ARTISTS' GAME MODS AND THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

by

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Abstract

As of 2010, there are 183 million active gamers in the United States, each of whom plays at an average of 13 hours a week. Forty-nine percent of these players are between the ages of 18 and 49, and two out of every five of them are female. Following in a tradition of tactical interventions in mainstream media, contemporary North American artists are working with videogames as a means to engage the public in a discussion of the repercussions and possibilities of an increasingly digitized world. Artists' games like Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon and Joan Leandre's *Velvet-Strike* (2002) and Zach Gage's *Lose/Lose* (2009) confront these issues by creating "mods," or alterations of popular games. These artists use familiar reference points as catalysts for engaging new publics in conversations about contemporary art and the culture industry.

Introduction

> In the space of language (as in that of games), a society makes more explicit the
> formal rules of actions and the operations that differentiate them.
> — Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

In 1962, Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Tech Model Railroad Club

developed *Spacewar!*, one of the earliest computer games. Led by Steve "Slug" Russell,

the small team of researchers built the program to run on the PDP-1, the first computer to

operate on keyboard commands rather than punch-card data.

The game was simple: two armed spaceships ("the needle" and "the wedge")

engaged in missile combat while maneuvering the gravitational field surrounding a star.

Despite the fact that *Spacewar!* functioned more as a recreational device than a strategic

military simulation, the program was one of the first to be ported over the Advanced

Research Projects Agency Network, a collaboration between MIT researchers and the

United States Department of Defense that would later evolve into the modern-day

Internet.

While access to videogames like *Spacewar!* was once limited to elite academics

and government officials, they have since become fixtures of entertainment within 67

percent of American households. While one's knee-jerk reaction might be to attribute

these figures to leagues of misfit adolescents and other social outcasts, this is far from the

case. Forty-nine percent of the world's 480 million gamers are adults between the ages of

18 and 49, and two out of every five of them are female.[1] More importantly, this

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[1] Entertainment Software Association. *Industry Facts* 2010 [accessed February 15, 2011].

demographic shows no signs of slowing. In 2012, digital games are projected to grow into a $68 billion industry.[2]

Recognizing videogames' cultural influence, contemporary artists have begun working within the medium as a means with which to engage individuals traditionally thought to be outside the scope of museum-going publics.

While there is a broad range of artists' game practices, this essay focuses on artists' "mods," or modifications of mainstream games.[3] While many of these works began as popular commercial videogames, their source codes have been manipulated and re-interpreted, resulting in a tactical process of semiotic disordering.

The functionality and intent of these modifications extend beyond the symbolism and narrative of the original games by provoking audiences to challenge graphical and behavioral representations as presented by archetypal game identities and scenarios. By starting with familiar reference points, artists' mods blend pre-existing circumstances and phenomena with subversive content, subsequently facilitating a space for engagement with individuals who identify more as gamers than art connoisseurs.

Modding has multiple art historical connections to earlier interventions in mainstream media: the Situationist practice of *détournement* developed in the 1950s, the tactical media spectacles staged by ACT UP in the 1980s and The Yes Men's present-day manipulations of news coverage.

By recontextualizing ubiquitous tropes of everyday life and infusing them with

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Available from http://www.theesa.com/contact/index.asp.

[2] Warman, Peter. 2009/2010. Newzoo Games Market Report. Amesterdam: Newzoo.

[3] Other terms for mods include: patches, skins, wads, maps and shapes.

counter-cultural messages, artists have exposed non-avant-garde publics to alternative ways of thinking about media spectacles and cycles of consumption. Recognizing this phenomenon as a response to the problem of post-industrial reification, French sociologist Michel de Certeau asserted that sub-cultures perform their own tactical adaptations, interventions and remediations of dominant cultural models to make them personally relevant. Referring to this practice as the "art of the weak," de Certeau's thesis hinges on tactical actions, or interventions that exploit temporary lapses in the overall efficacy of strategic demonstrations of power exerted by state, commercial or institutional entities.

By sketching a brief history of interventionist art and its relationship to key works in the fields of sociology and media theory, this paper positions artists' game mods as a new platform for creating accessible, yet subversive arenas for the re-imagining of public space. In contrast to traditional conceptions of the public realm as a physical location, this thesis will focus on digital sites as highly trafficked fields that function as zones for discourse, commerce and the manifestation of power dynamics.

I will first outline a brief history of interventionist art practices as exemplified by the Situationist International, ACT UP and the Yes Men, and then discuss the similar tactics and objectives embedded within two artist-made mods developed in the first decade of the 21st century: Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon and Joan Leandre's *Velvet-Strike* (2002) and Zach Gage's *Lose/Lose* (2009). Aside from unpacking the relevance of these works in terms of their own autonomous merit as artworks, I will proceed to examine the degree of reflexivity they have cultivated through cultural discourse and their relationship to an increasingly digitized public sphere.

Chapter 1: Web 2.0 and Tactical Media

During the period retronymically referred to as Web 1.0, the World Wide Web was just beginning to make itself available to users on a large scale. In the mid to late 1990s, the Internet primarily functioned as a publishing medium, where, as noted by Lev Manovich in his essay "Art After Web 2.0," the majority of Internet users accessed "content produced by a much smaller number of professional producers."[4] As technology moved away from dial-up modems to broadband and wireless connections, the transition to Web 2.0 meant that a rapidly growing sector of the population began accessing more content produced by non-professionals. This can in part be attributed to the increased availability of platforms for self-publishing and distribution, such as blogging, personal profiles and online marketplaces like the iTunes store.[5]

Another principal change corresponding to Web 2.0 is the transition of the Web from a publishing medium to a communication medium. The rise of social networking meant that users found entirely new ways to share information with each other. Websites like Facebook became public autobiographies that enabled individuals to connect not only through sharing private messages, but also photos, video, personal likes and dislikes,

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[4] Manovich, Lev. 2008. Art After Web 2.0. In *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by K. A. Levin. New York: Thames & Hudson. 68.

[5] When speaking about the transition between first and second waves of commercial Internet usage, it's important to clarify that I'm referring specifically to the global minority of users who actually have access to computers, wireless phones and Internet connectivity. While this essay concerns the use of digital games as a tool to generate political awareness and social participation, it is brutally ironic that they are not available to the developing nations that could benefit the most from them.

and even their physical whereabouts. These interactions take many forms, including comments, reviews, ratings votes, links, badges and video responses. Similarly, these communicative modes all serve distinct functions, as each expresses or quantifies different types of metrics and degrees of personalization.

While the platforms for these interactions are most often developed and controlled by major corporations like Google, Facebook, Yahoo! and others, these entities cannot determine the ways consumers will use them, nor can they fully forecast which social, interpretive or qualitative elements will emerge from the media. Manovich links this interpretive gap between the incentives for consumption and their reception with the work of French scholar Michel de Certeau, whose theories of consumer behavior in relation to the strategies employed by commercial and otherwise authoritative institutions is the subject of the 1974 text *The Practice of Everyday Life.*

Concerning his study with subcultures' use of "tactics" as a means to adapt mainstream culture, de Certeau gives the example of the Native Americans' response to Spanish colonists' forceful imposition of new rituals, representations and laws.[6] What resulted was a subversive response wherein the indigenous peoples understood it was impossible to reject or alter foreign symbols and procedures, but also that they could apply them toward "ends and references foreign to the system they (the Spanish) had no choice but to accept."[7]

This model, wherein subjects have no alternative but to live with circumstances

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[6] Manovich, Lev. 2008. Art After Web 2.0. In *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by K. A. Levin. New York: Thames & Hudson. 72.

[7] Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. xiii.

and symbols they did not select or create for themselves, is not limited to the Native Americans' interpretive adaptations of Spanish culture. Rather, there is a rich historical tradition of groups who have recontextualized elements of hegemonic culture by removing symbols from their original contexts and assigning them alternative meanings.

What sets the tactical reappropriations of Web 2.0 apart from those of prior eras and modes of communication is that the vast selection of online publishing platforms means that producers of content are more distributed than ever. This presents a complex predicament. The instantaneous nature of online publishing translates to an equally rapid process of co-option of sub-cultural trends, behavior and language. Further, the networked nature of the Web has vastly increased the number of individuals developing content (writing, video, music, games, etc.), but while these independent publishers may feel as if they are sub-altern, there is a mutual interdependence between themselves and the mainstream commercial sector. Because so-called "indie" media responds (albeit sometimes indirectly) to dominant cultural forms, it provides clear representations of specific demographics' desires, facilitating multi-national corporations' exploitation of users' tastes and preferences for marketing purposes. Despite the rebellious nature that often characterizes products of indie culture, it is not unusual for this type of content to be re-absorbed by the commercial apparatus.

Chapter 2: Mods, Patches, Shapes and Wads

Patches are regularly released by game manufacturers in order to correct software errors, or to add premium content for customizing graphics, sound, physics, architecture or other attributes of original computer games. However, for every publisher-sanctioned patch meant to function as an "official" software correction or enhancement, there are countless more that are user-generated.

These mods take multiple forms. Some add or subtract architecture, bonus elements (power-ups, extra lives, etc.) or characters; some re-skin environments by altering the appearance of in-game terrain or figures (such as Robert Nideffer's 1999 piece *The Tomb Raider Patch* [colloquially referred to as "Nude Raider"] in which Lara Croft, the impractically voluptuous protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* series, appears *au naturale*); and some mods shift a game's basic mechanics (the actions a player takes in order to play).[8] These "unofficial" mods circulate through a variety of channels, including: blogs, groups and message boards dedicated to fan art and fan fiction relating to original games; online communities specifically created to host software patches; and sites like runme.org and äda'web, which serve as digital repositories for artists' mods and other web-based artworks.

Similar to de Certeau's example of the Native Americans and the Spanish colonists, patch artists acknowledge the mutually dependent relationship between modding communities and the mainstream videogame industry. Artist Anne-Marie Schleiner

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[8] Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen classify these modes in three discrete yet overlapping categories: alteration, juxtaposition and reinvention. (Zimmerman, Eric, and Katie Salen. 2004. *Rules of Play*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 557-569.)

explains:

> Patch art structurally couples itself in symbiotic or parasitic relations to the host technocultural systems of the industrial game engine and online game fan networks, an art form whose tentacles reach outward into the fabric of technocultural subdomains with the capacity for effecting the evolution of popular gaming culture.[9]

While at first glance patch art might appear as a threat to game publishers' intellectual property, it is not unusual for software companies to release source codes for public use. Because community-generated mods reflect players' desires, identities and interests, this practice often functions as a tool for corporate research and development. In the case of the first-person shooter *Half-Life*, Valve (*Half-Life*'s publisher) released the game's source code, encouraging both artists and amateurs to build their own mods. This proved to be a strategic move on Valve's part, as users' innovations led to the development of the mod *Counter-Strike*, a tactical first-person shooter in which players have the option to play as either terrorists or counter-terrorists operating within an urban center.[10] After Valve bought the rights to *Counter-Strike*, it became one of the most popular games available online, with a base of 70,000 North American players accessing the gamespace on any given day.[11]

While some developers of game patches identify as artists and others do not, the community formed around software patching shares many of the same non-hierarchical,

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[9] Schleiner, Anne-Marie. *Parasitic Interventions: Game Patches and Hacker Art*. Essay. [accessed January 17, 2011]. Available from http://opensorcery.net/patchnew.html.

[10] Tribe, Mark, and Reena Jana. 2006. *New Media Art*. Cologne: Taschen. 82.

[11] Valve Corporation. *Steam & Game Stats*. 2011 [accessed April 11, 2011]. Available from http://store.steampowered.com/stats/.

open and evolutionary qualities of hacker culture. Despite the fact that hacking is frequently perceived as an activity for isolative misanthropes, many hacking practices are highly collaborative and community-based. In his 2004 text *A Hacker Manifesto*, digital culture theorist Mackenzie Wark contends that hacking is not inherently malevolent (as it might be portrayed in films or evening news programs), but is an ongoing project dedicated to the continuous extraction of knowledge and generation of possibilities. He writes:

> Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colourings, we create the possibility of new things entering the world… In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it and where in that information new possibilities for the world are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old.[12]

Hacking collectives like 4chan and others function as unions of individuals working toward shared goals. While there is a broad range of hacking practices, including Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, virus generation, phishing and many others, certain types of game mods can be classified as hacks as well.

However, this is not the case for all game mods, and those that are hacks serve a particular purpose. More specifically, hacks objectify games by breaking what sociologist Johan Huizinga refers to as "the magic circle," a sacred space in which participants agree to temporarily suspend their disbelief and buy into the primacy of a game's rules and circumstances. This momentary break from reality affords players freedom to experiment and play without consequence. However, in violating the magic circle, game hacks re-incorporate accountability (on behalf of the player, the game-maker or both) by

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[12] Wark, McKenzie. 2004. *A Hacker Manifesto*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1.

demonstrating the fragility and changeability of game realities.

One of the most successful game hacks was executed in 1996 when Jacques Servin, an employee of the game publisher Maxis, added a few lines of code to highlight the hetero-normative bias embedded in *SimCopter*. Aggravated by the "aggressively heterosexual" nature of the bikini-clad "bimbos" featured in the game, Servin was moved to surreptitiously modify *SimCopter*'s code. Maxis shipped 50,000 copies of the software before discovering that, on certain dates, those in possession of the hacked programs would experience a phenomenon in which men in swimming trunks would suddenly appear in the game and kiss each other onscreen. Servin's termination from the company followed soon afterward.[13] When interviewed about the hack for an article in *Wired* Magazine, Servin explained that, despite his co-workers' acceptance of his own homosexuality, it was important for him to highlight the fact that "heterosexual content is always implicit" in videogames. Continuing his explanation of the motives behind the hack, Servin explained:

> I've always wanted to be an activist… but activism is so moribund now. Do you think these heads of corporations are going to walk into an art gallery and say, 'Oh, wow - I was wrong'? Symbols are so much more powerful where you don't expect them.[14]

Just as Servin's hack challenged the heteronormative "reality" presented by SimCopter, earlier generations of interventionist artists implemented similar tactics intended to draw attention to the cycles affecting social, political and consumer behaviors.

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[13] Silberman, Steve. 1996. Boy 'Bimbos' Too Much for Game-Maker Maxis. *Wired Magazine*, December 3, 1996.

[14] Ibid.

Chapter 3: Interventions

Starting in the early 20th century, European artists responded to radically shifting political landscapes and the absurdity of war by attempting to separate themselves from the cultural institutions of previous eras. Individuals like German dramatist and composer Richard Wagner and Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti sought to tap into creative resources that reunified what seemed like a fractured relationship between art and everyday life. Seeking to separate themselves from a culture they believed had become corrupt and obsolete, these artists began pursuing *gesamkunstwerk*, or the concept of a "total work of art." Perhaps most notably, Richard Wagner's conceptualization of the *gesamkunstwerk* in his 1849 essay "The Art-work of the Future" responded to the failure of the 1848 Revolution by claiming that artists' practices had drifted too far from the everyday lives of the people, resulting in an isolated egoism on the part of the artists. In response, Wagner urged all artists to give up the distinctions between their media and instead create works that spoke to the *Kunstwollen*, or artistic desire, of the people.[15]

The *gesamkunstwerk* was not only intended to unify all arts in one ritualistic spectacle, but also to function as a transcendental event that somehow forged spiritual and political unions among all peoples of the world.

After Wagner, there have been many attempts by individual artists to dissolve their own authorships into the communal *Kunstwollen*, as demonstrated by Filippo

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[15] Groys, Boris. 2008. A Genealogy of Participatory Art. In *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by K. A. Levine. New York: Thames & Hudson. 22.

Tommaso Marinetti's leadership of the Futurists and their tactic of merging public scandals with newspapers, manifestos and public performances. The aggressive and provocative nature of these scandals (which sometimes included direct physical attacks on audience members), was intended to interrupt the traditionally passive roles taken by viewers. By inciting outrage amongst the masses, the Futurists hoped to catalyze the public's discovery of their own organizational and political power.[16]

However, Wagner and Marinetti's practices were far from perfect. Aside from the fact that the scales of their ambitions prevented their actualization, the totalizing social and political natures of these practices are closely tied to Fascist ideology. Despite the highly problematic nature of the *gesamkunstwerk*, it is emblematic of a crucial turning point in the history of participatory art. By attempting to synthesize multiple art forms and create multimedia work intended to ameliorate the problems of modernity (and later post-modernity), subsequent generations of artists borrowed from movements like Wagnerian drama and Futurism in order to build connections between their work, their public and daily experiences of city space.

One tactic that emerged from 20th century participatory practices, as exemplified by Marinetti's practice of embedding art into all elements of everyday life, is culture-jamming, a selection of methods intended to disrupt and subvert the patterns of human behavior as dictated by capitalism. Aside from the reconfiguration of districts meant to accommodate the new commercial presence in Paris, elements like outdoor advertisements and an increased dependence on automobiles began changing the ways individuals experienced the public realm. Similar to the Futurists, the Situationist

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[16] Groys, Boris. 2008. A Genealogy of Participatory Art. In *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by K. A. Levine. New York: Thames & Hudson. 24-25.

International placed greater emphasis on crafting experiences rather than individual artworks. This practice stemmed from a belief that the modernization, international restructuring and reallocation of resources that followed World War II had resulted in a crisis of reification, an extreme form of alienation attributed to the disassociation of commodities from the sociopolitical contexts in which they are produced.[17] Conflating the elements of consumption, leisure and image, the power of the spectacle trapped individuals within the perpetual pursuit of personal fulfillment through an insatiable compulsion to consume.

As the figurehead of the Situationist International, Guy Debord aimed to rectify this cycle of unfulfilling consumption by reunifying art with everyday life. Consequently, Debord dedicated his artistic practice to constructing new types of situations intended to subvert the social norms established by advanced capitalist models. These techniques intended to promote the public's imagining of a world without capitalistic influence and to alter individuals' social and psychological relationships to city space. However, rather than create original artworks to articulate these ambitions (this would indicate too great a separation from the sociopolitical status quo), the Situationists developed an art form based on playing with pre-existing elements of culture.

What resulted was the formal introduction of *détournement*, a method of stealing, disordering and redirecting the symbols of capitalism. This process was intended to recontextualize cultural artifacts by assigning them new meanings that somehow subverted the system that had originally produced them. In an essay Debord co-wrote

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[17] Macey, David. 2000. Reification. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books.

with Gil J. Wolman in 1956 titled "A User's Guide to Détournement," the authors noted two types of *détournements*: the minor form, in which an element of little importance (such as "a press clipping, a neutral phrase, a commonplace photograph") gains new meaning when placed in a new context; and the deceptive *détournement*, in which an "intrinsically significant element" (Debord and Wolman give the examples of "a slogan of Saint-Just… or a film sequence from Eisenstein") is given an entirely new meaning when recontextualized.[18] Debord's hope for the *détournement* was that it would promote the reader's recognition of the fragility, as well as the fluidity, of mainstream cultural aesthetics, and that it would subsequently lead to the "reversal of established relationships" between individuals, commodity culture and the city.[19]

While much of Debord's practice functioned primarily as symbolic gestures in the mid-20th century, there is clear theoretical crossover with de Certeau's "art of the weak." The *détournement* is certainly tactical in nature in that it alters the reception of pre-existing phenomena. However, while de Certeau's model is one of resistance through consumption, the *détournement* is more theoretical in that it concerns itself primarily with debunking the myths of capitalism. But in order to successfully achieve this sort of cognitive rupture, one must first develop an understanding of the nature of the objects being détourned.

More specifically, the Situationists identified media (especially advertisements) as the primary vehicles for the inculcation of spectacle. However, the fact that media take

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[18] Debord, Guy and Wolman, Gil. 1956. Methods of Détournement. In *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by K. Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets.8-13.

[19] Debord, Guy. 1967. *Society of the Spectacle, section numbers 205 and 206*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.

many forms (including print, film, television and countless others) means that successful *détournement* demands an understanding of the tropes that define each communicative medium. Artists' abilities to masterfully mimic these stylistic elements have proved to be invaluable tools for staging interventions intended to *détourn*, or otherwise subvert, mainstream culture.

Differences in media technologies can drastically affect overall reception of content. One particularly poignant example is the 1960 presidential debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. While those listening to the radio broadcast interpreted Nixon's confident oration as an indicator of his victory, those watching on TV witnessed JFK's cool delivery juxtaposed with his opponent's "flop sweat." At a time when 90 percent of American households possessed television sets, this led the majority of the public to conclude that Kennedy had won the debates. This pivotal moment in media history marks a transition to an era in which candidates' appearance had equal or greater importance than the contents of their speech.[20]

As television became an authoritative source for news and entertainment, broadcasted content functioned as a shared experience and point of contact between the public and producers of content. Further, live news broadcasts blended both genres, keeping audiences hooked in the hopes of witnessing any "breaking news" as it happened. However, the privatized, centralized and federally regulated nature of television translated to a significant amount of homogeneity among broadcast stations, leaving little to no room for the expression of viewpoints contrary to those representing

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[20] Boorstin, Daniel J. 1961. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum. 41-44.

the interests of private industry.[21]

However, in 1972 the Federal Communications Commission issued its *Third Report and Order*, which ordered all cable systems in the top 100 television markets to provide public access channels, opening up low-cost and no-cost broadcast slots to anyone who wished to reserve them.[22] In the 1980s and '90s, public-access TV became a site for artists and activists to interrupt the stream of network broadcasts with their own messages. Subsequently, non-commercial cultural producers began to develop fluency in televisual language. This not only included learning the nuts and bolts of film or television production, but also how to exploit media coverage of their work, as well as how to produce art that gained its full meaning through the press' coverage of it.[23]

Media theorist Daniel Boorstin unpacked the influence of mainstream news and dissected its relationship to advanced capitalism in his 1967 text *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. In *The Image*, Boortsin observed that, historically, journalists were tasked with the function of reporting on events after they happened. However, the ever-present phenomena of reification and spectacle cultivated viewers' desires for news that did more than chronicle history. These desires led to "pseudo-events," events that are "not spontaneous" in that they are planned for the sake of being reported on. Further, the pseudo-event's "underlying relation of the situation is ambiguous," resulting in

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[21] Joselit, David. 2007. *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. xi-xiii.

[22] *Regulation and Franchising*. 2011. Website documenting the history of public access television. [accessed April 2, 2011]. Available from http://www.publicaccesstv.net/history05.html.

[23] Atkins, Robert. 2008. Politics, Participation, and Meaning in the Age of Mass Media. In *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by K. A. Levine. New York: Thames and Hudson. 53.

obfuscation of the reasons for or significance of the event. Perhaps most portentously, pseudo-events are intended to function as self-fulfilling prophecies, meaning that the way an event is reported is of greater importance than the event itself.[24]

One collective that recognized the power of press coverage and its impact on public opinion is ACT UP, a grassroots organization dedicated to generating media attention to the AIDS crisis through nonviolent civil disobedience and innovative media practices. By staging spectacular events intended to generate sympathetic and empathetic perceptions of people with AIDS, the collective drew attention to the dire nature of the AIDS crisis at a moment in which the United States government was unresponsive. Savvy to television news' propensity for covering events marked by visual spectacles, playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer founded the group in 1987.

ACT UP's first demonstration took place on March 24, 1987, as protesters gathered in front of New York City's Trinity Church to demonstrate against the lack of available treatment options and the high prices charged by pharmaceutical companies for HIV and AIDS medications.[25] Carrying banners reading the group's slogan, "Silence = Death," ACT UP détourned the symbol of the pink triangle, a symbol used by the Nazis to identify homosexuals. By recontextualizing the pink triangle, the artists added new political significance to the image by creating a negative association with President Ronald Reagan's lack of a response to the AIDS crisis and Nazi genocide. It also transformed what was initially a badge of shame as a symbol of pride. Seventeen

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[24] Boorstin, Daniel J. 1961. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum. 39-40.

[25] ACT UP. *No More Business as Usual.*1987. Flyer promoting the first ACT UP action on March 24, 1987. [accessed February 20, 2011]. Available from http://www.actupny.org/documents/1stFlyer.html.

demonstrators were arrested at the Trinity Church action, but the event was considered a

major success. Shortly after the demonstration, the United States Food and Drug

Administration announced that it would shorten the drug approval process.[26]

Recognizing the media's vital role in shaping the public's perceptions of people

with HIV/AIDS, ACT UP established its own media channels to combat conservative

"spins" on the AIDS crisis. Part of this methodology included using a manual that guided

organizers through the processes of drafting press releases, staging events and interacting

with members of the press. ACT UP also conceived DIVA TV (Damned Interfering

Video Activist Television), a weekly television program intended to further combat the

mainstream media by broadcasting the group's actions on public-access television. By

executing events to be reported on by others and by producing shows intended to provide

alternative perspectives to those on television news, ACT UP developed a comprehensive

media plan that effected social and political progress related to the treatment and

perception of people with HIV/AIDS.

Just as artists learned the tropes of televisual language in order to infuse media

discourse with countercultural perspectives, contemporary collaboratives like ®™ark

(pronounced art-mark) and The Yes Men employ the aesthetics of public relations to

draw the public's attention to multinational corporations' lack of social, economic and

ecological accountability.

In many ways, The Yes Men grew out of ®™ark, an online activist collective

founded in 1991. Working under the pseudonym "Ray Thomas," Jacques Severin co-

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[26] Crimp, Douglas. 1987. AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism. *October* 43
(Winter). 7-12.

founded ®™ark as a response to the Supreme Court decision that corporations were

entitled to the same rights as human beings.[27] Using this ruling to its advantage, the

group registered itself as a corporation with a limited-liability clause (a benefit enjoyed

by every corporation in the United States). As a result of this clause, ®™ark can protect

its members from legal recourse related to any of their interventions.

In addition to providing members with relative anonymity, the group takes

advantage of the dialogical nature of online organization by allowing any interested party

to submit project ideas for review. As its members shares their input on proposals, the

®™ark community can choose whether or not to move forward with a project. While

accepted ideas develop, the message boards on rtmark.org function as an organizational

tool and a means to generate funding when necessary. This operational structure indicates

a new collective form, the networked nature of which facilitates including participants

who are often spread out geographically. Further, the fact that multiple contributors can

offer feedback promotes a more collaborative model than single-author projects.

One of ®™ark's most recognized stunts is the Barbie Liberation Organization

(1993), in which the group swapped the voice-boxes of 300 talking Barbie and GI Joe

dolls before returning them to the store. While there are only few reports of these dolls

actually finding their way into households, the action received a significant amount of

panicked media coverage referring to the intervention as "sick" and a "terrorist act

directed against children."[28] Despite the negative nature of the reports, the objective of

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[27] *RTMark*. Tactical Media Files. Description of ®TMark. [accessed April 11, 2011].
Available from http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.jsp?objectnumber=41760.

[28] *Gender Bender Barbie*. A Current Affair 1993. TV clip. [accessed April 11, 2011]. Available
from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVT4T7OR3iQ.

the Barbie Liberation Organization was to generate press attention around the

perpetuation of gender stereotypes through children's toys. This media spectacle was

carefully planned by ®™ark, which included pamphlets along with each doll. The

leaflets identified the Barbie Liberation Organization as the perpetrators of the stunt and

included phone numbers to reach the BLO, as well as television stations and newspapers,

urging recipients to call if they agreed with the group's anti-violent and anti-sexist

message.[29]

     The Barbie Liberation Organization action attracted the attention of fellow

activist-artist Igor Vamos. He and Servin adopted the *noms de guerre* Andy Bichlbaum

and Mike Bonanno, thus beginning their work together as The Yes Men. The group's first

actions took place in 1999, when the two appeared as representatives for the World Trade

Organization (WTO) at several venues, including international conferences on trade law,

textiles and accounting. The two delivered satirical presentations on auctioning off the

votes of U.S. citizens to the highest bidders, administering electrical shocks to sweatshop

workers to boost productivity, and even announcing that they would shut the group down

and refound it as an entity "whose goals were not to help corporations, but rather to help

the poor and the environment."[30] These interventions set precedents for their work

manipulating media to oppose the fiscal, environmental and social practices of

multinational corporations.

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[29] Firestone, David. *While Barbie Talks Tough, G. I. Joe Goes Shopping*. The New York Times, December 31, 1993. [accessed April 11, 2011]. Available from http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/31/us/while-barbie-talks-tough-g-i-joe-goes-shopping.html?src=pm.

[30] The Yes Men. 2011. *WTO*. Project description. [accessed February 4, 2011]. Available from http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/wto.

Blurring the lines between art and activism, the bulk of The Yes Men's work consists primarily of creating fraudulent press releases and staging press conferences that call major corporations to take accountability for their actions. These interventions are intended to highlight destructive actions taken by corporations in the name of profit. By staging humorous yet poignant actions that mimic the public relations strategies executed by multinational enterprises, The Yes Men demonstrate the fallibility and changeability of the seemingly impenetrable realm of big business.

One of The Yes Men's most notable interventions took place on December 3, 2004, 20 years after the Bhopal Disaster, a chemical leak regarded as the worst industrial catastrophe in history. Bichlbaum and Bonanno orchestrated a media event that called for Dow Chemical Co. to acknowledge its responsibility for the thousands of people who were killed, injured or otherwise impacted by the event. In preparation, the group produced a fake website for the company with a real-sounding URL (DowEthics.com). The site began receiving emailed press inquiries asking for official statements about the upcoming anniversary of the tragedy.

Accepting an invitation to speak on BBC World News, Bichlbaum appeared as Jude Finisterra, a fictional representative from Dow Chemical. [31] Ecstatic, Finisterra announced on live television that the company was proud to roll out a $12 billion plan to compensate the victims in Bhopal and clean up the plant site. The representative explained that in order to fund the project, the company would sell Union Carbide, a Dow subsidiary.

Twenty-three minutes after Finisterra appeared on BBC World, Dow Chemical

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[31] Bichlbaum chose this pseudonym because St. Jude is known as the patron saint of the impossible, and "Finisterra" is Latin for "Earth's end."

lost approximately $2 billion on the German stock exchange.[32] Two hours later,

representatives from Dow Chemical released a formal statement in which they

emphatically assured stockholders that the company would not be liquidating Union

Carbide, nor would it compromise the quarter's profits by redistributing any funds to

Bhopal.

While the Bhopal action was influential in that it drastically affected Dow's stock

price and motivated the company to formally articulate its refusal to apologize to or

compensate the people of Bhopal, some fairly problematic elements remain. Primarily,

there is the issue of momentarily giving the people of Bhopal false hope about receiving

long-overdue reparations. Further, there is the subsequent problem of incorporating the

images of the impoverished, injured and sickened people of Bhopal into The Yes Men's

own media spectacle.

Considering the subsequent acclaim the artists received for staging this stunt, the

ethical repercussions are somewhat fuzzy. In this regard, the Bhopal intervention

resembles the cycle in which counter-spectacular actions end up embodying many traits

of spectacles themselves. However, part of what makes the work of The Yes Men so

interesting, as well as that of the Situationists and ®™ark, is the way their practices

navigate the fact that individuals can never truly separate themselves from the capitalist

apparatus.

The success of The Yes Men's work does not lie in their ability to effectively

abolish corporate entities, but to create a space that makes the practice of consumer

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[32] Paterson, Caroline, and Satinder Bindra. 2011. *Bhopal Hoax Sends Dow Stock Down*. CNN 2004 [accessed April 15, 2011]. Available from http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/12/03/bhopal.hoax/index.html.

vigilance a lively, participatory and approachable endeavor. Moreover, the complex layers of interdependence between the production of spectacle and the ideology of revolution reflect the "parasitic" relationship between game publishers and patch artists as mentioned in Anne-Marie Schleiner's description of patching culture.

Chapter 4: Velvet-Strike

While artists and avid gamers Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon and Joan

Leandre were not the executors of any major pranks on the international news media, their

knowledge of videogaming culture facilitated a type of intervention that enabled them to

use *Counter-Strike* as platform for engagement. Despite the fact that Schleiner and

Condon are North American artists located on opposite sides of the continent and that

Leandre is based in Spain, the three were united by their interest in working with games

and digital media.

The *Velvet-Strike* project came to fruition from a workshop on computer game

modification that Schleiner conducted in Spain. In "*Velvet-Strike*: War Times and Reality

Games," an essay hosted on the *Velvet-Strike* website, Schleiner explains the origins of the

project:

> When I arrived the next morning at the workshop I learned that the U.S. had
> declared war on Afghanistan. The workshop organizers had installed a new demo
> of "Return to Castle Wolfenstein", a remake of an old Nazi castle shooter game,
> on all the PC's. The sounds of the weapon-fire echoed off the concrete walls of
> the workshop warehouse space--what I once approached with playful macho geek
> irony was transformed into uncanny echoes of real life violence.[33]

Fascinated by the vast number of modifications for *Half-Life* and other online games that

followed the September 11 attacks, the artists noticed that while many of the mods

allowed users to shoot at and otherwise torture Osama bin Laden, not all of them were

overtly violent. For example, in one mod of the popular simulation game *The Sims*,

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[33] Jansson, Mathias, and Joan Leandre. *Interview: Joan Leandre's "retroYou" (1999-2004) & "Velvet-Strike" (2002)*. GameScenes.org 2010 [accessed April 13, 2011]. Available from http://www.gamescenes.org/2010/04/interview-joan-leandres-retroyou-1999-velvet-strike-2002.html.

players were encouraged to feed Sim-Osama poison potato chips, forcing him to "overeat American junk food, to binge," leading to an eventual "death by over-consumption, death by capitalism."[34] In addition to the bin Laden skins and mods, many in-game chat networks became flooded with anti-Muslim sentiment.

In response, Schleiner, Condon, and Leandre produced *Velvet-Strike*, a patch for *Counter-Strike*. Alluding to the 1989 Velvet Revolution, in which Czech citizens participated in a series of non-violent protests leading to the overthrow of Communist rule and the election of President Vaclav Havel, the game functions as a guide for online civil disobedience. By establishing their intervention within a space accessed by more than 70,000 people daily, the artists tested the limits of online games as platforms for discussion of post-9/11 cultural politics and their remediation through popular media.[35]

Working collaboratively, Schleiner, Condon and Leandre modified the game's source code to create a software patch that, when voluntarily downloaded, causes players' guns to shoot anti-war graffiti instead of bullets. Much like Servin's hack, which called attention to *SimCopter*'s heteronormative bias, Schleiner, Condon and Leandre's patch seeks to engage *Counter-Strike* players within a dialogue regarding the oversimplified binarization of Middle-Eastern politics. The link to download the patch is hosted on the *Velvet-Strike* website (www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike), along with instructions on how to both *Counter-Strike* and the artists' mod.

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[34] Schleiner, Anne-Marie. 2011. *Velvet-Strike: War Times and Reality Games* 2002. Essay. [accessed January 14, 2011]. Available from http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html.

[35] Valve Corporation. *Steam & Game Stats* 2011. [accessed April 11, 2011]. Available from http://store.steampowered.com/stats/.

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Part of the motivation for interventions like Servin's *SimCopter* hack and *Velvet-Strike* lies in the fact that videogames are a persuasive medium that encourages players to internalize procedural rhetoric, a type of reasoning executed by implementing system commands.[36] The successful resolution of a game hinges on players' capacity to reconcile their actions with its system of representation, and a player is rewarded for mimicking the computer's "thought process." Or, as put by digital culture theorist Ted Friedman:

> To win, you can't just do whatever you want. You have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game. You must learn to predict the consequences of each move, and anticipate the computer's response. Eventually, your decisions become as smooth and rapid-fire as the computer's own machinations.[37]

By encouraging players to mimic computational processing, videogames reiterate and perpetuate the influence of informatics (human-computer relations) on global networks. In his 2006 essay, "Allegories of Control," media theorist Alexander Galloway wrote, "the relationship between video games and the contemporary political situation refer specifically to the social imaginary of the wired world and how the various structures of organization within it are repurposed into the formal grammar of the medium."[38]

Galloway gives the example of the real-time strategy game *Civilization 3*, in which players begin with nothing and are given the task of building a global empire by

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[36] As mentioned earlier in this paper, *Counter-Strike* is a mod of *Half-Life*, thereby making *Velvet-Strike* a mod of a mod.

[37] Friedman, Ted. 1999. Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space. In *Discovering Discs: Transforming Space and Genre on CD-ROM*, edited by G. Smith. New York: New York University Press.

[38] Galloway, Alexander. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Edited by M. P. Katherine Hayles, and Samuel Weber. Vol. 18, *Electronic Mediations*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. 89.

interacting with 16 "historical identities." Each of the nationalities featured in the game

bare their own blatantly oversimplified character attributes. For example, "Aztecs are

religious, but not industrious" and Romans are "militaristic but not expansionist."[39] As

players manage their empires, they learn and internalize a procedural system of causes

and effects, what Galloway refers to as "a massive, multipart, global algorithm."[40] The

ways the game's different elements fit together within the game are persuasive because

the relationships among the various symbols in the game are functional. By associating

the success of winning with the game's algorithm, *Civilization 3* exerts a persuasive

power that valorizes imperialist-expansionist logic.

     Velvet-Strike seeks to complicate *Counter-Strike*'s procedural rhetoric by

providing frameworks for alternatives to violent in-game actions. However, while not

militaristic, the patch is confrontational in that it facilitates direct contact with players

seeking traditional combat play. While players seeking to use the *Velvet-Strike* patch

must first download it online, the graffiti sprays are still viewable to those who do not

have it installed. The artists created some sprays, but many participants submitted their

own. The submission of user-generated content is significant because the model

resembles the democratic submission practices of patching culture, but further, it

indicates that *Velvet-Strike* generated enough interest and enthusiasm to inspire its user

base to create original artworks.

     Despite the fact that the images needed to be fairly low-resolution in order to be

integrated into the *Counter-Strike* landscape, the sprays represent a broad range of anti-

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[39] Ibid. 90-97.

war messages, ranging from cutesy to resentful. Along with the sprays, players were encouraged to partake in acts of passive resistance as suggested through "Intervention Recipes," a series of nonviolent in-game actions for both individuals and groups.

For example, the score for Anne-Marie Schleiner's *Recipe for Heart Stand-In* reads:

> Ask the members of your Counter-Strike team, (must be at least 14), Counter-Terrorist or Terrorist, to stand in a large, low, flat open area in the game that can be viewed from above.
>
> 1. Arrange everyone to stand in the shape of a heart. Do not move or return fire.
> 2. On all player chat send out the message repeatedly: "Love and Peace"
> 3. Retain position stoicly (sic).[41]

The recipe's structure and content reveals not only the influence of peaceful political protests, but also a keen awareness of the tropes of the gaming aesthetics. Similar to ACT UP's savvy staging of media events and The Yes Men's fluency with the language of corporate public relations, *Recipe for Heart Stand-In* adapts a classical mode of resistance to suit the videogame medium. By asking players to place themselves in an arrangement that is visible only from a bird's-eye view, Schleiner reveals her personal awareness of a kind of third-person perspective that is unique to videogames.

In addition to demonstrating a solid understanding of both the social and visual conventions of gaming, Schleiner, Condon and Leandre's anti-war intervention is particularly poignant because it uses an online game as a platform for public engagement. This means that *Velvet Strike*'s message was not only shared by the artists and those who had willingly downloaded the *Velvet Strike* patch, but by a network reaching to thousands of "normal players."

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[41] Tribe, Mark, and Reena Jana. 2006. *New Media Art*. Cologne: Taschen. 82.

If considered in the context of Servin's belief that "Symbols are so much more powerful where you don't expect them," Schleiner, Condon and Leandre's use of the gamespace as a point for public intervention is meaningful because it creates a more direct link between art and everyday life. *Velvet Strike*'s combination of graffiti sprays and the Intervention Recipes *détourn Counter-Strike* by shifting players' understandings of the game from a combat fantasy to a reminder of the complicated nature of real-world political issues.

However, these interventions were not always welcomed by players, as demonstrated by the "flaming," or digital hostility, incited by *Velvet-Strike*. Flaming is a fairly common phenomenon on online message boards, websites' comment sections and in online gaming spheres. While individuals dissenting in physical public space always face the threat of retaliatory confrontation, digital dissidents often perceive a greater degree of personal safety and anonymity.[42] Speaking about her experience with the critical reception of *Velvet-Strike*, Anne-Marie Schleiner remarked:

> I have never done a project with so much negative feedback. We received death threats and hate mails from every conceivable direction. I think a big part of the negative reaction to "Velvet-Strike" was anger over a woman becoming involved in what has become a very male culture. Another faction were "patriotic" American boys who perceived our project as an affront on America.[43]

The *Velvet-Strike* website has a "Flamer Gallery" in which viewers can peruse the various submissions of hate mail related to the patch. The online archive contains

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[42] However, this is not always the case, as federal interventions like the United States' Patriot Act and China's Golden Shield Project legalize the monitoring, censorship and even arrest of individuals whose online activities are deemed threatening to national security.

[43] Soler, Pedro. 2003. *SonarOnline*. Interview with Anne-Marie Schleiner. [accessed January 19, 2011]. Available from http://opensorcery.net/interviewp.html.

comments like "if you don't realize that videogame is just a VIDEOGAME, an that its a fake world, well then, GO PLAY WITH YOUR BARBIE!" and "It's a fucking game. and if you have nothing better to do then try to fuck it up. I pitty you and you are makeing your selfs just as 'low' as the people you alienating."[44]

Despite the profanity and spelling errors, the Flamer Gallery contains some powerful statements worth considering. While the Velvet Revolution was successful in that the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia), has been a democracy since 1989, *Velvet-Strike*'s efficacy is more difficult to measure. The openness of the forum and the fact that anyone can contribute indicates a type of accessibility and reflexivity that is rarely afforded by traditional art contexts.

Further, the fact that respondents can submit their feedback anonymously means that individuals may be more willing to express their true sentiments, as opposed to feeling as if they had to provide some sort of "correct" response to the piece. However, the phenomenon of the Flamer Gallery is further complicated because while Schleiner, Condon and Leandre elevated these anonymous individuals' opinions to something publicly viewable, the format could be perceived as derisive.

By lumping articulate responses with others that are laced with spelling errors and profanity, the Flamer Gallery does not facilitate much distinction between users and their opinions. Further, the fact that the gallery fails to include any sub-categorization means that there is a lack of thematic or tonal gradations to contextualize content. However, if one considers the flaming culture, the objective of the practice is usually is not to engage

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[44] Schleiner, Anne-Marie. *Flamer Gallery*. Collection of feedback from *Velvet Strike*'s Flamer Gallery. [accessed November 11, 2010]. Available from http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/mailgallery.html.

in a productive discussion but to incite controversy.

Simultaneously, the practice of "flamebaiting," or deliberately provoking emotional responses to subjects the provocateur often has no real interest in, can be considered a tool for engagement. However, this practice is more associated with the tactics of shock and alienation deployed by the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, such as the Futurists, rather than the more generative and inclusive techniques associated with ®™ark and ACT UP.

Chapter 5: Lose/Lose

Returning once again to Jacques Servin's thesis that "Symbols are so much more powerful where you don't expect them," Zach Gage's 2009 piece *Lose/Lose* charges Tomohiro Nisihikado's 1978 arcade classic *Space Invaders* with contemporary relevance.

Because *Space Invaders* is arguably one of the most recognized and popular games of all time, Gage's adoption of *Space Invaders*' aesthetic places *Lose/Lose* in a position to build upon the layers of individual experience and nostalgia established by its predecessor by adding unanticipated, real-world consequences to in-game actions.

Inspired by H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, *Space Invaders* imagines a scenario in which the player must act as Earth's sole defender against row after row of advancing spaceships. While the game's pixelated visuals may appear simple and crude to modern-day audiences, *Space Invaders*' iconography represents a radical shift towards more direct narratives in videogames.

Considering the abstracted, puzzle-like nature of prior generations of arcade games (for example, *Breakout* and *Pong*), *Space Invaders*' representation of immediate player confrontation is unprecedented. While one can infer that both the invasion and the player's demise are inevitable, the player is challenged to keep firing at the invaders as a matter of principle (perhaps earning a high score in the process).[45] By establishing a binary between Earthlings and aliens, Nishikado's construction of a "life or death" scenario asserts an imperative, thereby absolving the player of any greater ethical

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[45] *Space Invaders* was the first arcade game to allow players to record high scores. (Silverman, Ben. 2011. *5 Things You Might Not Know About Space Invaders*. Games.Yahoo.com 2011. [accessed April 15, 2011]. Available from http://blog.games.yahoo.com/blog/607-5-things-you-might-not-know-about-space-invaders/.)

dilemmas related to any simulated onslaughts of extraterrestrial carnage.[46] The fact that a player's in-game actions are limited (one can move laterally from one side of the screen to another, fire a cannon and hide behind buildings) results in escalating tension as the invaders draw closer and closer to their touchdown on *terra firma*.

Despite the game's stark existentialism, *Space Invaders* was so successful that, upon its arcade debut, it caused a temporary shortage of 100-yen coins in Japan. Since then, the pixelated invaders have become a widely recognizable symbol of videogame culture, featured on T-shirts, in pop songs and even in the work of the street artist Invader.[47] Aside from the fact that *Space Invaders*' success attests to its merits as a compelling and enjoyable pastime, it speaks to Japan's history as the subject of American military occupation, resonating with themes of territorialization, otherness, subordination and oblivion.

While *Lose/Lose* mimics *Space Invaders*' appearance, New York-based conceptual artist Zach Gage has shifted the traditional player/game relationship by altering two core mechanics: the invaders do not shoot at the player (although contact with any of the aliens will automatically end the game) and whenever an invader is destroyed, a random file is permanently deleted from the user's hard drive. As both an

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[46] Tairne, Eric-Jon Rössel. *Analysis: Space Invaders and The Genesis Of Video Games*. Gamasutra.com 2010. [accessed April 14, 2011]. Available from http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/29033/Analysis_Space_Invaders_And_The_Genesis_Of_Video_Games.php.

[47] Invader is a French artist who uses square tiles to create micro-mosaics of the 8-bit aliens from *Space Invaders*. He is most known for his work pasting up the figures in cities all over the world, thereby executing a playful invasion of public space. (Cinque, Nicholas. 2011. *Quick Interview: Space Invader*. Cinque Collective October 4, 2010. [accessed April 15, 2011]. Available from http://cinquecollective.com/lang/zh-hk/blog/quick-interview-space-invader-watch/.)

artist and developer of casual games, a significant amount of Gage's practice is dedicated

to concretizing abstract concepts related to the convergence of digital and physical

spaces.

Gage released *Lose/Lose* on September 13, 2009, by posting links to his personal

website as well as to ExperimentalGameplay.com, an online repository for independent

and non-traditional videogames. In addition to its online circulation, *Lose/Lose* made its

gallery debut in *Data*, Gage's MFA thesis show at the Art, Media and Technology

program at Parsons. Intrigued by the blind trust individuals invest in the steadfastness of

digital data (in regards to its safety, privacy and decay), Gage's *Data* series features a

range of works in multiple media, incorporating technologies like Twitter, chat bots and

Google in a thoughtful investigation of the issues of dematerialization, digitization and

the increasing spacelessness of the digital age.[48]

Having observed that videogames are most frequently used to simulate real-world

phenomena, a significant amount of Gage's work is dedicated to pushing the boundaries

of what procedural rhetoric can cause humans to feel. While *Velvet-Strike* employs the

game format to engage players with a discussion of post-9/11 cultural politics and to re-

invent historical modes of political protest, Gage's piece creates a unique experience

rather than a model of a pre-existing phenomenon. By building on players' prior

knowledge of and experience with *Space Invaders*, *Lose/Lose* facilitates a type of

détournement that could be facilitated only by a computer game. What results is a new

kind of human-software interaction characterized by pyrrhic dimensionality.

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[48] Gage, Zach. *Data*, 2010. [accessed April 14, 2011]. Exhibition summary. Available
from http://stfj.net/index2.php?project=art/2010/Data%20-
%20MFA%20Thesis%20at%20Parsons.

In this regard, one can observe a certain amount of conceptual overlap between

Lose/Lose and Eddo Stern's *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), a piece in which 32

participants received bracing electrical shocks in correspondence to the injuries sustained

by their in-game avatars while playing the popular PlayStation game *Tekken 3*.[49] After

having considered the *Tekken Torture Tournament* apparatus as a physical object and its

ability to create physical pain, Gage began experimenting with ways "to create tangible

pain by working in the virtual space entirely."[50] *Lose/Lose* attempts to elicit this

experience by interrogating the emotional response that comes from the deletion of digital

files. However, while *Tekken Torture Tournament* translates in-game actions to real-life

sensations, *Lose/Lose* complicates that paradigm by transforming real-world content into

digital material and integrating that media into a game.[51] Once the play experience

becomes charged with a real and pressing threat, players are forced to consider what, if

any, digital data would they be willing to part with.

Rather than pose the challenge of mastering a game's procedural rhetoric, Gage's

piece hacks the traditional structures of the game by creating situations that force players

to make difficult decisions regarding their relationship to their lives outside Huizinga's

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[49] Stern, Eddo. 2011. *Tekken Torture Tournament*. www.eddostern.com [accessed January 11, 2011]. Artists' description of *Tekken Torture Tournament*. Available from http://www.eddostern.com/tekken_torture_tournament.html.

[50] W., Tim. *Interview: Zach Gage Caught in a Lose/Lose Situation*. Indie Games, the Weblog 2009. [accessed January 30, 2011.] Available from http://www.indiegames.com/blog/2009/12/interview_zach_gage_caught_in.html.

[51] Another artwork worth noting is Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff's *PainStation* (2001), a modification of the 1972 Atari game *Pong*. While *PainStation*'s aesthetic resembles *Pong*'s, players receive sensory feedback that includes heat, burning, and electrical shock. (Morawe, Volker, and Tilman Reiff. 2011. *Idea & Realisation* [accessed April 17, 2011]. Available from http://www.painstation.de/index.html.)

magic circle. By lending real-life consequences to gamic decisions, *Lose/Lose* presses the questions, "Why do we assume that, because we are given a weapon and awarded for using it, that doing so is right? Is the player supposed to be an aggressor, or merely an observer, traversing a dangerous land?"[52]

Similar to *Space Invaders*, individuals playing *Lose/Lose* have the option to refrain from firing at the invaders and to evade contact with the ships until their imminent doom. While both Servin's *SimCopter* hack and *Velvet-Strike* draw attention to the biases embedded in the games they have modified, *Lose/Lose* is the most directly confrontational in that the player experiences a palpable sense of loss.

Whereas Nishikado modeled his creatures after the octopus-like creatures from *War of the Worlds*, each extraterrestrial in *Lose/Lose* is generated by a file on the host's hard-drive. The figures are procedurally generated, which means their appearances, behaviors and health are all based on attributes of the original file. Although players do not know the exact name of the file that's been deleted, they can see the file extension (e.g. .mov, .mp3) pop up amidst the digital fuselage of each defeated invader. While at first these extensions may seem meaningless and disorganized, the more time spent playing reveals the path *Lose/Lose* is taking through the player's hard drive.[53] The only methods with which to stop this data evisceration are either to play until one eventually deletes the contents of the "Applications" folder (and subsequently, the *Lose/Lose* file) or to get hit by an alien craft, at which point the game will delete itself.

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[52] Gage, Zach. 2011. *Lose/Lose* 2009. Artists' description of *Lose/Lose*. [accessed January 2, 2011]. Available from http://stfj.net/index2.php?project=art/2009/loselose.

[53] For example, if the player encounters several .jpg extensions, it's clear that *Lose/Lose* is currently working through the host's iPhoto folder.

In the statement released alongside the trailer and download link for *Lose/Lose*,

Gage writes:

> At what point does our virtual data become as important to us as physical
> possessions? If we have reached that point already, what real objects do
> we value less than our data? What implications does trusting something so
> important to something we understand so poorly have?[54]

By transforming games from something strictly contained within an imagined play space

to "authentic" sensations and consequences, *Lose/Lose* highlights the impulse to

downplay the importance of digital events. Just as flamers responding to *Velvet-Strike*

complained that *Counter-Strike* was "just a videogame" and thus an inappropriate site for

artists to intervene, individuals have a general tendency to assume they know more about

their digital data than they actually do.

In a lecture given at Babycastles, a New York gallery that functions primarily as

an exhibition space for artists' games, Gage elaborated on this phenomenon, explaining

that one of the basic premises of home computing is the organization of information.

Both PC and Mac operating systems incorporate terms like "files," "desktop" and

"folders" to mirror the functionality of their physical counterparts. Gage remarked: "This

worked extremely well for a really long time. So well, in fact, that now our entire

experience of using a computer can be mapped to things that we do in our everyday

lives."[55] However, the properties of digital information are inherently different than the

material objects we can move around our physical desktops, making this re-mapping

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54 Gage, Zach. 2011. *Lose/Lose* 2009 Artists' description of *Lose/Lose*. [accessed January 2, 2011]. Available from http://stfj.net/index2.php?project=art/2009/loselose.

55 Gage, Zach. 2010. Interview with the author, specifically pertaining to academic research. New York, January 7.

process less clear a transition than it might appear to be.

For example, one might relish the simple duplicability of digital content like photographs and videos, while simultaneously one hears countless horror stories about relationships ruined or jobs lost because of the rapidity with which such material can proliferate without the author's consent. This catch-22 contributes to the perpetuation of the myth of eternal data, the false belief that reconciling content to the digital realm means that it has become impervious to decay or deletion. But as any victim of a crashed hard drive or failed server will know, virtual information can be destroyed as easily as a physical photograph can. By expediting the file deletion process, *Lose/Lose* suggests to players that files are not simply containers for information, but that they are how individuals organize their memories, as well as how they construct representations of themselves and others.

Soon after the release of *Lose/Lose*, Symantec flagged the application as Trojan malware, and anti-virus providers Sophos and Intego followed.[56] The fact that these companies released patches specifically to block *Lose/Lose* from users' hard drives indicates not only the software developers' perception that *Lose/Lose* had the potential to reach thousands of users, but also their belief that the general public would not possess the wherewithal to understand the repercussions of the art piece. Gage disagreed strongly

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[56] In addition to manufacturers of anti-virus software, *Lose/Lose* attracted the attention of several "white hat" hackers (individuals who hack, publish and decompile virus codes in the name of network security). While the white hat hackers writing about *Lose/Lose* do not give the piece much credence in terms of its artistic merits, their reports are interesting in that they express a general ambivalence towards the work and the general public's ability to read and comprehend Gage's statement before downloading the *Lose/Lose* file. (Long, Joshua. 2011. *Lose/Lose and psDoom: Art, Games, or Malware?* 2009 [accessed April 16, 2011]. Available from http://security.thejoshmeister.com/2009/11/loselose-and-psdoom-art-games-or.html.)

with the patches, explaining that they only obscured the differences between physical and digital worlds, and that corporate interference in the name of network security only continued to insulate the public within "the lies we've learned about computers."[57]

By September 14, *Lose/Lose* appeared on CreativeApplications.net, a website dedicated to digital art and mobile technologies. In the days following, the artwork generated extensive media coverage. While the media reception of *Lose/Lose* was arguably less calculated than interventions orchestrated by ACT UP or The Yes Men, articles with headlines like "The Game that Deletes Your Files," "Art Project or Malware?" and "Mac Game/Trojan Wipes a File for Each Alien Killed" attracted widespread attention.[58] However, the majority of these articles portray Gage's piece as more of a disguised virus than an art piece, despite the fact that alongside the link to download the *Lose/Lose* file is a warning that reads, "KILLING ALIENS IN LOSE/LOSE WILL DELETE FILES ON YOUR HARDDRIVE PERMANENTLY," and that a similar admonition pops up when the application is launched.[59]

Despite the press' one-dimensional interpretation of the piece, the articles

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[57] Gage, Zach. 2010. LoseLose and Other Weird Futures. Keynote presentation sent by artist to author via personal communication.

[58] Funk, John. 2011. *Lose/Lose - The Game That Deletes Your Files*. EscapistMagazine.com 2009 [accessed February 1, 2011]. Available from http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/94917-Lose-Lose-The-Game-That-Deletes-Your-Files. Mills, Elinor. *Mac Game: Art project or Malware?* Cnet.com November 4, 2009 [accessed February 1, 2011]. Available from http://news.cnet.com/8301-27080_3-10391185-245.html. McEntegart, Jane. 2011. *Mac Game/Trojan Wipes a File for Each Alien Killed*. Tom's Hardware US 2009 [accessed February 1, 2011]. Available from http://www.tomshardware.com/news/Zach-Gage-Lose-Lose-Mac-Game,9005.html#.

[59] As of January 2, 2011, *Lose/Lose* has been played 1,198 times. The current high-scorer is "arvernus," who has slaughtered 412 aliens.[59]

received significant feedback from comment writers, many of whom were likely

flamebaiters. But displayed in their element (i.e. alongside the text they are responding to,

in context to other posts), the comments appear more discursive and responsive than

those in *Velvet-Strike*'s Flamer Gallery. Because the Flamer Gallery exclusively features

negative criticism, the feedback appears isolated and not part of a conversation among

many participants. Thoughtful and articulate (albeit critical) feedback is displayed

alongside comments that are misspelled, vulgar and deliberately provocative.

However, one similarity to *Velvet-Strike* is that many of the comments regarding

Lose/Lose express similar sentiments of discontentment related to the process of breaking

the magic circle by introducing criticality and risk. For example, in one discussion about

Lose/Lose on the website RockPaperShotgun.com, one user wrote "Virtuality was never

meant to have real life (negative) consequences."[60] Some of the other remarks are more

overtly resentful, as one commenter remarked:

> The problem is that it is a game, it's meant to be played. I wouldn't go to that
> museum to ignore all the painting (sic), so why would I play that game? I
> wouldn't even call that place a museum, I'd call it a gas chamber, just like I call
> that game a virus.[61]

The amount of outrage speaks to a significant population's resistance towards the critical

analysis of digital gaming, as well as a generalized opposition to conceptual artwork.

However, not all of the feedback to *Lose/Lose* was antagonistic. While positive

respondents were in the minority, several individuals spoke out in favor of Gage's piece,

remarking on the value of artistic subjectivity and even likening *Lose/Lose* to Guy

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[60] Gillen, Kieron. 2011. *The Winner Takes Your Files: Lose/Lose*. Rock, Paper Shotgun 2009 [accessed January 30, 2011]. Available from http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2009/09/24/the-winner-takes-your-files-loselose/.

[61] Ibid.

Debord and Asger Jorn's *Mémoires* (1959), a sandpaper-covered artist's book that destroyed any book placed alongside it.[62] However, it is not uncommon for online discussions to yield more negative than positive feedback. Even when flamebaiters make up a small minority of a website's readership, their presence can quickly generate a climate of overall hostility. If a reader agrees with or supports the content of a post or article, there is frequently less motivation to respond than there would be had the reader become outraged.

Notwithstanding the sensational nature of the articles, the sheer fact that *Lose/Lose* received any kind of media attention meant that a greater number of people were exposed to the provocative ideas contained in Gage's piece. While many critiques falsely purported *Lose/Lose* to be a virus, there are viral components of the discourse that emerged from the work. Regardless of the often negative nature of responses to the piece, *Lose/Lose* stoked the fires of an ongoing online discussion about art's relationship to games. The fact that this subject continues to arise within gaming-specific realms (notable examples include Roger Ebert's series of articles regarding his claim that videogames "can never be art" and Brian Moriarty's lecture titled "An Apology for Roger Ebert," delivered at the 2011 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco) means that the broader online gaming community is far from sold on the concept of artists' games as a space for meaningful critical discourse.[63] Nonetheless, the sheer frequency with which

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[62] Ibid.

[63] See: Ebert, Roger. 2011. *Video Games Can Never be Art*. The Chicago Sun-Times 2010 [accessed April 14, 2011]. Available from http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html. Ebert, Roger. 2011. *Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn*. Chicago Sun-Times 2010 [accessed April 14, 2011]. Available from

this issue arises means that individuals on both sides of the debate are willing to ardently

defend their standpoints, opening up an inclusive, participatory and occasionally hostile

forum for the discussion of contemporary art.

http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/07/okay_kids_play_on_my_lawn.html. Moriarty,
Brian. 2011. *Brian Moriarty's Apology for Roger Ebert*. Game Set Watch 2011 [accessed
April 14, 2011]. Available from
http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2011/03/opinion_brian_moriartys_apolog.php.

Conclusion

Artists' mods are both similar to and distinct from the public interventions staged by the Situationists, ACT UP and The Yes Men. By reappropriating familiar symbols and scenarios, artists' game patches *détourn* popular videogame culture by manipulating code and altering the appearance and experience of videogames, forcing players to consider the interdependence between physical and digital spheres. As opposed to ACT UP's mastery of televisual aesthetics, artists' understandings of procedural rhetoric facilitate digital *détournements* that aggressively interrogate "reality" as presented by a hyper-masculinized and over-militarized videogame industry. And while The Yes Men's public interferences in the world of public relations very clearly identify corporations like Dow as villainous, artworks like *Velvet-Strike* and *Lose/Lose* are more ambiguous in that they leave space for players to discuss (and argue) the meaning and utility of these works. The fact that many of these conversations take place online has a distinct effect on the overall discourse surrounding artists' games.

However, the online distribution of artists' game mods attributes to what Anne-Marie Schleiner refers to as a "cultural intervention outside of a closed art world sphere."[64] Despite attempts to democratize physical art spaces through engagement initiatives that incorporate elements like live music and late-night party atmospheres, museums and galleries can still feel alienating and intimidating to members of the public who are unfamiliar with contemporary art. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the reality that many individuals discredit or diminish their own interpretations

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[64] Schleiner, Anne-Marie. 2011. *Velvet-Strike: War Times and Reality Games* 2002 [accessed January 14, 2011]. Available from http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html.

of work. Further, ongoing cuts to public education (specifically in the United States) means that most audiences lack a basic familiarity with canonical art history, let alone the contemporary discourses surrounding performance, conceptual and digital art.

One poignant example of this phenomenon comes from Kevin Haley, Director of Product Management for Symantec, who when speaking about *Lose/Lose* remarked: "I don't see the positive aspect of it, but I suppose if it's art we're not supposed to completely understand it."

In contrast to recent public art initiatives at museums such as the Getty Center's "Saturdays Off the 405" music happenings and the "Engagement Party" series at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art, clusters of online modding communities provide social platforms for creative expression and dialogue to those who might not have access to them in academic, professional or museological contexts. Contrary to scenarios in which artworks are displayed in fixed physical settings, game mods' online circulation means that they promote an unprecedented degree of reflexivity amongst audiences who may feel less comfortable within a formal museum context.

However, considering the fact that many artists' mods emerge as responses to dominant culture, there are problems that come along with formalizing a practice initially intended to resist institutionalization. As demonstrated by the often vociferous nature of the comments in *Velvet-Strike*'s Flamer Gallery and the responses to *Lose/Lose*, many users regard play as something not to be tampered with. However, there are several points to take away from the popular reception of these two artworks.

The first detail worth noting is that the online discourse surrounding games facilitates an alternative venue for critical public feedback. While both *Velvet-Strike* and

Lose/Lose were met with substantial resistance, it is possible that, if the public was given a similarly instant and anonymous outlet with which to comment on the artworks of earlier eras, the reactions might have been similarly vehement. [65] And, as mentioned previously, a dearth of positive comments does not necessarily exclude the possibility of positive reception. It is simply more difficult to chart non-textual responses. In this regard, it is important to hearken back to the concept of viral discourse. The public's circulation, conception and cognition of artworks continue long after their initial experience of a piece. Therefore, when considering negative responses to artwork published online, it means that even the most incendiary flamebaiters have been exposed to artists' content. This initial point of contact suggests the possibility that respondents may internalize subject matter, facilitating an opportunity for future ideas to develop. While an individual's immediate reaction to an artwork may be one of repulsion or distress, there is significant potential for responses to mutate over time.[66]

The sheer fact that the patch art and gaming communities are already active and responsive networks composed of artists and non-artists means that a constant stream of feedback can provide guideposts for future online art practices that may be more or less abrasive to players, depending on the artists' intentions.

In addition to the demographic of individuals who already participate in gaming and modding cultures, the audience for artists' mods expands beyond publics who self-

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[65] Galloway, Alexander. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Edited by M. P. Katherine Hayles, and Samuel Weber. Vol. 18, *Electronic Mediations*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. 118.

[66] One historical example of this phenomenon can be seen in the reception of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*. While the piece's first performance in 1913 incited a riot amongst audience-members, the piece has since become one of the most beloved ballets in the history of classical music.

identify as gamers. While interventionist patches and hacks may sometimes infuriate players by challenging or dismantling beloved gaming behaviors, characters or scenarios, they are appealing points of entry for non-gamers. And while it would be naïve to assume that artists' games will ever reverse-engineer the pervasive gender bias and combat-fetishism that plagues the mainstream videogame industry, these works slowly expand the gamer community and broaden its receptiveness to new ideas and methods.

If one draws anything from this paper's analysis of the media interventionist strategies deployed by the Situationists, ACT UP, and The Yes Men, it should be that one can never remove one's self from the society of the spectacle. Artists' patches and hacks do not exclude themselves from this network of cultural-commercial interdependence. Mods like *Velvet-Strike* and *Lose/Lose* were never intended to dismantle or destroy mainstream culture, but rather to serve as meaningful, transitory gestures and brief glimpses towards a more playful future.

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