

intellect Book Focus

Videogame Art Challenging and Provocative

By Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke

Although a comparatively new medium, videogames have rapidly emerged to become an established cultural form, taking their place alongside television and film. Yet while television and film are now, for the most part, acceptable to all, videogames retain an air of danger and degeneracy and are frequently vilified in public debates about the state of society.

Given this mix of popularity and controversy, it is inevitable that artists have looked to videogames as both their inspiration and their source material. Using the iconography of videogames in artworks is as old as videogames themselves, but a growing number of artists are using the videogames themselves as their artistic medium.

Some do this through writing art videogames from scratch (such as Thompson and Craighead's *Trigger Happy*); others hack videogame hardware such as Game Boy consoles (for example, Paul Catanese's *Super Ichthyologist Advance*); yet others take existing games – usually FPS (“first-person shooter”) games such as *Quake*, *Unreal* or *HalfLife* and modify these. This latter type of work, created by modifying existing games, is usually referred to as ‘mod art’ and is the most visible form of videogame art. The reasons for this are easy to understand: FPS games provide the artist with a formidable set of features including a real-time 3-D ren-

dering engine with equally realistic 3-D surround sound and a powerful scripting language, and the applications used to modify the games are relatively easy to master.

Mod art has sometimes been described, derogatively, as ‘parasitical’ as it relies on commercial videogames, but this description ignores both the practicalities and aesthetics of digital art in general. It, too, is reliant upon proprietary applications (such as Flash or Photoshop) and likewise has elements of appropriation (with or without manipulation) which although they have been around since Duchamp – if not earlier – have come into their own with digital technologies. Digital art presents inherent problems if judged by traditional aesthetic criteria (particularly those which emphasize ‘originality’, ‘uniqueness’ and ‘the hand of the artist’). This does not mean, however, that digital art is invalid; instead, it means that the criteria of assessment need to be re-thought when applied to digital works (including videogame art).

So rather than regard mod art as ‘parasitical’, we feel it is more correct to describe it as a virus that produces mutations in its host. Mod artists have found ways to subvert and modify every aspect of the game. They have placed themselves in the game (as in Feng Mengbo's *Q4U*); they have turned games into abstract patterns (Jodi's *Untitled Game* series) or

musical instruments (Julian Oliver's *QTO*); they have created virtual galleries (Fuchs and Eckermann's *Virtual Knowledge Space*) and recreated real galleries (Bernstrup and Torsson's *Museum Meltdown* series).

But it is not just the diversity of the works produced that makes videogame art so interesting. Every example of videogame art is a liminal work as it lies – by definition – at the border between the commercial videogame and the artistic world. This introduces a creative and intellectual tension within the works which is often lacking in other forms of digital art production.

Videogame artists routinely use their work to critique the games that they use both as medium and raw material and to provocatively

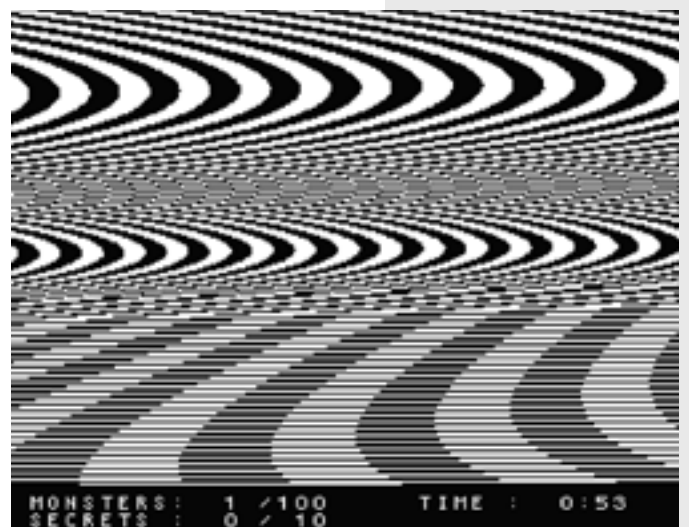
Below

Escape from Woomera
by Julian Oliver and others

Potsdamer Platz
by Tobias Bernstrup

Bottom

Untitled Game by Jodi
(Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans)



iQuote » “All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical.” – Marshall McLuhan

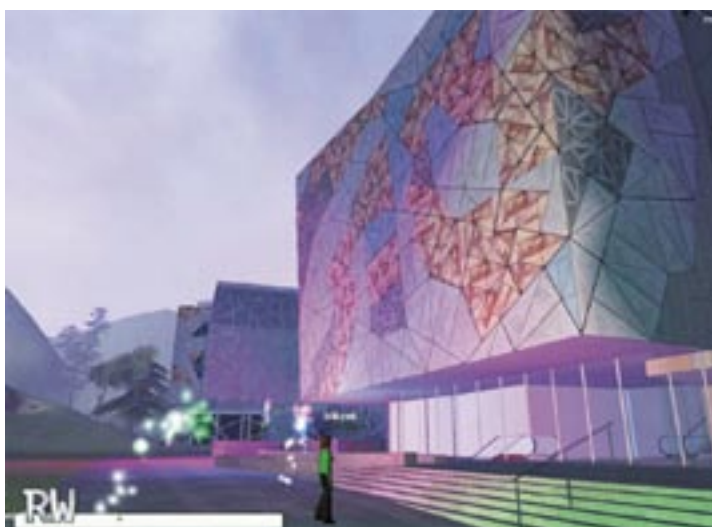
‘Videogame art is becoming more widely exhibited including in major public galleries with many of the artists now having gallery representation and being collected both by major institutions and by private collectors.’

question our relationship to these games. Often they will ‘play’ with the viewer of the artwork – inviting them to interact, but then frustrating their play or actively critiquing their reasons for playing or enjoying videogames in general. Other strategies include producing video installations which highlight the repetitiveness or vacuity of videogames (such as Brody Condon’s *Suicide Solution* or Stephen Honegger’s *Three Hour Donut*).

But videogame art is not only introspective and self-referential: a substantial number of artists have used games to comment on political and social issues, or on real-life events. Examples of this include *Escape from Woomera* (by Julian Oliver and others), *Dead in*

Iraq by Joseph Delappe and *Waco Resurrection* (by Eddo Stern, Brody Condon and others).

Just as videogames have entered the cultural mainstream, so videogame art is becoming a recognized part of the art world. Videogame art is becoming more widely exhibited including in major public galleries – such as the Whitney, the Stedelijk and the SF MOMA – and many of the artists involved now have gallery representation and are being collected both by major institutions and by private collectors. We anticipate that this interest will grow and that videogame art will continue to evolve whilst remaining a challenging and provocative alternative to commercial games. ●



Above acmpark by Julian Oliver and others

FURTHER READING

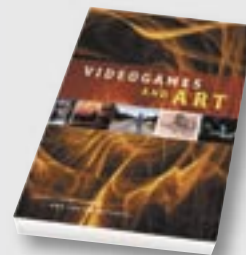
Videogames and Art

Edited by Andy Clarke & Grethe Mitchell
£29.95 / \$55 ISBN 9781841501420

Videogame art is a rapidly emerging genre of digital art and a flourishing area of both critical attention and academic study. A growing number of artists are appropriating the technology and iconography of videogames and their work is being shown in – and collected by – major art institutions worldwide.

This book features interviews with many leading videogame artists, as well as with emerging figures in the field. Others provide essays on areas such as games-console hacking and politically-oriented videogame art which draw on the insights and experience gained from their own artistic practice. There are in-depth analyses of specialist areas such as *machinima* and contextualizing essays which trace the history of videogame art or draw parallels between the aesthetics of videogames and other forms of art.

Overall, this book provides a thorough, yet accessible, introduction to videogame art and will be of interest to all of those interested in the field of videogames.



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