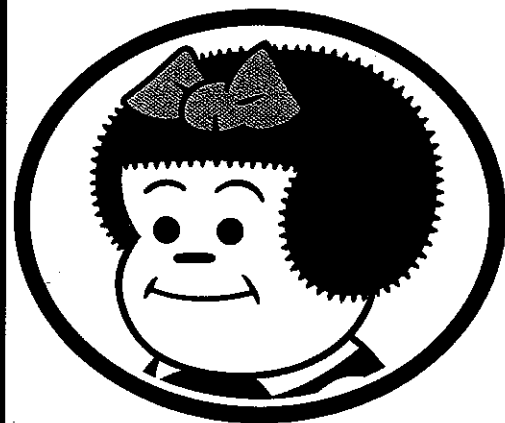


THE BELIEVER



ANNOUNCING THE GAMES ISSUE

INCLUDING: *Crosswords as literature, virtual-reality helmets of David Koresh, and the most ingenious (and racist) puzzle ever invented*
by VARIOUS EXCELLENT WRITERS



A WILD AND UNCOOL DREAM

The fantastically exciting and curiously sad quest to play Dungeons & Dragons with E. Gary Gygax, the man who invented the game

by PAUL LA FARGE



SEPTEMBER 2006 \$8

REDOUBTABLE INTERVIEWS WITH:

★ MARK ALLEN ★

[VIDEO-GAME ARTIST]

★ PADGETT POWELL ★

[WONDERFUL/IRASCIBLE/SOUTHERN WRITER]

★ WANDA SYKES ★

[CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM]

BAD ADVICE FROM PUPPETMASTERS

& NICK HORNBY INTRODUCES

THE SCIENTIST OF THE

MONTH AWARD

EMBEDDED FUN: 1977-PRESENT

A history of real-life historical combat in video games, from pixelated Cold War paranoia to instant, playable news footage

★ by ED HALTER ★



“AGONY”: A GAME FOR THREE FAMILIES

A work in progress

by JOE WENDEROTH



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MARK ALLEN

[DIGITAL ARTIST]

“THE SHOCK WAS STRONG ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR ARM PULL YOUR HAND OFF THE CONTROLLER, SO YOU LITERALLY LOST THE ABILITY TO FIGHT BACK AS YOU GOT INJURED IN THE GAME.”

Ways in which video games mirror capitalism:
*You get off on getting more and more spells or gold or magic shields
There's always some level of aspiration that you have yet to reach
You're never satisfied, because that's the nature of the game
They don't want you to stop playing*

In 2001, Mark Allen and his collaborators at C-level—an art cooperative in a basement in Los Angeles's Chinatown—wired together a PlayStation, some electrodes, and a few photoreactive sensors to create a physio-cybernetic hybrid game they called *Tekken Torture Tournament*. It was hacking as performance art: the basement became a gallery in which visitors took turns playing a version of *Tekken* that shocked the user when the video-game characters got wounded. The experiment was a success, paving the way for Mark Allen to explore his interest in computer games as an artistic medium by developing a whole series of event-slash-installations. Allen is now a faculty member in the art department at Pomona College, where his program is called DARPA (Digital Art Related Program Activities) and offers courses in *Computer Programming for Artists* and *Electron Wrangling for Beginners*. As his official

bio states, Mark continues to search for “interesting ways of mixing art with electricity.” —Joshuah Bearman

I. “YOUR BODY IS AN ELECTRICAL SYSTEM”

THE BELIEVER: How did you come up with the concept for *Tekken Torture Tournament*?

MARK ALLEN: The exploratory idea was the avatar, and what directional control you have over it. The avatar is a stand-in for you. But what happens to you, or your avatar, only returns to you in the form of visual stimulus. So the idea with *Tekken Torture Tournament* was to create a closer bond between you and the avatar with an actual physical response.

BLVR: Hence the electric shocks.

MA: We created a system where you personally got a shock to your arm when your character got hit in the game. The shock was strong enough to make your arm pull your hand off the controller, so you literally lost the ability to fight back as you got injured in the game.

BLVR: It stung that much?

MA: It's not that it stung that much. Your body is an electrical system. So your muscles move automatically when given a charge.

BLVR: Did you have to figure out the right charge?

MA: It pretty much works that if you turn it up, it hurts more and you get a stronger contraction. It was very intense. It could actually lock your arm into place. It was a hard involuntary contraction.

BLVR: How did that system interact with the game?

MA: We wanted to get the data out of the PlayStation without getting into the code or anything like that. So instead, we kind of hacked a solution by placing photo sensors on the TV screen, setting the screen to black and white, and reading the hue changes as your energy bar went down. As you became more injured, you'd get pulsed more and more. The system was reflecting the lack of ability to fight back as you're dying.

BLVR: How did it play out?

MA: We were interested in the basic relationship. But we hadn't thought about the relationship between the players, and what wound up happening is that the participants got very aggressive and played with this incredible showmanship. It was like they were performing the piece. That was a great and unexpected result. We wanted the audience to become the performances.

BLVR: There's a great tradition of that in art.

MA: Yes, but games add a new perspective, because people lose their sense of self-consciousness when they're playing. Because they're so focused on a task, they no longer think about whether or not they look like an ass. The experience of being in a computer or video game space is disembodying. Your consciousness moves out of your body and into this fantasy space that's electronically mediated. Because of this effect, people become very detached from what they're doing and they wind up performing in ways they never would otherwise. So it's interesting, as an artist, to use these tools to set up a framework and see what happens. It's almost like you come across the art.

BLVR: If you've ever watched people play *Dance Dance Revolution*, it's clear that the execution of a game task erases inhibition and self-consciousness. People look nuts when they're playing *DDR*. They're focused solely on the screen, furiously trying to get their feet to hit the arrows in time, but from the waist up they're arrhythmic and slack jawed. It's very strange.

MA: Yes, that effect is really interesting. The next piece we did, *Cockfight Arena*, was engineered to directly manifest that phenomenon. *Cockfight* was a game we based somewhat on *Joust*, a classic Atari game we all loved. Continuing to look at the use of the avatar, we thought there would be a poetic justice by reversing roles a bit. The first time around, your fate was tied to the avatar's fate via the shocks. In this game, we wanted to make the physical player the avatar, so we made these bird suits for the players to wear.

BLVR: How did that reverse the roles?

MA: The idea was that you had become the avatar, and what was happening on the screen was more of a shadow representation of your actions. You flap the wings in real life and the bird on the screen flies. You step on a pedal and the bird caws. We had these ridiculous hats and this magic birdseed and you had to move your head really fast to get the birdseed—and, again, the players got really out of control in the performance. But we were not only trying to directly entangle the visitors into an absurdist experience; we wanted to draw in the entire audience. So

a friend, Daniella Meeker, wrote some gambling software that allowed visitors to place wagers on the individual matches. The odds were adjusted in real time, so that got lively and we even made some money off that. But more importantly, the audience became very invested in the matches. There's a great video of spectators going crazy, shouting, "Peck harder!" at the players.

II. "THERE WERE FOUR KORESHES PLAYING AT ONCE"

BLVR: Tell me about *Waco Resurrection*.

MA: We wanted to think about what happens when you model a real-world event in a video-game space. And we were starting to think about the piece as a sculpture and an installation. We created a first-person shooter that follows the events of the Waco incident. The game follows a ten-minute cycle: it begins; they set fire to the compound; everybody dies; it starts over. Playing as David Koresh, you attempt to convert the ATF agents to become your followers through your charismatic aura.

BLVR: And there was a helmet apparatus, right?

MA: Yes. The players—there were four Koreshes playing at once—each put their head on. The head featured a direct map of the Koresh head model in the game. So you wore this physical representation of an abstraction of a photograph of a person. Inside the head was a microphone. If you intoned certain chants, it expanded your charismatic aura.

BLVR: That must have been strange to watch for non-players.

MA: It was strange. The players became part of the sculpture. And the piece wound up being more for the people watching. You'd walk into the gallery, and there were these four expressionless heads on the shoulders of people clicking the mouse as they played. Chanting, too. It was eerie. Their repeated efforts to convert ATF agents inside the burning compound were projected on a big four-way split screen. We found some MP3s of

David Koresh's band, and those were also playing.

BLVR: What was his music like?

MA: They were these indie-folk-type rock songs about the Book of Daniel, and they're very sad. Not great, but pretty. And most of all, they were human. So as you're watching this thing, you're double-processing these two spheres of information: a sculptural game re-creation on one hand, and on the other hand, a reminder of the real human element it's based on.

BLVR: I saw the game demonstrated at USC once, but there was only one head. And I don't recall the music.

MA: What was going on at USC?

BLVR: It was part of an open house for their new interdisciplinary video-game program.

MA: Oh, right. Well, I think the piece was really only shown properly twice. You really need all of the parts. And the audience. As you can tell, the relationship people have when they experience events together is really important to me.

BLVR: So artists have taken up video games as a medium. But it seems that video games have yet to aspire to art.

MA: I think there might be a structural limitation to games. They cannot have the narrative power of a film or book, because what we look for or experience in art is less about choice. It's the expression of a feeling we've all had but have been unable to articulate ourselves, and then someone else articulates it beautifully. And that requires a singular narrative vision. When you have eight billion choices, as you do in a video game, any one combination of choices becomes meaningless.

BLVR: Art is about the signal in the noise, and games, by definition, create no signal.

MA: The only way to make the choices of game play meaningful is to embed them in some kind of problem-

solving activity. Like a puzzle. Or advancing through levels. Or adding power.

BLVR: You're always acquiring stuff.

MA: Yeah, a lot of games mirror capitalism, essentially, where you get off on getting more and more spells or gold or magic shields. And there's always some level of aspiration that you have yet to reach. You're never satisfied, because that's the nature of the game. They don't want you to stop playing. What you look for in art is not accumulation, or goal-oriented problem-solving. You look for ambiguity. Things that are not concrete.

BLVR: With all the talk about how video games are becoming art I have to say I don't yet see it. If you're comparing the narrative power of film or books to video games, most games just try to mimic movies, and bad ones at that, with these crazy nonsense stories, full of plots and little scenes cribbed from third-generation movie knockoffs to begin with. That's the fault of most games. They don't realize that the two types of media are like apples and oranges. But some games are totally different. They involve the user—or multiple users—in interactions, perhaps even meaningful interactions. Maybe the thing to do is not to compare video games to traditional media at all, but instead to figure out how to evaluate a game's merits as art using different criteria. People talk about, say, *Katamari Damacy* verging on art. It's not like a film, book, or any other video game. The experience of it is so unique that—

MA: In a way, I guess, *Katamari Damacy* is kind of like a painting. It's really incredible. It's true. Maybe I'm judging too strongly. On the point of story line and narrative, there is a problem. Games are different.

III. "THERE'S ALWAYS A HEALTHY RISK OF TOTAL DISASTER"

BLVR: The social dimension of games is, it seems to me, where the opportunity lies. Online games, where many people's social relationships are mediated through a server, or LAN gaming, or even a crowd of people at

a friend's house getting drunk and playing *Katamari*—that's not unlike the kind of experience that you're looking to stage with your performance-based installations. There, the art is also different from film or books. There's no narrative. No explicit poesy.

MA: But the difference is that here, there's no set algorithm controlling the entire experience. Algorithms play one role among many. When we create events, or hack something together, things are not so determined as they are in games. And with us, there's always a healthy risk of total disaster. Things may break or not be done in time. And so when you come to those events and they do come together, they're sort of special. It happens only in that moment.

BLVR: And games are devised entirely as commodities, whereas very little of what you do can be sold.

MA: Right. I deal in experiences. In a way, our gallery work is more like going to a theater. Maybe if you played video games in a movie theater, they'd be compelling. It could be the setting. I also have a hard time watching videos. That's the same problem with games—you can turn them off, pause them, and the investment isn't the same. I think being in the theater is important for movies. Maybe the same applies to games.

BLVR: It's the old problem of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Your art is aura-based because of the experience.

MA: Maybe we're not being fair to games because we're not developing them in a context where they have an aura. There's the crowd, the projection, the atmosphere, the presence that evening. Instead of being one of the million people who saw a movie, you're one of the handful of people who showed up on a particular night. I like the bonding that surrounds that. It develops my idea of community. And maybe that's what our video-game art projects like *Cockfight Arena* do—they supply an aura.

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BLVR: It's true. I feel like I missed out on something forever by not seeing the original *Tekken Torture Tournament* and *Cockfight Arena*.

MA: Yes, the aura creates that feeling.

BLVR: There's video footage of it for documentation purposes, right?

MA: Yes.

BLVR: But it's not the same as being there.

MA: It never is. ✱