

The Electric Playground: Review of Arcadia, 2003

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Arcadia, at the Govett Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth is ironically titled. Representations of rustic simplicity it ain't. The Arcades in question aren't distant tree-filled realms but those garishly-carpeted, dimly-lit caverns crammed with everything from Dance Dance Revolution to Mortal Kombat. Arcadia draws on computer game aesthetics and the models of conflict and competition they both participate in and help to foster.

What game aesthetics might look like is a question complicated by the way in which computer games inform and in turn are influenced by popular culture, but the field stretches from the 256 cathode shades of early videogame systems to the texture maps and mods of classic first-person shooters like Quake and Unreal. The cartoon-like simplifications of fuzzy reality familiar from early games (and today's Flash animations) are evoked by English artist Julian Opie's cleanly vectorised worlds. His landscape works resemble scenery from early flight simulators - those green airfields with blocky terminal buildings and grey runways limping across the digital horizon. The worlds he creates in his paintings, videos and installations high-rises, roads, mountains Æ† have the bland rationality of perfect models. He says of his shiny-eyed, blank looking portraits, (as seen on the cover of Blur: The Best Of) "I try to make a universal symbol for each individual I draw." His highly schematised images preserve quirks of appearance but flatten skin and hair, nullifying individual imperfections. This shiny sim city is a world Opie claims to want to inhabit. "I would like to make a painting and then walk into it", the artist says.

Simulation is one key to game aesthetics. Fiona, a work of Opie's featured in Arcadia is a beady-eyed video portrait. Fiona has a small menu of archetypal facial expressions, which she flicks between. Her displays of fear, surprise and pleasure are run by an algorithm. It is up to the viewer to impose some kind of narrative on this programmed agglomeration of simulacral emotion. Perhaps a little more responsive is Sean Kerr's two-monitor work "a couple of googly eyeballs that track viewers through the gallery space."

Games are capable of providing solitary entertainment, but they also have a social dimension. As the first public space devoted to the pursuit of cathode pleasures, the video arcade has often been seen as a marginal realm of delinquency, coin-fuelled petty criminality and occupational overuse syndrome. It is the social aspect of multiplayer online games that is explored by artists' collective Superflex www.superflex.dk. The Danish artists purchased a site licence for Counterstrike, a multiplayer game in which players compete in teams of "terrorists" and "anti-terrorists". Tagline: CLARIFYING THE NATURE OF THE COMMON ENEMY IS AN ESSENTIAL POLITICAL TASK. The artists provided 17 terminals running the game to gallery visitors, accompanied by videos of collective action in other, more traditional, contexts.

The game-world is a speculative arena of low risk, where you can machinegun the monsters or save the hostages and be back in time for tea. But does the effortless consumption of game violence change the way we think about the real thing? The bright allure of simulated annihilation was selling well as long ago as Wargames (1983), the first hacker movie, which starred a practically pre-pubescent Matthew Broderick both precipitating and challenging the prospect of global thermonuclear war. The sinisterly seamless relationship between military simulations of death and destruction and their civilian cousins was widely acknowledged during Papa Bush's Gulf War (the first virtual war). The disembodied violence represented by the view from the nose of a "smart" bomb both reflects the avatar violence of the gameworld, and brings it home to the Real. Virtual War is visited on actual bodies and played back for on-screen consumption by the folks back home.

It is in this contested interface between actual and virtual violence that artist Feng Mengbo's work operates. One of a small group of Chinese computer artists, Mengbo www.mengbo.com has created his own

Quake 3 modification, Q4U, which he presents as a three-player setup in galleries, and as a video. All the players and bots in the game have been replaced by the figure of the artist – bare-chested, wearing army pants, wielding a DV camera and armed to the teeth. When playing, He gets to frag himself onscreen, in starbursts of digital Mengbo-pulp. And so does everyone else who downloads his mod, or comes to the gallery to play. Of this work he says:

– is that too violent - better turn on the television. see the news. then you might think the virtual violent of Q4U is a GAME, a lucky happy ass-hole. a true story: when I was a young boy, my ideal is to be a PLA [People’s Liberation Army] soldier but also a painter, so the best way is to be a military-painter :-) now I realize why I add a DV camcorder in the hand of my 3D model. this is a real time game, and almost a real world.–

But in Mengbo’s Q4U the violence is visited only and always on the figure of the artist.

In making custom maps or skins or simply by bending the rules, mass-market entertainment is routinely frankensteined by home coders. The online game culture of software swaps, cracks and free downloads is drawn on by local artist and designer Warren Olds, who, as his contribution to the Arcadia project is designing a game-inspired font which will be available free from the gallery website.

As models of the real or moments of utter escapism, computer games are big business, but they are also zones of community, creativity and subversion. Extending the decades-old handiworks of pale teenaged boys, the artists in Arcadia explore the ways games can construct their players, but are also in turn constructed by them.

Arcadia, The Other Life of Video Games was an exhibition at the Govett Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth from 10th May - 20th July 2003

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