Level Up

What can video games teach us about reality?

For his *Tree* series, photographer Myoung Ho Lee erected white canvas backdrops behind solitary trees.

The path ahead is dark. A tree canopy seals off the sky, each leaf rendered so vividly it almost looks real. Gravel crunches underfoot. Your pursuers cannot be far behind. In front, the path splits in two. To the left, a starlit lake gleams in the distance, a single rowboat bobbing invitingly by the shore. On your right is a dead end, a wall rising abruptly from the undergrowth. Which way do you go?

Any seasoned video gamer would turn right. If one path is obviously designed to take you onward in the game's narrative, you take the other: It's where the treasure is hidden. No matter how counterintuitive it feels, you learn to go the wrong way first. Since most games are designed with linear narratives—a single route leading to a single ending—the wrong path is actually just the scenic route. So take a detour and investigate the forest. You'll still end up at the lake. We all get to the end, one way or another.

Games are like life—and unlike books or films—in that *you* are the protagonist, responsible for your own decisions. The difference, of course, is that those decisions have no real consequences, and so can be made with glorious abandon. Even if you reach that fork in the road with enemies hot on your heels, you can still go the wrong way. If they catch up and casually separate your head from your shoulders, you'll just resurrect intact at a checkpoint a few minutes down the road. Try again. Real life is not quite so forgiving. Each of the million decisions made in a day nudges you into a different future. The accumulated weight of so many choices can become paralyzing, particularly in a society that demands we pursue total life optimization, dispatching every minute with brutal efficiency.

Perhaps there is something to be learned from the pathfinding of the gaming world. Games have always been ground zero for exploration, a space where play is taken seriously and experimentation is rigorously encouraged. They teach us that taking time for discovery yields unexpected rewards—moments of grace that you might miss if you're always hurtling faster toward goalposts that, on closer inspection, only ever move further away.

Granted, the spirit of risk-taking is not appropriate in every life situation. Some decisions require careful consideration and firm resolve. There is no button to reload and start again. So other digital landscapes may be more instructive here. Perhaps the alien planets beckoning interstellar explorers, which teach us that looking beyond our horizons can bring us closer to a human truth. Or the intricate games which lead players through vast desert environments using only the faintest cues. There we are encouraged to observe every detail of a situation before choosing a path of action, since it is the angle of the cresting dune or the shadow thrown by the lone eagle that subtly guides us home. The ceaseless surge of life is represented most simply in old-fashioned side-scrolling arcade games. In these, following the logic of reading, you can only move from left to right. Mario can jump into the clouds or dive to the depths of the sea, but he cannot turn around. He understands, as we do, that there is only ever one direction: forward.

Words by Tom Faber

GAME PLAN

by Tom Faber

Video games can teach us about real-world problems. In 2005, a glitchy update to the online fantasy game *World of Warcraft* caused "corrupted blood"—a contagious disease—to escape Hakkar the Soulflayer's dungeon home and spread across the virtual world. Low-level players in main cities were wiped out in minutes. Bustling marketplaces turned to ghost towns, carpeted with skeletons. Those who would normally cooperate quarantined themselves in remote locations. The incident attracted the interest of real-world epidemiologists, who used it as a case study of how humans respond to contagion. They discovered bravery in the healers and the unanticipated ghoulish curiosity of hundreds who approached the infected for a closer look.