

The Military Games People Play



Written by HOLLY WILLIS

And the artists who play right back **The war in Iraq began** almost exactly two years ago, but seven months before that, you could play a video game — *America's Army: Operations*. As the violence in the Middle East increased, so too did the number of games designed to help us experience it, such as *Uday and Qusay's Last Stand* and *Fallujah Vigilant Resolve* from Kuma Reality Games.

Now there is Atari's just-released *Act of War*, set in a near future in which terrorists attack San Francisco and continue to launch attacks around the world. The game was hyped in early February through a viral ad showing a home movie in which a terrorist plane careening out of the sky toward a cityscape is handily shot down by a pair of missiles. The hapless cameraperson wheels around to see the source of such prowess, revealing a cavalcade of tanks and helicopters — American military might on parade.

But more than one can play (or create) this game, and a number of artists are responding to the onslaught of war-oriented work with more reflective projects. Los Angeles-based video artist Eddo Stern has spent the last five years playing games, studying player interaction and making pieces that comment on gaming's relationship to political events. His work is currently on view at the Hammer Museum as part of "Fair Use: Appropriation in Recent Film and Video."

An Israeli who teaches at CalArts and USC, Stern believes there's a political subtext in reality-based games. "After 9/11, there was an initial knee-jerk reaction to step away from reality in gaming," he says. "People didn't want to belittle the situation. But that shock only lasted a short time. Then it was just, 'Fuck it, let's go kill them.'"

Stern's work is in many ways a direct response. His acclaimed video *Sheik Attack* combines Israeli pop songs with sampled computer war games. Similarly, the video *Deathstar* compiles clips from a surprisingly large number of games depicting the violent demise of Osama bin Laden, the images appearing one after another in a bloody rush of cartoonish violence. For music, Stern used a remix of *The Passion of the Christ*.

As the second anniversary of the Iraq war comes and goes, we'll likely see more games, movies and TV shows based on the "reality" of the war. But Stern questions what *reality* means in this context. "I think American gamers play with a sense of irony, distance and humor. This comes from the distance that Americans have from the people they fight."

While many games promise to immerse you in the world of war, they can't overcome that distance. Stern, by contrast, does — not through depicting reality but by bringing us face-to-face with the very ways we avoid it.

"Fair Use: Appropriation in Recent Film and Video," featuring the work of Eddo Stern and eight other artists, continues through May 29 at the Hammer Museum. Info: (310) 443-7000.

Last Updated (Thursday, 31 March 2005)

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