

Where do Virtual Corpses go

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present descriptions and theoretical concerns of mine in relationship to the game development-based visual work I have created during the last three years. These theoretical concerns revolve around issues relevant to contemporary digital art practice and commercial computer game development, as well as personal observations and motivations.

Keywords

Games, game development, game modification, intuitive visual gesture, visual product, mod, patch.

1. INTRODUCTION

My history is up for grabs. I will set up trade alliances, and enter into truces. Or will I just let my Babylonian Bowmen rain terror down on my enemies' heads. I will lead a team of specialists into an abyss of vast caverns, snake-like passageways and luring dead-ends. I will command squads with precision and power using a GPS, night-vision, battlefield computers, and modular body armor. My unique magic system allows me to change the spells and creatures I bring into battle each time. I will stay frosty as the world explodes around me and my mission goals change on the fly. I will customize my squad into specialized experts in snipercraft, demolitions, and stealth. I will tread lightly, the depths belong to twisted cults, mutants, and hideous creatures that were never meant to exist. I will catch all the rip-roaring action from film-quality multiple camera angles: cockpit, chase close, chase far, dash, television camera, sides, front, ground, sliding, and even skycam views. I will plow through snow packed roads, bust out from a wall of fog and be blinded by oncoming rain. All while piloting the most badass 'Mechs ever.¹

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¹ This statement was created with appropriated and reorganized game magazine advertisements.

2. MAIN TEXT

To begin, I would like to present an image of what could be called “digital folk art”. It was scavenged from a web site² that held a contest that asked visitors to create a fake screenshot for the upcoming game *Doom 3*³.



**Figure 1: anonymous, 2001
082200_doomfake_30.jpg
digitally manipulated photography**

It represents a common intuitive visual gesture among a generation that has grown up with computer games. This gesture is the simple visual juxtaposition of representations (in this case photographs) of objects and people present in the surroundings of the image creator with visual elements common in popular games. Assuming that the face and hands in the picture are those of the artist, the creator of this digital manipulated photographic image has created a visual scenario where the human computer interface present in popular computer game has become the interface for his daily life. This new interface serves as a filter to his world. It allows him the freedom to imagine interaction with the real world in a game-like manner. Orthodox American rules of morality do not apply in game space. Considering the image, he can wander the halls of his house with weapons, preparing to kill whatever may pass his way, whether it be his parents, his dog, etc. It is important to remember that this

² Shacknews, 2000

www.shacknews.com/screens.x/doom2k/Fake%2520Contest/1/fake.

³ ID Software, 2002, www.idsoftware.com

is only a representation. It is what I see as a teenager's healthy outlet for frustrations concerning social and domestic constraints. During my own teenage past, I remember sitting in the high school cafeteria, drawing images of mutilation and death. One image consisted of representations of the students that were higher in the social ladder than I, slumped over the tables with shotgun blasts in the back of their head.

First person shooter games did not exist at that time. If they did, and I had access to Photoshop, I am sure that I would have been creating images not unlike this one. To some extent that teenager, the one who made this image, and the one who I was, are my intended audience.

The first of a series of visual products I would like to discuss is *Adam Killer*, (1999-2001). *Adam Killer* is a series of eight conversions of the popular first person shooter game *Half-Life*⁴. Computer game conversions are known in the game development industry as "mods". According to artist/curator Anne Marie Shleiner, a "mod" or "patch" can be described in the following manner:

"Beginning with add-on levels for bloodthirsty first person shooters a new kind of popular art form has emerged on the Internet that fuses the tactics of the hacker with the sensibility of the avid gamer. A patch (or a skin, a wad, a mod, a map or a shape) is an add-on to an existing game engine that alters the original code or state of a computer game. A patch can range from a simple repair of an error in the original game to elaborate manipulation and customizing of graphics, sound, game play, physics, code, architecture or other attributes of the original computer game."⁵



Figure2: Brody Condon, 1999-2001
Adam Killer: Machine Gun
Computer Game Conversion

In *Adam Killer*, my modifications included creation of the environment the player moves through, otherwise known as a "level", as well as the creation of the 3d character model Adam.

⁴ Valve Software, 1998 www.valvesoftware.com

⁵ Anne Marie Schleiner, 1998

Parasitic Interventions: Computer Games as Hacker Art
www.opensorcery.net

The player/performer navigated through the game "level" filled with multiple copies of the same Adam character standing "idle" on a white plane. I chose an acquaintance named Adam Frelin as a model for the character specifically because he commonly wore white clothing. White was an aesthetic decision, I felt it visually contrasted well with blood. As the characters were shot and bludgeoned with various weapons, an exploited glitch in the game's level editing software⁶ created a harsh trailing effect. This turned the environment into a chaotic mess of bloody, fractured textures.

In April 1999, in the now famous Columbine incident, two teenagers stormed their high school with assault weapons and killed several of their fellow students and wounded many others. Their actions, weapons, and speech mimicked elements from popular computer games.

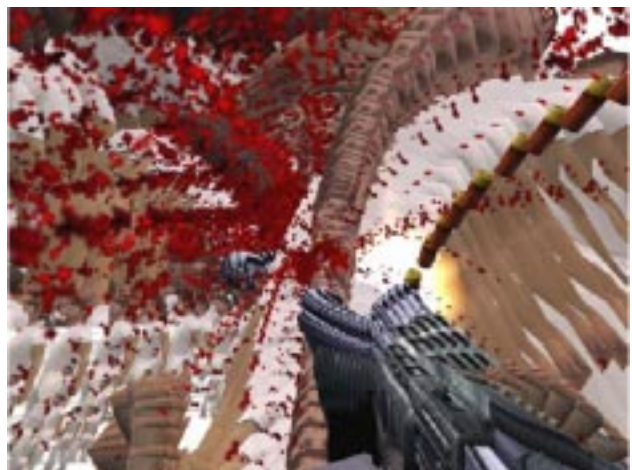


Figure 3: Brody Condon, 1999-2001
Adam Killer: Shotgun
Computer Game Conversion

"It's going to be like fucking Doom. Tick, tick, tick, tick Hah! That fucking shotgun is straight out of Doom!"⁷

The two teenagers responsible for the murders of their classmates *performed* what the anonymous creator of the fake screenshot *represented* in his image. The two actions – the creation of the image, and the murder in a high school – are also opposites of the same action; the simple juxtaposition of game space and real space. If the former action was the mixture of game elements and real representations in game space, the latter was a mixture, or a "mapping", of game elements and real elements in real space. One simply requires a different set of circumstances and sociopathic tendencies.

Adam Killer was the third and most successful in a series of intuitive attempts at game modification that turned out to be very

⁶ At the time of this paper, shareware called *Worldcraft* was the standard level editor for *Half-Life*

⁷ Eric Harris, From a videotape made right before April 1999

similar in structure to the fake screenshot image. It was a simple placement of photography of real elements, in this case the character Adam, into a computer game environment.

This placement begins to question the separation between the two worlds, and lays bare the effects of interactive media saturation on American youth culture.

In *Adam Killer*, there is also the added element of formal exploration of game development technologies such as C++ code, digital images, and polygonal 3d models as a medium. The type of exploration of these technologies that most interests me are those that deconstruct the visuals of the game in a post-psychadelic manner. Many of these visual products have ties to contemporary club culture.

Here, I am specifically referring to conversions of the RC racer game *RC Re-volt*⁸ by Retroyou from Barcelona like *Retroyou r/c*, (2001)⁹.

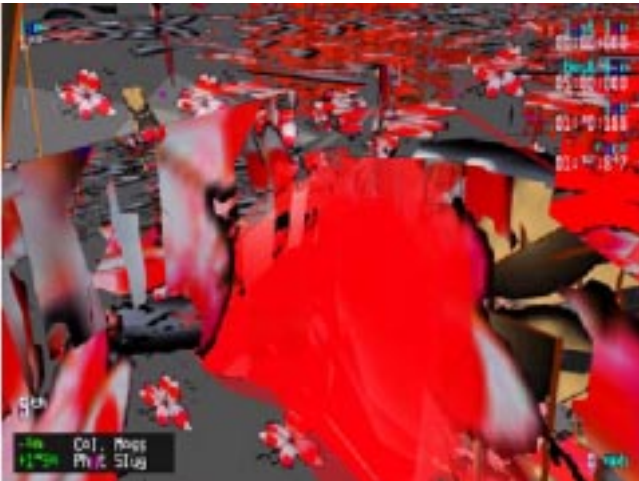


Figure 4 : Retroyou, 2001
Retroyou r/c
Computer Game Conversion

This type of work is fairly common, and represents an ongoing visual dialogue concerning attempts to deconstruct drivers, hardware, and game engine code. This dialogue occurs through a loose network of web exhibitions like www.selectparks.net, workshops, club events, and online forums like www.rhizome.org. Other artists, such as Beige¹⁰, are mixing this kind of hardware and software deconstruction with nostalgia by digging into older generation game platforms like the Atari 2600

⁸Acclaim, *RC Re-volt*, 2000 www.acclaim.com/games/re-volt/gameinfo.html

⁹Retroyou, www.retroyou.org/retroyou_RC_full_radioControl/reVision_why.htm

¹⁰Beige Programming Ensemble, Fat Bits, 2001 Looping real-time animations generated from re-programmed 8-Bit Nintendo cartridges www.beigerecords.com/cory/make-world/info.html

and the original Nintendo. My current addition to this dialogue is *c0a0*, (2002), a deconstruction of the intro sequence for *Half-Life*. The name of the original file which holds the intro sequence environment is *c0a0.bsp*. I have also created several levels to take advantage of the code changes. The most famous glitch that several of these formal deconstructions use is the “leak”. Due to the early limitations of 3d game engine technology, 3d games started as enclosed mazes. Every piece of a game “level” that the player could inhabit must be enclosed by 3d geometry. The “leaks” are parts of a level left open. With no texture or geometry to render, the computer hardware and drivers are confused about what to represent on the screen. This creates the harsh trailing effect exploited in *Adam Killer* and *c0a0*.



Figure5: Brody Condon, 2002
c0a0
Computer Game Conversion

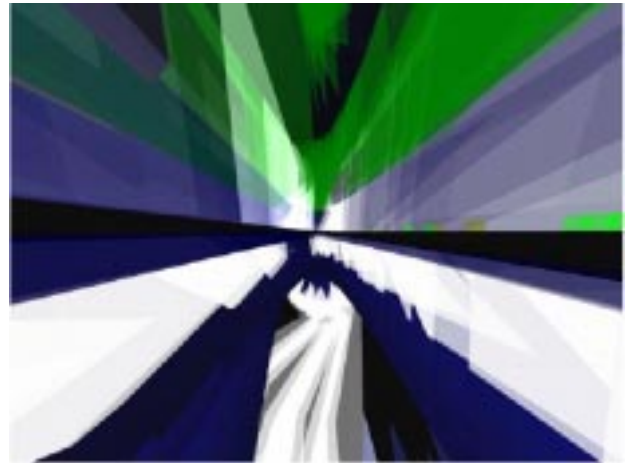


Figure 6: Brody Condon, 2002
c0a0:Blue Room
Computer Game Conversion

In previous work, I took a different approach to this series of game development work. One that has evolved from the history

of performance art. Interventions within online game space have become a common practice for artists. This strategy allows artists the freedom to experiment with the social spaces created by online gaming, and allows the artist to quickly investigate other issues that relate to gaming and culture without having to learn the complex technology it takes to build a game.

Worship (2002) is an intervention within the massively multi player online role-playing game *Anarchy Online*¹¹. To create *Worship*, I chose one of several preset avatar animations or “emotes” that are available to player characters: the worship.



Figure 7: Brody Condon, 2001
Worship: Syluus
Online Game Performance

I arranged the avatar that I was projecting myself in such a way so that it faced out of the screen towards my physical self. I then triggered a short script or text document with code instructions, a common practice in the game called a “macro” to make the character quickly perform a series of actions. It made my character repeatedly perform a worship animation. I then continuously typed, “I worship you.”, and followed it with, “Worship me.” This action created an emotionally compelling loop in which the character that I was projecting myself into was worshipping me, and was also asking me to worship it.

At the same time, I was typing, so I was telling the avatar I worshipped it, as well as asking it to worship me. In this strange ritual I was unsure exactly which manifestation of my identity was worshipping, as well as what it is worshipping. The performance became a strange division of self, destabilizing my identity. Worship and ritual are one place where we stabilize our identity by placing it in relationship to the rest of the world, and especially to an unknown which is considered by some the “ultimate truth”. I have documented *Worship* with several different avatars in an attempt to create more visual interest. Issues surrounding the avatar and identity have been well played out, but I feel it is necessary for me to add to the dialogue. The

¹¹ FunCom, 2001 www.anarchy-online.com

relationship between my physical self and the representation on the screen that I project myself into is a symbiotic one. The actual presence being something new, somewhere in between.

It is important to note that the computer games that I modify or intervene within are games that I am playing at the time. During play, I begin to notice places where I can use that game for another purpose. *Gunship Ready*, (2001) is documentation of a series of five interventions within the first person online shooter *Tribes 2*¹².



Figure 8: Brody Condon, 2001
Gunship Ready
Online Game Performance

Normal game play consists of two sides of thirty people controlling one warrior each connected to the same server. The two sides battle for control of flags at two bases. My collaborator, John Brennan (aka BigJB) and I (aka Sylo), piloted a transport ship which kidnapped warriors and took them on a tour of the landscape far away from the battle. Eventually the kidnapped victims realized their fate. They could not get back to the battle site unless they died and were “respawned”. The result is the characters were all forced to commit suicide (ctrl-k).

The “respawn” is a common phenomenon in computer games. It is closely related to the idea of reincarnation or resurrection. It is a familiar convention that game play is started and played until an event causes the player character to “die” or lose. If lost, the game restarts, either at the beginning of play, or at some point near where the player was before he/she was unable to successfully progress in the game narrative. The term “respawn” is used specifically in arena based online multiplayer games like *Quake 3: Arena*¹³ where the fighting goes on continuously by opponents randomly joining and leaving at random intervals. The goal is to have the highest score gained from killing opponents. When the representation of the warrior that the player projects

¹² Sierra, 2001 <http://tribes2.sierra.com/>

¹³ ID Software, 1997 www.idsoftware.com

himself into is reduced to negative “health”, that player is considered dead, and then is “respawned” somewhere else in the fighting arena. Due to this fact, death takes on a new experience. It is physically painless, and you are immediately resurrected. Also, in many games, key commands to commit suicide are built into the game structure, and are equally without much consequence.



Figure 9: Brody Condon, 2001
Gunship Ready
 Online Game Performance

It is exactly this change in the value of death in the game space that I am interested in. If Adam Killer was an exploration of the value of death enacted on characters and avatars other than the game player, *Gunship Ready* is an investigation of the value placed on the player’s own character. The intensity of the loss of the value of death regarding suicide becomes apparent in the following example from the documentation. QuandaryOne, a *Tribes 2* player, asks for assistance finding the suicide command, is helped, and responds in the chat window with a, “Thanks!”, immediately after shooting himself in the head. *Gunship Ready* is an attempt to exploit the boundaries of the game to control the screen of other online players. It is interesting that this trespass on the sense of place of the kidnapped player crosses the line of proper game etiquette, but it seems natural for the players to commit suicide on a regular basis.

I would like to propose a ludicrous prophecy. The day will arrive that we as humans transcend our current consciousness, and realize the cycle of reincarnation that our lives happen to take. Realizing this, what will be the value of death? Will we happily shoot, bomb, crush, push over a cliff, or “frag” our friends for fun with a smile and a hearty, “See you in the next life.”?

Perhaps the most recent ultimate juxtaposition of game space onto real space has turned out to be the computer game *The Sims*¹⁴ by Will Wright with Maxis. The game is a suburban

domestic simulation. According to the creators of the game, it’s design was based on the structure of the doll house. It was conceived of as a personal narrative generator for the consumer. Game play begins with the menu based creation of family members and a modest suburban home. The player is then enticed to control the character’s everyday domestic actions: cooking, cleaning, getting a job, and going to the bathroom, etc.

White Picnic Glitch, (2001) is my series of twelve conversions of *The Sims*. The series is broken up into three thematic sets: White, Picnic, and Glitch. Each set has four pieces that have a duration of approximately three minutes each. Each section portrays aesthetically mutilated characters performing repetitive, useless, or indiscernible actions. The characters inhabit neighborhoods like White, which consist of sparse white spaces and grids. Those of Picnic are placed in a bucolic canyon park setting. The environments of Glitch are fractured, nonrepresentational spaces.

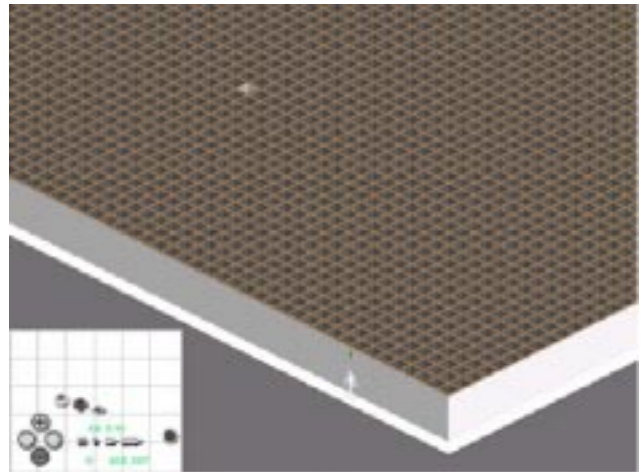


Figure 10: Brody Condon, 2001
White Picnic Glitch:
Man Outside Grid
 Computer Game Conversion

¹⁴ Wright and Maxis, 2001 <http://thesims.ea.com>



Figure11: Brody Condon, 2001
White Picnic Glitch: Canyon BBQ
 Computer Game Conversion

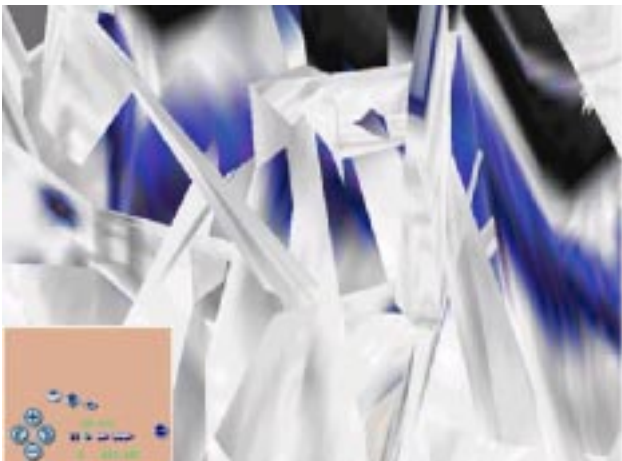


Figure 12: Brody Condon, 2001
White Picnic Glitch:
Self Portrait with Flowers 3
 Computer Game Conversion

Due to the nature of the game, the work is somewhere between a game modification and a game intervention. In some of the series I am constructing dysfunctional narratives; something the average consumer has done already¹⁵. I enjoy this play in the work being somewhere between fan art and a traditional visual arts product. In others parts in the series, I am reorganizing hexadecimal code, creating objects and animations, and altering 3d meshes to create

¹⁵ The Sims was based on the model of the dollhouse. Many of these consumer driven narratives are documented in web scrapbooks. <http://thesims.ea.com/us/index>.

twitching, fractured characters which fill the game space; technical skills beyond the realm of the normal consumer.

All of these works have led up to my most current project: *Chinatown*, (2002).



Brody Condon, 2002
 With assistance of Eric Cho and Sky Frostenson
Chinatown
 Computer Game Conversion

Chinatown was conceived as a site specific multi-player modification for the exhibition space Clevel in Los Angeles. C-level is located in the Chung King Road area of Los Angeles's Chinatown gallery district. In the past five years, several galleries that show mostly emerging artists have sprouted in the area. *Chinatown* is a simple juxtaposition of several elements. It is an evolution of my in-game portraiture that began with *Adam Killer*. It is also an evolution of my twitchy animation and dysfunctional AI experiments that began with *White Picnic Glitch*. It is also a comment upon the current gentrification process in the area, as well an attempt to understand the trauma and cultural change of the area's past. It is the most recent evolution of my experiments in the juxtaposition of real space and game space, and an emotional reaction to the site. The Chinatown gallery environment is a place the young artists wish to be a part of, but at the same time it holds the inescapable nature of art as business and relentless networking.

This ambitious project needed the help of two assistants, Sky Frostenson and Eric Cho, which was a necessary learning experience for me in the role of project superior. As my projects begin to get larger, I have begun to adopt the production strategies of game development companies. Organizing tasks and files for me and the assistants became a major learning process.

Chinatown is a game that is not player controlled, rather, all interactivity is internal and randomly controlled by "bots". These artificially intelligent "bots" also function as portraits of friends as they aimlessly wander around the game space twitching. The piece can be set up as a two PC local area network, one runs the server, and one runs the projector output.



Figure 13: Brody Condon, 2002
With assistance of Eric Cho and Sky Frostenson
Chinatown
Computer Game Conversion



Figure 14: Brody Condon, 2002
With assistance of Eric Cho and Sky Frostenson
Chinatown
Computer Game Conversion

It can also be set up with several machines, the other machines are for the audience to look through the eyes of the bots if they wish. The user can look around as the bot moves, but not effect its movement. The technology that I manipulated in Chinatown to allow spectators to view the internal artificially intelligent bot interaction was coined “Multicast Spectator Tech” by Valve’s project leader Erik Johnson:

“The Multicast Spectator Mode is designed to allow thousands, if not millions, to watch a single multiplayer match,” explains Johnson.

“Spectators can access a single game, giving them the opportunity to learn gameplay elements, study individual and team strategies, or simply enjoy the action.”¹⁶

As mentioned before, *Chinatown* viewers can only interact with the game in this “spectator mode”. Much in the same way the Chung King gallery visitor can only operate in a mode of spectatorship. In game space, the galleries in the area have been removed. This can be seen as a gesture to return the area to its pre or post-galleried state. I have also taken the meditative, stereotypical Chinese music and random sounds from the area to map the sound of the real space into game space as well.

It is important to note the experiential component that all of these elements created. The viewer experienced the movement from the actual crowded Chung Kind Road area to the calm, dark C-level exhibition space dominated by a projection of the game representation of the area. This type of experiential site specific installation structure is an important component that has carried over from my performative sculptural installation work from before 1999.

In each of these works, I have invested myself in the creation of alternative possibilities for game development technology beyond the commercial sphere. Each piece is a meditation on a different manifestation of dysfunction and its relationship to a contemporary culture that is becoming dependent on interactive screen based representations of its environment.

¹⁶ James Ham, 2001. Gamespy.com article on multicast technology. <http://gamespy.com/articles/june01/>

