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'Chicago New Media 1973-1992' pays tribute to the city's contribution to video games and digital art

Caroline Picard

10-13 minutes

On the frontier of free information, experimentation, and self-expression.

By *@cocolarolo*
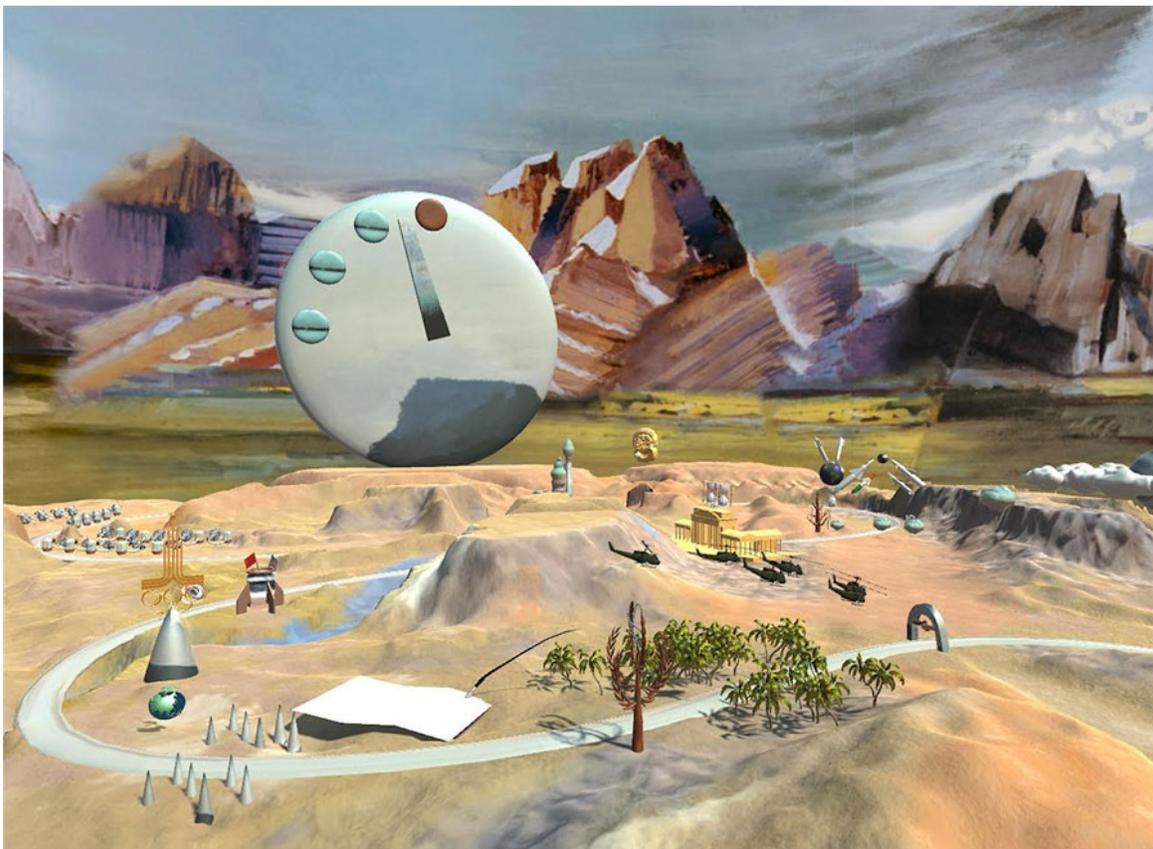
- *Have a Nice Day II: VR Tour Through the Decades*, Ellen Sandor, Chris Kemp, Diana Torres, and Azadeh Gholizadeh, (art)n, virtual reality installation with Unity and Oculus Rift, 2017.

- Courtesy of Ellen Sandor and VGA Gallery

Chicago isn't immediately associated with technology's vanguard in the popular imagination. But Gallery 400's current exhibition, "Chicago New Media 1973-1992," focuses on the city's contribution to new media history through a broad installation of video games, digital art, video art, and archival materials. The oldest photograph is a 1910 still from Uptown's Essanay Studios showing a cast of cowboys with horses posed beneath the elaborate (and heavy looking) electric studio lights. Not only is this image evidence of how, as curator Jon Cates puts it, Chicago was "an early contender" for the film industry, it shows a direct correlation between representations of the iconic west and the technology that produced it.

With assistance from Chaz Evans, Jonathan Kinkley and the Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery, Cates highlights the way "new media"—video art, video games, and electronic music—evolved through a radical community of Chicago-based early adopters in the early 70s. "This creative culture of collaborative communities gathered together regularly to perform in various configurations publicly during annual Electronic Visualization Events on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago," he says. "Their connections were social, artistic, educational, and technological." The exhibition shows how people like Dan Sandin, Phil Morton, Tom DeFanti, Ted Nelson, Jamie Faye Fenton, and others connected commercial gaming, academic research, and

independent art making in a way that permanently impacted the industry. These figures, Cates says, "fostered ethical commitments through new kinds of art, novel in their form and content."
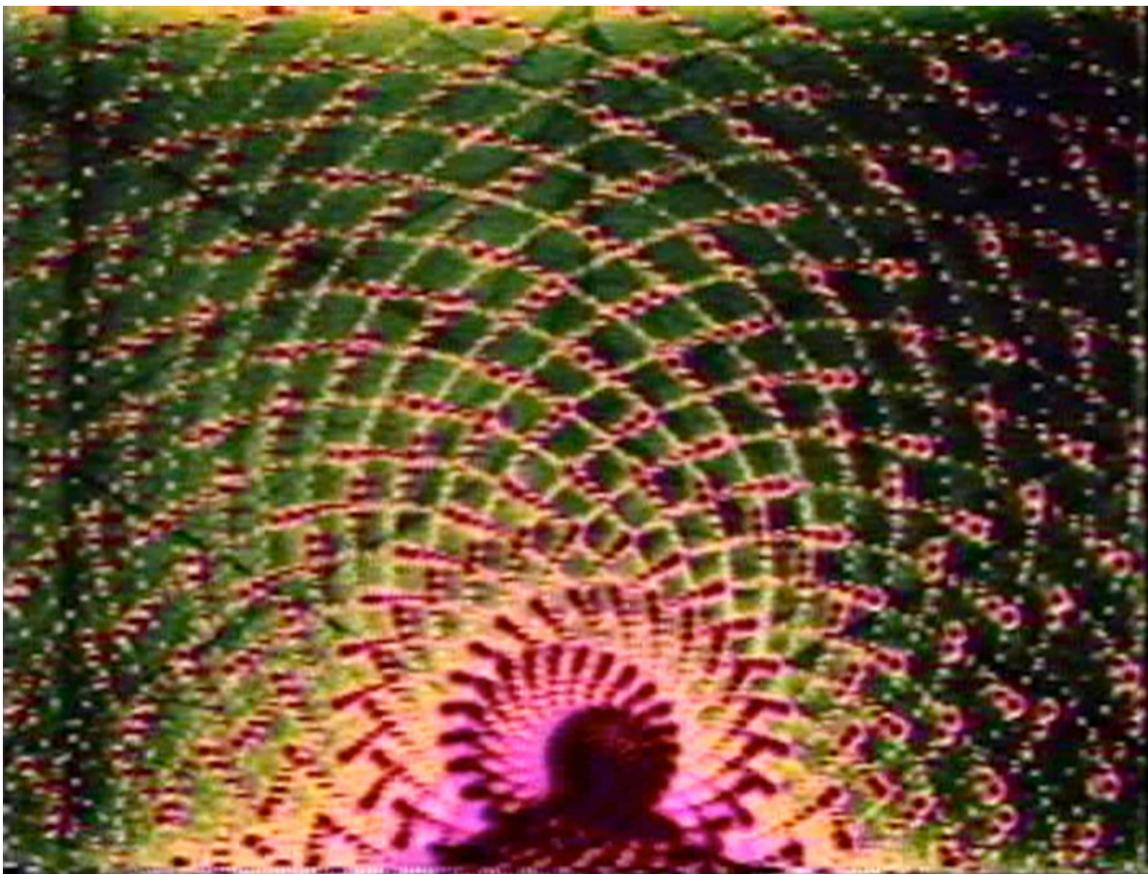
- *Spiral 5 PTL*, Dan Sandin, Tom DeFanti, and Mimi Shevitz, video, 1979.

- Courtesy of Dan Sandin and VGA Gallery

Upon entering the show, the first thing you see are two free-standing, free-to-play arcade- style video games, *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *Defender* (1981), both made by Chicago-based companies Midway Games and Williams Electronics Inc. (now called WMS Games and based out of Nevada). Behind these, a looping program of more than 20 films from 1973 to 2007 by Sandin, DeFanti, Morton, Annette Barbier and Richard

Mandeberg, Nancy Bechtol, and more is projected on the wall. These videos are all culled from the Video Data Bank archive—a local library of videos and media art that Morton began in the 70s, collecting video made by artists experimenting with then-new video tools. As Cates puts it, the films in view collapse "distinctions between what is artwork, documentation, or tutorial."

While many technological systems present in the show were originally spearheaded by the combined effort of university and military resources—the Internet, for example, began as a government initiative developed by universities to decentralize information exchanges during the Cold War—young people used the same innovations for their own artistic and ethical experimentation, an option that coincided with the development of more personal technology. Tools like the video camcorder, the personal computer, and reel-to-reel recording devices created new possibilities for self-expression. "A radical turn toward unprecedented opportunities for change provided new pathways for expanding consciousness and collective will through the creation of new genres, voices, and visions of art," Cates says.

Most of these innovations have become so integrated in our daily lives, it's difficult to remember that they are not only recent but also shaped, at least partly, by Chicagoans. Cates and his partners have created a compelling installation with almost 100 contributing artists, scientists, developers, and public program participants. The resulting showcase of once-innovative equipment, archival materials, school curricula, interactive timelines, and video games not only captures the energy of play but also the processes by which we see ourselves today.
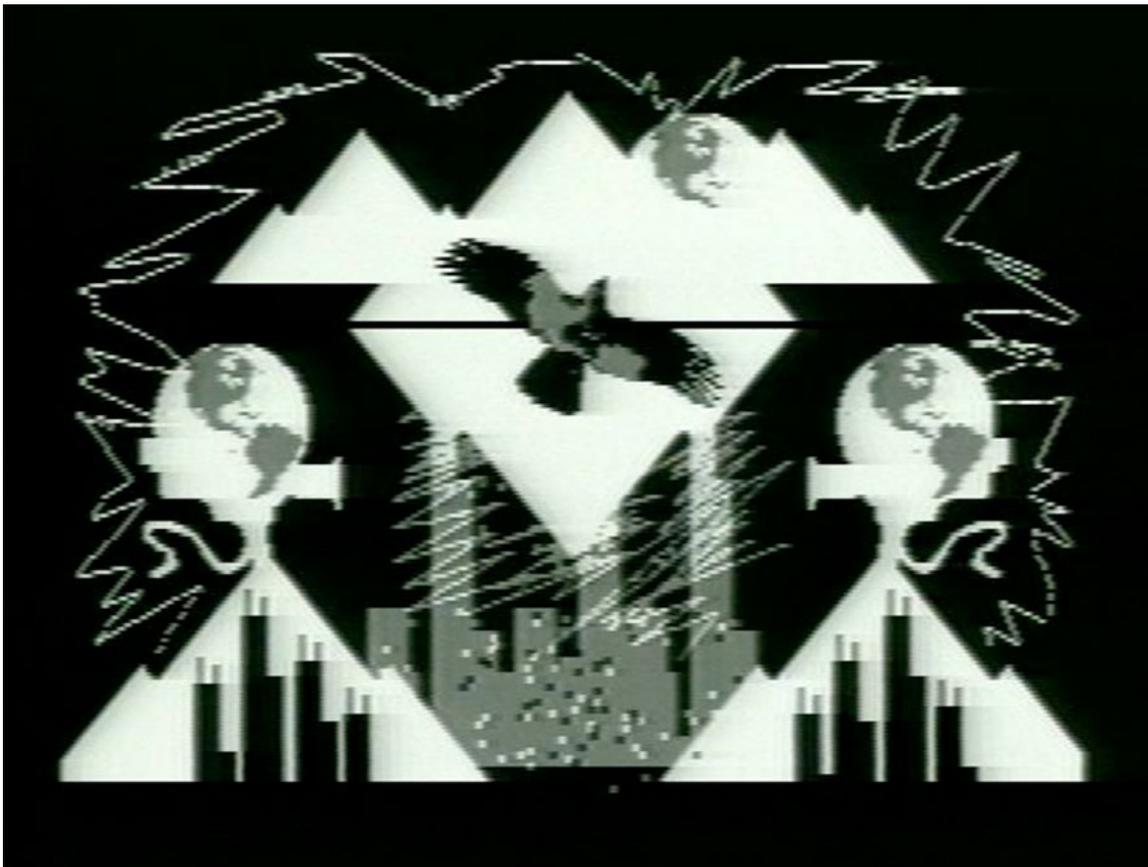
- *Montana*, Jane Veeder, video, 1982.

- Courtesy of Jane Veeder and VGA Gallery

To the left of the gallery entrance is *Forest* (1991), a virtual forest that viewers can only visit through a VR headset, by Ellen Sandor and (art)n: Stephan Meyers, Janine Fron, and Craig Ahmer. Jane Veeder's *Montana* (1982) loops nearby on a flat-screen TV. The deceptively simple three-minute animation features crude cartoon forms of an eagle and mountains. Similarly illustrated buildings and a pair of opposing camcorders slowly encroach upon the tableau until text pops up: "Good luck electronically visualizing your futures!" Given that a current strategy for addressing climate change today is technological innovation, this work seems particularly prescient.

Flickering through the entire gallery is a massive bull's-eye

projection by Jason Salavon. *Everything, All at Once (Part III)* (2005) uses custom design software to convert a live television broadcast into what the artist describes as "a circle of concentric stripes of color," which changes according to the average colors of its affiliated program. During my visit, the circle was mauve, purple, white, and gray, and a small low-to-the-ground television flitted between the *Ellen Degeneres Show* and a news report of the Camp Fire in Butte County, California. Although this juxtaposition was coincidental, the effect combined with other works and materials, like that original 1910 photograph, to suggest how representations of American landscapes are and have always been fully enmeshed with technology, whether because 19th century painters went out on surveying trips to map the country's geologic features or because their sublime pictures wouldn't have been believable without photographic evidence. Further echoes of this theme occur later in the show with Siebren Versteeg's post-9/11 work *Emergency* (2002). Played on a flat-screen television, this video features the tops of summer trees and sky while a simultaneous program produces sounds of emergency vehicles.

The American fantasy of the frontier arguably influenced these new media pioneers to the extent that they insisted upon free information, experimentation, and self-expression. Perhaps what is also American is the refusal to accept traditional hierarchies that would otherwise distinguish high art (painting, for instance) from consumerist culture (video games or—back in the day—photography)—a refusal Cates marks through his deliberate juxtaposition of video games, artist-made video games, art

videos, and technological tools. While "Chicago New Media 1973-1992" is the first exhibition to link Chicago's new media community to companies like Bally, Midway, and Williams, academic institutions, and ad hoc art communities, Cates, (who also teaches at SAIC) shows how "an early ethos of playfulness, interactivity and sharing" grew and expanded. This 1970s Chicago Media Arts character, he argues, "becomes massively and widely available starting in the 1990s with a lasting impact from then on up to and including today."   v

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