

# review

exhibition

**Bang the Machine:  
Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts  
@ Yerba Buena Center for the Arts**  
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Exhibition URL:

[http://www.yerbabuenaarts.org/va/current/bang\\_mach.html](http://www.yerbabuenaarts.org/va/current/bang_mach.html)  
Presented in conjunction with the Stanford Humanities  
Laboratory and the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford  
University (<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/SUMA>)

**I've seen a good number of shows dealing with games and game art, so I was expecting a fairly run-of-the-mill fun, but not terribly enlightening show. Happily, though, I was surprised. The show itself featured game mods, work inspired by the game aesthetics, and original games.**

## Highlights included...Game Mods:

The most noteworthy game mod was *Waco Resurrection* by the art collective C-Level. It's a traditional First Person Shooter type of game, but it all takes place as the ATF is storming the Branch Davidian compound. As rockets fall from the sky and snipers swarm into the meeting hall, it is your job (as David Koresh himself) to run around and convert or thwart the ATF foot soldiers. What's more, to get the full game experience you must don a Koresh mask with microphone (the microphone recognizes voice commands which are necessary to perform any of the spells). You can stun the agents with your charisma and lead them into the chapel (to convert them) or call out other spells to create a magic circle which levels those around you. (<http://waco.c-level.org>)

*Pain Station*, by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff, reintroduces physical consequence into game play. As the user plays a Pong-type game, they are given electric shocks (and are occasionally whipped on their hands) when they miss. The game was not in operation while I was there, but the video displayed smiling, cringing participants. The idea of introducing physical consequence to actions in a virtual world is clever and fun, but tying the physical to such a simple game is, perhaps, not worthy of lengthy analysis. Still, I couldn't help thinking of the scene in *Never Say Never Again* where James Bond and his nemesis are playing a video game, *World Domination*, and receive stronger electric shocks when they lose a country. (<http://www.painstation.de>)

Another game (Janek Simon's "*Carpet Invaders*") was basically *Space Invaders* taking the shape of Afghan rug patterns on an Afghan rug background. The piece was interesting partially because it was projected onto the floor, creating a seemingly living rug, and partially because it addressed the idea of the current two-front Mid-East conflict in a more poetic manner. It's unfortunate that the game play didn't really advance the aesthetic message, but the elegance of the statement itself was nice to see.

## Work inspired by games:

Also featured was Paul Kaiser's and Shelley Eskar's latest piece, *Arrival*, a mesmerizing animation that uses the isometric visual style so often found in video games. Characters move forward and backward through time, going through the minutia of busywork, theft, espionage, and travel. As characters perform their actions, a spotlight view of their world comes into view. As they complete their action, the spotlight -- and consequently the view of their world -- fades out and they disappear. *Arrival* takes on the familiar eye-in-the-sky perspective (as did the artists' previous work, *Pedestrian*), however, there is no unified "ground." The characters and scenes all operate on different "levels," creating a magical Escher-like world where walls and floors are not what they seem.

For the first time, Eskar and Kaiser have provided some level of interactivity: a dial that allows you to control the movement of the video (forward or backward). The idea is to put the viewer in the position of a security professional who might have to "scrub" the tape to illicit finer data, but because the video is already composed of scenes which move forward and backward, the interaction feels superfluous and somewhat distracting. In the end, the piece is about surveillance, where the audience is put in the position of the voyeur. However, you aren't watching the mind-numbing minutia of daily life but a world populated by characters whose every motion is finely choreographed and elegant. Kaiser and Eskar create a hypnotic world in which you lose yourself. (<http://www.kaiserworks.com>)



Kaiser & Eskar's *Arrival*

C-Level collective member Brody Condon's 650 Polygon John Carmack sculpture is also noteworthy. It is, literally, a 650 polygon representation of the Id Software (*Doom*, *Castle Wolfenstein*) mogul, realized in milled foam, resin, and laser prints; and standing about 3 feet tall. Its simplicity and congruency of idea and form is as remarkable as it is humorous and playful. (<http://www.tmpspace.com/carmack.html>)

## New Games:

All of the above projects stood out for specific reasons, but the most notable aspect of the show was the inclusion of an *America's Army* installation. The installation featured 4 arcade-style consoles, a simulation of a stone wall similar to the walls in the game, and a video on the making of the game.

*America's Army* is, according to their own site, part of the Army's communications strategy designed to leverage the power of the Internet as a portal through which young adults can get a first hand look at what it is like to be a Soldier. The game introduces players to different Army schools, Army training, and life in the Army. Given the popularity of computer games and the ability of the Internet to deliver great content, a game was the perfect venue for highlighting different aspects of the Army.

The creative team modeled the environment after actual battle zones, did extensive interviews and testing with military personnel, and made characters out of actual soldiers. In this installation, you can't fire a gun (thus missing out on the most popular role assumed by players, the Sniper), but you can command and communicate with other soldiers.

*America's Army* is the most profound incarnation of all of the concerns that come with any FPS or military simulation. I heard that the makers of the

game found it validating for AA to be featured in an art show. However, given the context in which the project was shown (i.e., the nature of the games that surround it), it's hard not to think of AA's inclusion as an exposure of the dark underbelly of the game industry and the insidious possibilities and realities of the technologies employed in game design and development. As such, it was utterly refreshing to see this subject addressed not by a work, but by the curators. AA is presented without the overt hand of the curator (i.e., there is no curatorial statement describing the reasons for the inclusion of the project), and so it could, conceivably, be read as a recognition of the massive amounts of money and work dedicated to the game. However, given the context in which AA is featured, this viewer found it impossible to see the project in a non-critical light. Indeed, several gallery patrons expressed shock at the presence and existence of the project. As I watched the video on the making of the game and then played the game itself, I felt both disturbed and disgusted. (<http://www.americasarmy.com>)

All in all, the curators did a great job representing the breadth of work being done with and around games and gaming culture. What's more, they actually tackled some of the more difficult issues surrounding the gaming industry at large.

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