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Interview with Eddo Stern, by Thomas Beard

Last month at Cinematexas, Eddo Stern unveiled Darkgame (prototype), a videogame installation in which two participants, playing against each other, maneuver avatars around a two-dimensional plane, their movements projected against the gallery wall. What's unusual about this scenario is that the experience for both parties involves elements of sensory deprivation. One person is completely "blind," unable to view the main interface and responding only to nonvisual cues: the vibrations of a headset Stern designed to correspond with the location of the opposing player, and related audio signals. And while the other character is able to see the action play out in real time, the field of play becomes obscured when he or she is hit and small patches of gray begin to expand. Sure to open up new avenues for gaming, it's an education of the senses and a truly heady mod.

Well known for his work on such projects as Tekken Torture Tournament, where gamers endured electric shocks relative to the injuries of their onscreen fighters, and Waco Resurrection, in which players assume the role of David Koresh as government authorities advance on the Branch Davidian compound, Stern's art challenges and expands not only our relationships with videogames, but also the social and political histories from which they spring. In this interview, Thomas Beard speaks with Stern about his latest work, as well as MIDIs, memes, and the act of straddling the worlds of art, industry, and internet culture.

Thomas Beard: Let's begin with Darkgame. How did the piece evolve and when did you become interested in this idea of sensory deprivation in gaming?

Eddo Stern: Well, it's an old idea that I've been sitting on for a few years now. Before Waco I wanted to make a game where you can't see but it got sidelined. Eventually it evolved into this new gaming concept that I'm trying to work with, a kind of empirical role-play. In researching my article "A Touch of Medieval," I was getting to this place where role play breaks down: the idea of the "real"-non-roleplaying player, the real character action, how dexterous their fingers are, or how social they are or how aggressive, the idea of real physical and mental abilities versus the idea of role playing, how those aspects of the person eventually come through into a game and what it would be like to build games around these aspects.

Where it happened for me was in Everquest--because I have a really bad sense of direction--and in the early days of that game they made it hard for you to get around. There were no maps, so basically your memory and your sense of direction were all you had. Eventually they developed the Ranger class, and they had this ability called tracking. As a Ranger you would have an extra interface, like a radar you could use to navigate, and for me this was the decisive reason to "roll" that character class, a class that artificially compensated for a physical/mental weakness that I had. I was kind of like a bionic character; suddenly you're experiencing the opposite of what happens in real life, being the guy with the super sense of direction who people ask for directions

Two other big inspirations for Darkgame are certain Paul Bowles short stories--one is called "The Tender Prey," which has to do with torture and exoticism--and JG Ballard's "Manhole 69," which is about a sleep deprivation experiment.

TB: Do you see this particular project moving in new directions?

ES: I'm interested in making it a game that blind people and seeing people, for instance, could play together, a game where the abilities of the blind person would become a benefit in the game, a boon to them, kind of what I was talking about before, the relationships of different types of talents that people have and different types of disabilities that the computer processes into different character types. The game is going to evolve into a 3D game using Torque, which is the same engine we used in Waco, and I'm also going to play around with having the players fluctuate between deprivation and full sensory overload, bombarded by too much information. So for example having them process mental puzzles or challenges or quizzes while performing with hand-eye coordination. That's a part of the game that I'm pretty excited about.

You know Open Mind? It's a research project started at MIT, creating a database of common sense knowledge for an artificial intelligence by feeding it true/false statements, and last I checked they were up to three quarters of a million. Curiously, while I was researching this in the beginning of this year I found another project online called Mindpixel, which is basically the same exact project except it's a corporate venture, not attached to a research institute. Something about this idea really hooked into me, and at the time I was using the data from the projects to make up elements of the overstimulation aspect of the game. So while you're playing, for instance, you come up to these big robots or creatures and they start bombarding the players with questions verifying truths from the database. As you're playing the game you need to respond yes-true, false-true and the questions move from being very scientific truths to historical truths to religious truths to truths where you really kind of stop in your tracks.

It also becomes kind of a language poem, this constant staccato of questions, anywhere from: "The universe is expanding. True or false?" to "White is a color. True or false?" So there's this idea of certain sensory deprivation where you will lose your vision as part of the gameplay and you'll lose your hearing and you'll gain this haptic feedback, which is the part that I demoed so far, but you'll also be dealing with this poetic-cerebral layer. Seems very simple at first but before you know it it's a really high computational order, your brain shuts down. I'm interested in stressing the brain, in this case logically, but also on a moral ethical belief level as well with more arbitrary questions about truth and what we know to be true.

TB: Along the lines of sensory deprivation and stress, considering past work like Tekken Torture Tournament and Cockfight Arena, you have a longstanding interest in transforming the experience of gameplay into a decidedly physical one. What do you find significant about those more corporeal aspects of your work?

ES: I think one of the quests for game designers is to enhance the gaming experience beyond these familiar experiences, categories. The idea of action

is one that they've always done, the pleasure of action, that's sort of the main genre really. But game designers have gradually expanded the play arena to humor, games that make you laugh, to competition, to social games like The Sims, to nurturing games where you're building things. But for example horror poses a problem where cinematic devices used in horror movies simply don't work in games. I always find that horror games are really not that scary. The idea of genre that's inherited from film in the game design thinking process presents a lot of challenges, like drama or true suspense and horror. And I wanted to see if there's a way to design games that move into psychological realms of horror and suspense, beyond the boundaries of irony and cinematic cliches.

For me one place to reclaim a wider range of experience was to incorporate the body. In a way the body allows for an undeniability of certain emotions, fear is one that I've worked with, as well as surprise, anxiety and embarrassment. Tekken was trying to create an experience that can be quite scary for some people and that really heightens the gameplay. The idea of anxiety and stress in the face of physical harm, and the process of overcoming that, allowed a much more compelling experience for a lot of players. Cockfight was a more casual piece, there's a social element there of course, the physicality of the game allowed for players to really perform beyond the confines of something predefined and preprogrammed.

TB: I was also hoping we could talk about music. In a video like Vietnam Romance, for instance, there seems quite a bit invested in the pop mythologies of the songs you make use of and the powerful sway that the nostalgia they evoke holds over us. What kind of role do you see these soundtracks playing in your pieces, both individually and as a whole?

ES: I use sound in two ways primarily, often simultaneously. I use music ironically and sometimes very unironically, employing their emotional force. Sheik Attack is a piece where the music is central to creating a rift between the more neutral, more mechanized visual footage that you see for most of the video, so most of the footage that's very lo-res is accompanied by very rich, baroque music that has a historical and political significance. At that time it was the most powerful tool I found I could use to metaphorically recreate this relationship between the emotional weight of utopian Zionism and growing up under its powerful ideology, and the reality of manifested Zionism which is much more rough and harsh and harder to come to terms with. The richness and warmth of the music and the cold tinniness of the visuals mirror this relationship and constantly temper each other.

Then in Vietnam Romance it's quite a different relationship because I used MIDI tracks. When you have a very emotional song and then strip out all the lyrics, all the human voice, but leave the melody, you preserve the emotional gush but also introduce a feeling of alienation. Somehow I feel this is the emotion of nostalgia. Regarding the use of MIDIs, I once saw Alexei Shulgin use them in his show and that really inspired me, his use of a hollowed out emotion, a hollowed out Russian nostalgia for America.

And in the new piece I'm kind of going in a different place with the music. I was at the MacDowell Colony earlier this year and I heard a great musician who was there at the time, Elizabeth Brown. She played a beautiful piece that was Theremin and flute, pure sci-fi emotion, but not in the way that cheesy Theremin music can be. I was overcome by it, and in Darkgame, I am

going for a science fictiony, yet politically referenced world. This whole recent history of post 9/11 events feels like science fiction to me. There was something about the way 9/11 happened that was so over the top, so fantastical, as I am sure many people feel, and images from Iraq and Afghanistan are still resonating on that layer, like a giant statue of Saddam being felled is so linked for me to JG Ballard's story "The Drowned Giant."

TB: Exactly, as though the past five years has just been one long alternate history story.

ES: Or the high-tech marine with the laser counter and F16s flying over him riding on a horse in Afghanistan. That was just crazy. The whole conflation is the visual inspiration for me towards the feel of the world that I want to recreate in Darkgame. Elizabeth Brown's music for me is that, a strange connection of science fiction and history, the sort of reality we're experiencing now.

TB: From film festivals to commercial galleries to conferences and seminars of various stripes, you've exhibited in a number of very different forums. Have you been struck by any interesting differences or similarities in how your work has been received or experienced from venue to venue?

ES: Yeah, it's interesting. The art world I think is somewhat aware of gaming art but is really fighting to process it on its own terms--of genre or its historical lineage as fitting it into a movement--and I think pop art is where it ultimately will fall. On the same hand, that fascination with pop exists in a parallel non art-world world, internet meme culture, which to me is really interesting. Recycling icons and mutating them through flash animations and Photoshop and what they now call mashups--All your base are belong to us, Punch a Spice Girl--is totally alive and well on the internet as digital folk art. Tekken was targeted in some ways for that audience, so once we did it we put up a little QuickTime movie and it had gotten picked up by Memepool and Metafilter and Fark and other Slashdot-like sites. It's funny that something like Tekken can work on both worlds at the same time, net meme culture and within a history of body art and performance as well.

Showing Waco at E3 was exciting, having the industry take a look. I think with games there's potentially a more complex relationship than we're used to with, say, products that you buy as gadgets versus fine art objects. The idea of a game busting into a gamer community, a game that's very different from what they're used to but that still adheres to some rules and standards of game design and gameplay technology, that's where I am most happy to be now. I can see game projects like Tekken and Waco and hopefully the new game project feeding back into a much larger awareness of what can be done both with gaming and art.

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Thomas Beard is a writer and curator of film and electronic art. From 2005-2006 he was Program Director of Ocularis, a non-profit media arts organization based in Brooklyn. Prior to that he served as a programmer at Cinematexas, and has organized screenings and exhibitions at such venues as Aurora Picture Show, Chicago Filmmakers, MassArt Film Society, Pacific Film Archive, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.