“Giving Back”

An Interview with Video Game Designer Ken Wong, by Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella

Abstract

In this interview, conducted by issue editors Frank Bosman and Alexander D. Ornella in August 2022, Ken Wong discusses the relationship between video game design, video game aesthetics, religious imagery, and cultural storytelling. He discusses how (secularized) religious tropes, ideas, and images can become part of the game design and the story of the game, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. He discusses how the ideas of “giving back”, atonement, and forgiveness can become elements of successful video games.

Keywords

Video Games, Atonement, Original Sin, Sacred Architecture, Religion

Biography

Ken Wong is an artist, designer, and game developer from Adelaide, Australia. He was lead designer of the iconic mobile game Monument Valley (2014) for ustwo games. For his own studio, Mountains, he was the designer and artist of Florence (2018). Both works were awarded BAFTA Game Awards and Apple Design Awards. Both games have been exhibited in museums around the world, including the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, MoMA, and Seoul Museum.

Frank Bosman & Alexander D. Ornella: Aesthetics, gameplay, story, and religion. How do these fit together in the competitive and booming video game industry? What role do aesthetics design choices play that might help lift the player out of and beyond the everyday? Ken Wong is the lead designer behind the 2014 game Monument Valley (ustwo games), which critics praised for its aesthetics. Thank you, Ken, for joining us! Who is Ken Wong?

Ken Wong: I’ve been developing games for about 20 years now. I began as a concept artist and then became an art director. I’m probably best known for my work for ustwo games as lead designer on a game called Monument Valley, which came out in 2014. Later on I founded my own studio called Mountains Studio, where I was the lead designer of a game

DOI: 10.25364/05.9:2023.1.2

called FLORENCE, which was also very well received. Now I'm a bit of a free agent, trying to figure out what my next thing is. When I was younger and started my career, I was very much into video games. The older I get, the less time I spend playing games, but I find myself becoming a curious observer. I feel like I learn so much about games from listening to the experiences of others.

Bosman: Now you describe yourself as a free agent, as someone who is free to find out what your next move will be. Do you want to keep producing indie games or do you want to join a major studio?

Wong: I'm not sure yet. I've been fortunate to have had a really wide variety of experiences and that I have my own studio. But at the moment, I'm not sure if I want to make another game of my own design at my own studio or whether I want a more collaborative project. You've caught me at a bit of a transitional period in my life.

Bosman: As a scholar of religion and video games, I'm curious what your religious upbringing has been, or religious context, or your religious identification? Maybe you don't have one, or maybe you don't want to share. That is perfectly fine, but I'm just always a bit curious to know where you are coming from.

Wong: I grew up Roman Catholic. My parents are from Malaysia. My father is from a Catholic background, but my mother was Buddhist and then converted later. I participated in church and went to Sunday School and was baptized and confirmed. But when I was a teenager, I decided that church wasn't for me, and I sort of stepped back. I'd say that I'm a spiritual person, but ultimately I'd probably identify as an atheist.

Bosman: So, you would identify as both spiritual and as an atheist?

Wong: I guess they are all labels, but yes. I feel like we are spiritual beings. Science and rational thinking can help us understand the world around us, but not necessarily provide answers to philosophical questions, for everyone. I think the best approach is to let people believe what they want to believe as long as they are not harming others.

Ornella: You said you grew up Catholic; so, you grew up immersed in a rich cultural, material, and visual tradition that comes with Catholicism. To what extent, do you think, has that exposure or immersion influenced your way of thinking about aesthetics, visual design, narratives, labels, or gaming? I'm asking because when playing MONUMENT VALLEY, the player comes across a number of fairly obvious religious references.

Wong: I think that a lot of it was on a subconscious basis. It might be interesting for you to know that I'm not much of a storyteller and I don't

play a lot of narrative games. I'm often asked regarding Monument Valley: Did the story, aesthetics, or gameplay come first? And it was very much in the order of gameplay and aesthetics and then much later the story. The story has an important role in the final work, but it was not the origin. I think I came to it instinctively rather than intellectually, and it makes sense that I was drawing on my upbringing, whether consciously or subconsciously.

The story is subtly and sometimes explicitly about forgiveness. The game's protagonist, Ida, is guilty of something, she's done something wrong and she's seeking forgiveness. What she has to ask forgiveness for is not explicitly answered. But we as developers, I think, our belief was that she'd actually stolen artifacts from these monuments, and the reason that you're playing Monument Valley is to put these artifacts back. The other influence behind the idea of forgiveness was that I grew up in Australia and a big part of being Australian is recognizing that these lands were stolen from the Aboriginal people. And Australia was an extension of the British Empire, and the British Empire stole many artifacts from around the world.

Video games frequently revolve around killing, defeating, taking. And I thought, if not from an ethical point of view but from a creative point of view: what if we invert that, couldn't that be interesting if you are actually trying to put back, and to give away?

I think that's part of growing up as an Australian: that you acknowledge that land was stolen from the original custodians of the land, and that there are wounds to heal, injustices to correct, and reparations to be made.

I think there's also an aspect of Christian theology, the concept of original sin or that we are all sinners and that we all need to atone. So that's where the idea of putting things back in the game came up. This idea came quite early on and informed the rest of the piece: this a journey not of conquering or of winning, but perhaps of trying to set things right in the world and to redeem oneself.

Bosman: You talked about the themes of atonement and asking for forgiveness, asking for gifts, you talked about something that may not be forgivable. As a game theologian, I find it fascinating that you brought up the term "original sin". I think it's fascinating that philosophical or existential or theological themes are discussed within a developer team and find their way into the game.

Ornella: **I want to go back to the game and your growing up in Australia. Who is "Ida", the game's protagonist?**

Wong: At the end of the game, we see Ida ascend as a bird with a crown. That's not the first time we've see Ida this way! A bit earlier in the game, in the chapter "The Descent", we see that the mirror reveals her true form, as the Crow Queen or Crow Princess. The idea is that she is the Queen or the Princess of these bird people and that by stealing the artifacts – we just call them artifacts, we don't know what they are – she doomed her people. She cursed the crow people to forget how to fly; that's why we see them sitting around in the game, sort of a bit annoying and mindless. I feel it's sort of an archetype, perhaps a leader or a king who shows hubris and ends up dooming their people? We thought it was interesting that it was up to her to try and right this wrong.

Ornella: **Looking at the aesthetics of the descent, the ascent, the transformation of Ida and her people: are Ida and her people dying and rising from the dead? There are rays of light beaming the crow people away, rapturing, I'm tempted to say. Can we use the word "resurrection", redemption, death, dying, and rising again, here?**

Wong: Yes, certainly. I mean, I don't think it was a prosaic process of here's the story that we want to tell and here's what this symbolizes. In a way we were sort of borrowing symbols from theology and utilizing them to resonate with the audience. Almost in the way that the Arthurian legends are constructed, or *Lord of the Rings*. We were borrowing from religious Christian imagery without necessarily telling the story of Christ or telling specific Biblical stories. And yes, there's this element of rapture, of ascent, of descent or redemption; these interpretations or themes you mentioned are all valid. I think we avoided the need to create a watertight narrative by just sort of scattering these symbols and saying: it's up to the player to put it together and take away what interpretation they will come to.

Bosman: **You just said developers often take all different kinds of stories that are already there without necessarily retelling them individually or exactly. Would that point to what in my own research I like to call the cultural persistence of Christian narratives, thoughts, ideas, and imagery?**

Wong: You're making an interesting point here. I didn't sit down and write down: here is what I believe, how I was brought up, and how I was raised. I didn't even think about Christianity until after the game was completed. And then I looked back and I realized that there's a lot of symbolism there and that has probably to do with how I was raised as

well as how the other seven members of the team were also raised. We all collectively formed the game together. In a way it was how you described it, it certainly was not a conscious process.

Ornella: Talking about this – unconscious – writing of religiously informed ideas into the game: obviously the game was a huge success and it got fantastic reviews. People enjoyed playing the game. Do you think that these religious undercurrents present in the game contributed to its success? And if so, why do you think these religious undercurrents resonated with the audience?

Wong: The game succeeded in several different ways. The thematic aspect may actually not have been the deciding factor. For some people, it was just a neat puzzle game, and the art and narrative were not a big draw. For other people, it was an audio-visual experience and that was their big take-away, and they might not have connected with the game on a thematic level at all. Then there were people that appreciated the shortness of the game and that they could finish it in roughly 90 minutes.

The game came out at a particular time, and in a way was a counter-offer to what was trending at the time, and it found an audience. And for people who didn't connect with the game on a thematic level but on a audio-visual level or because they liked the puzzles, I think the game provided them with something that perhaps other video games didn't provide them with.

Many video games are a form of power fantasy. They create scenarios like: hey, what if you had amazing powers? Every time you died, every time you were shot in the head, you could be resurrected and try again; even if you fail, you'll level up and eventually you'll succeed; and there's a certain satisfaction you get from that. Monument Valley presented a different sort of satisfaction, where you were not just given all the powers. I think that this was perhaps refreshing for a lot of people, and I think Monument Valley was part of a movement that tried to explore different themes within video games.

The earliest videogames were good at representing numbers and binary states like "alive" or "dead". It makes sense to simulate sports, combat, accumulating wealth. I don't have anything against games built around these mechanics, many of my favorite games are among them. As technology and game design have evolved, we've gotten better at simulating things that are not so quantifiable – narratives, emotions, relationships. I see Monument Valley as part of the movement to explore these alternative themes.

Ornella: Talking about power fantasies: Robert M. Geraci, in his book *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (2014), argued that some people find meaning in games because they can be a hero in the game or they form communities around their gameplay that they experience as *meaningful* communities. Some of these players might have mundane and repetitive jobs in their everyday lives but feel they are valued and taken seriously by these communities they form around gameplay. In a Games Developers Conference talk you gave in 2015,[1] you argued that people might find it comforting when playing MONUMENT VALLEY to see the whole world in one place; that everything that the player needs to solve is right in front of them. That idea of being in control in MONUMENT VALLEY sounds somewhat similar to WORLD OF WARCRAFT players reporting a sense of control and the experience of being a hero. Could you maybe expand on the idea of control and comfort in the context of video games?

Wong: Fantasy comes in many forms. I suppose I should try to break down what I meant by a power fantasy. I think your example of WORLD OF WARCRAFT is very good: in that game, you're the hero and can only level up. Even if you're terrible in the game, if you keep at it, eventually you'll keep ascending in power: you'll do more damage, gain more skills, get access to more areas. There's no aging, there's no true loss, you're forever going upwards. Miraculously, they make millions of players feel like the hero.

But fantasy can come in many forms, as you noted. One fantasy is having control over all of your problems. Very early on, we thought about adding panning to MONUMENT VALLEY, so that we could create larger puzzles, but we quickly realized that it's nice to have all the clues you need to solve a problem in front of you, contained in a single screen. There's also something nice about these small, contained worlds that often feel somehow easier to digest.

Another interesting example are gardening games. You take the activity of gardening from real life but simplify and streamline everything. Often you don't need to worry about overwatering, or the seasons, or the amount of light, or pests. Gardening games realize the fantasy of easily raising a garden, perhaps one that couldn't exist in the real world.

1 Wong, Ken: The Art of Monument Valley, Presentation at the Games Developer Conference 2015, San Francisco, March 2015, https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022299/The-Art-of-Monument, also available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0X8-5PpYVg, minute 13.

So, I think games can serve many different fantasies. I think a big part of Monument Valley's success can be attributed to the game fulfilling a different kind of fantasy to what was popular at the time, especially on a mobile device.

Bosman: You just talked about how developers might consciously or subconsciously infuse their games with religious ideas. But let's talk about what happens with the audience. For example, when I was playing Monument Valley and Princess Ida came along, I immediately had to think about Mount Ida, probably because I was raised in an environment where the Greek and Latin classics were very important. In Greek mythology, there's Mount Ida on Crete, the mountain of the goddess, and I thought: Monument Valley, goddess, mount, Ida, princess, and it all made perfect sense to me. You said that players may or may not take in what you as developer consciously or subconsciously write into the game. But at the same time, individual players can find meaning in your game that you did not put in there, neither consciously nor subconsciously. That raises the question: where does meaning in the video game come from? Or: where is meaning in a video game situated?

Wong: I think that it's up to the viewer. They bring their own experiences to the game and what they thus see in art is a valid interpretation. We can try and provoke those memories and experiences. There's also a cultural memory we can touch on by naming things, or the color schemes we used, some of that is going to resonate with people. For people of different backgrounds, it will resonate in different ways. By creating a diverse range of environments, for example a tomb or a monument on top of a mountain, I think we are basically pulling at threads, we are pushing certain buttons. Whether playing the game makes people cry or laugh or relieves them from boredom, I don't really mind. If our work gives them something to think about, or leaves them with an emotion afterwards, I think we've done our job. I try to downplay meaning as something the author would inscribe. Rather, I like to think that art can be more powerful when it's a dialogue between the prompts that the author leaves and how the viewer responds to it.

Bosman: In the last 15 years, there has been an ongoing discussion about the status of video games as a piece of art. In your opinion, are video games art?

Wong: I used to answer yes, games are art, or at least they can be art. That's how we think about moving images: we usually recognize film as a form of art. What about television? What about advertisements, YouTube videos, and pornography? It's arguable whether all moving images are

art, but they have the possibility of being art. I see games the same way. Certain video games function as art, and we have video game critics and essays on video games and some games are also shown in museums.

However, at the present moment my answer to your question whether video games are art is that it doesn't really matter. If society argues about the definition of art, it seems futile to me to try to answer whether video games meet the definition, or why that's important to answer. It really doesn't make much of a difference to most people. Let's forget about these labels and let's look at how video games operate within culture. Games are a popular pastime. They make us cry. We connect over them. Games can really change people's lives. Games operate on a cultural level. We make games that cover a wide variety of topics: death, cancer, love, family, politics, philosophy. I think it would be very hard to make a sincere and serious argument that games cannot be art. But again: I don't really care because I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing, and the video games industry is going to keep doing what it's doing. Regardless of whether games are art or not, they will continue to make loads of money; to enrich our lives; and to be part of our cultural discourse.

Ornella: MONUMENT VALLEY was released in 2014 and you said the game had to be made at that particular point in time. But it also was a time – Obama was still president of the United States – where the world might have felt a bit more under control. What role or purpose or function would you say a game like MONUMENT VALLEY could have today, at a time that feels much more chaotic and out of control?

Wong: I feel like I don't have my finger on the pulse of the games industry as a whole as much now, compared to 2014. So, I'm not sure if I'm equipped to answer this question well. Many have observed that video games were very important to people during COVID-19 lockdowns – either as soothing escape or as a way to stay connected with friends and family.

It's interesting how video games have always allowed us to escape from reality, while also often helping us understand our reality.

Bosman: I would like to ask you about ludonarrative dissonance, the conflict between the narrative of the story and the narrative of the gameplay. Could you reflect on this based on your game experiences?

Wong: I think that was on our minds as we were creating the game. Many games seem on the surface to be violent or antisocial, but I think players are actually engaging with them more like sports. Violence might be part of the attraction, but I think for many it's much more about a sense of

competitiveness, or accomplishment, or cooperation. The fact that you are killing someone is almost removed from real world killing because obviously they resurrect again in the next round, it becomes more like paintball. I think this is something that non-gamers often don't understand. Games can have narrative dissonance but still be really successful.

That said, Monument Valley and Florence attempt to minimize that dissonance. I tried to design gameplay that reflected the narrative and the themes.

Bosman: Could you give some advice for people who are trying making video games. Should they start with the story, with the narrative, and then try to find the appropriate gameplay for it, or should they start with the gameplay and then create the story around it?

Wong: I think that all approaches are valid. I'm inclined to say: be conscious of what you are doing. However, sometimes creating instinctively or naively can also turn out to be an advantage.

Monument Valley is the product of the very specific chemistry of the environment, the team members, the particular time, and the audience. We were very lucky that everything managed to come together. Going forward, we can't replicate those specific circumstances, so sometimes it's hard to extract words of wisdom to pass on to others. I think the best chance you can have is to understand your most valuable resource: your team. What their strengths are, and how to channel them, how to get them to harmonize.

Ornella: Is there something that we can learn about society, about culture, about religion by looking at the games that people play at any particular point in time?

Wong: That's a good question but I've not given it much thought, so I don't want to speculate, and I'm not active enough as gamer. But what I can say is that games operate as a kind of subculture and that subculture has various movements within it.

Bosman: In Monument Valley, you can see traces of the work of Escher. Can we talk about the idea of sacred geometry here?

Wong: What happened here was that I'd been thinking about how to make a game about architecture. At that time, I looked at an image by Escher called *Ascending and Descending*, with its infinite stairs. What struck me was the building in the middle of it: it's not quite isometric and when you're looking at it, it's kind of from a bird's eye view. There's nothing beyond the building, it's just a void space and there are charac-

ters outside the building and on the steps. It does look like you could go into the building and eventually end up on those steps, and I thought to myself: would it not be interesting to be that character and your goal is to get to the top of this building? But in order to get there, you have to open up the building and figure out the path. So that was the inception, the spark of the idea that led to Monument Valley: it's about navigating to the top of a building.

When we sat down to actually create the architecture, I tried to draw my own building. I did that from an isometric viewpoint, and the thing about drawing things in isometric is that perspective flattens out and it's possible to create impossible connections. I realized this as I was drawing it, and I made a mental note: I have to make sure that I don't create impossible connections. But then I showed this to a programmer and I said: could we actually create impossible connections? And the programmer said yes, absolutely. And that led us to embracing impossibility and experimenting with optical illusions. We tried to make things look one way, but then used the power of video games, the skills of our programmers, and some maths behind the scenes to accomplish things that are basically illusions.

When it comes to the term sacred geometry, I think that most people, especially mathematicians, feel that there's something beautiful about numbers. But in Monument Valley, you don't see raw numbers, everything is expressed in terms of units and space and lines and volume. In other words: you don't see raw numbers but everything lines up perfectly; when things move in Monument Valley, they line up perfectly. You can have something that moves from A to B and it joins in a way so that there's no seam. Often, that's part of the illusion. And when something lines up perfectly, our brains find it just satisfying. It makes it feel like this is the world as it should be; or that there's something spiritual or godly about how things are lined up in such a harmonious way. I'm afraid I don't have better words to express this, but I think sacred geometry was a term that we just tossed in there to express something that we were feeling but perhaps had not necessarily researched. It was more of an impressionistic process of "this feels right", rather than "this is our thesis".

Bosman: What you are saying sounds a bit like numbers having to do with harmonizing things and when things are harmonized, or in harmony, people tend to be glad about that. Many people seem to like things that are – or at least seem to be – in harmony or in synchronization with one another.

In the beginning of this interview you brought up the term original sin and you talked about the stolen land in Australia. It seems that the idea of original sin emerges in a number of other modern video games, for example BRINK (Bethesda Softworks 2011), or METRO EXODUS (Deep Silver 2019), or REMEMBER ME (Capcom 2013), or HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Sony 2017).

Wong: I wonder if it has something to do with atonement for colonialism; that we are all collectively reckoning with that. It might have permeated our culture so strongly that it's become part of the fabric of who we are, and when you confront someone with the imagery, they automatically get it. It's just such a useful device, especially in video gaming. If you create a story around the idea that our people ruined the world, we now have to go on a quest to restore harmony, I think a lot of people can identify with that, no matter what their background is. Original sin has become such a strong fabric of our culture which I don't even think is constrained to a Christian concept. And it might be interesting to look at non-European cultures and contexts. For example, World War II is a big part of Japanese popular culture, and you can find a lot of post-apocalyptic themes there.

Bosman: There's the term "ancestral sin" in anthropology and it seems to be imbued in a lot of cultures: the idea that the next generation has to bear the consequences of our choices.

Wong: Since you are mentioning this: I spent five years living in China and making games in China. And China strikes me as an example of a society that doesn't really gel with that concept, as far as I know. It's not appropriate to talk about the sins of the country historically, it's very taboo; not just taboo: censored. It's also not appropriate to talk about the shortcomings of your parents, that's also very taboo. The correct attitude is to honor their father and mother in China. I think this would be interesting to further investigate: how does the concept of original sin resonate with a Chinese audience, if at all?

Bosman: You said that it's convenient to use the concept of original sin because it gives the player a framework, a reason to go on the quest to restore what was broken by those who came before us. When you talk about what we or our parents or grandparents did wrong, it sounds almost a bit like you are talking about a paradise lost?

Wong: I guess I hadn't thought about it that way. If we think that that term links to the idea of the Garden of Eden, I think it speaks to a romanticized view of the past. For example, a contemporary romanticization of the British Empire perhaps, a lost golden age? It's actually really interest-

ing how some video games romanticize agrarian lifestyles or feudal lifestyles without addressing any of the shortcomings: you've got peasants and you've got princes, it all seems great, they all live happily with one another. This again makes me think of contrasts and Chinese culture, in particular contemporary Chinese culture. There exists a concept of "paradise lost": Chinese culture does romanticize older eras in Chinese history. But unlike in Western thinking of paradise lost, in Chinese culture, I don't think there's necessarily a desire to return to those values or times. I think culture is very much propelled into the future, so the idea of "paradise lost" comes with that twist and I think it would be worth exploring these differences in more detail.

Bosman and Ornella: Thank you Ken, for spending this time with us. It has been great (virtually) meeting a real-life actual video game developer.

Wong: Thank you, it was a bit of a trip down memory lane and it was a great opportunity to discuss questions you usually don't get asked or don't have the opportunity to explore with media or in media interviews.