



**Rebecca Cannon's Paper was delivered at *Plaything*;
The Language of Gameplay 2: artist presentations.**

The Language of Gameplay 2: artist presentations

Artists are incorporating various types of gameplay into their practice resulting in new hybrid forms.

Leon Cmielewski (Aus)

GameArt: playing to lose

Laurens Tan (Aus)

The minute you walked in the joint...

Rebecca Cannon (Aus)

Introduction to game modification

Artists Presentations – SelectParks

Rebecca Cannon

SelectParks.net.

SelectParks is an artistic team from in Melbourne working with computer game technologies. The online incarnation of SelectParks is a website that provides a central resource for the international community of artists working with computer games. My involvement with SelectParks is as the curator of the online archive of artworks made using computer games. So, although I'm here for an artists' presentation, the works I'll be discussing are those in the SelectParks archive rather than my own, or SelectParks' creative endeavours.

The SelectParks website contains valuable resources for artists such as a collection of relevant theoretical articles, links to conferences and exhibitions, links to modding tools, a forum, an email list, and the very popular game art archive. All aspects of the site are always open to submissions.

The archive is over two years old and has over eighty artworks in it. The earliest game mod in it is a decade old, which is quite interesting given that most of the works have only been made in the last three years, and game modding has only recently received recognition as a contemporary art form. We are the only international collection of artistic computer game modification. I'm often asked how we define what goes in the archive and what doesn't, since all games can easily be defined as art, and there are a huge number of game mods that are very creative but are not listed in our archive. Primarily, it comes down to the intention of the mod maker. Many modders are 'gamers' and don't want to be identified as 'artists' – hence although their work would be suitable for our archive, they aren't interested in having their work contextualized within the framework of contemporary art. Most of the work in the archive is by artists who use games as an artistic medium. There are many interesting artworks, such as music and paintings that address games and gaming, which we don't include in the archive because they do not directly interrogate the formal qualities of computer games as an artistic medium. There are also a huge number of highly creative and experimental games that we don't include because they are well supported elsewhere on the web. Also, we have to draw some boundaries for ourselves.

Although we call it an archive, it isn't really one in the strictest sense of the word, since only a few of the artworks are hosted on the site. This for several reasons; bandwidth costs; some of the artists host their own work online; others don't want their work distributed. Also, some of the works cannot be archived because of the nature of the work - performative interventions, hardware hacks etc. For each work listed in the archive we include a description, image, title and link where available.

Trigger: Game Art.

As a curator my interest extends to all new media, however 2002 I curated an exhibition entitled Trigger: Game Art, which looked at a whole variety of digital media that had been inspired by computer games. The exhibition surveyed some of the effects that playing computer games throughout our childhood later had on us as artists. The exhibition overviewed the semiotic, aesthetic, psychological and phenomenological effects of games, such as methods of interactivity native to games, goal-oriented and competitive practice as an aesthetic experience, game technologies being employed for other artistic purposes, the audio-visual aesthetics of games influencing other media etc.

Game Art Genres.

Common to digital media, two main distinctions between types of game art can be made; those that are interactive, and those that are not. Various subgenres exist within these two categories.

Non-Interactive	Interactive
Machinima <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Made with 3d game engine.- Mostly narrative.- Some experimental non-linear narrative.- Can be distributed as a video file or as a game-play script with maps that plays back inside the game. Abstract <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Although non-interactive to show, significantly interactive to make.- Usually involves some degree of technical ability – remaking maps, using in-game console to control the image, and/or hacking the engine. Console mods <ul style="list-style-type: none">- I know of at least one non-interactive mod, but these are unusual.	Abstract <ul style="list-style-type: none">- As with non-interactive abstracts, but can be played with! Site-specific installations / site-relative mods <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Usually maps replicating a gallery environment. Site-specific when installed at the location. Online/Performative interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Performances and other interventions, usually in online games, usually disruptive. Hardware mods/hacks <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consoles or emulators. Realtime performance instruments <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Using the game as a musical/video/physical performance instrument.

Non-Interactive.

Machinima.

Of the non-interactive works, the most prevalent is machinima, literally *machine animations*. I've been asked to focus on this type of game art as Josephine thought that people might be less familiar with it. The SelectParks archive does not specialize in machinima, however we do have examples of experimental types. Machinima.com is the best resource online¹. There are two methods of machinima production. To make a broad generalization, the two communities of machinima makers - gamers and artists - tend to stick to one or the other method. Hardcore machinima involves making completely new models and maps in the game, and recording the animation as a gameplay script. Understandably, this is the method preferred by gamers. Gameplay scripts can be distributed as relatively small files online, with maps and models if necessary, and loaded into a viewer's local copy of the game. An interesting aspect of this format is that it is dependent on the game for playback. The other method is a more traditional animation technique; a script is acted out in the game and recorded to video for post-production.

These machinima works are distributed as video files. Gamers tend to make more commercial styled, traditional narratives; artists tend to be more conceptual in their approach. These are broad generalizations though; Quake Backwards is a work available at machinima.com, made by gamers. In it, the game quake unfolds from the completion of the hardest level backwards through a series of rebirths to the start of the game. There are some great experimental pieces by gamers explore non-linear narratives, which is understandable given the gaming influence on the works.

Randall Glass. Warthog Jump: A Halo Physics Experiment (2002).

This work is more experimental than most machinima. It draws attention to the role of sound in game narrative. The cultural artifacts from which audio samples are appropriated serve as examples of popular entertainment forms where violence is indulged in as compelling, pleasurable, narrative content. There are some lovely, non-game-like transitions. The mise-en-scene indulges in the dynamics of gameplay and game physics. *Warthog Jump* is available at machinima.com as either a .pak or .mov².

Linda Erceg. Skin Pack (Australia 2000).

Skin Pack consists of a two channel video installation depicting four Quake 2 bots with nude skins, in various poses, doing not much other than occasionally shooting clones of themselves to smithereens, and at other times masturbating with their plasma guns. Sound effects in the piece are sampled from porn movies. The camera work in *Skin Pack* does it's best to make the nudity of these characters as confrontational as it can, skirting around and even right into the vagina of one of the models.

As a non-interactive installation, in the context of an art gallery, these images become the content of critical theory and do not illicit the same response we might have to them when witnessed in the context of gameplay. *Skin Pack* asks us to question what motivations players have to make and use naked skins. In traditional porn, as in traditional film, it is common for the viewer - the subject - to obtain sexual arousal through visual and imagined exploitation of the sexual object; usually a female on screen. While this subject-object relationship remains latent in games, the 'objectification' of the sexual target is complicated by the user's interactivity, which causes the player characters to become subjectified as an extension of the player. The naked chick being blown to smithereens in a game is no longer a simple 'other' – she is now a virtual mirror of aspects of the player. When *Skin Pack*'s bots kill their own clones, they metaphorically symbolize the player's investment-of-self in their sexual target. *Skin Pack* suggests that as viewer-players we are now experiencing a new model of voyeurism, one that is not as easily understood by traditional feminist critiques of porn³.

Tobias Bernstrup (Sweden, Germany 1999-).

Tobias Bernstrup is a Swedish born musician, performer and installation artist. His work addresses issues surrounding the construction of identity through virtuality. His machinima works vary from DVD loops intended for installation projection in a gallery, to music videos for his electro pop tracks. A common theme in his work is the representation of himself as a super star; in *Polygon Lover* masturbating his avatar which has the body of a curvaceous female, but his own head; in *Penthouse Idle*, as one of several sexy, stylish but melancholy characters performing "idleness" around a penthouse swimming pool.

Bernstrup's fascination with artificial surfaces, fetishes and transgender themes are as much an influence on the virtual representations of himself as they are on his real life persona as the mediated character. The constructions of real Bernstrup and virtual Bernstrup walk hand in hand through a narcissistic feedback loop. Skins designed for his avatar have become his live performance outfits.

The emotional ambience he desires for his live performances informs the rhythm and aesthetics of his video works. The combination of real, virtual and mass-mediated publishings of Bernstrup effectively document “the inevitability of re-presentation in a media and consumer culture” (Selfware, Austria 2003)⁴. The reciprocating forces of desire, imagination, and realization affecting Bernstrup’s virtual and real selves symbolize the new freedoms for construction of identity granted to us as virtual entities in all types of mediated networks, not only virtual environments.

Berstrup has produced few machinima works since 2000. He is now living the life of the pop star that he created in his artworks. He tours regularly and has released his first non-limited-edition CD. He has fulfilled the fate that he wrote for himself in his game mods. In a way he has used game modding as an existential tool to co-author his destiny – extending one of the key attractions of game play to real life⁵.

Brody Condon. *Worship* (USA 2001).

The last machinima that I will talk about is *Worship* by Brody Condon. Originally it was a performative intervention into the MMORPG Anarchy Online, however it is documented and distributed as a type of machinima. By rewriting the code of his avatar’s behaviours, Brody was able to turn his avatars around to face him, and worship him, as their god. *Worship* illustrated that it is through the language of code that we embody our will in a virtual entity who is at once separate from us, and, through the extended enactment of our will, a part of us. So successfully does this intervention symbolize the god-like authority granted to users over their virtual slaves that I barely need mention it. *Worship* was also a sci-fi styled metaphor for the anthropological evolution of cultural entities – whether virtual or real – to a level of consciousness from which they can perceive an outside force affecting their behaviour and world conditions.

Like many mods that have hacked an online game to achieve greater capacity for user authorship of activities in the game, *Worship* highlights the co-authorial attraction of games as an interactive entertainment media.

Non-Interactive.

Abstract/ed Animations.

The next form of non-interactive mods I’ll discuss are abstract animations. Although they use similar techniques to machinima, they are not usually referred to as machinima because of the lack of narrative. They are often employed as ambient visuals. *Glanzol* by Glaznost⁶ and *q3apaint* by delire⁷ are two beautiful examples – there are many out there. Both of these involved the artists either making or hacking a map to then output and record visuals from. Glaznost also make the original *Glanzol* map available for download, so it can also be found in either an interactive or non-interactive form.

Brody Condon. *c0a0* (USA 2002).

This example is *c0a0* by Brody Condon. He hacked the engine to deconstruct the intro cinematic to half-life. This is an excerpt from a 12-minute piece.

Non-Interactive.

Consol Mods.

The last category of non-interactives is console mods. I only know of one work – *Video Ravings* by Cory Arcangel. This work used a hacked Mario 2 cartridge on NES, the objective of the game being that instead of dreaming about the princess, Mario dreams about going to a rave. Thus, as soon as the game starts, the objective is completed when some rave-like glitched up visuals appear. I don't have an image, but insert some random 8-bit pixels into your imagination here⁸.

Interactive.

Abstract/ed Interactives.

The first form of interactive works I'll discuss are abstract interactives. These usually employ deconstructive techniques to further explore the mechanics of the game, and expose the true/hidden power of the game over the player. They usually require some degree of technical proficiency to execute.

Leading the field in the complete reduction of navigational cues in a 3D game are Dirk Paesmans and Joan Heemskerk, aka JODI. Their three game mods, *ctrl-space* (1998), *sod* (1999), and *untitled game* (2002) were built on the Wolfenstein and Quake 1 engines. For each piece, JODI have hacked various aspects of the game engine to produce standalone games that are hardcore minimalist reductions of the original 3D parent games. These range from the 'Arena' level which is nothing but a stark, blindingly white 'space', without a single distinguishable visual spatial cue; through to levels which are chaotically shifting shapes, producing hallucinatory op-art effects as one tries to move about.

These mods illustrate the function of game-play as being inextricably linked to an apparatus – the game program – that is implicit in the determination of user freedom. Although a player may be granted certain liberties to explore virtual worlds, adopt different personalities, make decisions and discover secrets, these options remain carefully tested and calculated parameters. Jodi's work is an excellent example of the potential for reductive techniques to impose upon us an awareness of the cognitive processes being affected by the artificial physics of virtual worlds⁹.

Interactive.

Site Specific / Site Relative.

Site specific and site relative interactives often replicate the gallery/exhibition space as a map inside the game. Participants are forced to consider the real environment in the terms of game logic, and vice versa. These works provide a fantastic opportunity to compare differences between real and virtual world physics, architecture and behaviours; and our corresponding expectations of and responses to these.

Chris Cornish. Repeater (UK 2002).

Chris Cornish's *Repeater* series is one example of many such works. He rebuilt a series of museums, including the Tate Modern¹⁰. (Tate Modern is only site relative, as it hasn't been shown there yet). These works are often the first introduction that audiences have to game art. When site-specific mods are set in fine art museums, it is really fun to run around inside the game shooting expensive art to pieces.

Eric Cho. Cyber Café Killers (USA 2002).

Another example of a site-specific work was *Cyber Café Killers* by Eric Cho. Significant in this work is the site it reproduces; a networked gaming environment, which, by its nature, is already infused with a psychological association to the thrill of game play. In *Cyber Café Killers*, players kill their opponents who sit with them in the café, as they would in any normal networked gaming LAN. However this virtual reproduction is a catalyst to a psychological experiment. *Cyber Café Killers* engages standard emotional responses gamers have to the proximity and reality of their opponents, and then amplifies these responses: firstly by making players consciously aware that these responses exist, and secondly by providing them the opportunity to test the extent to which these responses can be manipulated.

Stephen Honnegger and Anthony Hunt. Container (Australia 2002).

Container by Stephen Honnegger and Anthony Hunt, which is on show at the MCA for Prima Vera, is a site specific installation in which a constructed full scale replica of a shipping container houses a machinima projection. The machinima narrative reveals the curious origins of the container, whilst also depicting a sinister and unsettling event that took place in the gallery. This work elicits an exciting response in viewers whose physical reality seems for a moment to be completely merged with the virtual story. The viewer's fear responses rupture Newtonian physics as our subjective extension into virtual reality takes on solid, emotional resonances.

Mike Caloud, Jeff Cole, John Brennon and Aaron Kwon. 911 Survivor (USA 2003).

Another great site-relative mod is *911 Survivor*. Using Unreal Tournament, these gamers (they don't like being called artists) built the world trade centre into a game map, the moment after it was hit. A lone survivor walks around one of the top stories, contemplating his fate before jumping out of the building. Viewers cannot control the bot, but they can control their view of his fall, and they can jump with him. There are no competitive elements to this game. Most people who heard about this piece thought that it was a commercial game and were really pissed off. The guys who made the mod had to shut down their website because of the hosting bills they received in the few days after Brody and I spoke about the work at Siggraph. We now host their site on SelectParks¹¹. The mod, which runs in Unreal Tournament 2003 is also available¹².

Interactive.**Console and emulator hacks and mods.**

These usually mean changing an existing game, but can also mean making a new game, e.g. rewriting the code of a GameBoy emulator, or re-wiring the circuit board of a Nintendo Entertainment System.

Cory Arcangel, Beige. I Shot Andy Warhol (USA 2002).

One of my favourite works, which was shown in Australia recently at Electrofringe, is *I Shot Andy Warhol* by Cory Arcangel/Beige (2002)¹³. Cory rewrote the game Hogan's Alley, which runs on NES and uses the interactive light gun. Although the target of the game is Warhol, other characters such as the Pope, Flavour Flav and Col. Sanders also make appearances. The rules of the game become difficult to determine as Warhol takes on the appearance of the other characters, and others mimic him. The game logic dissolves into pandemonium in a manner reminiscent of Warhol's own impact on fine art institutions.

Carbon Defense League. Super Kid Fighter (USA 1999).

Another of my favourite works in this genre is *Super Kid Fighter* by the Carbon Defense League. Having identified 12 year old boys as a target audience that is relatively difficult to disseminate subversive or counter-cultural information to, the CDL set out to disperse information through medium that this demographic was well familiar with – the GameBoy. They illegally burnt their own game *Super Kid Fighter* to GameBoy cartridges. The game involves a 12-year-old boy having to wag school, sell drugs, work for the mafia and kill a policeperson to reach the objective of the game – a new brothel that is offering free sex¹⁴.

Interactive.

Online Interventions.

Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, Joan Leandre. Velvet Strike (France/USA, 2002).

One of the most exciting types of artistic computer game modifications is online intervention. *Velvet Strike*, conceived by the French game maker Anne Marie-Schleiner, saw anti-war slogans being sprayed on to the walls of counter strike in various online games, much to the confusion of many gamers¹⁵.

Eddo Stern. Runners (USA 2002).

Runners by Eddo Stern saw three characters running endlessly through EverQuest. Using a custom-made triple mouse, gallery audiences were forced to make a decision about which character to embody and which to abandon, while a varying live web-audience of thousands follows their performance in the online game. *Runners* highlights the emotional potency of character-player allegiances.

Interactive.

Real Time Performance Instruments.

The final category of interactive is real time performance instruments. These are usually audio-visual generative units, either hardware or software, that are playable in much the same way as a musical instrument.

Delire (Australia 2000 -)

Quilted Thought Organ (which is included in the Playthings exhibition) comes into this category. Delire has hooked up audio samples of his music to geometric objects in his game map. *Qthoth* is played live at gigs, with both video and audio output as live a/v set¹⁶.

Another piece by Delire is *q3apd* which uses activity in QuakeIII as control data for the real time audio synthesis environment Pure Data. Multiple users can jam live in any quake map, using the dynamics of their gameplay as an audio instrument¹⁷.

Eddo Stern. Tekken Torture Tournament (USA 2001).

Tekken Torture Tournament is a modified Playstation that converts onscreen damage into electric shocks through player armbands. Although this work is technically complex, it employs a very simple scenario to illustrate one of the major attractions of games – the fictional nature of the violence. *Tekken Torture Tournament* makes a provocative contribution to the debate surrounding the sociological effects of game-violence by reminding us first hand that real pain hurts. It also sets up a compelling experiment for testing the affects of a forced synchronicity between virtual and physical experiences¹⁸.

C-Level. Waco Resurrection (USA 2001).

The final project I'll mention is *Waco Resurrection*, currently being produced by the C-Level team, (which includes Brody Condon and Eddo Stern). *Waco Resurrection* will be a complete 3D TPS (Third Person Shooter) multiplayer; the first chapter in a series called Endgames. Future EndGames will also focus on Heaven's Gate, The Unabomber, and Ruby Ridge.

C-Level hopes to release Endgames commercially. *Waco Resurrection* places all players in the role of David Koresh, each competing to die successfully as the true martyr.

The EndGames series attempts to incorporate elements of subjective documentary and experimental fantasy with new interactive technologies to create a visceral gaming experience focused on extreme psycho-social phenomena.

Ensnared in the custom "Koresh skin", players are bombarded with a soundstream of government "psy-operators", FBI negotiators, the voice of God and the persistent clamor of battle. Players must speak texts from the book of revelation, wield a variety of weapons from the Mount Carmel cache and influence the behaviour of both followers and opponents by radiating a charismatic aura.¹⁹

¹ <http://machinima.com/>

² <http://www.machinima.com/films.php?id=204>

³ http://nextwave.org.au/skinclub/skin_club.html

⁴ http://www.selfware.at/03/03games/index_e.html

⁵ <http://bernstrup.com>

⁶ <http://www.glaznost.com>

⁷ <http://locust.f0.am/delire/pxl/>

⁸ <http://www.beigerecords.com/cory/>

⁹ <http://jodi.org>

¹⁰ <http://www.talltrees.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.selectparks.net/archive/911survivor/index.html>

¹² <http://mildchoice.mine.nu/pub/>

¹³ <http://www.movingimage.us/alt/culture.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.carbondefense.org/downloads.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/>

¹⁶ <http://selectparks.net/archive/qthoth.htm>

¹⁷ <http://selectparks.net/archive/q3apd.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.c-level.cc/tekken1.html>

¹⁹ <http://waco.c-level.org/>