For the Love of the Game

SIX ARTISTS. THREE TEAMS. ONE MISSION: CHANGING THE FACE OF PLAY.

Artists have always been fascinated with games. After all, art can't be made without play—or without collaboration, despite the myth of the artist working alone in the studio. As the Surrealists put it, "poetry must be made by all and not by one." Some of the best works of that movement were products of *Exquisite Corpse*, a game in which each player contributes part of a drawing. Similarly, Net artists often work with each other to create online games, which, by their interactive nature, always involve the user as a "collaborator" as well. We asked Natalie Bookchin, creator of the Web-based game *The Intruder*, to moderate an animated discussion on artists' computer games. Acting as an umpire, she assembled three teams of artists (each with games set for 2002 release) to participate, via e-mail—as if playing a game. With spirits high, the players gave it their all.

ActionTank:

An independent agency co-founded in 2000 by Natalie Bookchin and Jin Lee. Bookchin is a 2001-2002 Guggenheim Fellow and faculty member at CalArts in Los Angeles. Bookchin was a member of the Net art collective R^{Tm}ark from 1998 to 2000. Jin Lee, a Chicago-based visual artist who teaches at Illinois State University, was an R^{Tm}ark contributor from 1999 to 2000.

aux2mondes:

A collaborative project between artists Isabelle Massu and Martine Derain. The duo live in France, where they work on public art projects in various cities in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. aux2mondes is supported by La Compagnie, a Marseilles-based artists' collective.

Playskins:

Co-founded in May 2000 by gamers and artists Melinda Klayman and Anne-Marie Schleiner. Klayman is an art historian who works at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Schleiner has curated online exhibits including *Cracking the Maze: Game Patches and Plug-ins as Hacker Art* and *Snow Blossom House*. Originally a site that featured free erotic skins for characters in shooter games, Playskins is a female-run operation that is currently developing its own online multi-player, role-playing game.

Choose Your Character

~ANIME~
~NOIRE~

Name:
Dr. Honey

Profession:
Scientist

Gender: Female

Age: 32

Hobbies:
Judo, Butterfly
Collecting

Done

:start:

Subject: Re: Game Descriptions

ActionTank_NB:

MetaPet is a virtual pet strategy game set in the near future, at a biotechnology firm. Players, in the role of managers, begin by selecting a worker, (a.k.a. a pet) and choose between three offices in which they and their pet will work. The firms reflect existing biotech companies: a leading gene therapy company, a genetics diagnostic devices manufacturer, and a biopharmaceutical company. As the stock value of these companies fluctuate, so do the players' balances. The challenge is to maximize the performance of the pet to make as much money as possible and to become the best manager. An additional challenge is to figure out how to promote one's pet. Players overcome the limitations of the pet's mind and body by using state-of-the-art technologies such as genetic screening tests, the latest biochemical pharmaceuticals, and body surgeries. This project is part of the DNAid series, in which artists are working on themes related to genetics, sponsored by New York–based, non-profit public art organization Creative Time. Additional support is provided by Hamaca, a new Net art platform in Barcelona. We hope to make the players emotionally experience these issues. The game emphasizes that biotechnology is about business first, science second.

Playskins_MK:

The working title is *Anime Noire*. It meshes Japanese *anime* and film noir. The setting is Japan during World War II. A brilliant scientist, Dr. Kitty, invented a genetic cocktail to weaken enemy soldiers; instead, it heightened the sexuality of anyone who took it and mutated animals into sexualized humanoids. When the war ended, humans and animals infected by the cocktail prowled the streets, seething with sexual energy. Players select 3D avatars: scientists, detectives, animal-humans, and then choose from actions such as kiss, whip, bite, lick, and spank. Using a 3D map, they navigate the city. Players can flirt and perform sex acts on each other in the chat space. The game's goal is to find three sex toys that serve as keys to Dr. Kitty's underground lab. The real goal is to have fantastic, erotic interactions.

aux2mondes_MD_IM:

Our public and work space is located in the middle of Belsunce, a neighborhood in Marseilles, mainly inhabited by northern Africans. City planners and local politicians are in a frenzy building new homes, boutiques, restaurants, and public amenities. We are both witnessing the gentrification process and are implicated in it. Players will embody different characters from Belsunce, negotiating and finding solutions to resist gentrification in a variety of ways. We decided, as artists relaying a story that does not always belong to us, to construct some of the characters through a series of collaborative workshops with people from the neighborhood. Workshop participants will create composite personalities through discussion about living in Marseilles and sharing ideas on what it means to "play the game." These workshops will also emphasize that the Net is a public space. The intention is to collectively write another story, reiterating everyone's right to the city (*droit de cité*).

Subject: Re: Business Unusual?

ActionTank_NB:

Developments in computer games have been guided by the commercial market. There is barely a genre of artists' computer games; there have been patches, modifications, variations on and critiques of commercial games, but until now, few are made from scratch. One can see an economic reason for this—computer game development requires money, time, and resources that many artists don't have access to. On top of this, games require teams of artists, programmers, and designers, and this goes against the grain of the art world/art market understanding of artists as creative individuals working alone. Then there is the old high/low dichotomy; computer games are classified as "low." Aiming for mass distribution through a commercial distributor is a different challenge, where experimentation follows profitability.

Pet Project: ActionTank's futuristic game, *MetaPet* (seen as prototype here), tackles the "absurdity of business culture."

Playskins_A5:

To make a profitable game according to the rules, most game developers would advise that we scrap our project, spend years working our way up as minions at rigidly hierarchical all-male game companies. And then we still would find it difficult to make a game that fits within the guidelines of what pre-established genre game publishing houses would market and distribute. *Anime Noire* is the first potentially commercial game I have worked on. If "the bottom line" were money, though, developers would make it for only a proven market of hetero male gamers or male porno aficionados. It would contain graphic visuals, and would emphasize flirtation. We are making the kind of game that we, as women, would want to play. As a game created by artists, rather than an art project with game-like qualities, we hope to reach a broader audience of players.

ActionTank_NB:

A game, strictly defined, is a closed system with rules and obstacles. It does seem that artists' online games have been concerned with breaking rules both in the game form and in the means of distribution, usually free and on the Net. My project, *The Intruder,* does both, as does the game modification *SOD*, by Jodi, and *Trigger Happy,* by Thomson & Craighead.

Playskins_MK:

I work at LACMA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and it dismays me how games, and technology in general, are relegated to the corners of this and other institutions. There are occasional interactive computer displays, but they're inevitably shown under the auspices of education or children's entertainment. I find the same problem at other art museums. The recent show at SFMOMA, *010101: Art in Technological Times*, only had a few game-like pieces. And they were the most popular and interesting, judging from the reactions I observed, particularly "Ephémère," the virtual reality environment by Char Davies, "Ping" by Chafe/Niemeyer, "Tap Type Write" by John Maeda, and "Floating Time" by Tatsuo Miyajima. Recently, I visited the New Museum in New York City, where off in the dingy, rarely-visited back room in the basement was some really nifty game art. I was the only one back there for over a half-hour on a Saturday. So, while computer games as art are getting *some* attention, primarily online and from smaller institutions, the traditional art world has a long way to go. But I don't think they're interested in catching up. It would require redefining collectible art mediums, and that's a hassle.

Playskins_A5:

At a recent panel in San Francisco on art and games, Will Wright, the creator of *The Sims*, compared the current position of computer games to painting in the Renaissance—striving towards hyper-3D realism above all else. He suggested, and I agree, that computer games could benefit from symbolic, iconographic, and abstract forms of representation. This would diversify and enrich the communication palette of computer games. It's positive that artists are working with gaming, and there is much unexplored potential. What I find less interesting is work that incorporates game-like tropes into traditional forms like sculpture and painting, yet this is the work that is making it into the museums and galleries because it doesn't challenge the pre-existing system. It is collectible. It doesn't contribute to gaming-at-large, and it is only created for a smaller art world elite audience. Customization of games is something I have noticed in the game-modification community. Players often insert their own personalized characters and level add-ons into pre-existing game engines, sometimes very geographically specific. In *aux2mondes*, have you considered using a pre-built "game engine"? Perhaps there is an editable version of the classic urban design game *Sim City*?

aux2mondes_IM:

I first thought of *aux2mondes* as a mix between *Sim City* and *The Sims*, but I hardly see the parallel now. We want to invent new forms, and I do not want to create an ironic mirror of *The Sims* that reproduces the same power schemes. *Sim City* and especially *The Sims* are a particularly American view of life relying on a set of homogenized codes.

I agree that the outward agenda of *The Sims* is to propagate heterosexist capitalist consumerist "family values." But a game's rules and ideology can be subverted (and to some extent even the designers of *The Sims* intended this). Will there be room for subversion in *MetaPet*?

Make Love, Not War: Playskins' *Anime Noire* gets players in touch with their erotic alter egos.
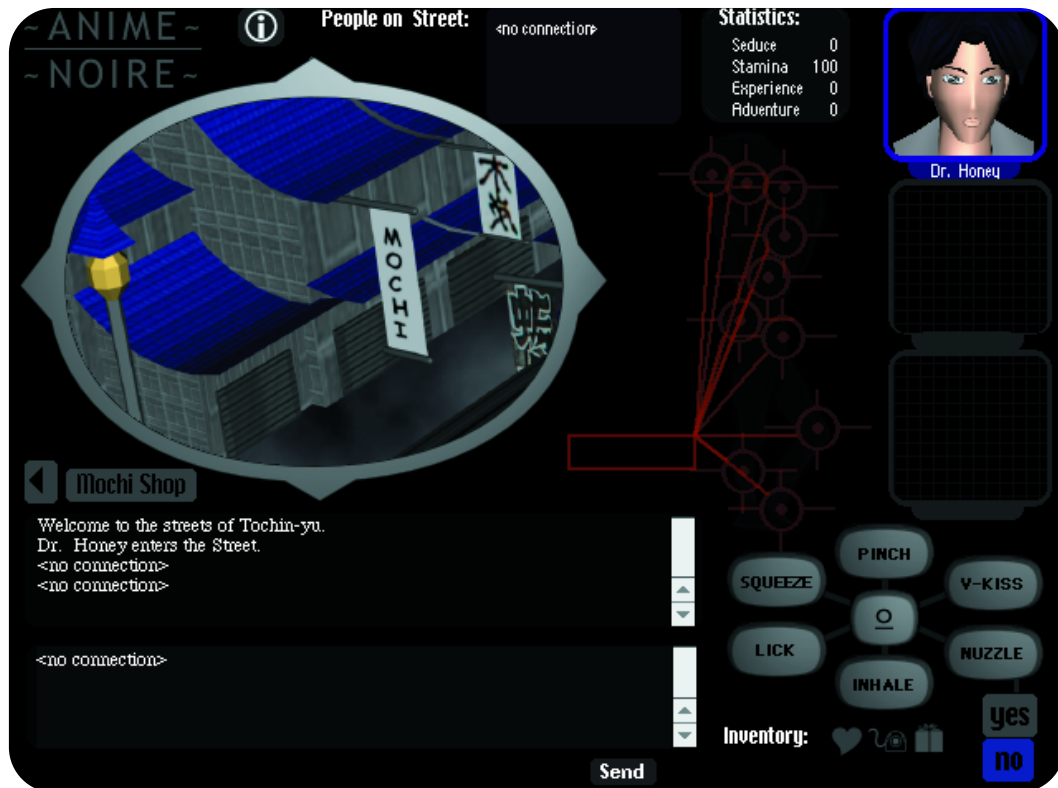
It is hard to know until we release it. There have been requests to play the role of the pet rather than the manager. After all, it may be more comfortable to taunt the boss than to assume that role yourself. *Dilbert* is a good example. The comic strip is an unthreatening, uncritical look at the corporate workplace. The boss is a silly dingbat. Readers laugh, feel a little better, and get back to work. They don't have to think about how this amusing dynamic is inescapable in a corporate system that puts profit above everything else. We are hoping to make people feel unease with our system.

Masters become emotionally dependent on their pets, just as the pets are dependent on the "masters." Will you create the same sort of scenario? Will your pet have any independence? Can it rebel?

Hopefully people will develop an attachment to their pets, making their role as manager all the more uncomfortable. If pets are not "properly" cared for, they will become increasingly unmanageable. They may steal, quit, go postal, or refuse to do anything except play computer games, becoming what they call in the human resources departments a "problem employee."

Subject: Re: The Need To Play

aux2mondes_MD:

Why do our societies need so many games? Games, as the Situationists said in 1958, are—in their degenerate form—about competition, elimination, and winning more life and money.

ActionTank_NB:

Is it the form itself that is corrupt or is it what is done with the form? In the 1960s and 1970s the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström created a body of game paintings with the desire to build a popular, democratic art form and offer a critique of capitalism and the Western political order. The Fluxus Group made games in part because of their interest in reaching beyond traditional art audiences and creating actions rather than aesthetic objects. Before them, the Surrealists—who valued chance and collaboration over rationality and individual aesthetics—invented games such as *Exquisite Corpse*. Duchamp made use of game elements in much of his work, finally giving up art to devote himself to playing chess. Many computer games, from *Tekken III* to *Doom*, can be seen as games of conquest and aggression. But there are numerous simulation games (including *Sim City* and *The Sims*) and some by Eric Zimmerman and by his company gameLab that emphasize play and creation over competition. Another aspect of games, applying the colloquial use of the term, are those that marginalized groups and individuals play to outwit, maintain agency, or trick those with power. This seems to me to be an extremely interesting aspect of *aux2mondes*: making visible some of these games, whether they have to do with getting through bureaucratic red tape or creating obstacles to divert authority.

Subject: Re: Role Playing

aux2mondes_IM:

I have to admit to you all I am totally hooked on "Lara's polygons!" [in *Tomb Raider*] Never did I think I would be so into a game. My favorite moments are when I play with my pal in Paris. You don't see time pass...three hours, five hours...you *have* to solve the puzzle otherwise you feel lame for the rest of the day. The amount of patience we have with Lara amazes me! She never has her period; she is always in a good mood, in shape, strong, available, and never says a wrong word. Yet I wish Lara would express herself more, talk to me, interact with me, ask me for help, beg me to save her, protect her, guide her. I love Lara, and Lara loves me.

In *Snow Blossom House*—an online exhibition I put together recently about erotic games and digital art—I included screenshots of gay and lesbian movies made with nude Sims Skins. Gaming has become a digital folk art medium. Within their online communities, gamers play the roles of critics, curators, and artists, distributing their own game mods and collecting and reviewing others.

Community Affairs: aux2mondes encourages use of the Net as a public space.

Subject: Re: Power Struggles

aux2mondes_MD:

The game is a form that reflects the details of everyday life. It is used to qualify a political move, a behavior, or an action. Whether the player will lose or win is not the point. We decided to adopt this form because we are in such a strategic place within the gentrification process. We want to "replay" it with the people in the neighborhood and, in a creative way, to give us some distance. There is also much within the game structure to reinvent as artists. Our game does not have an obvious outcome or goal other than reinventing certain situations. This might not create enough excitement for some players, but while we accept the risks of a new form, we invent new rules and new ways to approach games and play in general. It's similar to the evolution of movies. There used to be movies with plots, characters, and happy endings. Then other forms emerged and challenged these conventions. The audience was small but slowly grew, and some even embraced these new forms.

Playskins_MK:

All of our games describe power struggles within different contexts. That turns me on: massive multi-player games developing microcosms that recreate real world power struggles. People often fall right into existing patterns, but sometimes they devise creative and rebellious alternatives. Anyone care to explain the appeal of games designed to recreate our existing lives?

ActionTank_JL:

It may seem strange to play a game about work, but as revealed in the huge popularity of *Dilbert*, we want and need to see humor in our daily lives. What makes something fun is hard to define. We worked with unexpected elements, various narratives, strong internal logic, interesting obstacles, and cool visuals. "Issues" are not something we're addressing in the game, but we reflect the real corporate and scientific world that we find so perversely fascinating. Our hope is that workers will play this game and see the absurdity of business culture. We hope that deciphering the lines between the real and the imagined, and the present and future, gives the game its edge, fun, and meaning. While creating game characters and narratives, how do we deal with stereotypes? Evil, uncaring managers, for example, or Japan as an exotic, hyper-sexualized place?

Playskins_AS:

We chose Japan because we shared a fascination with Japanese *anime*, and we had read about the demise of Geisha girls with the influx of Western culture after World War II. The time period is critical because it is when Japanese culture fused with Western culture in certain ways. Cultural appropriation can be tricky, but even Japanese *anime* characters have a very Western influence in their eyes and appearance. We mix things up and borrow back.

aux2mondes_MD:

One of the main ideas of *aux2mondes* is to work with the local people to eliminate stereotypes about migrants, Muslim women, and so-called passivity of the poor.

ActionTank_NB:

In *MetaPet*, the manager's personality is not predetermined but formed through the player's choices. If managers are ethical, they may lose the game. But who's to say that losing is necessarily a bad thing?

Umpire's Assessment:

Our game ended, as games often do, with a desire for more. We stalled with thoughts of discussing the hazards of game addiction and halfheartedly withdrew, with plans to meet again somewhere, sometime, for a second round.

—N.B.

LINK LIST:

THE INTRUDER:
http://calarts.edu/~bookchin/intruder

SOD: http://sod.jodi.org/

TRIGGER HAPPY:
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/slide/th/title.html

GAME LAB: http://gmlb.com/

::GAME OVER::