

the early years of the revolution, a “modern architecture with Chinese characteristics.” Indeed, this taste for tiled hats on official buildings remains widespread, one of the all-too-trivial reductions of the idea of the local against which many of the progenitors of those weird buildings will bridle. And right they are: it’s one thing to find the uncritical imports anathema and to encourage homegrown forms of the creative, but quite another to offer this sort of synthetic kitsch as a remedy.

In the case of both Charles and Xi, it’s difficult to discern the degree to which these struggles over symbolic form are meant to displace the relatively progressive ideas that each man periodically espouses. Most of Charles’s manifesto concerns motherhood issues (indeed, it’s virtually the same list he published twenty-six years ago in *A Vision of Britain*): no one denies the urgency of using our resources sustainably on a planet caroming down the road to environmental perdition. Xi, for his part, just signed on to a “breakthrough” emissions treaty with the United States and is clearly concerned with the foul state of his own nest. In my experience working on planning projects in China, everyone is talking the green talk (even if far fewer are walking the walk). The idea of a sustainable architecture with Chinese characteristics is a fine formulation, assuming those characteristics are authentically local (based on climate, topography, materiality, artistic invention and lively forms of social relations), not simply billboards for Han—or Communist Party—hegemony.

**T**HE SAME IS TRUE FOR CHARLES: HIS ADVOCACY for the land and air, his sweet conversations with shrubbery, and his activities on behalf of preserving craft traditions all speak, shall we say, of noble impulses, however undercut they may be by the welter of images that his hapless flacks have been circulating of HRH in £2,000 bespoke Savile Row weeds, strolling concernedly through the rainforest, chatting with chickens or planting a scrawny tree in Jamaica, with Camilla standing by in dazzling white, protected from the absence of ozone by a tiny parasol—a wannabe cult of personality that lacks an actual personality as its object.

Nor is any real harm being done by Charles’s advocacy for the charms of village architecture and organization, despite his failure to see this project not as the kind of self-initiated and informal growth begat by the original progenitors of these places, but instead as noblesse oblige. Charles convenes the focus groups, then hands the thing to Léon Krier to design.

But he truly wanders into the woods when he insists on more sacral truths. “Our age,” Charles writes in *A Vision of Britain*, “is the first to have despised the principles of mathematical harmony and proportion and to have embarked on a course which glorifies the triumph of science and man’s domination over nature. All this coincides with what can only be described as the denial of God’s place in the scheme of things and the substitution of man’s infallibility.”

Here Charles meets Xi and his apparent anxiety over

the abandonment of “scientific” socialism for baser appetites. Whether Xi’s own compendium of artistic harmonies invokes feng shui (no Chinese developer puts up a McMansion without a consultation), the Little Red Book or some fresh construct of cultural nationalism (KFC with Chinese characteristics), both of these would-be taste-makers succumb to the same instrumental fallacy: the confusion of cause and effect. Their hope is that things will simply be as they appear.

The two also share, it would seem, an anxiety endemic to the unelected about insubordination, in which uniformity becomes the sign of acquiescence. But architecture, notwithstanding its duty to serve, must always retain the liberatory possibility of going weird. Both Xi and Charles want to shut down disagreement. What are they afraid of?

150th

## Game Not Over

*Despite the Gamergate backlash, a new generation of activists is working to end the racial, sexual and gender stereotypes promoted by the video-game industry.*

HELEN LEWIS

**I**N THE BRITISH MUSEUM IN LONDON, AMID THE MUMMIES AND DISPUTED marbles, there is a delicate wooden board around a foot long, inlaid with limestone and lapis lazuli. Its design gives a hint to its purpose: twenty squares, covered in flowers and dots. One of the oldest surviving games in the world, the Royal Game of Ur seems to have been played a lot like modern-day checkers, with competitors racing across the board. It comes from southern Iraq and dates to around 2,600 BCE.

We know humans have played games for even longer than this: as the Dutch theorist Johan Huizinga put it in 1938, “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.” He suggested that our species, *Homo sapiens* (the wise man), could be described with equal accuracy as *Homo ludens* (the playing man).

Huizinga’s work also helps us to understand why play is far from a frivolous enterprise: because it is voluntary, and not necessary to survival, how we have fun says more about our species than how we work. “Play is superfluous...it is free, is in fact freedom,” he writes. “Play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life.” In the 1860s, just before this magazine was founded, soldiers distracted themselves from the horrors of the Civil War with pastimes such as louse-racing or ten-pin bowling using cannon balls. The Civil War Trust records that “by the last years of battle, decks of cards were hard to come by in the Southern ranks,” with Confederate soldiers reduced to taking them from Union prisoners and the bodies of the fallen. It’s not hard to imagine the effect this had on morale.

Nonetheless, Anglo-American culture has long grappled with the idea that fun can be wholesome and, in fact, necessary to happiness rather than a debauched, degenerate luxury. Perhaps that’s a hangover from the Puritans—in the seventeenth century, they were so hard on the idea of relaxation come Sunday that King James I was moved to issue a “Declaration of Sports,” which specifically permitted “leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation” on the Sabbath.

But taking games seriously, it turns out, is vital, both socially and politically: neuroscientists now acknowledge the role of imaginative play

in the neural development of children. Women, too, often miss out on leisure time. As Rebecca Abrams's 1997 feminist treatise *The Playful Self* asks: "A man has a God-given right to play football on a Sunday morning; a child cannot survive without two hours' frenetic activity in the park. What does the woman in their life do? Make the lunch." In 2014, Brigid Schulte's book on work/life balance, *Overwhelmed*, observed that throughout history, "women's time has been subjected to unpredictable interruptions, while men's ability to experience blocks of unbroken time has been protected. The 'good' secretary and the 'good' wife were the ones guarding it."

Strange as it may sound, these theoretical explorations of the concept of play provide the hidden background to 2014's biggest story in the video-game world: Gamergate.

This months-long social-media fiesta of harassment (of women in games) and hand-wringing (over the future direction of the medium) had its roots in one fundamental fact: men used to dominate gaming, back when gaming meant big console titles that demanded hours of continuous attention. But gaming has changed. Over the last decade, there has been an explosion in "casual" games—smartphone puzzles, say, or iPad time-wasters. Meanwhile, the big console manufacturers have decided that they are close to maxing out the hard-core demographic. The next step is to capture the family market; in the words of Microsoft staffers, "to own the living room." That means offering sports games, motion-sensitive exercise routines, and more creative titles like the blockbuster *Minecraft*, which appeals to everyone ages 3 to 93.

Casual games are popular with women too, perhaps precisely because they do not demand great blocks of unbroken time. They can be played while commuting, or watching the stove, or in those exhausted hours once the kids have gone to bed. Their popularity means that the gender split among video-game players is now close to even: the 2014 report by the Entertainment Software Association, the industry's trade body, says that "women over the age of 18 represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (36 percent) than boys age 18 or younger (17 percent)."

In practice, this shifting market means fewer nerd-rage simulators and macho power fantasies, and more titles with interesting roles for women and minorities—and more stories in which the primary method of interacting with others is not shooting them or running them over. Behind Gamergate's apparent concern with "ethics in games journalism" was the fear that activists, gamers and critics were demanding an end to lazy stereotypes about race, gender and sexuality—as if having fewer games where you mow down faceless natives or bludgeon

strippers to death meant banning fun itself.

Gamergate was right about one thing, though: many of the industry's leading figures are trying to expand the medium's appeal. In 2013, there was a spate of "dad games" like *BioShock Infinite*, *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, where instead of rescuing a princess from a castle or impressing a hot chick with your sniping abilities, the gamer was cast as a middle-aged man trying to protect a young girl. (Many writers speculated this was the result of game developers hitting middle age themselves—if so, look out for a spate of walker and cane simulators in about thirty years.)

The same year, *Tomb Raider* was rebooted—and Lara Croft got to wear trousers instead of hot pants. We now have war games that hate war (*Spec Ops: The Line*, *This War of Mine*), and games about mental health (*Depression Quest*), immigration (*Papers, Please*) and terminal illness (*That Dragon, Cancer*). One of my favorite games of 2014 was *80 Days*, a retelling of Phileas Fogg's journey around the world, which sought to shift the focus from Great White Men Making History to the ordinary people they meet along the way. It was written by Meg Jayanth, a woman of Indian descent living in London, who was unimpressed by the passive, objectified character of the Indian princess Aouda in Jules Verne's original novel. She has said that her first question was: "How can I write a game which is, ostensibly, about two Victorian white guys racing around the world for a bet, that nonetheless has space for Aouda as something other than a prize for the protagonist?" (If you have \$4.99 and a smartphone, you can find out how well she did.)

Inevitably, as the games become more mature, game journalism has to grow up, too. One of Gamergate's demands was that reviews become more "objective," meaning that games should be assessed on their technical specifications rather than criticized, as books or films are, for their ideological assumptions and messages. ("*Ulysses*: great font, very readable; all pages printed in correct order. A solid 7/10.") An "objective" reviewer could then praise a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* for telling an interesting story—but never discuss that story's content.

Games deserve better than that. They are both an \$80-billion-per-year industry and an evolving, exciting artistic medium. They connect us to one another—despite the popular stereotype of a gamer "alone in his basement," many of today's blockbusters, such as *Destiny* and *Hearthstone*, are designed to be played with friends—and they also connect us to the long and winding thread of human history. If you Google "Royal Game of Ur" today, you can play the same game that entertained ancient Mesopotamians in the golden days of the Akkadian Empire. The only difference is that you'll win now with a click of the mouse, not a throw of the dice. **150th**



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TESTIMONIALS

**MIKHAIL GORBACHEV**

**I** am happy to convey my greetings to *The Nation* and its contributors and readers. It is very important that a magazine that stands for left-wing, progressive ideas has an audience in America. Today, such ideas are of particular relevance as a counterweight to concepts that, though they have different names in different countries, endorse and promote inequality and put vested interests above the interests of the people. My life, which spanned a large part of the twentieth century and continues into the new one, has made me a supporter of social democracy. I see social-democratic ideas as humankind's best hope for avoiding social and environmental catastrophes and building a safer, more just and more stable world order. I am confident that *The Nation* will continue its thought-provoking work, bringing together concerned individuals disturbed by the current state of the world and ready to act in order to change it for the better.

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