



EDDO STERN
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO
BY BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN

Not long ago, the world of computer games seemed simple. Arcades and Atari-connected rec rooms offered games that pitted a single player (good) against alien invaders (bad). Home computers introduced Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) where communities of networked players maneuvered via typed command through interactive fantasy realms. Graphic technology advanced and the illusion grew deeper. Virtual realities began to look more and more "real." In little more than 20 years, the blip-bounce-dissolve of the arcade/Atari era has given way to the as life-like as possible ultra-violence of today's computer games.

While the dizzying speed of technology's development is a fact of modern life, its subtle effect on the world around us is often overlooked. Video games are no exception. In his exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Los Angeles-based artist Eddo Stern presented a selection of video works and sculptures that track the intertwined history and development of computer games, as well as the

deep-rooted ties that connect the commercial game industry and the military.

Like Hollywood, video game makers understand that heroes sell. Both industries have capitalized on repackaged versions of war where historical fact gives way to saleable mythology. On screen battlefields are full of larger-than-life heroes who, with the odds stacked against them and guns blazing, always return victorious. Stern highlights this fantasy industry in *Vietnam Romance*, a video montage of images drawn from Vietnam War-based computer games. Projected cinema-style on the gallery wall with a MIDI soundtrack of familiar 1960s pop songs, *Vietnam Romance* points out obvious parallels between game design and mass-market films like *The Green Berets* or *Platoon*. This is war as entertainment. Stern calls it "a tour of nostalgia for romantics and Death Match veterans." Another projection work, *Sheik Attack*, works from the video game-derived God's eye perspective

of an Israeli commando in the 1966 Six Day War. This not only references the deadlocked history of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Stern served two years in the Israeli army), but also virtual learning games developed by the U.S. Army, among others, to train soldiers for the frenetic terror of modern urban warfare.

Stern's sculptural work *Fort Paladin* expands on the connection between the military and virtual reality games. A castle constructed from the plastics used for hard-drive casing houses a monitor featuring a digital automaton repeatedly playing *America's Army*, the U.S. military's Internet recruiting game. By design, virtual war games completely immerse players in a fictional battle zone. No one is really maimed or killed and the more real the battle seems, the better. Stern's stand-in player decodes this ethical blur. By allowing viewers to step back from the virtual world, Stern neutralizes the seductive entrapment of direct play. As illusions of reality fade, the

essentially crude digital graphics and destructive narrative extremes become clear. Viewers can look objectively at the dehumanizing violence and moral ambiguity that is key to the game's commercial – and military – success. This in turn raises larger questions of how the immersive potential and seductive pseudo-reality of virtual war games might actually shape a player/soldier's conscious and subconscious view of the real world. And then what? At the very least, it's safe to assume that innocent days of computer games are over.