

JODI: untitled-game

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2001

Notes from an informal talk presented as part of the exhibition of JODI's *untitled-game* as part of *Words and Things* at CCA: Glasgow, on Saturday 17th November 2001.

Quake

Quake is the most famous of all the first person shooter games that emerged in the 1990's. Coming out in 1996, it has developed from a one player system into a multi-player system in which people can fight each other across the internet.

The first game of this type was *Wolfenstein 3D*, produced by the same company, id software, in 1992. *Wolfenstein* is set during World War II in a German castle used as a war prison. You have to break in and shoot lots of German troopers. It introduced the idea that you could play the game seeing it through your character's eyes as though you were actually there. Games of this sort have become the most widespread form of 3D computer environment in use today.

Ever since the spread of computer gaming alongside the spread of the home computer in the early '80's, games like this have always enjoyed a large, dedicated fan base many of whom are game creators and programmers themselves. This has meant that the relationship of the actual software to those playing it has often been a lot more open than in other media. As well as creating their own spin-off games, game-players also extend and adapt the original games themselves. There are five ways in which this is most commonly done: through *patches* and *mods*; through people creating their own game environments (called *levels*); through people hacking the original software; and, as in the case of *Wolfenstein* and the early version of *Quake*, through the games companies themselves making their own source code available to the public.

Patches are small add-on bits of code, originally produced by the game manufacturers to fix bugs in the game software or add new functionality to it. Because the patch is a new piece of code which modifies the main game code, people quickly realised that they could hack their own patches to change a game to suit their own ideas, such as changing the way characters are represented on screen. One of the most famous of these being the nude Lara Croft patch which removed all the clothing from the heroine of *Tomb Raider*. This patch has itself been re-hacked to change Lara in other ways such as giving her a beard. Games companies realised that by allowing people to change to games to suit themselves the game actually increased in popularity and fan loyalty. The two ways in which this was introduced was through mods and level editors. Like the Lara Croft patch, mods allow you to change the appearance of characters and objects in a game. Level editors allow you to create you own virtual worlds to play in. A popular past-time amongst Silicon Valley employees has been to make levels which recreate their workplace and populate it with characters based on fellow employees who shoot it out with each other in the corridors.

Hacking can be a little more subversive in the way it changes a game. One of the most successful game hacks was that of *SimCopter*, a helicopter fighter simulation. This was actually funded by the anti-corporate activist group RTMark, who are also known for creating fake version of the WTO and GATT web-sites so as to promote counter-information, as well as actually infiltrating WTO meetings with their own delegates. In the *SimCopter Hack* they put up money as a prize for a hacker to introduce openly

gay elements into a military game at the production stage. An employee on the *SimCopter* game took this up and the game entered the stores with the built-in functionality of allowing the all-male helicopter fighters the option of cruising the airbase in swimming trunks or engaging in romantic liaisons with one another. This was not just a cheeky ploy aimed at subverting the sexual stereotyping of such games but also a way of highlighting the discriminatory measures against gay personnel which the American Military was introducing at the time. The *SimCopter Hack* is related to another form of coding exploit known as an *Easter Egg*. Easter Eggs are bits of surprise content built into software to appeal to those who like to poke around where they shouldn't. This is not just found in games but in other software as well. The sound editing package, *Cool Edit Pro*, for example contains an Easter Egg which enables you to play games of Pong inside it.

Making source code freely available has been one of the ways in which internet based software development has expanded, a kind of ethic known as Free Open Source Software development. This is best known in the case of GNU/Linux a completely free operating system developed by hackers and programmers for their own use and which has now become one of the most robust and widely used systems for running the server machines which house web-sites. In 1997, the source code for the Netscape web browser was made publicly available which led to the development of various alternative browsers such as Opera. It also became the inspiration behind a whole new genre of web-art in which artists and hackers created their own forms of alternative browser. Although few of these actually use the Netscape code itself and instead rely on simpler multimedia packages which implement it. JODI have produced their own series of, what they call, *wrong browsers*. Rather being a utility for displaying web content these feed off webpages and the links between different sites as a form of kinetic stimulus for purely graphical or 'anti-informational' projects. Similar explorations of web as sensory rather than informational media have been made by Mark Napier through his potatoland projects. When id software made the source code for the early version of *Wolfenstein* and *Quake* available, it became a natural move for JODI to go from messing up web browsers to messing up games.

untitled-game

untitled-game is a series of variations on the source code of *Quake*. Primarily they intervene in the code which deals with the visual display of the game on screen. This follows on from JODI's project with the *Wolfenstein* code in which they replaced the images of German troopers and guard dogs and the interior of the castle with simple, blocky, black and white abstract shapes. The narrative content of the game is effectively stripped out and it instead becomes a kind of formal aesthetic reminiscent of the early abstract computer art of the late sixties and early seventies in the work of Frieder Nake and Vera Molner.

The making of multiple variations of a work is a feature of JODI's practice. They claim to have made around 150 variations of their web-site. The CCA show presents 12 variations on *Quake*, but they are currently producing more of these, and quite probably doing so as we speak, which are due for publication on CD-ROM. In one sense, this is the continuation of a very conventional form of artistic practice, the production of a series of studies which explore different technical and formal issues of a particular medium. We can relate it to Monet's series of haystack studies, or even the development of series of etchings as Rembrandt used to do, or perhaps Frank Auerbach's obsessive reworking of paintings. As JODI point out, the ability to constantly rework and change digital media is one of its inherent features. Unlike traditional art practices, such as painting, the output of digital practice is not a static, finalised 'work' but a fluid, often ephemeral and always active working. Some of JODI's work consists simply of emails through which the boundary between public art object and personal communication is broken down and which can always invoke a response from the recipient who effectively, in doing so, generates a new variation in the series. In JODI's case digital media are always 'works in progress'. One way to think of JODI's work as a form of performance art, with the performance emerging from the interaction between the human user and the software. JODI themselves relate the production of continuous variations in their work to the idea of versioning in dub reggae, and others have compared it to sampling and re-mixing, in which elements of an existing piece of music, or in this case software, are reworked into new versions, sometimes radically different from the original.

untitled-game therefore, is a series of *Quake* remixes which are not intended to be variants on the game itself but rather a new alternative type of work which uses the game code as an existing material

which is sampled, manipulated and reworked into a series of kinetic, performative studies. These explore formal aspects of the computer game as medium such as screen display, and user interaction. The point is not to frustrate our expectations of the software as game but rather to offer something new built out of the way in which the software is used to create a game. This is directly analogous to way in which Modernist abstract painting was not intended to frustrate our expectations of painting as representation but rather to develop something new out of an awareness of the visual potential of paint, canvas and rectangular frame. This abstract Modernist aesthetic however is undermined in JODI's work by the fact that the original sound effects of the games — guns firing, dogs barking, explosions, etc. — have been left in place. The High Modernist conception of an artwork as a discrete singular entity, unfolding the formal play of its material properties collides with the appropriation of a non-art medium like a digital extension of Cubist and Da Da collage. The temporal dynamism of the works relate them to music and film, to re-mixing and scratch video. It's almost as though the game code had been mixed in with sampled snatches from Hans Richter films.

aesthetics of error

Any pretensions of High Modernist expertise in JODI's work are however undone by their working methods. They are not experts they are self-proclaimed cluts. The look and feel of JODI's work does not come from an attempt to seek out and distill some refined pure essence of the digital but rather from making mistakes. JODI are amateurs not professionals and the aesthetics they pursue are not those of Modernism but the aesthetics of error.

Like many of the pioneers of net.art, which primarily developed over the years 1994–1997, there is a strong, slightly punkish DIY-angle to what they do. In terms of DIY as do-it-yourself this comes from a simple pragmatic necessity as in those days, the tools and people to produce such work were simply not there and most artists working with the web had to do it themselves, but this was also in keeping with the general ethos which had influenced the early growth of the web. There is also a sense of DIY as disturb-it-yourself or disrupt-it-yourself which is common to many if the artists of this time. This partly comes out of an anarchistic or activist political bent as in people like Heath Bunting of irational.org or I/O/D who were interested in challenging the standardisation of web and computer media and the kind of establishment of corporate control over the medium which companies such as Microsoft have implemented. JODI share sentiments with I/O/D, in particular, as well as AntiRom, and M9ndvirus. These groups created early CD-ROM and software projects which challenged the accepted ways of interacting with computer media by sometimes creating work which superficially appears conventional but then behaves in unexpected ways or which is deliberately opaque in how it works in order to make you explore it more consciously - an approach which acquired the name of 'anti-interactivity'. The intention here is very similar to Brecht's concept of 'alienation' in his theatre work, which deliberately foregrounded the artificial and constructed nature of theatrical performance in order to force the audience into a critical awareness of what they were watching. The punk angle of an aesthetics of error, however, also comes out of foregrounding a deliberate clumsy amateurishness for similar critical effect and as a means of distancing yourself from the mainstream. It is not surprising that JODI's favourite band are the Fall. A lot of JODI's work looks the way it does simply because they made a mistake and decided that they preferred it that way.

The exploitation of error as a positive factor also has parallels in the development of electronic music. Despite the fact that almost all digital and electronic equipment introduces something new into the world it is often orientated towards recreating what we already know allowing us, sensibly enough, to integrate it into our existing ways of doing things. The computer desktop is designed around the concept of a real office desk with sheets of paper and objects placed on it. The guiding principle behind much web page design is to make the documents look like magazine pages or paper brochures. Drum machines were designed to sound like human drummers. None of these qualities are directly inherent in the technologies themselves but rather the technologies have been built to simulate these qualities. By deliberately using a technology wrongly, or taking advantage of a fortunate mistake, something of the internal nature of the technology can be revealed and a new way of working develops out of that far more in tune with the nature of the technology itself or enabling a medium to develop in ways conventional practice could not have foreseen. This happens when you realise a record doesn't have to be played in one direction and that by manually scratching it back and forth you can create new rhythms out of the sound recorded on

it. When Hip Hop producer Marley Marl accidentally recorded a drum-beat on his Emulator E1 he paved the way for the use of sampling to extend this concept and inaugurated an entirely new way of making music. Similarly acid, techno and drum'n'bass all owe their distinctive style and sounds to pushing drum machines and sequencers to their extremes at which point their simulation of human-made music falls apart and something wholly new emerges. One day, when typing a page of HTML code (the computer code that creates web pages) JODI mistakenly missed out a character from the code. When they looked at the resulting mess in their browser they realised that rather than being something undesirable this actually demonstrated a new way of working with text as a medium which was completely unknown in the paper-based concepts of textual layout which the browsers had been designed to reproduce. This mistake revealed a unique browser aesthetic which is not determined by the use value of the browser but by its materiality, the code from which it is made.

the error of belief

That code is a form of logic system. Any computer program or piece of software, whether it is a web browser, word processor or game, is the encapsulation of a logic system. As Gödel's theorem demonstrated, any complex formal logic system is incapable of being fully consistent and comprehensive. It will always produce statements in that system which are self-contradictory or mathematically unprovable in themselves as he illustrated in the example of an analogous paradoxical statement: "This sentence is false." Much of Mike Kelley's work is based on the creation of made-up logic systems based on arbitrary components such as discarded soft toys and graffiti slogans. His use of performance was a means of acting out that logic system, just as a computer program acts out its logic system when it runs. Kelley has described how he uses "theatre as the traditional way of presenting a false belief system live."

At the end of the project, I would do a performance where I would perform the system of logic to the best of my abilities, to convince people that it was true. Then it was over, I could get rid of that system of beliefs and work on another one.

The point of which JODI's work meets with that of the other artists in *Words and Things* is at this point. Just as Simon Starling takes apart and reconstructs the logic of one manufactured product into another, or as Mark Dion plays with the way knowledge can be constructed through the creation of museum-like display systems, which are themselves a presentation of a particular person or discipline's concept of a logical, true system of knowledge, so too JODI, in remixing, messing up and constantly reworking software into new forms, playfully destabilise the belief systems on which computing is based, tweaking out the self-contradictions inherent within it and reminding us that there is always an element of the arbitrary in even the most apparently rigorous logical devices.