

YOU CAN NOW PLAY Bill Viola's languorous first-person video game, *The Night Journey*, in your living room, from your own sofa, with your own PlayStation controller. Set in a dreamlike, largely black-and-white outdoor world, *The Night Journey* sends its protagonist on an adventure with no clear objective. Players might find themselves moving through Seussian vegetation or drifting, injury-free, down a cliff; wading into an ocean's depths or venturing into isolated buildings that mysteriously turn into ruins once they've been explored.

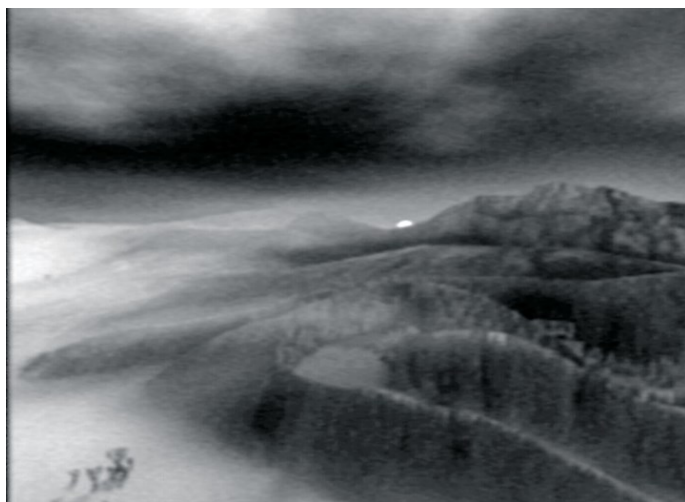
The Night Journey began in 2007 as a collaboration between Viola and a USC Game Innovation Lab team led by experimental game designer Tracy Fullerton, and it has been exhibited as a work in progress for over a decade. This June, it saw wide release on multiple platforms—meaning that the gallery no longer circumscribes *The Night Journey*'s modes of reception. The game can now assume other identities: that of a curiosity visited by Twitch streamers (who broadcast their gaming exploits to internet spectators); a tongue-in-cheek challenge for "speedrunners" (who make an art form of dashing through games in record-breaking times); an inexplicable waste of twenty bucks to gamers who find their bliss in boss fights and better gear.

At times, the PlayStation version seems a sly send-up of conventional game mechanics. Left and right joysticks, as expected, control the invisible protagonist's movement and gaze, respectively. But the only other button that does anything is the X that falls squarely under a player's right thumb. In most games, that X makes a character jump or wield a weapon or exert some extreme force on the virtual world, but in *The Night Journey* it causes the invisible protagonist to "reflect." The

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consequence of “reflecting”? The eerie landscape is overlaid with classic Viola video footage—some of it rousingly beautiful.

There are times, though, when the game seems to relish replicating classic video-game features, such as when players find their wanderings punctuated by the pop-up alerts that accompany “trophies,” which are a bit like Cub Scout badges awarded for discovering and unlocking aspects of a game. (I earned a “Water of Life” honor after scuttling across a seafloor for five minutes.) The fact that *The Night Journey* indulges PlayStation’s goal-oriented reward mechanism suggests that its creators saw themselves as more than just artists staging a drive-by appropriation of a video-game platform. Fullerton did point out that all PlayStation games require trophies. But there are ways of creatively circumventing that requirement; as Fullerton also noted, the indie game *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) crams all its trophies into the end credits.



If you are attuned to contemporary art, and particularly its impetus to engulf whichever logical medium lies next in its path, then how you respond to the game will likely correlate with how you feel about the rest of Viola’s work. With its cross-culturally symbolic imagery—of trees, of birds taking flight, of rebirth via watery immersion—and its “Sources” area, which explicitly cites such visual and textual references as Rumi and Saint John of the Cross, *The Night Journey*, like much of Viola’s video work, traffics in a religious universalism that seems somewhat at odds

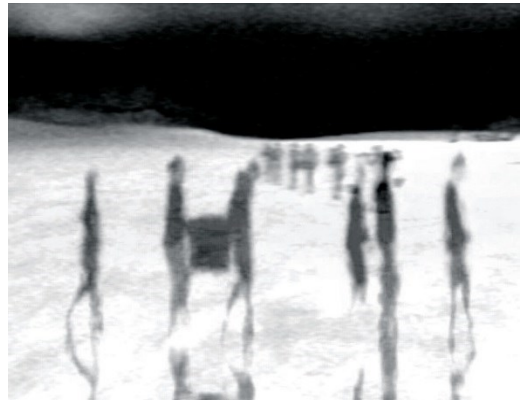
with the deeply researched, laser-focused specificity underscoring so many art practices of the moment. In fact, *The Night Journey*’s cultural omnivorousness perhaps puts it more in step with contemporary video games. The highest-ranked game on Metacritic, *God of War* (2018), features an almost comic mash-up of mythological worlds, with its protagonist, the Greek god Kratos, fending off the Norse god Baldur while traveling to Jötunheim, the land of giants in Norse mythology.

At first glance, one might think that Viola has dragged a medium known for a proliferation of goal-oriented quests and mindless violence into the realm of profundity. But the artist is genuinely meeting the genre where it’s been headed for a while now. Games that strive to brush up against the sublime have reached a critical mass in recent years, ranging from puzzle-solving undertakings (like *Witness* [2016], littered with “audio-logs” featuring the wise reflections of Wordsworth and Einstein) to blockbuster first-person shooters (like *BioShock Infinite* [2013], which has scenes of a baptism so epic that it resonates across the narrative’s multiverses). And then there are remarkably poignant indie games like Jenova Chen’s *Journey* (2012), in which players encounter each other anonymously in an otherwise barren desert landscape and learn to cooperate by evolving a protolanguage of chirps.

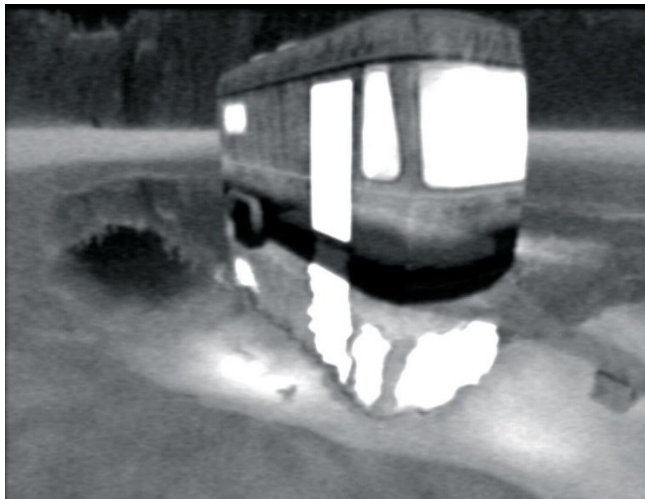
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What's really interesting about *The Night Journey* are the ways in which the medium inflects the latest output from an artist who, at his best, is audaciously, almost perversely unafraid to venture into unfamiliar terrain. Who else would dare to both inject their videos into a full-scale production of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*—as Viola did in the 2007 *Tristan Project*—and infiltrate the world of PlayStation? In the *Tristan Project*'s production at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, the artist's video footage appeared on one large screen over the stage, dangling above an ensemble performing the 1865 masterwork. Critics argued that the videos' chaste minimalism worked against the opera's eroticism and that the projections brought a jarring self-consciousness to the encompassing nature of the composer's *Gesamtkunstwerk* vision.



The Night Journey, by contrast, proves to be a better vehicle for Viola's aesthetics and concepts, even if the results get maddening—or maybe *because* the results get maddening. The artist's work is slow-paced: ecstatically or punishingly so, depending on its viewers' temperaments. Yet his videos are typically assembled into, and received as, elements of immersive installations, sometimes with an ambient soundtrack saturating the space. And if installation art is marked by its "insistence on the literal presence of the viewer," as Claire Bishop puts it, there's often a strange paradox in Viola's work, for the subjects of his videos move glacially, yet viewers approach the work in real time: gently invited to slow down, but also perfectly welcome to zip by at a blithe, workaday tempo.



In *The Night Journey*, though, both seer and seen are forced to move in slow motion. By jamming at the joystick you only become more aware of the rupture between your own physical exertions and the constraints of your virtual body. Gone is the experience of breezing through a gallery at your own pace, craning to see over shoulders. An encounter with the digital world in *The Night Journey*, no matter how brief, is one in which you are obliged to move slowly, or not at all, through a desolate virtual space. At more than a few points, I found the game to be frustrating, and

chillingly lonely. In those respects, it might not be all too different from many real-life spiritual journeys, if pilgrims' reports are to be believed.

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