

## ■■■■■■■■■ Digital Games as High Art

“Anyone who understands nothing but chemistry doesn’t properly understand that either!” Whereas the cultural techniques of gameplaying, of manual production, of emulation, serialization and imitation, of scientific and philosophical practice were still not separate fields prior to modern times, Modernism has undertaken the demarcation of differences here and brings us—accelerated since the emergence of the computer game—as media-pedagogical attitude, the forcible separation of Serious Art and entertainment, of media art and the game as “industrial product.” As a matter of fact, games and e-toys are not pure play—has there ever been such a thing?—but rather inscribe themselves into the contexts of the technology of power, of the high-output dispositive, of the sciences of workplace efficiency and ergonomics, military strategy, cognition training and scientific evaluative processes. Artistic games like *Painstation* by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff (2001) allude to this. In this context, they redesign the perceptive and receptive register of *View, Gaze, Watch, Observe* etc. that has already been built into the process of watching movies and TV. And in this schooling of the senses, other traditional skills of gameplaying like reaction speed, manual dexterity and bluffing ability survive as well.

But what connects art and gameplaying? What are the new aspects and intensities, the *final frontiers*, of digital gameplaying culture? It has often been maintained that media art and network art are carrying on pure appropriation of the game matrix and are said to be processing it with their own procedures: aesthetic or contextual alienation (in the sense of putting something to a use other than the one for which it was intended), erosion of meaning, overstatement or paradoxification. And at first glance, that seems to be the case. The visual penetration into the space of images, sounds and signs, surfing in picture and text, activation of earcons and icons actually are reduced or converted in most artists’ games. In *Nybble Engine* (Margarete Jahrmann / Max Moswitzer, 2002), bots, textures, avatars and, ultimately, the ego shooter—the essence of the game genre itself—are recoded and reversed into their opposites. The process of breaking down the lavish optical-graphic play environments and landscapes, the reduction to simple basal forms and colors, the consistent emptying of visual and narrative content have already gone down in media history: in *Sod* (1999) Jodi reduce the surface textures of the game engine all the way down to a black-and-white format consisting of lines, while Milton Manetas, Arcangel Constatini and Vuc Cosic substitute text and/or typography for the game textures. But, historically speaking, this has constituted only one of many virtual strategies of artistic appropriation. In their work, Arcangel Constatini, Lars Zumbansen, Cory Arcangel, Tom Betts and many others programmatically adopt repetitive and modifying cultural techniques that in Western societies are basically considered a secondary processing procedure in that they raise re-narration, repetition and variant re-performance to the status of law. This game is played, so to speak, according to different rules. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves whether it is actually and exclusively a matter of quotation or of pastiche—stylistic imitation—when Yan Zhenzhong declares documentary camera images to be a game scenario (*Rice Corns*, 2000), the Stadtwerkstatt has its *Rolling Art™* bowling action oscillate between real space and monitor screen space as a politically interventionist game, and *SF Invader* lets the tiny figures of that legendary game reappear on building facades and street corners, or whether gameplaying and art can rather be understood as THE major and socially legitimated counterpoint to institutionalized everyday life, and, to put it more precisely, refer to the same political field and are nourished by the same sources.

The comparison between gameplaying and art is valid for the aspect of action and inter-

action as well if gameplaying is considered as a subjective act of creation (“Create Worlds!” was already the slogan of the game *Black & White*). After all, the attitude of gameplaying and that of the production of works of art characterize a procedure that, following the approach put forth by Levi-Strauss, can very well be characterized as “bricolage.” Uncompromising, intrepid combining and collage-making, handicrafting and testing, hobbyism and amateurism that aren’t constantly stealing furtive sidelong glances at media origins or materiality constitute an artistic attitude that is by no means new (consider, for example, the programmatic declarations of allegiance to the amateur format by Maya Deren or Jean-Luc Godard); nevertheless, to the extent of and with the simultaneous reference back to the collectivity / connectivity with which this is pursued in the hacker, cracker and gaming scene, it is a completely new phenomenon. Even the process of specification brought about by the modes and spatial dimensions of the game engine can be included in this surplus of gameplaying pleasure and experience. As the *Space Invaders*, among others, declare: “Simply put, the game engine is the specification of the world of the computer game in all of its physical aspects.”<sup>2</sup>

Game Patch Art (Brody Condon, Joan Leandre, Anne-Marie Schleiner and others) extends this principle to the practices of collecting, swapping and reinstalling that are common in the MOD and Machinimas communities, and constitutes a way of processing virtual textures and spaces based on circulation, exchange and communication<sup>3</sup>—thoroughly within the tradition of that principle of collecting and compiling textures, objects, ideas and texts that was also to be found in a number of Modernist genres and art scenes, and is subsumed under the practice of bricolage.

The fact that the result still bears within it the mark of the production process itself and the aesthetics of the material used or the adapted engines doesn’t disturb anyone; quite the contrary—this is integrated into the practice of production and presented with irony. This, in turn, corresponds to that “postmodern” attitude that Umberto Eco described with the term “serialization” as a Modernism-linked artform of repetition whose defining feature is said to be the coexistence within the work of repetition/iteration and innovation.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, pleasure is the upshot of this not only through the interplay of repetition and alienation but also especially in that the player sees through the rules of this game and even enjoys playing by them. “Trust no game engine! It could be a meta-level that possibly wasn’t edited completely or a fake that is now attempting to infiltrate your system in order to occupy and divert your own gameplaying energies! It is ultimately a non-playable level leading to a recursive labyrinth.”<sup>5</sup> Artists like Margarete Jahrmann, Max Moswitzer and Heiko Idensen often explicitly refer to the concept of coupling, which, in the contexts in which it is used in the writings of Norbert Wiener, among others, is attractive for network artists. “The concept of coupling,” as Jahrmann / Moswitzer wrote in the text accompanying their *Nybble Engine Project*, “has, with second-order cybernetics, general systems theory and radical/new constructivism, enormously increased in complexification and differentiation.”<sup>6</sup>

The independent game scene, which is interested in a new aesthetics, multi-modal narration options, mixed reality concepts and freeing the game from its industrial exploitation and narration contexts, has, in turn, mandated a number of exclusions (some serious, some of an ironic nature) whereby conventions beyond the realm of conventions have been formulated: 3-D graphic cards are forbidden, the usual genres and techniques (like cut scenes) are banned, the simple diametrical opposition of good and evil is ruled out of the game narrative, etc.<sup>7</sup> Members of this community like Dreaming Media do not, as a rule, consider themselves artists but their interventions operate in the same direction as art games. The fact that there also exist some commercial games that, even with respect to complex-



ity, outward appearance, polyvalence and degree of alienation, certainly can be allocated to the category of "high art" is made evident by *XIII* (Ubi Soft, 2003) and *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999ff.), games that I cite here as examples on the basis of their contrasting styles of visualization. Whereas *XIII* has a classic shooter in cell-shading look that evokes optical and narrative parameters of the comics and cites cinematic conventions while applying them to the panel structure and onomatopoeic dramaturgies of graphic stories, the *Silent Hill* series invents narratives and aesthetic scenarios that are obviously borrowed from dark Romanticism (H. P. Lovecraft), surrealism, splatter movies, avant-garde and underground filmmaking in equal measure. Both games are saturated with allusions to art and media history as well as with references to elements of the aesthetics of production and reception or those with which digital culture is rife. For example, *Silent Hill 2* operates with the virtual mirror image, an option that was not technically feasible for a long time but one that the game community was continually calling for. The spatial strategies of the two games provide another stark contrast. *XIII* repeatedly thrusts us out of pictorial space by making leaps back into the classic form of the comics or cartoons, its flatness, its fragmentation and flat linkage aesthetics, while the latest version of *Silent Hill* involves players in an ever-more-inscrutable and complexly interwoven referential thicket of closed circuit constellations and narrative fragments that even attack the figure of the avatar himself. Ultimately, there is one thing that computer games have always communicated: the art of communication and the productivity of errors. After all, didn't the classic game *Zork* bestow the following dialog upon us right at the outset of digital game-playing culture: "You are in the kitchen of the white house. A table seems to have been recently used for the preparation of food ... On the table is an elongated brown sack smelling of peppers. A bottle is sitting on a table ..." User: "Pick up." Program: "Pick up what?" User: "All but the sack." Program: "Kitchen table: an interesting idea ... Bottle: Taken."

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald



- 1 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg
- 2 Mertens, Matthias; Meißner, Tobias O., *Wir waren Space Invaders. Geschichten vom Computerspielen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002, p. 162. A comprehensive collection of artistic games is the subject of documentation and commentary in: *Games. Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen* (published by von hardware / Tilman Baumgärtel), Duisburg 2003
- 3 "A ring is a circular collection of sites all focused on a related topic. Each member of the ring typically displays a graphic, called a ring fragment, that will allow visitors to move forward and backward through the ring"; definition from: *Quake Engine Skin Artist ring site*.
- 4 Eco, Umberto, "Serialität im Universum der Kunst und der Massenmedien"; in: *ibid.*, *Streit der Interpretationen*, Konstanz 1987, pp. 49-65.
- 5 Idensen, Heiko: "Theorie Engines / Game Engines / Theorie Games", in: Jahrmann / Moswitzer, *Nybble-Engine-Project*, pp. 22-24, here: 24.
- 6 Jahrmann, Margarete; Moswitzer, Max: *Nybble-Engine-Project*, textbook 2002, p. 6.
- 7 Ernest W. Adams: *Dogma 2001*, cited in: *Games Odyssey*, TV feature, Part 4, D 2002, directed and conceived by Carsten Walter.