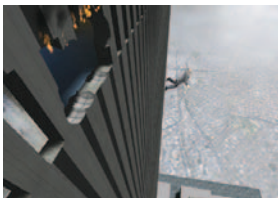


Making Sense of a Mod World

Words: Jesse Ashlock

Even if you have only have the most passing acquaintance with online gaming, you probably know what a mod is. Maybe you've even played one – you just might not have known what you were looking at. The concept took hold during the '90s after id Software, maker of the first-person shooters *Doom* and *Quake*, cleverly realized it could extend the lives of its products by making sections of its code available to amateur tinkerers, essentially spawning a free labor force that introduced new maps, sounds, rules, physics and other variables that endlessly expanded the game worlds players could explore. By decade's end, game companies were even recruiting young modders into their ranks, and the most popular online FPS of the early 21st century, *Counter-Strike*, was itself a mod.



Meanwhile, the electronic arts community kept pace with this evolution, as creative developers noticed that mods offered opportunities to adapt games for purposes other than pure entertainment. In the late '90s, Julian Oliver, an Australian software developer and theorist then working in virtual reality, became frustrated with game technology's inaccessibility to independent developers and artists. "New media lacked an interface to popular culture," he recalls. "I came to feel, 'there's got to be some way this technology can be domesticated.'" That led him to early experimental mods of *Quake 2*, often focused on sound and performance. Seeking similarly minded artists, in 1998 he also founded Selectparks, a media laboratory, Web archive and game art community. One person he soon discovered was LA-based Brody Condon, who was working with mods as well as original game design, machinima and performance. Condon's 2001 mod, *Adam Killer*, exploited a bug in *Half-Life* that produced dramatic trailing effects by inserting endless multiples of a benign new character called Adam into the game. This forced players to shoot Adam, transforming the screen into a sea of fractured, kaleidoscopic carnage. Begun soon after the Columbine massacre (in which the shooters, as Condon noted, were ardent *Doom* enthusiasts – who even had their own *Doom* mods), *Adam Killer* was one of the first projects to explicitly investigate the socially critical potential of art-modding, bluntly calling attention to the first-person shooter's role as murder simulator.



breaking out: stills from *9-11 survivor* (top) and *escape from woomera*. opposite page: vladimir toodorovic performs *game music* on the beach in santa barbara.

Not long after Condon released *Adam Killer*, the World Trade Center fell, the War on Terrorism began and Osama Bin Laden characters began popping up in mods across the gaming universe. These developments spawned *Velvet-Strike*, one of the first and best known of an emerging species of overtly political mods. Conceived by California-based artist and critic Anne-Marie Schleiner and developed with Condon and Joan Leandre, *Velvet-Strike* critiqued what its creators saw as a chauvinistic, ethnocentric military-industrial complex in overdrive by turning *Counter-Strike*'s soldiers-versus-terrorists setup on its head. Now shooters sprayed antiwar graffiti instead of bullets, a ham-handed but unmistakable commentary on the value system of shoot-and-kill FPSs. Such critiques inevitably raise the ire of game enthusiasts, many of whom interpret art-mods like *Velvet-Strike* as part of a larger censorship effort – of a piece with the media's constant harping on the Columbine killers' *Doom* habit – whose ultimate goal is to ruin their fun. This misses the point. Art-modders are by definition gamers themselves (Schleiner has expressed a fondness for shooter games). As Jeff Cole, one of the designers of the topical mod *9-11 Survivor*, says, "using the medium of games as canvas is just as natural for us as a painter using paints." If, as is now commonly accepted, games reflect the broader culture, then they offer a powerful opportunity for cultural critique. Oliver calls this gadfly ethos "a necessary antagonism," noting that players themselves have long used game spaces as forums for expressing stances on real world events, recently organizing mass online protests in opposition to the Iraq War. "Games are a public space – at least any multiplayer game," Oliver says. By extension, he suggests, we should value freedom of expression in the game world as much as in our real world public spaces.

Oliver has his own history of antagonism. "I always reserve the right to make unpopular games," he comments wryly. Perhaps his most

notoriously unpopular, at least with Australian immigration minister Philip Ruddock, was the 2003 *Half-Life* mod *Escape from Woomera*, co-designed with collaborators Stephen Honnegger, Kate Wild and a small Australian team. Oliver is fascinated with the ways videogames address questions of agency and thresholds; *Woomera* used the *Half-Life*'s existing game logic to make those themes unmistakable, casting the player as a prisoner breaking out of Woomera, an actual refugee detention facility that is a sort of desert Alcatraz in the Australian consciousness. Because the prison was so inaccessible to the public, the group had to generate its maps by sneaking disposable cameras into and out of Woomera in containers of laundry detergent and drawings through barbed-wire fences (three other Australian facilities were also used in modelling). For Oliver, *Woomera* represented a "symbolic breakout," penetrating the double wall that kept detainees (and detainee abuses) inside Woomera and Australian society out. But the symbolism was quite real for Ruddock, who publicly blasted the game and its government funder. "[It] turned out to be far more significant than we had intended," says Oliver. "And it illustrated to us the power of games."

Perhaps even more willfully antagonistic than *Woomera* was *9-11 Survivor*, developed by Kinematic Collective, a trio of UCSD art students working under the tutelage of Condon. The concept was simple: using the *Unreal* game engine, Kinematic recreated the upper stories of the World Trade Center just after the planes hit, using blueprints, photos, video footage and their own media-filtered impressions of the event. The player simply traverses the wreckage – as a spectator, without a typical game objective – while a lone businessman passes by and leaps from the burning building. Though the game is politically agnostic – simply a 3-D construction of the event – Kinematic was roundly accused of exploiting the tragedy after releasing the game in mid-2003, a response it encouraged with a bogus claim that *9-11 Survivor* was an actual in-development title. But the question of exploitation was part of the group's point. "If a game about 9/11 is sensational, why do games about World War II or Pearl Harbor, which actually exist, not elicit this sort of outcry?" asks Kinematic's John Brennan. "Is there a statute of limitations whereby, once met, a tragic piece of history is deemed exploitable? Just where does good taste place this imaginary line in the sand?"

This question goes beyond *9-11 Survivor*, extending to virtually any mod that uses a commercial game engine to deliver something more than the game industry's violence-as-fun. "It is hard for people to see beyond the B-rated horror games often deliver and think that the medium could be used to deliver more thought-provoking or culturally aware content," Cole acknowledges. Yet the field keeps expanding, as young artists continue finding novel applications for game engines. Last year, Serbian-born, California-based artist Vladimir Todorovic released an *Unreal* mod called *Game Music*, which, he explains, "follows a hippie idea where people cannot kill each other in the game and can only produce music." Weapons are harmless, their aggressive sounds exchanged for classic videogame tunes of yesteryear, thus "undermining the ideologies of the military-entertainment industries." In a sort of "make music, not war" reversal, the game transforms the virtual battlefield into a site of creative production. One can see how *Game Music* consolidates the gains of Oliver's early sound-based mods and *Velvet-Strike*'s oppositional utopianism. As more artists enter the fray and talk to one another, we can expect culturally provocative modding to continue growing in scope and influence.

And while Oliver is one person exploring standalone, open-source systems that would free artists from commercial game engines, such technologies can be dizzyingly complex, both to develop and to use. "For artists, modding is often the only solution they have," says Cole. There's also a tremendous built-in advantage to using such familiar, broad-based technologies. "We're talking on the level of widely disseminated culture," says Oliver. That's a kind of power many artists can only dream of. → RES.COM