

Clash of the Titans

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In preparing for Eddo Stern's exhibition, I've spent the last several months thinking about video games. I had more or less convinced myself that to curate this work, write and talk about it, I had to immerse myself in the online gaming world. Though my obsession with the phenomenon of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) continues, it is strictly as an outsider – I read articles in the *New York Times*, peruse message boards, look at fan art online. I still haven't taken the plunge into playing these games.

My first exposure to Stern's work involved putting an oversized plastic mask/helmet on my head and speaking the words "I am David Koresh." Moulded in Koresh's likeness, this rigid enclosure served to unlock game play in Stern's *Waco Resurrection*, a first-person shooter-style video game casting the player as Koresh defending the Branch Davidian compound from invading ATF agents. *Waco Resurrection* is an absurdist cultural-theory train wreck, like much of Stern's work over the past few years: players donning rooster costumes control a virtual battle in *Cockfight Arena* (2001); *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001) involves players rigged with custom hardware that translates virtual injuries into electric shocks; *RUNNERS: Wolfenstein* (2002) allows Israeli players to invade Nazi Germany

in a hacked version of a popular World War II game.

Stern constantly mines the depths of game culture – its ethos, imagery, modes of communication – to create complicated mashups of sources, historical references, jokes and analyses. Within the dialogue of contemporary art, a predictable outcome of appropriating and referencing these gaming sources could easily be one of uninformed analysis or pop-culture banality. Stern's work, however, comes out of an in-depth involvement in the culture, and his approach is one of documentary, anthropology and historical analysis. Gaming is not the absolute focus of his inquiry; he uses these references to investigate broader social and political themes, blurring the distinctions between the virtual and the actual.

While it plays out in tangible ways in projects like *Tekken Torture Tournament*, this amalgamation of game and real life is manifested in a slightly different manner in Stern's recent work. His kinetic shadow sculptures are more subtle and playful than a piece like *Waco Resurrection*. Over the last year, Stern spent 2,000 hours immersed in *World of Warcraft*, the wildly popular MMORPG. The imagery in these sculptures is largely drawn directly from the game, its characters cast alongside the likes of Chuck Norris; it is über-obsessive fan art taken to the next level. Though the figures in these tableaux are derived from games and pop culture, their influences can be traced to sources beyond that. Historically, the most direct connections would be

Chinese shadow plays or the Indonesian art of *wayang kulit*. With characters and scenery built from leather and wood and illuminated by oil lamps, these proto-cinematic theatrical performances often focused on Buddhist fables, “fairy tale”-like fantasies and narratives about warring kingdoms and the battles between good and evil.

Stern’s motorized Plexiglas puppets don’t spin tales of war or the battle against evil in quite the same way. These small scenes reduce the notion of fighting to its most basic form, as in *Man, Woman, Dragon*. There is a banal simplicity to the objects and their actions: Chuck Norris slowly kicks a dragon in the head as a Night Elf raises her arms in adoration of the hero. There is a humorous juxtaposition between our perception of these figures, their shiny 3-D rendering onscreen and the repetitive mechanical motion of Stern’s shadow puppets. This effect points to the changing face of technology and culture, positing the virtual world of gaming in the lineage of modes of storytelling throughout history. It also highlights Stern’s love/hate relationship with gaming culture – an admiration and obsession with the characters and the ideas, mixed with a recognition of the absurdity in this endless cycle of battles with dragons and monsters. The shadow puppets operate on further levels as well. The placement of Steven Seagal and Chuck Norris into these scenes extends this dialogue beyond the virtual world of gaming into a broader one about masculinity and hero worship. Norris and Seagal,

both notorious action-adventure movie stars, are not dissimilar to the heroes of *World of Warcraft*: unbeatable, mythical warriors who can lay rest to an entire room of bad guys. Just as these digital characters are juxtaposed with these mechanical contraptions, these 1980s cult heroes represent a legacy of banal fantasy fighting that stretches from B-movies to online gaming.

Though Stern’s work is squarely situated in the world of gaming, the points of inquiry expand in many directions. There is often an initial reaction that Stern’s work is inaccessible; I’ve been in discussions of his work where audience members will preface statements with something like, “Well, I don’t know anything about video games, so I am not sure if I know how to talk about this work.” This misses the point of what Stern is doing. Though my initial impulse was to mimic Stern’s immersion in *World of Warcraft* to better understand the work, the reality is that Stern’s art exists outside of that realm as well. Above, I reference the idea of anthropology, an interesting way to frame his forays into the world of actual video-game production, as well as game-appropriated works. Like an anthropologist, Stern researches and immerses himself in a particular subculture, using his findings to form cross-cultural analyses. Through exposure to this seedy underbelly of the virtual, we learn more about the seedy underbelly outside of the game world: our understanding of history, the complexities of social dynamics, infatuation with heroes, and complicated relationships with violence and war.