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God's Eye Views

While considering American war nostalgia and the guilt-ridden Israeli misappropriation of Zionist ideals, amongst other things, artist Eddo Stern obsessively plays computer games. Stern's sculptures, videos, interactive virtual reality installations, and collaborative gaming events simulate the social spaces of computer and video games and their corresponding emotional nuances. To contextualize the work, Stern uses the gaming term "God's Eye," which refers to player's position as God, General, or Wizard floating above the world with total control over cities, armies and minions. From a multiple-player virtual-reality game that revisits the 1993 Waco, Texas episode by resurrecting virtual "Koreshes" to a new series of cold war inspired pin ball machines, Stern provocatively entangles gaming pleasure and tedium with often sad and chilling historical rumination.

Growing up in Israel, Stern spent much of his childhood on the computer. His father, an American-born engineering Professor, owned one of the first Apple computers in Israel, and early on encouraged Stern's accelerated academic interests. A one-year pre-military stint abroad at California's UC Santa Cruz confirmed the budding gamer savant's interests in the intersections of technology, art, and philosophy. Of course, Eddo's three-year military service back in Israel would later inspire his war game artwork. Stern vaguely describes the army experience as "pretty surreal."

After graduation from UC Santa Cruz and a brief tenure as a virtual reality whiz in a bureaucratic Silicon Valley tech company, Stern discovered a formative inspiration—the ground breaking 1998 computer game Everquest. As the first internet-based, three-dimensional role-playing game, Everquest was an exciting manifestation of the sci-fi, cyber-punk ideals Eddo and peers imagined in the burgeoning field of new media and virtual reality. Over the Internet, a Syrian eleven-year-old could potentially play Everquest with a forty-year-old soccer mom in Kansas. Really the complex social rules governing these unique social environments intrigued Eddo. His art now explores the range of possible emotional experiences that occur in these, although socially interactive, often desensitized, politically neutral gaming narratives.

In perhaps his most keenly felt video, *Sheik Attack* from 2000, Stern collages found computer war game footage with music and lyrics from Israeli folk songs. The short vignettes or scenes are connected with graphic markers of progressive game "levels," which indicate historical phases from the nation's folk origins to an expansive *SimCity* rendered Tel Aviv metropolis. *Sheik Attack* is very literally based on real Nineties military incidents in Lebanon, during which Israeli soldiers snatched Lebanese sheiks from their beds. The video ominously repossesses violent computer game imagery with cinematic editing and sound to evoke a disturbing digital representation of unquestionable brutality.

Eddo describes the conflicted guilt in *Sheik Attack* as, "the pain of growing up in Israel and trying to live with, and up to an ideology that can't sustain itself anymore and maybe never did." *Sheik Attack* does not simply take sides, but through the fantastic, illusory mode of gaming, addresses the conundrum of Jewish Israeli nationalism. Stern indulges the foundational nostalgia and romanticism, which support the ideals of Israel, but he simultaneously expresses the sadness and guilt that underscore what he calls the, "mis-remembrance of a long lost Zionist Utopia."

Injecting reality into the action hero blur of gaming culture's "pure" entertainment, Stern has collaboratively staged dynamic gaming events at his collectively-run media arts lab C-Level in Downtown Los Angeles' Chinatown. In "Tekken Torture

Tournament,” thirty-two willing participants publicly played a projected video game. Players received bracing but non-lethal electrical shocks when their on-screen avatars suffered injuries. Eddo and his collaborators realized early on that these visceral projects needed to develop in their own unique multidisciplinary space. C-Level hosts a variety of community events from activist oriented teach-ins and grassroots video screenings to a cross-disciplinary hacking seminar, in which artists, activists, and programmers envision tech-savvy agit-prop.

Most recently, Stern has developed artwork about the neo-medieval and Tolkien inspired fantasy genres in gaming culture with conceptual sculptures that incorporate modified computer hardware into feudal-style castles. In addition, a new video project *Vietnam Romance* eloquently continues Stern’s exploration of the nostalgia for war heroes. In *Romance*, Stern also collages computer war game graphics with midi transpositions of both American patriotic and hippie peace protest anthems. Sweeping aerial shots with modest three-dimensional grandeur rival the iconic military scenes from *Full Metal Jacket*. Still, Stern’s conceptual treatment of fantastic war takes a fresh look at the hidden ideologies and repressed guilt in video games’, not to mention textbook and news media’s hazy, if not sloppy, representation of wartime history and violence.

In exhibitions at Postmasters Gallery and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and at numerous galleries, museums, and festivals around the world, Stern re-treats these fractured world histories with a playful and often poignant nostalgia. Eddo describes his newest project in the works as, “a speculative history of Jerusalem told with computer game graphics and animation—sort of like a gamer’s Clash of the Titans, where the gods conspire a twisted curse on humankind.”

-Matt Wolf