

Counterstrike Counterstruck: Plaything by
Leon Cmielewski & Josephine Starrs
Programming: Adam Hinshaw
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In the world of digital computer gaming it seems that there are two ways in. Either you're a player or a watcher: on the inside or the outside. But study the phenomenon a little more closely and it becomes apparent that the watching still takes place from within-the-within, as in-world metacommentary. Red v Blue, everybody's favorite critique of online gaming and internet culture, takes place, in character, as a series of machinemas, recorded live, in-game, from the set of Halo. Stephen Honegger's Suspect Device and Container are likewise machinemas, set-up scenarios from within his hacked gameworlds.

It appears it's near impossible to step outside the world's inside, to make a convincing work about digital gaming without being drawn in to their virtual worlds, without already being 'one of them' operating from the inside. How do you bridge this inside-outness, and bring the gameworld out of its solipsistic closure? Starrs and Cmielewski adopt a Derridean strategy. In his phrase, deconstruction works by stealth, an "invasion" or subversion which begins by "inhabiting from within": the "outside becomes the inside" in a destabilizing gesture in which the outside invades, turning the outside in. [Of Grammatology, 19-20].

Starrs and Cmielewski begin by constructing a game, complete with purpose-built console, but removed from the cosier confines of the living room TV or the personal pc (and the individual cell-like hives of pc rooms). Redesigned for public gallery space their ur-console played only one Meta or ur-game. Plaything thus initially, and innocently, brought the outside to the inside through the interface of a site-specific metagame, scaled to the installation space of the gallery.

Indeed, Plaything had to be a hands on affair, the engagement of playing bridging the two worlds of the real and digital gaming's virtuality. Otherwise Virilio's "identification with the vector", in which players actively merge into the gameplay assemblage, wouldn't take place. Only from inside the game can the outside commentary/critique achieve deconstruction's "invasion from within."

Plaything presents as straightforward. The gallery goer is invited to progress through the levels of this ur-game directly named on the buttons: Defend (repel the invading force), Wander (you acknowledge no border), Escape (flee from the area),

Colonise (grab the unprotected territory), and Petition (sway opinion towards your own position). Already the critique is underway. It's as if the metastrategies of Day of Defeat, Command and Conquer, Counterstrike, World of Warcraft, Runescape, Medieval Total War, Rome Total War, Barbarian Invasion, Grand Theft Auto et al have been extracted in a metagame in which the shared stakes of aggression and survival reveal a more implicit political agenda once Massively Multiplayer Online Games and Role Player Games have been stripped of their skins and narrative color. (Game-builders add their flavors – medieval, futuristic, ancient world, war histories – literally through a process of skinning, the 'wallpaper' of costume and landscaping which wraps around the characters and settings of the game-engine.)

Starrs and Cmielewski figuratively strip and deskin to take gaming back to the politics of its core. Their game, therefore, has an abstract look and feel, a platform for mental acts of cognition and reflection (no role play characterisation). Only on successful completion of each level is the invasion from within more readily apparent, in that the Level Reward movies have been replaced by documentary footage of a bevy of beautiful real world young women, all critiquing aspects of this predominantly male bastion: the infantile aggression, the sexist obsession with boobs, the shallowness of the characterisation, the shabby ethics and politics. The color and personality has returned as outside critique: Counterstrike, and its ilk, counter stuck (excuse the labored pun) from within the laws of its own strategies and ground.

Written by Ann Finegan, image courtesy of the artist