

RESETPLAY

RESETPLAY

Concerning the Juncture of Video Games and Art

by Marcin Ramocki and Paul Slocum

Games have existed for millennia so it is important to understand what makes video games unique. Excluding their technological basis, video games are not dramatically more complex to play than non-video games. Traditional discrete games such as Chess and Go are computationally difficult games to master even with contemporary computing, and the physics of sports (as well as the universe) are very challenging to emulate convincingly in video game form. Complex multi-player war games and role-playing games have also existed for centuries. In fact, when viewed through the lens of history, it seems that many video games simply attempt to model or extend traditional games. However, the unique trait of video games is that they carry the spectacle of technology in all its forms, and with this, its burden of disposability. Pong is a sensation and then fades into obsolescence, but ping-pong is here to stay. And while many visual artists have fashioned artworks from or about games over the centuries, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a new cadre of artists who find in the specialized realm of video games and the rampant rise of video game culture fertile fodder for artistic creation. RESET/PLAY surveys several trends in art made about video games and includes works by both emerging and pioneering practitioners in the field.

Concerning the Juncture of Video Games and Art

Video games are neither videos nor games. They are their own discourse, their own culture. One can attempt to compare them with video and talk about linear versus non-linear media, narrative versus algorithmic script, passive semiosis versus active participation, etc., but when push comes to shove, a good electronic game is its own kind of thing, with its own space and time. It involves user (as opposed to “viewer”) familiarity with specific metaphors and sign languages. It is driven by dreams of control and domination. It demands repetitive physical interactions with the computer and an unconscious surrender and submersion into the virtual environment. Like other games, it is played to win and requires practice and repetition.

Furthermore, video games and artworks based on video games are two separate genres. One is a pop cultural, commercial enterprise while the other is a conceptual, postmodern form of fine art. Obviously there are instances in which commercial video games stretch the aesthetic and conceptual limitations of their genre so far that one would not hesitate to characterize them as art. And vice versa, some artistic projects appear very pop, appeal to an audience beyond the art world, and even become commercially successful.

Among the pioneering figures in conceptual art projects are Cory Arcangel, Alex Galloway, JODI, and Edo Stern, all of whom have been concerned with purposefully deconstructing games. Their structural game works are very modernist in their essence and deal with exposing the codes, control mechanisms, and limitations artificially imposed on the software/hardware level by game companies. These kinds of works are often political and relate to the broader field of capitalist and media critique: they seek to sabotage the hidden structures and motives intrinsic to making video games, which are part of a highly addictive and lucrative commercial enterprise.

Concerning the Juncture of Video Games and Art

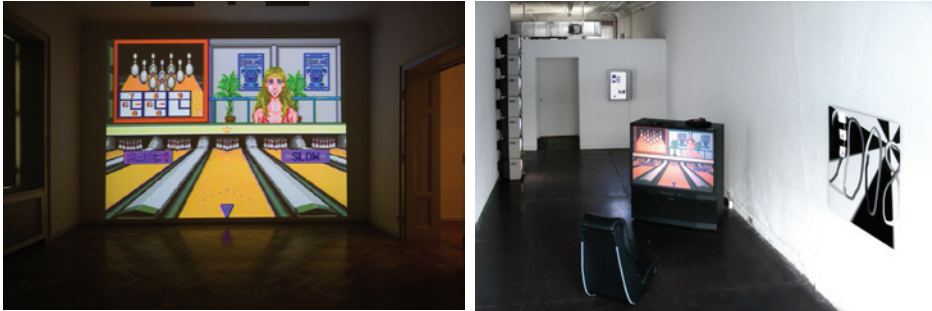
Another group of artists use machinima/modding, which is a form of filmmaking that uses the game engine to produce linear video material. These artists manipulate options embedded in the game environment, including lighting, camera angles, and video and screen recording options. The quality and success of the artwork in these cases is dependent on the critical abilities and aesthetic sensibilities of the maker; artworks can range from a seemingly naïve form of folk art to a manifesto of creativity. Employing a sort of reverse machinima are Michael-Bell Smith and Kristin Lucas, who both create digital videos that look like video games, but which are made using traditional video software instead of games.

Artist-made video games which are partially or fully playable game environments comprise a third, yet interrelated, strain of conceptually-based artworks. Such games require a complex level of production and are made by artists who are usually very familiar with programming languages and basic gaming concepts. Some of the artists in RESET/PLAY who create their own environments are Guthrie Lonergan and Joe McKay (and collaborators). Artists working in this area often explore the boundaries of what defines a video game by altering interfaces or by changing or removing the game’s goals or obstacles.

Finally it is only natural that video game material would bleed into other territories of fine arts. More and more artists include or reference game discourse; after all, it is part of the common cultural heritage of Generation X. This influence occurs in various media, from traditional platforms like painting and sculpture, to more experimental forms such as video installation and web art. Conceptual art often crosses media boundaries and ends up as a hybrid expression. Works by Mike Beradino and Michael Smith, in particular, are great examples of the direction where things may be going as game themes filter into the mainstream art world—an art world that grew up with Atari, the Commodore 64, and Nintendo.

Cory Arcangel

Born 1978, Buffalo, NY
Lives and works in New York, NY



Beat the Champ (*Sega Genesis Championship Bowling: Dana*), 2008

installation with hacked Sega
Genesis game controller
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Team Gallery, New York, NY

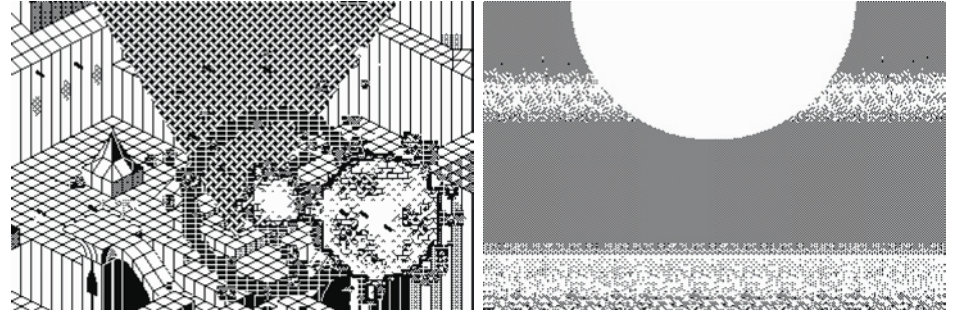


Cory Arcangel is a computer artist whose work is concerned with technology's relationship to culture and the creative process. He is a founding member of BEIGE, a group of computer programmers and enthusiasts who recycle obsolete computers and vintage video game systems to make art and music, and a member of RSG (Radical Software Group). Although Arcangel studied music at Oberlin Conservatory, it is his minor in computer science that is most evident in his work. After graduating in 2000, he began writing computer code and hacking, or modifying computer programs. With a belief that humans have very little control over the technology that surrounds us, Arcangel suggests that the only way to combat technology is to try and understand what we have been given. He reclaims human power by manipulating and changing technology through his art.

Beat the Champ (*Sega Genesis Championship Bowling: Dana*) is a self playing Sega Genesis game that has been manipulated and programmed to repeat and bowl only gutter balls. Arcangel recorded the moves he made while playing the game, and then installed a device on the controller that replays his game endlessly, an action perhaps meant to convey futile attempts to escape the growing impact of technology over our lives. The game was altered by hand and is projected onto the wall from the Sega console.

Michael Bell-Smith

Born 1978, East Corinth, ME
Lives and works in Philadelphia, PA



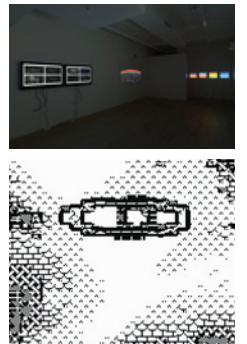
Michael Bell-Smith, who graduated from Brown University in 2001 with a degree in Art Semiotics, makes animated, Web-based, and audio works that explore the strained relationships between people and machines and art and technology. While his art has frequently been described as painterly because of its color and composition, there is no confusing it with oil on canvas. Bell-Smith reveals the construction and technology in his work out of a desire for viewers to examine it more closely—down to the pixels—and wonder how it was made.

While We Slept is a black and white, very pixelated video loop that begins with a sunset. The black and white patterning references early Mac Paint applications from the 1980's, in which various black and white effects were used to denote texture. After the sun sets, the scene scrolls up into the sky and through the stars and universe. There, a battle begins and the black night is lit up with white flashing explosions as a sleeping city is bombed below. Once the battle end, the screen scrolls back to the original setting in time for sunrise. With a sense of peace and tranquility, there is no sign that a bombing ever took place—perhaps Bell-Smith's commentary on both the terrible yet magical potential of technology.

While We Slept, 2004

digital video with sound
3 minutes, 26 seconds
dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Foxy
Production, New York, NY



Mike Beradino

Born 1976, Alton, IL
Lives and works in Montgomery, AL



Liquid Pong, 2008

interactive sculpture
36 × 36 × 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Electric Paints, 2008

canvas, conductive paint,
Atari 2600, monitor
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Mike Beradino received his B.F.A. from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2006 and in the same year was awarded the Linden Labs (Second Life) fellowship. He graduated with his M.F.A. from Parsons School of Design in 2008. Beradino's work functions in multiple ways, both in the real world and in online communities. Beradino looks to many of the DIY online communities in which he is involved and finds in them content and resources for the creation of his work, as well as a venue for its production and dissemination. Central to his work is a belief that growing technology is responsible for the fragmentation of human relationships. Yet in the virtual world, a reciprocal relationship can develop between the audience and the artist and two roles become blurred. As a result, the audience is able to learn from the artist's technical instructions and create new works.

Liquid Pong is an attempt to create a real-time, physical representation of pixels from the intangible space of the computer screen. The piece is made from a grid of 144 electromagnets placed below a tray of ferrofluid, extremely small magnetic particles suspended in a liquid. These particles become strongly polarized in the presence of a magnetic field. Low resolution animations and games can be displayed in the liquid, transforming the liquid into pixel formations. Beradino used an online tutorial and free control software called Blinkentools to create the piece. Demonstrating the democratic applications of freeware, *Liquid Pong* brings the digital world into the tangible world, blurring the line between technology and real-life interaction.

Brody Condon

Born 1974, city?, Mexico
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA



Brody Condon creates digital and video representations of historic events and religious paintings by hacking and reprogramming popular computer and video games. Recognizing that violent video games has been blamed for violence in society, he incorporates violence into his art by using the detail and accuracy of gaming to mimic and depict the violence that has always existed in our world. His visual representations also express the emotions and feelings that arise from violence, an area where most commercial video games fall short.

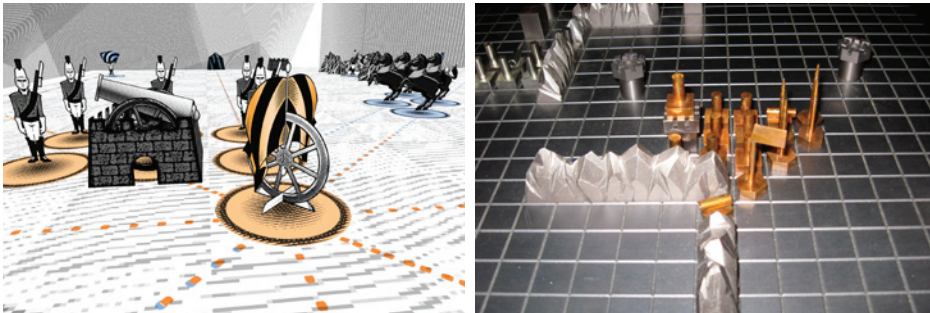
Judgment Modification (After Memling) appears to be a running game waiting for a player to return. Perhaps most accurately described as a moving painting, it is an animated version of the 15th century painting *The Last Judgment* by Flemish master Hans Memling. Having lived in the Netherlands for many years, Condon has a deep familiarity with historical and religious paintings, and sees a connection between the fire and brimstone subjects of those paintings and the fantasy themes found in video games today. In this particular work, Condon proposes that the turmoil depicted in Medieval religious paintings is not so very different from what we encounter in today's globalized media.

Judgment Modification (After Memling), 2008

self-playing video game
Courtesy of the artist and
Virgil de Voldère Gallery, New
York, NY

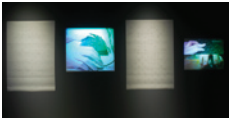
Alexander Galloway

Born 1974 in (waiting for this information)
Lives and works in New York, NY



How to Play World of Warcraft, 2005

Installation with video and ultrachrome prints
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist



Alexander Galloway is an author, programmer and Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University. Galloway graduated from Brown University in 1996 with a BA in Modern Culture and Media and received his Ph.d. in Literature from Duke University in 2001. A founding member of the Radical Software Group, he has written such books as *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*, *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, and a new book coauthored with Eugene Thacker titled *Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. His art, which has been described by *The New York Times* as “conceptually sharp, visually compelling and completely attuned to the political moment,” explores issues of aesthetics, digital media, software, new media art, and games.

In a lecture about modern capitalism and social interaction Galloway cites the online multi-player fantasy video game, *World of Warcraft*. Developed by Blizzard Entertainment and launched in 2004, the game now has over nine million players worldwide. In the game, players must collaborate with other players to form groups that must work together. Galloway’s response to the game, *How to Play World of Warcraft*, is a multi-media artwork that features prints that depict characters and tasks from the original game, abstractly constructed from keystrokes and text. The images simplistically describe the very complex and elaborate game played by millions everyday.

JODI

Joan Heemskerck

Born 1968, Kaatsheue, Netherlands. Lives and works in the Netherlands

Dirk Paesmans

Born 1965, Brussels, Belgium. Lives and works in the Netherlands.



JODI is a collective formed in 1994 by Dutch artist Joan Heemskerck and Belgian artist Dirk Paesmans. With backgrounds in photography and video art, both artists are digital art veterans who began making work primarily in the mid 1990’s. Although their work has evolved to encompass a wide variety of digital platforms, they continue to create work that is meant to be viewed on computer screens, in the same context in which it was made. Despite their pioneer status in the genre of new media art, JODI claims they were never trying to work against traditional art practice; they just made art using what they already knew. While the two artists use technology, they use it to humorously criticize itself.

Composite Club is an installation of different Playstation 2 games combined with prerecorded video clips. The video games are motion sensitive and the movements in the video clips determine the actions in the video games. To say it simply, the movies play the video games. In this scenario, human interaction and involvement is completely removed as technology begins to replace humans all together.

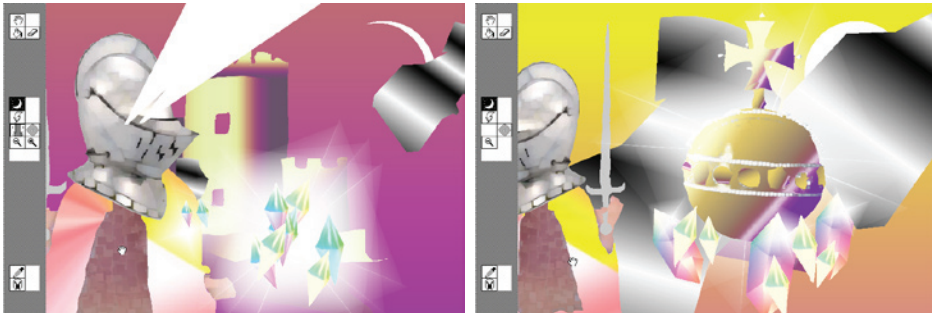
Composite Club, 2007 *digital videos with sound*

dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists and
And/Or Gallery, Dallas



Guthrie Lonergan

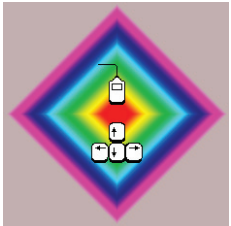
Born 1984, Los Angeles, CA
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA



RPG Paint, 2004

video game

Courtesy of the artist and And/Or Gallery, Dallas, TX



Guthrie Lonergan, an emerging media artist who graduated in 2006 from the University of California at Berkeley, works primarily on the Web, searching the depths of the Internet for materials and images to appropriate. Lonergan explained his approach in an interview on *Rhizome.com* in 2008: “there’s so much stuff out there already that it seems pointless to make something new, from scratch.” He considers his work a new form of appropriation that points to or lists things that already exist in order to comment on our computer and media based culture.

RPG Paint is an interactive computer video game that takes place in a reprogrammed Microsoft Paint application. While playing the game, one can alter its setting by changing the time of day or adding geographical details or meteorological conditions. Depending on a player’s agility and speed, villains, who are identified by their black cloaks, can be removed from the game with the eraser application. A player uses common Microsoft Paint tools in innovative ways to play the game. This interactive experience could be likened to a digital painting that the viewer can modify, giving the player power over the technology which seemingly rules our lives. At the same time, RGP Paint allows gamers to use common, commercial software in new and unexpected ways.

Kristin Lucas

Born 1968, Davenport, IA
Lives and works in Oakland, CA and New York, NY



Kristin Lucas, who received her MFA from Stanford University in 2006, explores the fundamental relationships between humans and technology through her videos, projections and installations. Inhabiting the role of the main character in her works, Lucas creates cautionary tales about using technology. She is often seduced by the technology and then hurt by it in order to explain its psychological effects of technology, which in many cases can develop into physical ailments as well. She believes, as humans with flaws, we create technology that inherits our flaws, and though technology was meant to help us, it usually serves to separate people from one another. Using a combination of digital media and real life objects, Lucas creates an immersing experience that balances the pros and cons of the rapid growth of technology.

5-Minute Break was inspired by a tour of the World Trade Center’s sub-basement that Lucas took while a resident artist in the North Tower in 2000. In the video, a female avatar travels through empty hallways and stairwells, encountering dead ends, faded graffiti, and trash. A benign version of the video game and film heroine Lara Croft, she roams around like a ghost—aimlessly going through the options she has been programmed to complete—as if the player had abandoned the controller. The video is dedicated to Robert Lynch, a Port Authority property manager, who gave Lucas the sub-basement tour and died in the towers’ collapse in 2001.

5-Minute Break, 2001

digital video with sound
4 minutes, 35 seconds
dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and And/Or Gallery, Dallas, TX



Nik Hanselmann

Born ? Lives and works in Berkeley, CA

Joe McKay

Born 1970, Swansea Wales, Ontario, Canada. Lives and works in Oakland, CA

Gregory Niemeyer

Born 1967, ? Switzerland. Lives and works in Berkeley, CA



Return of Balance, 2007

video game

Courtesy of the artists

Greg Niemeyer received his MFA in New Media in 1997 from Stanford University where he also founded the Stanford University Digital Art Center. He currently teaches at The University of California, Berkeley. His works focus on the mediation between humans and individuals as a collective through technological means, and emphasizes playful responses to technology. Joe McKay, a former student of Greg Niemeyer, received his MFA from The University of California, Berkeley, before participating in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2001. McKay creates work with and about technology and digital culture, exploring how they affect us and how we can regain some control over them in our everyday lives. Nik Hanselmann is a programmer and student of Greg Niemeyer.

Return of Balance is an interactive game that requires players to use subtle shifts in weight to control a virtual platform. Players use the platform to deflect bouncing balls into colored hoops, and, like any good video game, it becomes increasingly more difficult. Unlike most other video games, however, it requires that players find their own balance and center of gravity. Players must first master their own body and weight to combat the game, and therefore, technology. Perhaps ironically, Nintendo's new interactive gaming platform, Wii, was released at about the same time as this work.

Michael Smith

Born 1951, Chicago, IL

Lives and works in Austin, TX and New York, NY



Michael Smith, currently an Associate Professor of Transmedia at The University of Texas at Austin, is an internationally recognized performance artist most well known for his character or alter ego "Mike." His thirty-year career includes performance art, video art, installations, and comic publications. Smith's work, especially through his persona "Mike," explores issues of isolation, failure, fear of failure, and the rapid pace of technological change. While "Mike's World" seems to be a reality in which we see one man's struggle with entrepreneurship, technology and the American Dream, it is actually a synthetic reality that is meant to be familiar.

Mike Builds a Shelter is the earliest work in *Reset/Play* and is one of Smith's first forays into the new technologies of the 1980's, an era which had a great impact on many of the other artists represented in the exhibition. Created on a Commodore 64 computer and housed in a video cabinet just like an arcade game (and restored specifically for this exhibition), *Mike Builds a Shelter* takes place in "Mike's" fictional suburban house, a frequent setting for Smith's works of the period. In the game, a bomb siren goes off and the player must try to build a fallout shelter before the bomb explodes. The game is timed so that it is impossible to complete the task in the allotted time, thus the player always blows up. As in other aspects of "Mike's" life, perpetual failure is to be expected, as technology and the world always move too fast for him.

Mike Builds a Shelter, 1983

arcade cabinet, video game

74 × 32 × 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist and
Dunn and Brown Contemporary,
Dallas, TX

Eddo Stern

Born 1972, Tel Aviv, Israel
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA



Level sounds like Devil (BabyInChrist vs. His Father, May 2006), 2007

3D computer animation with sound

10 minutes

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Eddo Stern grew up in Tel Aviv in the 1970's and played video games just like any other child. However, unlike most children, the violence he encountered in the fictional realm of games often mirrored the violence happening in the real world around him. Now as an artist with his MFA in Art and Integrated Media from the California Institute of the Arts, Stern draws upon his childhood experiences to address issues of fantasy, reality, politics, and cross cultural perspectives through his computer games, films, and online media.

Mashing together characters and icons drawn from the most popular multi-player online fantasy game, *World of Warcraft*, Stern has created a 3-D animated face titled *Level Sounds Like Devil (BabyInChrist vs. His Father)*. The face is a surrogate for that of a real life teenager and *World of Warcraft* player, username BabyInChrist, who had posted questions to online Christian forums about the morality of the game and how to reconcile his love for it with his adopted family's fundamentalist faith. The animation gives voice to the boy's posts as well as to the posts he receives from others in response. In this work, a virtual community encroaches upon the territory of an established religion, and the boundaries between fantasy and reality begin to blur.

Keita Takahashi

Born (waiting on this information)
Lives and works in Tokyo, Japan

Keita Takahashi studied art and sculpture in university, but decided that art alone could never fulfill his goal to change the world. Desiring to make a positive impact on society, he eventually turned to creating video games as a means of making people happy. Cognizant that many people only see the negative effects of video games, he strives to create player friendly games that, if even for an instant, can make the world seem like a better, less violent place.

Katamari Damacy is just this kind of surprisingly simple game. Each player starts off the game as a small, sticky ball which can be rolled around various environments to pick up everyday objects. As the ball grows in size, so do the objects it picks up, until a player is grabbing up cars and skyscrapers off the street. The game is purposefully non-violent and has even been described as therapeutic. Takahashi feels his games are similar to his earlier, light-hearted sculpture in that they should not be taken too seriously. He hopes that his games can act as a peaceful distraction from life and help bring a little joy to the world.

Katamari Damacy, 2004

commercial video game
dimensions variable

About the curators

Arthouse Texas

Paul Slocum

Paul Slocum is a musician and new media artist living in Dallas. Computers and computer culture are often the medium and subject of his work. Some of his projects are *The Dot Matrix Synth*, an 80's dot matrix printer with re-programmed firmware to transform it into a sort of musical instrument, *The Century Callback Project*, a phone number that calls you back 8 times in a century, and *The Time-Lapse Homepage*, a video made with HTML. He is also half of the *Tree Wave* project that makes music and video with obsolete assembly-language-programmed computer and video game gear. Some of Slocum's performances and exhibitions include *Transitio MX* (Mexico City), *The New Museum of Contemporary Art* (NY), *Deitch Projects* (NY), *Le Confort Moderne* (France), *README 2005* (Denmark), *The Liverpool Biennial*, *Eyebeam* (NY), and *Fluxfactory* (NY).

Marcin Ramocki

Marcin Ramocki is a new media artist and independent curator based in Williamsburg Brooklyn. His works have been exhibited at MoMa, Hirshhorn Museum, Pacific Film Archives, ACMI Melbourne, SAT Montreal, Anthology, Artmoving Projects and many more. His recent project include the feature documentary *8 BIT* (director) and the web based "Blogger Skins". Currently Marcin teaches New Media at Jersey City University, he is also the founder of vertexList space in Brooklyn.

