

Sheik Chic

Diane Ludin interviews Eddo Stern

11/08/2002 THE THING [interviews]

<http://bbs.thing.net>

[Showing "Sheik Attack" and Afghan War Rugs at Postmasters through November 16: <http://www.postmastersart.com>]

Q: C-Level (<http://www.c-level.cc/>) looks like an interesting gang, how long have you been involved with them?

A: C-level has been going on for almost two years. Right after grad school I started getting together with a bunch of friends to do the kind of stuff we were all interested in doing -- hacking, gaming, reverse-engineering, agit-prop, and community-building. Getting a space with a hardware/software/video lab, our own public screening area, our own server and a bunch of shared equipment was the solution. Gaining independence from other institutions was essential; the c-level model for an artist studio / research lab / public-private space seems to work.

Q: How is it that you arrived at working within the realm of computer gaming culture?

A: These days I spend about 20-30 hours a week playing computer games. At an early point when I just started making things I decided that the way for me to be happy was to keep the art-making rush at full speed and make work around all the other things I was doing -- a sort of grand unification life theory. Doing this seems obvious to me now but it felt like a revelation at the time -- it's basically about working with your life experience, very non Platonic. With games it's particularly great, a way to justify and process the thousands of hours of playing and reading game magazines. I find game culture fascinating beyond the experiential acts of gaming. It's so rich with questions about identity, power, and politics -- there's a lot of work to do.

Q: Do you focus on networked computer game culture or do you also expand your gaming culture interests to include video game culture?

A: Nowadays I mostly play computer games rather than console games or arcade games. The games I play are not solely networked games. I play first person shooters, fighting games, real time strategy, and multiplayer role-playing games. The types of games I find most interesting are Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and multiplayer Real Time Simulation (RTS) which are both multiplayer genres, but what drives my interest at this point more than game type are the "thematic" genres of medieval fantasy and war games.

The culture around computer games is so rich with the questions I am interested in: neo-medievalism, representations of war, gendered identity, and geek culture. The idea of a "hard core gamer", the guy who plays game alone in front of his PC every day after work for more than sixty hours a week is something born out of computer games, not video games. This kind of character is particularly fascinating and central to that culture.

Q: What was the process by which you started using game culture motifs to create a filmic narrative in Sheik Attack?

A: (I'll cut and paste an answer from another interview)

Well, there is a very particular moment I remember where the idea of Sheik Attack started brewing. In 1997 I was playing the popular computer war simulation game Command & Conquer with a few friends. Command & Conquer 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 my commandos. Then, one of my competitors made a remark that was quite chilling: "I heard you lost six commandos last night." He wasn't referring to a game but to a news item regarding a botched Israeli raid into Lebanon, where six Israeli commandos were killed. That moment was strange, all the ironies and complexities rushed up. His reference to the real events ruptured the fantasy of our game...and it got me thinking. It was probably the moment when I first began imagining a work like Sheik Attack, where the tension is played out between a "fantasy of war" (as a game industry representative has called it) and the "real-life" counterpart.

Q: How do the carpets relate to the video?

A: I think Afghani war rugs and computer war games are both incarnations of a deep condition of mediated culture, the condition of fascination with unmediated reality, the quest for real experiences and authenticity. Both are pop representations of war, processed through complex economic and psychological organs. For many people, immersive, media generated fantasizations of war, like Black Hawk Down, Saving Private Ryan, all the romantic Vietnam movie-musicals, books like Dispatches, and computer war games are so visceral, or viscerally nostalgic, that they begin to quench the thirst for real experience. (I'd hate to quote Baudrillard here but...) The consumption and production of war rugs belongs to this same economy of fantasy but processed through a non-mainstream (or less so) channel. The ideology around consuming these rugs interests me - who's buying them? Why are they buying them? What are the politics here? Is the

consumption of these rugs seen by some as a form of activism? Does it support the indigenous people of Afghanistan in their struggle? Or is such consumption an exotic fetish for war? For a lost experience of the real? For political agency?

Q: An excerpt from the Summons to Surrender site (<http://stern.aen.walkerart.org/>) has a description of "...computer controlled sentinels that exploit untapped narrative possibilities within these game arenas..." What are 'computer controlled sentinels?' What type of software (and/or hardware) are you using to manifest the sentinels?

A: The computer controlled sentinels are re-purposed game characters acting in medieval massively multiplayer games. They did several different things. First they transmitted what they saw in the game world to a live feed that was streamed online; a play I wanted to make on the

idea of telepresent surveillance -- take the idea of a webcam and train it back onto a virtual world and reframe the idea of virtual telepresence. It's something that's been around with desktop surveillance software like Timbuktu where a boss can electronically look over an employee's shoulder, and actually inhabit their computer. Another project of this cinematographic device was to archive and historicize (also on video tape) the experiences of the early days of a game like Everquest. I have hundreds of hours of rare footage from 1998 and 1999 that I treasure like footage of Jerusalem that was shot by the Lumiere brothers a hundred years ago. Everquest blew my mind. At the time I was first working on Summons to Surrender, I was playing more than sixty hours week--sometimes over a hundred. Everquest manifested the matrix -- the metaverse -- and caught me completely off guard, a medieval future that sucked me in. I was never a big Fantasy buff and I was already hugely skeptical about the transcendent promise of VR, VRML and anything three-dimensional. I am much more of a sci-fi fan. And I believed more in MOOs and MUDs, but they were always a bit too boring for me. What made Everquest so intense was the combination of real people, you didn't have to talk to, the immediacy of a live real time game, the 3D graphics and sound to some extent (Ultima Online didn't do it for me), the endless scale of the game world, and maybe most importantly the extreme learning curve and high stakes that made the game so competitive and challenging as a game... I could go on for days, I should stop, I don't play it anymore, its too much... back to the sentinels. They were my revenge.

The other things the sentinels did, other than broadcast game footage, was play the game automatically when I wasn't there. There were different characters I made, very primitive at first, watchers, crawlers, mimics, sentinels pretending to be non-player characters, etc. ... The engineering evolved over time, as game features were added and finally I have a system with a simple program running in the background that continually parses a text log file from the online game, looks for key words and phrases, does some logic and sends a serial command to a piece of hardware that translates the serial data into PS2 keyboard scan-codes, that function as electronic key presses. The cool thing is the program can issue all of the in-game commands including logoff, logon, write a log file, talk to people, issue all game commands, navigate and control the camera, as well as shut down the computer. The video feed came out of a video-out card to a machine sitting right next to it, which did the live encoding and uploading to a streaming server. It takes a ton of hardware and bandwidth to make it all happen this way...

Q: How do they exploit "untapped narrative possibilities?"

A: Well, I was able to do different things with the sentinels that have nothing to do with the built in game narrative, for example create algorithmic characters like Crawler.EQ which has a control loop which maps out a city in Everquest using a simple search algorithm not unlike what a mechanical mouse might use to explore a maze. Another example is for the project RUNNERS (in its 1999 incarnation it allowed a player to control three avatars in Everquest with a special triple mouse), I had the same data sent to three separate "cloned" game characters simultaneously, controlling all three in exact synchronization. The project became about challenging the narrative hegemony of the

medieval world (that keeps Everquest so immersive) by introducing noticeable traces of the computer technology that is kept hidden underneath the illusion of immersive fantasy.

Q: Do you build avatars for computer games, or are you recycling existing avatars, staying true to the role of game player?

A: If you mean visually, then no. I use the in-game character creation parameters. In MMORPGs you can't yet create your own skins or models, which was one element of what made it a challenge to "hack" a social game like Everquest, I had to come up with behavioral rather than cosmetic methods to intervene in the narrative.

=====
=====