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Game resurrects Waco tragedy and challenges video game conventions

JEFF DOUGLAS
Associated Press**KANSAS CITY, Mo.** - "Waco Resurrection" is a video game.

But video game makers say "subjective documentary" best describes their 3D version of the 1993 tragedy that killed more than 70 people near Waco, Texas.

And when the burning religious compound and cult leader David Koresh glows across the wall of the Grand Arts gallery here, it's considered contemporary art.

What's also clear is that video games creators are taking advantage of rapidly evolving technology that allows them to mimic reality with increasingly vivid detail.

Game experts say Persian Gulf War-based games have been best sellers since the war ended more than a decade ago. Last year, a classroom project at the University of California-San Diego called "9-11 Survivor" gave a brief game-like tour of terrorism, letting online players jump or escape from the World Trade Center.

But never have commercial video games let players use their joystick to experience specific events clipped from the headlines. For now, art houses and Internet sites appear to be a back door to these sorts of games.

More than 300 people attended "Waco Resurrection's" Midwest debut at the "Join Us" exhibit, which runs through July 24. Since last fall, the game has been on display in San Francisco, New York, Australia and the Netherlands.

At the debut several weeks ago, a few people sipped wine in a dark room filled with uneasy smiles and uncomfortable laughter. They watched movie-like images of Koresh defending his compound from federal agents with his AK-47 rifle.

Colin Weigel, 27, waited for a turn at the game and recalled watching from television in his high school cafeteria as the Branch Davidian compound caught fire, ending a nearly three-month standoff against authorities in April 1993.

Spending just a few thousand dollars, a six-member team called C-Level created the reality-based game last summer in their Los Angeles media lab. By next summer, the public art cooperative will let players make a donation and download the game online to share and play with others.

The creators say the "Resurrection" will never find its way to Nintendo or Playstation home consoles.

In the game, Koresh can run, jump, shoot and hide. Like traditional video games, players have special weapons and can energize themselves. Koresh's energy comes from massive Bibles that rain from the sky. Those Bibles also rain bullets and turn federal agents into Davidian followers.

Although it's presented in a PC-game format, the group calls "Waco Resurrection" a documentary and points to its attention to historic detail.

"There's something shocking about making a game about a specific event," said Peter Brinson, one of the game's creators. "It seems so radical to do this in a video game, and that's because it's not often done."

An idea for a Columbine killings game never got off the ground and was apparently a

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...in fact for a certain time, things never got on the ground and was apparently a hoax. But Brinson said other games developed around the world show this genre's potential. Middle Eastern game creators have developed and sold Palestinian, Israeli and Islamic political unrest games. And "Escape from Woomera," plays out as an online criticism of Australian immigration detention camps.

Mark Wolf, author of "The Medium of the Video Game," believes that eventually no game topic will be sacred, and much as the movie industry's standards have loosened over the years, so will the game industry's. He says that will open the door to more violence, tragic re-enactments, even pornography.

"All events are fairly similar. A video game about a sinking ship would be acceptable," Wolf said. "If you call it 'Titanic,' it becomes credible and brings an audience."

The following for Gulf War, World War II and Vietnam video games is growing, according to Shane Bettenhausen, an Electronic Gaming Monthly magazine editor.

Games-as-political-commentary, however, have not found a market and will be a tough sell to the masses, he said. Unlike "Waco," most popular war games are only loosely based around a real event.

"Now that we can recreate reality in a convincing way, adults are learning that games are an art form that gives an experience books and movies can't match," he said.

"Waco Resurrection" creators said they made the game as a piece of art did not want to offend anyone.

One 1993 Branch Davidian survivor, David Thibodeau, laughed at the concept.

"I have had so many different people come to me with screenplays and other creative endeavors, very little angers me," he said from his home in Maine. "It's not a game. What happened there was real and real people died."

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