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Out of the box

A Los Angeles group brings games into the real world with three multimedia performances

By Ethan LaCroix

When it comes to today's video games, the key words are *blood* and *pain*. Gone are the days of *Double Dragon*, when onscreen characters (or "avatars") barely changed their facial expressions after getting hit, and every impact made the same whoosh-grunt sound. Today, if gamers don't see realistic blood splatter or hear a loud crack when a bone breaks, then it's kid stuff.

But now the Los Angeles–based "media lab" C-level is turning the tables on gamers. In a trio of wide-ranging multimedia performances taking place at the Kitchen this week, they make players endure the kind of pain they so glibly dispense, forcing them to perhaps recon-sider the implications of becoming immersed in a video trance.

In *Tekken Torture Tournament*, volunteers are wired to a modified PlayStation console running the popular fighting game *Tekken III*. The machine delivers shocks to electrodes strapped to the players' right arms when their onscreen counterparts are injured. "When the electrodes trigger, they cause a shock which most people interpret as painful," writes C-level, which speaks only as a collective and conducts interviews via e-mail. "The shock causes the arm to flex involuntarily. It becomes harder for

the injured player to fight back, as both the player and the avatar are injured." Surprisingly, the volunteers who participated in earlier performances in L.A., Texas, Israel and Australia seemed to be having fun. "After extensive beta testing at our lab, some of our members have come to enjoy [the shock]," writes C-level. "There is little danger of anyone being injured. We use a device that is medically approved for administering shock for either recreational use or muscle rehabilitation—yet we do require players to sign a release form. Just in case."

But *Tekken* isn't just fun for brave souls willing to strap on electrodes—it's a blast for onlookers as well. According to C-level, "We were amazed by the kinds of 'performances' people were giving while playing the game. The combination of the adrenaline flow, the competitive environment, the cartoon violence and the energy from the crowd seemed to inspire people into going totally over the top in the way they acted out the drama of fighting and being shocked."

After this initial success, C-level really made gamers come home to roost with the more comical *Cockfight Arena*. As with *Tekken*, players are drawn into the game, but this time, rather than feeling the pain of the avatars, volunteers dress like their onscreen counterparts: chickens. Players move the roosters using winged controllers while sporting feathered helmets. "We saw this as a novel way to articulate the relationship between the person who plays the game, the avatar that stands in for them and the complex process of identification that occurs when you play a video game," writes C-level. "Watch anyone cheering for a sporting team, betting on a horse or watching a rock band—on an unconscious level, they move their bodies as if they could physically affect the outcome of the event. By making the players wear bird suits that directly control the video-game birds, the game facilitates this impulse." Translation: Audience members love watching grown-ups run around like chickens with their heads cut off.

The third piece that C-level is bringing to the Kitchen is the world premiere of *Waco Resurrection*, a decidedly more somber, overtly political work. According to the group, "in 2003, the spirit of [David] Koresh and the Waco tragedy have become paradoxical embodiments of the current political landscape—Koresh is both the besieged religious other and the logical extension of the neoconservative millennial vision. Our primary focus is the hypocrisy and contradiction that permeate the Waco showdown." To drive this point home, visitors actually play David Koresh in a standard third-person shooter, in which they must defend the Branch Davidian compound from skeptics, government agents and other players also portraying Koresh, all while collecting followers. Unlike the other games, *Waco* does

not feature a spectator element. All visitors to the Kitchen (rather than just preselected volunteers) will get a chance to play—and grapple with what it means to enter the mind of a famous madman.

Of course, such lofty sociopolitical concepts would never stick with the average player unless these works were as amusing as they are thought-provoking. And in the end, it's the chance to have a little electronic fun that will bring gamers out of the house on a Saturday night.

The members of C-level will be speaking at the Kitchen (512 W 19th St between 10th and 11th Aves) on Thursday 9 at 6pm (\$8). *Cockfight Arena* is on Friday 10 at 8pm, *Tekken Torture Tournament* is on Saturday 11 at 8pm, and *Waco Resurrection* will be held Wednesday 15 through October 25. All game events are free, but reservations are recommended (212-255-5793). To participate in *Cockfight* or *Tekken*, call 212-255-5793, ext 10.