliness; also quietness, decency, ‘good form.’ It is related to the word which we render by ‘face’ in the well-known Chinese expression ‘to lose face.’ ”

“Anything that is impractical can be play,” Miyamoto said. “It’s doing something other than what is necessary to continue living as an animal.” As to its purpose, he said, “When it comes to other animals, they play to prepare themselves for hunting. If you ask me why human beings play, well, I just don’t know. It must be just for pleasure. We generate chemicals in our brain so that we can have some pleasure, and by now we’ve come to understand that pleasure makes you happier, and being happier makes you healthier.”

The games Nintendo has been making have become less isolating and more social. The Wii was designed, in some respects, to bring gaming out of the basement and into the living room—to make it more acceptable to parents, many of them retired gamers themselves, and to reach more eyeballs and thumbs. “I became more conscious about the environment in which people play the video games, especially after we had our first child,” Miyamoto said. (He has a son, twenty-five, who works at an advertising agency, and a daughter, twenty-three, who is studying zoology.) His children played video games, although on sunny days he made them go outside to play. “I don’t think I ever talked about doing homework first. But, if there was any rule, it was that inside our house the video games—hardware, software—they are my property, so that when the children want to play they have to borrow them from me. So, for example, when I said, ‘It’s time for you to stop. Otherwise you cannot play again at all’—I think it worked!”

He doesn’t have much time anymore to play other games. He noted, with what seemed to be some annoyance, that the long pregame movie sequences that come with most games—prologues that establish the narrative and the scene and that involve no gameplay at all—take what little time he has actually to play. (As it happens, Donkey Kong was among the first games to have a pregame sequence.) To find out what’s out there, he prefers to interview Nintendo’s developers and employees about their experiences playing games. When I asked him which game developers he admired, he named only one, Will Wright. “It’s becoming increasingly difficult to tell, from the looks and the play of the games, who has created the software,” he said.

Unlike most of the better-known game designers, Miyamoto doesn’t have a particular niche. His games have spanned many genres. He’s also been at the forefront of three major phases: the side-scrolling game; the free-roaming 3-D game, like Super Mario 64 and Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, to which Grand Theft Auto and its ilk owe their existence; and, with the Wii, the motion-capture game, now the prevailing paradigm. (Consider Kinect, the new Microsoft toy.) The

only big shift he missed, perhaps, is the push toward hyperrealistic graphics.

“I recognize that there are certain types of games for which the photorealistic graphics are suited,” he said. “But what I don’t like is that any and all games are supposed to be photorealistic.” He prefers to direct his team’s efforts and resources toward the quality of the gameplay—the choices and challenges inherent in the game, also known as the game mechanics. Mario, his most famous creation, owes his appearance to the technological limitations of the first Donkey Kong game. The primitive graphics—there were hardly enough pixels to approximate a human form—compelled Miyamoto to give Mario white gloves and red overalls (so that you could see his arms swing), a big bushy mustache and a red hat (to hide the fact that the engineers couldn’t yet do mouths or hair that moved), and a big head (to exaggerate his collisions). Form has always followed functionality. The problem now, if you want to call it one, is the degree of functionality.

What impressed him most about the early manga artists of his youth, aside from the fact that they created a genre “from nothing at all,” was how they later subverted it. “When they became much older, they started to destroy the style they themselves had created,” he said. For example, they began to ignore the cartoon-panel framework or combine multiple narratives or else use the manga form to explore macroeconomics or their own private thoughts. “When I started working for the company, I thought that someday I would like to do the same. I wanted to destroy the styles that we ourselves created. I don’t think we can do so completely, but I think that in the way that we are making video games today we might be getting closer to my idea of destroying the original style.” He went on, “Because we ourselves have created the original format or style of video games, we understand why we had to do it at the time. Because we understand that, we can also understand why some of them must be kept intact and why some of them we can destroy.”

**M**iyamoto fans have made pilgrimages to some of the larger limestone caves near Sonobe. These have electric lights and permanent stairways and are open to tourists. He told me that although he’d visited these caves, they weren’t the ones he’d talked about exploring as a boy. His were smaller, more hidden. A few years ago, he was in Sonobe and went to look for them. He found that houses and roads had replaced a lot of his old terrain, and that someone, presumably out of concern for safety, had blocked off the entrances to his caves.

Two days after my meeting with Miyamoto, I went to Sonobe to have a look around. I took a taxi. The driver, like Mario, wore white gloves. He spoke no English. It was a bright, mild autumn day; in the hills outside the city, the foliage was beginning to turn. We got off the highway in Sonobe, which seemed both rural and light-industrial in a way that reminded me of Nyack. The houses were small and close together, with handsome roofs of ceramic tile. We stopped alongside the Sonobe River, where Miyamoto, as a boy, had caught fish with his hands, and I descended the bank and stared at the riffles for a while until I realized, with a start, that there were six or seven giant carp in a pool right by my feet. Then we stopped at the Shinto shrine, at the foot of one of Miyamoto’s mountains; a quick reconnaissance of the bamboo forest that abutted it turned up nothing but garbage—an instant-ramen wrapper, a gym sock. Next up was Komugi Mountain, atop which, Miyamoto had told me, I would find the ruins of Sonobe Castle, the epicenter of his



childhood explorations. We parked near a collection of municipal buildings, including a new pagoda-style “international center” that had been modelled on the castle. We walked past a drained swimming pool and a little park decorated with statues of stone monkeys and lions to a paved lane that appeared to wind its way to the top of Komugi Mountain, which, it turned out, was hardly a mountain at all; it had an elevation of just a few hundred feet. It was thinly forested, with a sign every hundred yards or so describing the flora in Japanese. The driver and I stared helplessly at the signs; I was reminded of those moments in *Zelda* when you push a button on the Wii Remote and are provided with hints about what to do next. The button, in this case, was defective. Sunlight slanted through the trees; the hollows were full of ferns and mushrooms. Near the top, a path broke off and led to a flat open plot, where the castle should have been, but, save for an old stone wall, there were no ruins to be seen. A set of austere monoliths dominated the site. There was also a small nursery surrounded by a fence.

On a whim, I went down the backside of the hill. It was steeper here, and more thickly wooded, and the earth underfoot was gravelly and slick. I had to hold on to branches to keep from sliding. About twenty yards down, I came across a hole in the ground. Someone had slid some logs into it lengthwise, to narrow the entrance. Leaves had packed in around them, like mortar. Three logs had been lashed together and planted in the earth as a crude little fence. For a probe, I found a branch nearby, but it hit nothing. Holding my cell phone, I stuck my arm in, but the phone’s display illuminated only roots and dirt. The opening, if you’d cleared out the stuff blocking it, would have had room for the frame of a boy with a lantern.

I wandered around in the brush for a while longer but found no other open holes. Visible below, in the valley, was a running track, a soccer pitch, and a giant dirt lot, where you could hear the shouts and screams of children at play. I bushwhacked back to the cab, and we drove around to where the sounds had been coming from: a schoolyard. I stood at the edge of it for a spell and watched a bunch of boys, aged nine or so, play a frenzied and unruly game of kickball. On one side of the yard, a group of girls were playing something else. One at a time, they dashed in and out of the brush at the foot of Komugi Mountain. The object, it seemed, was to venture in deeper, or stay in longer, than the girl before. ♦

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