Video game artists seek respect

LOS ANGELES, California (Reuters) -- The portrait depicts a pop-culture icon past well his prime, toothless, slouched and hooked onto an intravenous drip of yellow pellets.

Meet Pac-Man in the sunset of his life -- as imagined by artist Greg Simkins.

As video games slip into the cultural mainstream, more artists are finding inspiration in their images and music. And, like their predecessors in the pioneering days of film, the creative designers who work in the $7 billion industry are aiming for something more than commercial success: They want artistic recognition.

"Everyone bitches that games are not art, so let's show them otherwise," said John Gibson, curator of an irreverent Hollywood show of art inspired by nostalgia for the classic era of gaming -- all of 15 years ago.

Packed with guests and pulsing with "micro music" from the soundtracks to old games, the prize of the opening night at the new Gallery Nineteen Eighty Eight was the painting of the over-the-hill Pac-Man, which sold for $3,000.

"I've been painting the back alleys around here for years and now I'm finally in the shop," said Simkins, who in his youth was active as a graffiti artist in the neighborhood and who until recently worked for game publisher Activision.

Across town, the more staid Los Angeles County Museum of Art is displaying video-game art as part of a competition under way called "Into the Pixel."

"We're trying to make static something which by its very nature is active," said lead juror Kevin Salatino, curator for prints and drawings at LACMA. "In the art
world, we stopped mimicking reality so long ago, we're always interested in alternative ways of representing reality."

The opening of the show called "I Am 8 Bit" at Gallery Nineteen Eighty Eight in Hollywood drew the city's young and beautiful to upscale Melrose Avenue on a breezy spring night with a nostalgic look at the good, old days of gaming.

"There's a nostalgia value out there. Look at the gamers who are out there now, the first-generation gamers. They're in their 40s now. You do have sort of an aging population there sort of affectionately looking back," said Marc Sherrod, academic director of the game and art design program at the Art Institute of California-San Francisco.

A number of the pieces at the Hollywood show featured Mario, the squat Italian plumber with the handlebar mustache who was among biggest youth icons of the mid-1980s.

The Mario mania can be extreme. "I would love to take a year of my life and do my Mario movement," said Gabe Swarr, an animator with three Mario-themed pieces at the show.

With some polls suggesting that nearly all recent American college students have played video games, throwback T-shirts, bumper stickers and games are a big and growing business.

"Anybody under 35, games are as much a part of their lives as classic movies," said Keith Robinson, president of Intellivision Productions, a company dedicated to classic gaming. Robinson was a game programmer for the original Intellivision, one of the pioneers of the industry.

With a new audience coming of age after having grown up with games, many artists see an emerging legitimacy.

"A lot more artists are being drawn to the games space," said Rich Mahon, a veteran of paintings for movies who worked on the LACMA exhibit entry "Chinatown Level Study" from the game "The Matrix: Path of Neo."

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