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Interview with Eddo Stern
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FZ: For your video *Sheik Attack*, you have chosen the images of different games to illustrate your thoughts on the politics of Israel towards the Palestinians. This kind of interpretation is going way beyond the assurances of the game industry, that claim that even the most violent attack fantasies are "only a game".

What is, in your eyes, the game-to-life relevance? Is it the illusionary approach? Is it a question of programming as the predetermination - and therefore, countable instead of endless - of actions that can be taken? Or is it the social and political issues many combine with it?

ES: You ask about the game to life relevance. I can start here by telling a story. In 1997 I was playing the popular computer war simulation game *Command & Conquer* with a few friends. C&C is one of those standard "god's eye" war simulations where an army of soldiers, tanks and other material are at your disposal.

I remember I was in the process of attacking an enemy base with a small group of commandos, (which are incidentally the rarest and most expensive units in the game.) At this time one of my competitors made a remark that was quite chilling. "I heard you lost six commandos last night". He wasn't referring to the our game of yesterday but to a news item regarding a botched Israeli raid into Lebanon, where six Israeli commandos were accidentally killed when munitions they were carrying mysteriously blew up. That moment was a strange one, many ironies and complexities rushed up. The reference to the real events completely ruptured the fantasy of the game and it got me thinking. It was probably the moment when I first began imagining a work like *Sheik Attack*, where the tension between the "fantasy of war" (as a game industry representative called it) and its of real-life counterparts is played out.

If you look at the game industry you will notice an obsession with several themes or genres. Sports, Fighting, War, Science fiction and Medieval Fantasy. Each one of these genres is loaded with complexities relating to questions of masculinity, violence, race, history and politics.

For example when looking at war-games, both first-person-shooters and strategy-sims, there is a strong Nationalistic/Patriotic flavor. The games most often are organized around a dichotomy of Western/Commando/Technological/Organized/Advanced/Cop/Marine/Good vs. Eastern/Southern/Primitive/Chaotic/German/Russian/Arab/Central American/Drug Dealer/Terrorist/Evil. Yet with most games any reference to specific political or national events is blurry at best. The industry doesn't want to take any responsibility for that sort of thing, their business is "pure" entertainment.

So what we are left with is an ideological functionality without any explicit specificity and accountability. It's interesting to look at the exceptions to this rule. WW2 games are very common, and the historical specificity is there. This is testament to WW2's function in American Ideological legitimization and perhaps also to a "statute of limitations" period that also allows certain other narratives such as those of the (US) War of independence, WW1, and even the Korean war to become historically canonized and easily reproduced in popculture in a way that those "hairy" narratives of say The American Civil War, Vietnam, Panama, Kosovo, and Somalia never could be. It is interesting to compare the scope of Hollywood's war film genre which appears wide and diverse in comparison to the super conservative and narrow arena the computer war game genre occupies.

Now after 9-11 things are going to get very interesting I think. The game industry has used the unspecified "terrorist" archetype for years a la James Bond and other Hollywood movies' use of "imaginary evildoers". Now that The WTC was blown up by those who are now officially called Terrorists, with a Capital T, the industry will need to reexamine its Commando/War game genre and what we will probably (and already) see is first a sharp decline in fantasy/war narratives. For instance the super popular team strategy *Half-Life* mod *Counter Strike* which pits a team of blue "terrorists" vs. a team of red "counter terrorists" will never hold its uncanny balance, where choosing to be a terrorist was just plain "cool". There will be no doubt be a deluge of Sci-Fi and Tolkien Fantasy to go with the all the Football, Hockey and then more "greatest generation" good vs. evil narratives with more Heroes and Nazi's to boot.

And here comes Fantasy again but only in it's "purest" form. The neo-medieval fantasy genre of the Game industry and current obsession with fantasy in Western culture is fascinating. *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and computer fantasy role playing games are exploding. Swords and Sorcery are dominating the media right now, just in the nick of time for our new Crusade...

FZ: Georg Sesslen recently wrote, that all wars are started with the fantasy that the own soldier/ the own side cannot be hurt. A vision perfectly supported by war games. Your video hurts, it is using tough metaphors for tough things done in the real world. Helicopters are searching, artificial fighters intrude houses and shoot hostages, behind that romantic Israeli folksongs. At the end you list all Palestinian leaders shot in Israeli attacks (till1999). Since then a lot has happened. But in terms of your artwork, you definitely say something about computer games with the real events - do you think, especially the computer game images can say something unique about the real events?--

ES: Yes, much has been remarked on this question by theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virillio about the virtually of modern wars, specifically acute with regards to the media representations of the US wars; the gulf war, a sterile war, a video-game war...In *Sheik Attack* I chose to use specific images from computer games to represent "real" political violence. I chose images that for me at least crossed a certain line where they were still able to create a sense of horror even though it seems like the medium has created a threshold of desensitization that defies any possibility for an affected response to violence. Most people who watched my film who do play video games seemed surprised by the fact that some of the video game images I used were horrifying of chilling, and were able to transcend their desensitization.

So to try to answer your question, I wanted to try to rupture a deeper condition of fantasy/horror where the multitudes of violent fantasies that play out in this culture leave little room for a "horror" that is "real". Now of course everything has changed as you say and this real incomprehensible "horror" has arrived on 911 and the sky is falling here (in the states) as a result. The fantasy factories of Hollywood and the computer game industry are responding by removing the remaining elements of "the real" from their fantasies, pulling certain scenes, movies and games off the shelves. This is a market driven form of self-censorship, they're just pulling their pants back on so to speak... Much has been discussed in the US media recently about a return to "simple tales of simple times", no more action-hero terrorists explosion fantasies for a while they say. But we'll have to see how long the quarantine lasts and the urge for the mediated versions of unmediated war experience can be tempered. Hey, *Black Hawk Down* almost did it for me...

FZ: what about the cathartic aspects of the violence?

ES: It's a tough old question, and very loaded politically here in the US with Columbine and free speech etc... I feel it works just like sports, just made available for computer geeks. I've

seen so many varying accounts of very calm and very aggressive people who play violent video and computer games yet most retain their original configuration of violence. I haven't psychoanalyzed anybody, I'm sure many studies are being conducted on the new generation of kids brought up on *Doom* and *Duke Nukem*. I do see many gamers responding to urges of aggressive competition as well as those enticed by the simple pleasures of making their own special effects with colorful explosions, lights and sounds. But I'm really not sure about the answer to this question of the psychology of catharsis in computer games.

FZ: You have recently made the "information" of "loosing" in a computer game also a body - experience. First, this sounds cruel. What is the reason to increase the "directness" of this game experience?

ES: You are talking about *TEKKEN TORTURE TOURNAMENT*. That project came from reading lots of Cyberpunk. If you recall William Gibson's *Black Ice*, the security software that literally would fry the mind of the hacker. The simulation that crosses from the mind to the body is another part of the dystopian fantasy of technology. Sex with your computer is analogous. So with *TTT* we really wanted to actualize what was and still is one of the driving fantasies of cyberculture. This was an opportunity too great to miss, after *Fight Club* (the film) and more and more arcade games moving into the physical realm (*Dance Dance Revolution* is only the tip of the iceberg for these games).

FZ: What is the art-to-game relevance? And in which direction do we read this question these days? Does art, which is influenced by games, also influence the games?

ES: I think the "game-art" phenomenon is a testament to computer games' emerging status as a primary form of pop culture. Where only a few years ago video and computer games were part of a youth subculture, today a large percent of a western population and a growing world population can recognize *Lara Croft*, *The Sims*, and probably have heard of *Doom* (especially in the US with the Columbine mess). Games have found their way into mainstream television through pop reference and through prime-time TV game advertisements. Hollywood is also taking notice and computer and video game inspired movies like *Tomb Raider*, *Final Fantasy* and *Resident Evil* are positioned more in the mainstream than the game movies of the 80s and early 90s like *Double Dragon*, *Mortal Kombat* or *Tekken*. So you have the pop culture aspect as well as the formal elements of the games that have caused more artists to take notice.

Another point is the nature of interactivity. There has been much excitement and a fair amount of hype about interactive art for years now. I would say that for those who've played them, computer games represent *the* primary "de facto" example of what a rich multisensory interactive experience with a computer can be, one that does not feel superficial or forced as in many interactive artworks. This may sound unreasonable but the *engagement* with most "interactive" artworks made for the museum or gallery or the net for that matter, along with the myriad interactive net advertisements, pales in comparison with the deep *passionate* relationships game players have with their "interactive" software.

So back to your question, I would say it's the games that are affecting the art. In my mind this is very much a one way street, most of the "game art" you see is either sampling the game culture aesthetic, or borrowing its structural logic of interactivity.

There are occasions where "fine artists", in the limited art-world and net-art-world senses of the word, have moved into the industry (*Game Lab* does a good job of hovering on the fringe). Many "lower profile" game designers (i.e not auteurs in the genre's sense such as Richard Garriot or Will Wright) come from a "fine arts" background. But in the "*game-modding*" works we see coming from many new-media artworld artists, you usually see a use of game

engines to repeat familiar art narratives or aesthetic models: formal, minimalist, feminist, dadaist etc. The games in these cases function as a new medium or toy to play with (I'm thinking JODI.ORG's "untitled game", Vuk Cosik's "ASCII Unreal", Alexei Shulgin's "Forms Game" as some examples of formalist games by net.artists)

In an art historical context, game-art is currently in a characteristic early formal stage, like net-art and video-art before it, where many artists are exploring the formal qualities of a new medium. Lots of "info-aesthetics" or "data formalism", "glitch art", "narrative stripping" and cool design. For my particular taste there are few and far between examples of "game art" that extend the exploration of the medium into the wider social and cultural significance of video and computer games. As computer-games become more "legitimate" members of popculture and artists may regard them not merely as eye candy but as media forms already affecting social, economic and ideological structures, perhaps game-art will shift to resemble the evolution of indi film, or the 60's and 70's "activist" independent video art movements.

The question I ask myself as someone who uses games in almost all facets of my work is what's next here? I do feel its time for artists to stop fooling around and start indi-game companies, and create fully developed computer games that go beyond samples and hacks. The challenge is clear...