



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2010

## Discourse engines for art mods

Poremba, Cindy

---

### Suggested citation:

Poremba, Cindy (2010) Discourse engines for art mods. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 4 (1). pp. 41-56. ISSN 1866-6124 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1400/>

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*

<http://www.eludamos.org>

---

**Discourse Engines for Art Mods**

Cindy Poremba

*Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2010; 4 (1), p. 41-56*

---

# Discourse Engines for Art Mods

CINDY POREMBA

## Introduction

The practice of using games to make art has a history that extends beyond computing, but has clearly exploded with the growth of digital gaming; so much so, that game art can be seen as constituting its own genre within new media art. Typically, what we call an “art mod,” or artistic game modification, is a creative manipulation of the software, or hardware/software combination, of a digital game within an artistic context<sup>1</sup>. It has a complex relationship with a parallel folk practice of game modding<sup>2</sup>, a popular activity among computer game players that can see hundreds of mods emerge around certain games – most of which are custom maps and character scenarios that are variations on the original game. In fact, many games, such as *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games) and *Half Life* (Valve), are recognized more for their potential as a modifiable engine than a game. As a diverse and interdisciplinary practice, there are numerous theoretical issues surrounding the interpretation of art mods.

Fortunately, if we are looking for interpretive guidelines, we have many options. This paper presents a genealogy of game mod definitions and frameworks<sup>3</sup>. Such frameworks serve, either intentionally or unintentionally, to establish *artistic* game modification within a tradition of analysis and critique. Like game mods, these discourses come with their own assets and affordances, rulesets and structures, audiences and ideology. Although many, if not most, work on definitional frameworks for understanding, situating, and/or designing art mods draw from across several discourses (sometimes in ways that confuse domain-specific understanding of various concepts and themes), viewing these frames as situated in a dominant discourse is useful in understanding how such a context shapes the way in which art mods are understood. Furthermore, such an analysis allows us to see how art mods are specifically constructed, often in relation to non-artistic game modification.

## Game Mods as Open Authorship

The first such discourse<sup>4</sup> is the critique of the game mod in the context of interactive media design, often specifically as a critique of authorial determinacy, against the grounds of interactive media. This discussion grows out of the mingling of early digital media and hypertext theory of George Landow and Espen Aarseth<sup>5</sup> (which itself is situated very much in literary traditions) with the “information wants to be free” code of the late 90s hacker ethic. It emphasizes the blurring of authorship roles (for example, by suggesting the game player is a co-author in interacting with the work), the politics of production (specifically, the flattening of production hierarchies), and digital ownership. As such, work situated within this discourse can often appear as heir to both “death of the author” theorists such as Roland Barthes and Michel

Foucault, and Umberto Eco's<sup>6</sup> writing on the open work (often as an instantiation of these concepts). In this context, game mods are a tangible denial of authorial intention and authority, so art mods showcase this redistribution of power from media consumers to media producers, symptomatic of the digital age. It is important in this conceptualization to show computer game players as empowered media producers in their own right; and to show the range of creative practice that may exist within common digital game tropes and technologies: what the world might see now that access to these powerful design tools are in the hands of so many. This also presents a political agenda of maintaining videogames as an open, moddable form. This line of discourse can be problematized, however, in the relationship between vernacular mod production and artists work; particularly in defining the context of production and reception dynamics. The position of artist is arguably not synonymous with everyday media consumer – even today, in most Western cultural contexts, artists maintain a privileged position as authors that they are sometimes reluctant or unwilling to recognize. As such, art mods are perhaps less typical of this new power distribution, and may in fact serve two other functions: providing a model of “best practice” to authorially-empowered game players what they *should* be doing with their creative freedom; and contributing appropriately creative and meaningful examples of game modding to offset the relatively non-creative contributions of typical game modders. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's 2002 framework appears to be situated within such a discourse, and Maia Engeli's (2005/2008) work on design strategies for shooter games stems tangentially from such a discussion.

Salen and Zimmerman locate game mods (as a general category) within the context of *critique*, as design interventions and acts of creative resistance creating dialog between (presumably connected) groups: producer/consumer, artist/hacker etc. (2002). They propose three strategies used by mod producers:

- *alteration* (making changes to existing game elements),
- *juxtaposition* (combining unexpected elements); and
- *reinvention* (reworking the entire structure in the game, and/or engaging symbolic spaces beyond game borders).

All three categories maintain a grounding in the original source design. They describe the practice as inherently transformative (always referencing the originating design), blurring roles and categories, and creating dialog with larger forces as a form of cultural critique – specifically, the game industry<sup>7</sup>. However this is not portrayed as overtly political resistance, but rather a soft resistance addressing authorship politics rather than harder socio-political issues. Even though the framework suggests a balancing of player/author power positions, it nonetheless reifies the categories of player and designer. Salen and Zimmerman's cultural touchpoints include punk's DIY ethos and appropriation and conscious misuse of iconography, and the readymades of Marcel Duchamp (reinforcing the theme of reference and commentary). The examples supporting their argument include both artist and fan created works, and no attempt is made to differentiate between them.

Engeli's typology breaks works down by design strategy:

- *strip* (isolate/abstract and intensify game elements),
- *shift* (visual re-formation),
- *impose* (add a cultural or social overlay),
- *recycle* (remediate real world forms and locations),
- *overload* (overburden mechanics, audio-visual systems etc.),
- *spill* (draw the game out into the real world),
- *break* (completely remove the game from the digital, or obliterate the game); and
- *abuse* (deny/comment on the core game mechanics – here the first-person shooter).

Serving a dual role between grouping similar works for critique, and suggesting models for design, the framework adopts a language of confrontation (in fact, it presents orders – an authorial call to arms as it were) that evoke manipulation and abuse of the original game, and by extension ownership and control. Although Engeli's framework is limited to the first person/ego shooter genre it also addresses an audience of player-designers.

## Game Mods as Alternative Media

A second approach is in viewing game mods as alternative media. Frameworks drawing from this tradition tend to emphasize tactical intervention into mainstream media (often driven by issues of access), and borrow from the analysis of alternative media initiatives and projects (predominantly from television, video, and guerrilla media). Such efforts can serve to disrupt (or ideally remake) mainstream games or gaming, or cultivate a parallel alternative gaming practice, and may take as its spiritual predecessors scratch video, political collage, the Situationists movement -- even arthouse cinema. While work within this discourse also emphasizes power redistribution (as does discourse on open authorship), there is more emphasis placed on group over individual practices, and institutional resistance over reconfigured understandings of authorship<sup>8</sup>. Huhtamo's (1999) "Game Patch- Son of Scratch" is an obvious entry into this discourse, but Galloway (2007) also makes attempts to find a frame for understanding art mods as "countergaming" in the tradition of arthouse cinema (along side filmmakers like Jean Luc Goddard, and countercinema theorist Peter Wollen). This approach situates the art game mod within the realm of a broader dialogic visual culture (art mods as the undercurrent), and their rhetoric seems to strike a revolutionary tone – *Even the fan mod can be Art!*

At its heart, this is a critique of mass-media, and draws from ongoing debates that the hegemony of mass or commercial media is stifling diverse voices, creating passive, disengaged audiences etc. (into which we may draw in Theodor Adorno, Guy Debord, Walter Benjamin, Hans Enzenberger etc.). Game mods are again an

intervention, but this time as a second stream of voices providing a counterpoint to a dominant media form. In this context, using existing games, rather than creating new works, is an important strategic gesture. It shows what might be possible within contemporary technological constraints, and common tropes. In this light, art mods show opposition to a monolithic, uncreative, and hegemonic commercial games industry (as an extension to an ongoing battle with mass media) – and as a result demonstrate an implicit dissatisfaction with mainstream games.

While Huhtamo doesn't present a formal framework, he presents a model of artist motivations including history/nostalgia, media intervention, reaction (to games), tactics (in the de Certeauian sense), and expression (specifically, inserting one's presence) within the game form. The work presumes a historic connection (and audience familiarity) with alternative media forms such as scratch video. Huhtamo cites precursors such as political photomontage artist John Heartfield and the Situationists concept of *détournement*: the integration of elements of artistic production into a superior milieu. He proposes motives for game modification include arguments of ideology, player-creation (as mentioned above), subversion, humor/parody, and mastery. However, he is cautious about the future of the form, insisting these works are an essential manifestation of tactical media-- and like scratch video, simultaneously an expression, a reaction, and an intervention. Noting, however, the "failure" of scratch video and alternative television, Huhtamo insists access and independence are key to preventing the "civilization" (i.e. co-option or segregation) of guerrilla media such as game mods.

Galloway begins his model by describing three basic ways in which a digital game may be modified: 1) through the visual<sup>9</sup> design (for example, the addition or alteration of design assets) 2) through the rules (here including most structural elements of the game itself, such as goals) 3) through software (for example, altering the processing of in-game physics). His formal grammar of this practice (2006), pitting mainstream production against modification as "countergaming," includes:

- *transparency versus foregrounding* (creating a seamless experience versus showing the construct),
- *gameplay versus aestheticism* (focusing on gameplay versus focusing on audio/visual experience),
- *representational modes versus visual art* (creating realistic visuals versus artistic ones),
- *natural versus invented physics* (simulating the real world versus creating the artificial),
- *interactivity versus non-correspondence* (providing players with interactive agency, versus creating a disconnect between player action and game response); and
- *gamic action versus radical action*<sup>10</sup> (reiterating game play patterns versus exploring new play dynamics).

He suggests art modifications, as countergaming, “defy the industry style point by point” (2006), demonstrating oppositional cultural production against a hegemonic games industry. The assumptions built into this framework include an insistence that gameplay forms part of core definition of games – so where many mods ignore or subvert gameplay, they are in essence somewhat heretical. Galloway is also critical of what he perceives as game artists' focus on the game technology, again rather than the gameplay.<sup>11</sup> He argues such countergaming needs to be focused on gaming, otherwise it is essentially reactionary, and limited as an alternative form. As such, this model is also a critique of the relationship between art modders and the mainstream industry, and embodies a remedial agenda intended to bolster the role of art mods as an alternative to commercial games.

### Game Mods as Folk Practice

Still other frameworks present mods as folk art (technical variants including hacker art, and fan art), including Olli Sotamaa (2002) and Anne-Marie Schleiner (1999; 2002)<sup>12</sup>. This discourse draws heavily on theories of cultural appropriation in the production of everyday life (but also extends, to an extent, into the politics of production/hypertext discourse mentioned earlier). Key theorists for works in this vein include Michel de Certeau and Henry Jenkins, although it often leaves a vast body of untapped, and often heavily political, work on cultural appropriation extending beyond fan-based works (you won't see bell hooks or post-colonial theory here). These definitions are particularly interesting in how they approach the value of mods as a cultural form, and debate the value of situated, local practice versus extricated but “universal” themes and values (vernaculars versus canonical works). What is important for this line of interpretation is to recognize and value previously devalued works in the form of game modification; and by extension to recognize and appreciate a variety of folk art practices among digital consumers. In some ways artists creation of game mods may be said to parallel a Modernist fascination with “naïve” art, as artists attempt to tap in to *something* intangible player mod production seems to say about digital culture. However, it may also be approached as quite the opposite – suggesting such work, indicative more of community building and social exchange, is in fact non-extricable and perhaps misunderstood and overvalued by artist and critics.

But what exactly is the game vernacular? In what ways is modding banal; in fact an unreflective practice outside narratives of subversion, with a little value outside of local cultures of exchange? Reception dynamics play a heavy role in how meaning is teased from game mods. While artists presenting their mods in gallery spaces to specialized interpretive audience giving the work limited time; popular mod production exists as a system of exchange among intensely situated gamers highly familiar with the original cultural product, and within a community of already existing interpretation and value. The proliferation of boring (in the larger sense) mods speaks more to the reiteration of meeting within these micro-cultures (this is in fact argued by Sotamaa). In this case it might not make any sense to evaluate mods in terms of aesthetic structure or value within larger cultural systems. As “mainstream light,” modding is simply popular hackerism. Sotamaa likens the practice to a knitting circle

– or even “preschool.” Art mods, so the argument goes, misunderstand and overestimate the lay practice.

Sotamaa's player-centric framework suggests five primary “passions” for game modification:

- *playing* (passion for the game, usually demonstrated through extension of the original work),
- *hacking* (passion for the code),
- *researching* (passion for subject matter embodied in the game),
- *artistic work* (aesthetic or political work with art assets/design (note: art may be used broadly here to also indicate design assets)); and
- *cooperation* (participation in a social group, or team).

What Sotamaa is trying to draw out is what he believes are the actual meanings modders give to these works – he seeks a view from the inside, rather than relying on external interpretations and connections. Fan culture theory (such as Jenkins' work) may provide a more useful and accurate description of a more complex, often laudatory, relationship with media that is also seen in other forms of fan culture (television fans, etc.) These fan mods are seen as more genuine, untethered from an avant-garde emphasizing irony and distance via appropriation over personal affect and passion. Fan game mods don't necessarily critique mainstream media, but primarily serve to support an active sharing of meaning – neither do they reveal a newly empowered creative class, since a democratization in production has led to a shift in gatekeeping away from production, and towards distribution, promotion, and industry acknowledgment.

Schleiner counters that this view of unreflective modding culture originates from the devaluation of women's leisure and folk art practice, and is in fact a misogynist reading that underestimates the cultural value of mods. A game art curator, Schleiner has included both fan and art mods in her exhibitions<sup>13</sup>. Although Schleiner does not present a formal framework, she advocates strongly for the reception of game mods as computer folk, “hacker” art. She also points out mod artists and gamers are not mutually exclusive categories-- and indeed, digital media artists are often rabid media consumers. While some modifications are on the personal or expressive level (customizing avatars and architecture), others are more critical/subversive in relation to their host game.

## **Game Mods as Fine Art**

Still another means of situating and contextualizing game mods is as a fine art practice – typically, but not exclusively, within media art. This perspective is taken up by game art curator Rebecca Cannon (2006), (and to a lesser extent Schleiner<sup>14</sup>; Celia Pearce and Julian Oliver). Viewing mods from within fine art brings to the forefront themes of creative appropriation (here conceptualized through the fine art



tradition) and artistic intent. The game becomes a cultural form that presents opportunities for artistic expression, and (drawing from activist art) social critique. Lines of influence are often drawn from precursors including movements such as Dada, Fluxus, Pop Art, Found Art, Appropriation Art and Graffiti Art; and also specific artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Yoko Ono (both game modders in their own right<sup>15</sup>).

Drawing lines of influence into fine art traditions is reminiscent of Horst Bredekamp's (2003) approach to *bildwissenschaft*, the broadened field of art history embracing "low" art objects as a legitimate field of research. Is this perhaps the only means of understanding and legitimating these works within a larger context such as fine art? Conversely, what validates these interpretations? Part of the answer may lie in authorial intent – many of the works that are put forward as artistic game modifications are in fact specifically designed and arguably come for context of fine arts production and art history. These works may be interpreted as artistic expression within a popular cultural form; and their embedded nature suggests a promising (and perhaps stealthy) form for artistic social critique – at least in theory. This framing constructs game modifications as an extension of practices that fall within certain traditions of art, and in a way are natural extension and progression for contemporary arts practice. Its practitioners are legitimate artists, and its critics are legitimate critics. Indeed, the entire discourse legitimates art as cultural commentator.

In Cannon's typology, mods are subdivided into sub-genres within the language familiar to media arts: narrative/abstract machinima, real-time performance instruments, abstract interactives, and site-specific installations. Art mods are differentiated from fully independent art games, and, oddly, still image works, such as the *Unreal Art* series by Alison Mealy, are omitted. Cannon also stresses the importance of artistic intent – excluding fan works and indicting lay readings of art mods (2007). She insists proper readings of artistic game modification work need a conceptual focus that includes the motivation and history of the piece.

## Adam Killer and the Engines of Interpretation

*Adam Killer* is in fact a series of eight mods created between 1999-2001 by artist Brody Condon using the 1998 computer game *Half Life*<sup>16</sup>. As an iconic and somewhat controversial work of early game modification art, it can serve as a touchpoint for this larger discussion on frameworks for contextualizing art mods. In the mod itself, the player encounters a game level filled with multiple copies of the same character, Adam, standing unarmed, unaware and generally idle (as Cannon describes, "biblically pure" (2007, p. 46)) in a nondescript white space. Adam is in fact modeled after a specific person: sculptor Adam Frelin, an acquaintance of Condon's who was ostensibly selected because he was commonly seen wearing a white shirt, which Condon felt would create an attractive contrast with the blood spatter (Condon 2002). The only course of action a player has available, aside from navigating through the space of Adams, is to dispatch with Adam using the variety of weapons in the *Half Life* arsenal (different types of guns, grenades, a crow-bar etc.). As Adam is annihilated, a software bug in the core game is exploited to create a dramatic kaleidoscopic trailing effect. This turns the environment into a visually

intense, chaotic mess of fractured textures, marked by the characteristic bright red colour of virtual blood and guts.

*Adam Killer* was initially presented in one of two ways: as an artist performance (consisting of Condon playing the game in a gallery space, with the work projected against one or more screens), or an interactive installation (i.e. a stand-alone game mod that gallery audiences could play) combined with an artist talk about the work. In later iterations, version 3 of 8 (deemed the most successful version) was made available as a downloadable mod on the web<sup>17</sup>. Currently it is disseminated as a multi-channel non-interactive video installation or 10 minute DVD “virtual performance”<sup>18</sup> documentation of Condon's game play. The following anecdote (Cannon, 2007, p.47) suggests why:

The first time he showed *Adam Killer*, one woman in the audience started crying, and another started yelling at him about the poisonous nature of mediated violence. Intensely frustrated with their myopic reading of the work, Condon threw a chair against the wall to shut them up. He then asked them to make a distinction between the reality of that act and what they saw on the screen. “If I am ever asked the idiotic question what is the difference between real violence and media violence again, I think I will cry.”

How do you interpret an art mod like *Adam Killer*?

### **Adam Killer as open culture exemplar/critique of determinate design**

For Salen and Zimmerman, *Adam Killer* would be an example of *alteration*. As such it could be interpreted as a form of DIY therapy; a means to reinscribe and remake cultural symbols into the specific. We could view the modification as a parallel to the pre-collage practice of reworking mass media imagery into the personal domain (for example, pasting heads of relatives serving as soldiers onto propaganda images)(Banash). The abstract, depersonalized experience of violence found in common commercial games, in *Adam Killer*, is thus mutated to form a resistance (although perhaps not primarily in the form of a response centered solely in the game itself – but rather the practice and experience which is the response). In Engeli, *Adam Killer* is specifically listed as an example of *overload*. Analysis of the work in relation to this design strategy draws out Condon's feeling of having been numbed; the necessity for overload in order to feel (this model of re-design also starts to sound a bit like Salen and Zimmerman's punk aesthetic.)

In a wider context, *Adam Killer* is presented as a personal response to the anesthetizing effect of mediated death. If we are to consider authorial intent (bearing in mind the specific bias of such a reading, specifically in relation to discourse surrounding the open work), Condon has described *Adam Killer* as “a desperate attempt to work out the box that the consumption of those images [the images of the industry] have placed me in” (Brucker-Cohen 2003). There is a sense in this quote of “talking back, through” digital games. Still, while *Half Life* was specifically chosen as a commentary device, there is little indication of a *connective* relationship between Condon and the game's developer, Valve, or to the industry as a whole. Condon goes on to state: “I think any direct and positive relationship with the actual game development community has been fairly non-existent, and mostly relegated to the

traditional and media art circuit” (Brucker-Cohen 2003). If the game does function as an authorship critique, it does so from the outside, despite seeming to come from the inside.

*Adam Killer* also demonstrates a relationship to a pliable medium: Condon references a post-psychedelic aesthetic popular in pre-millennial club culture (Condon 2002), created through exploring and exploiting game bugs like the trailing effect, and to a certain degree the work can be read as experiments with this type of visual. However, Condon still wants audience to read the work in a certain way<sup>19</sup>, and has come out against readings focusing too heavily on the critique of violence. The tweaking of viewing format also reveals a desire for greater control over interpretation that might run counter to an understanding of the work as an open culture exemplar.

### **Adam Killer as a disruption or alternative to the mainstream games industry/mass media**

Galloway's *Adam Killer* may be classified as a software modification<sup>20</sup>. Viewed from Galloway, the work celebrates and aesthetizes technical error, presents no explicit narrative, and uses the core game engine to support formalist visual experiments typical of the avant-garde (2006). The use of an invented physics of visibility in the trailing (hall of mirrors) effect, “explicitly (defies) conventional design techniques for optics in gaming, techniques that try to mimic the visual physiology of human sight as best they can” (Galloway 2006, p.120). In opposition to the industry focus on transparency, *Adam Killer* foregrounds and denaturalizes the hyper-violence of the core representation. The work de-emphasizes (in fact, more or less removes) gameplay in favor of aesthetic choices such as the visual rhythm of kaleidoscopic trailing, sharp colour contrast, and the previously mentioned club culture look. The result is not a realistic bloodbath, but an abstracted collage. *Adam Killer* also swaps interactivity for non-correspondence: while the weapons are interactive, the interactivity is highly constrained in the space. There is no way to win, no strategy to employ, and very little progression (in the downloaded version of the game, players could “progress” to a non-interactive level with body parts falling on them). In the current version of the work, interactivity is removed entirely. Through Huhtamo, *Adam Killer* could be read as a *reaction* to the previously mentioned anesthetizing effect of videogame violence, motivated by *subversion* accomplished through pushing violent videogames to an extreme.

Shuen-shing Lee's review of the work argues that “the distortion of the original version wherein the goal is to gun down all the opponents and win the battle, intrigues one to look deeper into the game's intention.” and further, that “The shooting of this Adam figure frightens one in a certain way by conjuring up the memory of the Columbine shooters, who, as Condon reminds us, have mimicked Doom.” Artist Julian Oliver believes *Adam Killer* addresses, “First-person shooter's most popular taboo - wanton and hapless representative killing...positioning...the first-person shooter as a laboratory for experimenting with dying, and even laughing about it.”<sup>21</sup> Condon's own assessment of the work suggests that it is a media response: “...I realized I had no connection to media images I saw on the news [of the Columbine shootings] and their actual context and meaning<sup>22</sup>. Death had become a floating signifier” (Cannon, 2007, p.47). However, dominant readings of *Adam Killer* as a

general response to the violence in videogames (a touchy issue in the games industry and gamer community), have been dismissed by Condon as an unnuanced reading that denies the personal nature of the work.

Within a broader media ecology, as an art work, *Adam Killer* is easy to identify and contain, and dismiss as being atypical practice – perhaps not a *genuine* tactical act, but an overly aware provocation, or a thinly disguised glorification of hyperviolence. It is interesting to ask whether such “misinterpretation” nonetheless constitutes an intervention or disturbance in mainstream culture, or whether it simply reinforces common perceptions about violence in games and the troubled nature of an essentialized gaming youth.

### Adam Killer in relation to folk culture

For Sotamaa, *Adam Killer* falls under the motivation category of *artistic work* (again, aesthetic or political work with art assets/design). Perhaps most importantly, artistic work is necessarily defined against a host of other motivations. The work risks being interpreted as disingenuous and ironic, and may have a hard time working within the kinds of communities of exchange that mods thrive in. While it can (and did for a time) circulate within the modding culture of gamers, Sotamaa raises some doubts as to whether it may do so *as an artwork*. Anne-Marie Schleiner takes an opposing view. Her *Adam Killer* would be an exemplar of a superficially offensive mod with greater depth – a hacker artwork that presents a “stealth” address to gamers with the potential to evoke a powerful response, seeming to come from the inside.

Condon references the inspiration for the work as the “digital folk art” (Condon 2006, p.113) commonly disseminated between gamers. *Adam Killer* can be read as a fusion between the common adolescent practice of mapping oneself or one's environment into the game, and the often shocking and tragic practice of mapping the game into the world (with *Columbine* as an indicator). Condon also maintains a tie to this folk culture, noting his past as a “hard-core” gamer (2006).

But this can also come back in the negative, where the work is seen as merely typical of fan practice, as with in Christopher Reiger's Art Cal review (2007):

The work is little different from the high school code play I engaged in over a decade ago...I assume that the artist intends *Adam Killer* as a confrontation of contemporary anxiety and violence, but it is merely representative of those denominators. (With some relief, I later learned that *Adam Killer* is an older work, dated 1999-2001. I am not sure why the gallery or artist elected to exhibit it currently.)

Can art modders still be gamers? And as art modders, can they in fact speak to each other, mirroring the community practice of modding – and perhaps more importantly, do they want to? While this may suggest the same kind of localized impact found in fan modding, perhaps art mods like *Adam Killer* can, in part, make visible aspects of game modding that remain largely hidden in local communities. While the meanings may not remain stable, that is not to say that there is in fact no meaning to be extricated.

## Adam Killer as an extension of fine art movements

Cannon's *Adam Killer* serves as both an act of artistic expression, and a quasi-abstract interactive piece. She specifically discusses the work as a playable, stand alone mod, and a narrative-abstract machinima (relation to video art) based on video documentation of Condon's private performance of the work (acknowledging the different forms the work has taken). Cannon observes in the work a "spiritually heightened focus on the recreational attraction of murder" (2007, p.46). Honing in on Condon's stated objectives, she describes *Adam Killer* as a vehicle for release, self-expression, and means of improving self-awareness within the context of artistic practice. This extends to an insight about the release felt from first-person shooter gameplay: prompting us to ask in what ways they satisfy survivalist urges, and reflect back on human nature.

Condon admits an attraction to clichéd game play structures as material – finding the recurring images in game culture (such as reloading and respawning) interesting cultural indicators (Brucker-Cohen). He describes *Adam Killer* as "an intuitive investigation into the material and some of the issues that surround it." In other words, the game provides the material from which to explore larger issues in digital culture (and games in particular). Condon is trained as a sculptor and currently considers himself a performance artist, citing Marina Abramovic (Creative Capital) and Chris Burden<sup>23</sup> as broader artistic influences on his work. While Condon has suggested the language and culture of gaming as an interesting site for cultural criticism, he sees his work as rooted far more firmly in the history of performance art than in the game or new media art. For Condon, these works extend from his past practice of "semi-ritualistic repetitive motion performances" (Creative Capital). However, these are specific influences for a specific work, so the question still remains of whether it makes sense to cite Fluxus, or Found Art, as foundational movements for artistic game modification as a whole. In what sense does this undercut the specific influences underlying particular works?

## Conclusion

Cannon's asserts that a specialized lexicon of critique can help convey hidden meanings and motivations behind particular cultural works such as art mods. She makes a good argument that creating frames for understanding can address what appears to be a crisis of misunderstanding in the interpretation and valuation of artistic game modification. Hers is strategic theory: if artists and critics don't define this practice, it will be defined for us. It is perhaps no surprise that it is from Cannon's paper that one finds the anecdote about the crying women and the thrown chair.

As a further case in point, in March of 2008, Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal's mod *Virtual Jihadi* (a mod of *Night of Bush Capturing*; itself a mod of a game called *Quest for Saddam*), was removed from a Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) campus gallery where Bilal was a visiting artist. The official reason for the removal was that the work was parasitic on a core game (as are all mods) that, in this case, was viewed as an Al Qaeda-sponsored piece of terrorist propaganda. The work was subsequently moved to another local gallery, where, after protests, the entire gallery was shut down due to suddenly urgent code violations (Debatty, 2008). Who is to

say, if a critical illiteracy surrounding art games and mods is extending into censorship, a “strategic theory” intervention is not perhaps warranted.

Yet there are still open questions:

- How do we deal with cross-over terms like *appropriation*, which contain different histories and connotations between fine art and cultural theory? Does *Adam Killer* appropriate a game engine as a tactical gesture? Appropriate and claim the modding culture of a disempowered group? Appropriate and re-work a videogame in the tradition of Found Art? Appropriate and subvert digital games as a mass media form?
- How do we prevent “mod artists” (or indeed, modders in general) from being flattened as a category, in a way that may create misunderstandings of specific works? Does it make sense to say art modders (as a united category) are confronting the mainstream, embracing open authorship, creating works in the tradition of found/appropriation art etc., or addressing fan production? What commonalities truly exist between *Adam Killer* and other artist-created game modifications?
- What assumptions are being made about who or what mods speak to – or whether the “mod” speaks at all? Is it fair to say modding is an inherently and intentionally parasitic practice, if the canvas (i.e. engine) of an original game can take both years and a team of people to make? For example, Axel Stockburger (2007) suggests modding is just a way-point to creating full games; artist Julian Oliver (2006) also suggests modders are simply optimizing resources (but would create full games given the proper tools). Just as viewing a newspaper layout as collage denies practical realities of layout and the mass print process, does viewing all mods as a movement deny mundane realities of digital game production?

Still, it is true that without a frame for analysis, there may be a tendency for one type of interpretive lens to dominate, or for works to collapse into opaque vernaculars. This is not an issue endemic to game research, but one that extends to all interdisciplinary work. Classificatory frameworks serve an important role in any interdisciplinary art, and it is a mistake to view the proliferation of models as mere territorial pissing. However, making the ideological underpinnings and “way of seeing” of these theories more apparent can go a long way in addressing some of the issues noted above. Furthermore, definitional frameworks cannot work independent of the critiques of individual works. Such critiques provide an important base, not only for testing the value of a framework or typology in understanding these works, but for creating emergent interpretive frames – perhaps new discourse engines.

## Cited Games

Epic Games (1999) *Unreal Tournament*. GT Interactive (PC)

Valve (1998) *Half Life*. Sierra Studios (PC)

## References

- Banash, D.C. (2004) From advertising to the avant-garde: Rethinking the invention of collage. *Postmodern Culture*, Vol 14 (2).
- Bredekamp, H. (2003) A neglected tradition? Art history as *Bildwissenschaft*. *Critical Inquiry*, 29, p. 418-428.
- Brucker-Cohen, J. (2003). An interview with Brody Condon. Available at: <http://rhizome.org/discuss/view/11443/> [Accessed March 2008].
- Cannon, R. (2007) Meldown. In Clarke, A. and Mitchell, G. (ed.) *Videogames and Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press,.
- Clarke, A. (2006) An interview with Brody Condon. *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol. 7 (1), p.43-51.
- Condon, B.K. (2002). Where do virtual corpses go. In Clarke, A., Fencott, C., Lindley, C., Mitchell, G., and Nack, F. (eds.) *Proceedings of COSIGN 2002*. Augsburg, Germany: University of Augsburg.
- Creative Capital (2006) Brody Condon: The youth of the apocalypse. Available at: <http://channel.creative-capital.org/images/projects/Condon.pdf>.
- Debatty, R. (2008) A few words with wafaa bilal. Available at: <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/what-did-your-previous-project.php> [Accessed March 2008].
- Engeli, M. (2008) strip – shift – impose – recycle – overload – spill – breakout – abuse artists' (mis-)appropriations of shooter games. In Jahn-Sudmann, A. and Stockmann, R. (eds.) *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon. Games Without Frontiers - War Without Tears*. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Galloway, A.R. (2006) *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Huhtamo, E. (1999) Game patch - the son of scratch. *Switch*, 12. Available at: [http://switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch\\_engine/front/front.php?artc=119](http://switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?artc=119) [Accessed March 2008].
- Lee, S.-S. (2003) 'I lose, therefore I think' - a search for contemplation amid wars of push-button glare. *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 3 (2). Available at: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/lee> [Accessed March 2008].
- Nieuwenhuis, C.A. (1974) New Babylon. *Haags Gemeetenmuseum exhibition catalogue*, The Hague.
- Oliver, J. (2006) The game is not the medium..or 'how to ignore the shiny box'. In Santorineos and Dimitriadi (eds.) *Gaming Realities, Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*. Fournos, Athens.

- Pearce, C. (2006) Games as art: The aesthetics of play. *Visible Language*, Vol. 40 (1), p.66-89.
- Pichlmair, M. (2006) Pwned - 10 Tales of Appropriation. *Proceedings of medi@terra conference 2006: Gaming Realities*, Athens, p. 218-227.
- Reiger, C. (2007) Brody Condon at Virgil de Voldere Gallery. *Art Cal Zine*. Available at: <http://zine.artcal.net/2007/12/brody-condon-at-virgil-de-vold.php> [Accessed March 2008].
- Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2003) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Schleiner, A.-M. (1999) Parasitic interventions: Game patches as hacker art. Available at: <http://www.opensorcery.net/patchnew.html> [Accessed March 2008].
- Schleiner, A.-M. (2005) Game reconstruction workshop: Demolishing and evolving PC games and gamer culture. In Goldstein, J. and Raessens, J. (eds.) *Handbook of computer game studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p.405-414
- Schleiner, A.-M. (2007) 'Cracking the Maze' Curators Note. In Clarke, A. and Mitchell, G. (eds.) *Videogames And Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sotamaa, O. (2003) Computer game modding, intermediality, and participatory culture. University of Århus, DK.
- Sotamaa, O. (2004) Playing it my way? Mapping the modder agency. Presented at *Internet. Research 5.0 Conference*, University of Sussex, UK.
- Stockburger, A. (2007) From appropriation to approximation. In Clarke, A. and Mitchell, G. (eds.) *Videogames And Art*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although it is impossible to define art outside of specific socially-determined contexts, this paper tentatively positions “art mods” as being works that have been flagged as art works either through the research and/or institutional discourse that surrounds them, or through self-identification.
- <sup>2</sup> Another thread can be seen in the use of game modification as an educational tool (which also pre-dates computing), although links between artistic and educational game modification are less apparent.
- <sup>3</sup> Note this analysis only includes frameworks that have explicitly attempted to include works that have been identified as “art mods,” and are thus implicated in directing their understanding through a specific interpretive lens.



- 
- 4 The demarcation of lines of discourse is a tricky endeavor at the best of times. The various discourse themes suggested by this paper are not fixed discursive categories, but suggested clusters of themes, histories and epistemologies.
- 5 Landow suggests hypertext necessitates a radical reconfiguration of authorship, including ideas of authorial property, and of status relations in the text. Aarseth's position is more cautious: emphasizing the politics of elevating media consumers to authorship status.
- 6 Eco defines the open work as one that produces acts of conscious freedom, allowing a viewer/reader to insinuate themselves within a net of open relations.
- 7 Which is portrayed as, in turn, reacting.
- 8 Although discourses may share similar threads, often times the ways in which these threads are expressed are quite distinct. For example, it is not uncommon for alternative media initiatives to maintain a very traditional position on the authorial privilege of its oppositional producers, or for open authorship proponents to espouse oddly depoliticized assessments of whose voices are heard in "open" practices.
- 9 It is unclear why Galloway excludes sound assets, given the significant presence of audio-centric game modifications.
- 10 This is Galloway's proposed addition to the formal grammars he identifies.
- 11 Julian Oliver provides a nice counter-argument to this position in his 2006 paper, "The game is not the medium..or 'how to ignore the shiny box'."
- 12 Hector Postigo has also written from this perspective, although his work did not include art mods at the time of this research.
- 13 Schleiner's *Cracking the Maze* was one of the first exhibitions to showcase game modification; documentation for this online exhibition can be found at <http://www.opensorcery.net/projects.html> [Accessed March 2009].
- 14 Schleiner argues for the inclusion of non-artists works as art.
- 15 Pearce (2007).
- 16 Documented at the Virgil de Voldere Gallery, CA, Spring 2008.
- 17 Condon had theorized the work might be successful in a private, contemplative context amongst players familiar with the first-person shooter game genre.
- 18 In other words, Condon as a performer is no longer present apart from his representation via the first person perspective.
- 19 This is reinforced by the author's personal email correspondence with Condon (March 2008).

- <sup>20</sup> Although this could potentially be a misreading depending on the specific time frame and stage of the work being addressed.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted on [http://www.tmpspace.com/ak\\_1.html](http://www.tmpspace.com/ak_1.html) [Accessed August 2008]
- <sup>22</sup> Condon is referring to televised and/or print images as prompting this sense of disconnection.
- <sup>23</sup> Personal correspondence (March 2008).