

SHIFT-CTRL

In October 2000, the University of California, Irvine, opened a new research and exhibition space called the Beall Center for Art and Technology. We were asked to curate an opening exhibition for the Beall Center that would in some way be about computer games. The result was "SHIFT-CTRL: Computers, Games, and Art," an examination of games, gaming and related new technologies as interpreted by a diverse group of artists.

SHIFT-CTRL cast a broad net, including artworks created specifically as games, artworks that more loosely appropriated game-like metaphors and design principles, stand-alone games, networked games and even some commercial games and freeware, intended to help establish a larger historical and cultural context. During its 6-week run, the exhibition occupied both the Beall Center itself and the adjoining University Gallery. It also took place on the Internet, as about half the works included were either Net-accessible or designed exclusively for the Net. The show had an accompanying web catalog as well [1].

The majority of the pieces were distributed across the floor of the Beall Center in a relatively informal, quasi-rec-room fashion that invited visitors to sit down on orange rugs in front of some 15 game stations and begin playing [2]. Across the hall were six large installation pieces in the University Gallery. These works were presented in dark, cave-like areas, with large projection screens and sound domes. In these spaces visitors stood at consoles to play.

Our goal with SHIFT-CTRL was to look critically yet playfully at how games are altering social systems and creative practice as they explode from a niche market dominated by a youth demographic to occupy the cultural center stage. Over the past 75 years, some of the most provocative works produced by artists can be situated as games of one kind or another, and we wanted to extend this tradition with SHIFT-CTRL. The works we selected incorporate elements of play, performance and parody and they all encouraged—and even demanded—interactive participation by visitors in order to be realized.

SHIFT-CTRL gave visitors hands-on experience of the many new forms games are taking today (and even did a little bit of genre-bending), with a special focus on three main areas: role-playing games (RPGs) and shared social spaces; evolvable/emergent systems; and what we loosely termed "world hacks"—pieces that involved the rewriting of existing games or worlds. Many pieces in the show fell into more than one of these categories.

Role-playing games and shared social spaces interested us because they show artists increasingly creating not just individual pieces but entire systems that are internally consistent and richly detailed enough to be thought of as "worlds" rather than "works." Many of these spaces are shared and collaborative, embodying alternative social forms and attracting thousands of players. In this category were works as diverse as the commercial RPG *Ultima Online* and Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brenneis's experiments in what they call "desktop theater," guerrilla performances that take place in a graphical chat world known as the Palace. Also included were Eric Zimmerman and Word.com's *SISSY FIGHT 2000*, which invites web players to take part in a schoolyard war between girls with the goal of ruining other players' self-esteem; *Honor in Ciberspazio*, a cyber-opera in the process of being composed by a worldwide group of Net denizens that currently numbers over 60 contributors; and Eddo Stern's *Summons to Surrender* project, which critiques the social and behavioral assumptions built into medieval-fantasy-based RPGs.

We also wanted to highlight the many ways in which artists are simulating life-forms and their environments within the computer, creating elaborate artworks through algorithmic

composition and mathematical manipulation. Among the evolvable and emergent systems included in SHIFT-CTRL were Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau's *Life Species II*, in which 3D creatures are created out of text typed in by the player; Maxis's game *The Sims*, which lets players create an entire neighborhood of simulated people; and Jane Prophet, Gordon Selley and Mark Hurry's *TechnoSphere III*, a kind of networked virtual animal park for which players can make either herbivores or carnivores and watch Darwinian evolution at work. Two pieces in this group explored the nature of the soul: Rebecca Allen's *Bush Soul*, in which a human soul, represented as a sphere of energy, enters and negotiates a world of artificial life; and Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro's *Dead Souls* (loosely based on the writings of Nikolai Gogol), which plunges the player into a world where a mysterious stranger has been buying individuals' genetic rights.

Many artists today create games that transgress established conventions, question common assumptions, or rewrite the rules of existing games. These critiques—which we termed “world hacks”—raise fundamental questions about both art and games: Under what conditions can a work be extended beyond its original boundaries? How is agreement reached on rules? How do rule-based systems maintain themselves? In *Bio-Tek Kitchen*, Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs hacked the commercial game *Marathon Infinity* to create a new game in which the player has to clean up the kitchen laboratory of a biotech enthusiast using weapons such as dish cloths and egg flippers while being attacked by mutant vegetables. In *Faraday's Ghost*, Perry Hoberman questions the blind search after ever-newer technologies with a game featuring ghosts of obsolete household and office appliances brought fleetingly to life by a bar-code scanner. Both Dirk Paesmans and Joan Heemskerk's *SOD* and Ken Feingold's *JCJ Junkman* attack facile assumptions about user-friendly interfaces and meaningful game goals. Natalie Bookchin's *Intruder* uses familiar game structures to construct a loose fiction, while Lev Manovich and Norman Klein's *Freud-Lissitzky Navigator* and *Negativland's* playful *Squant* use the idea of the informational or archival web site to confuse the boundary between truth, fiction and history. The most extreme hack comes from the group @TMark, which has deliberately structured itself as a corporation in order to pursue a no-holds-barred critique of corporate capitalism, including corporate sponsorship of art exhibitions like SHIFT-CTRL.

While our three categories may seem a bit arbitrary, they served to delineate what we felt were important areas of common focus among the chosen works—areas that, for better or worse, have yet to be generally defined. Indeed, what makes the intersection of computers, games and art interesting is precisely that there currently exists no agreed-upon set of curatorial, art-historical, critical or economic practices that function to legitimate such works. Are the pieces in SHIFT-CTRL art or are they games? Are they serious, collectible objects or pretexts for frivolous play—or neither? We'll leave that decision to you.

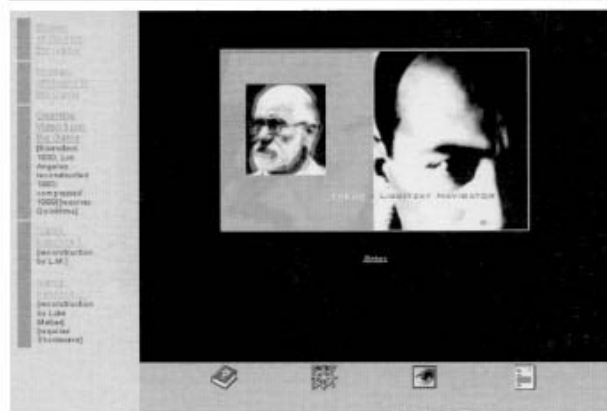
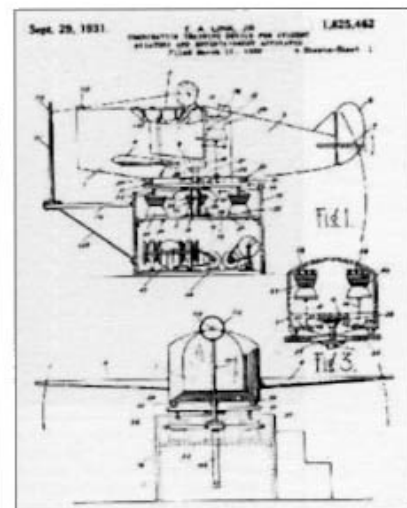
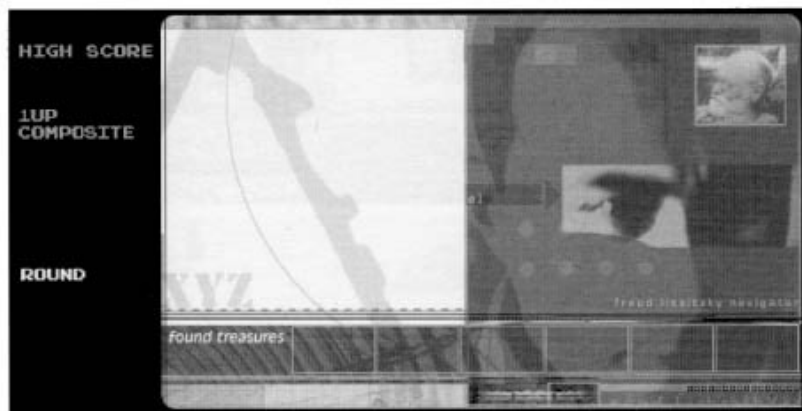
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Notes

1. The SHIFT-CTRL catalog is on the Web at <http://beallcenter.uci.edu/shift>.
2. The installation design was commissioned from Antennae Design, New York.



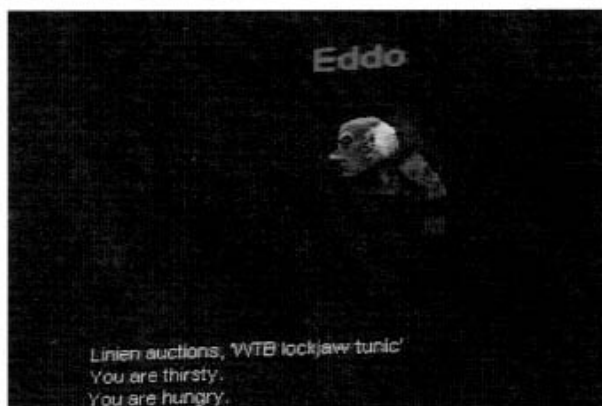
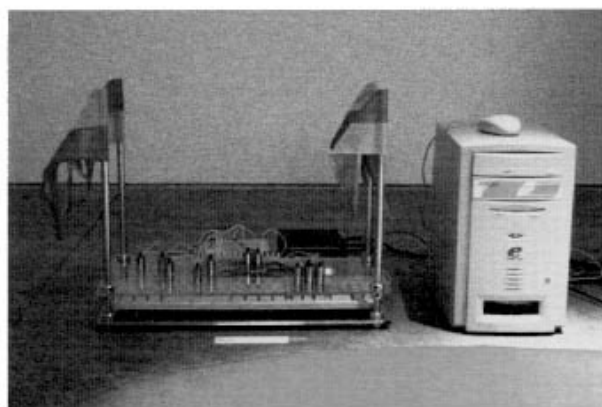


LEV MANOVICH AND NORMAN KLEIN

The Freud-Lissitzky Navigator, 1999. (© Lev Manovich and Norman Klein) *The Freud-Lissitzky Navigator* is the partial reconstruction of a mythical computer game whose history spans the whole of the twentieth century. It is a computer-game prototype; a narrative about software; a virtual exhibition; an imaginary software; a tool for navigating twentieth-century cultural history; and an experiment in developing analysis of new media that uses the very forms of new media (in this case, computer games and software interfaces). The project grew out of conversations between Klein and Manovich about a problem that Klein had been wrestling with since 1995: how to imagine a navigable game for Sigmund Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. If our civilization runs on databases, then somehow novels constructed purely from data should follow. They should sprawl like Balzac or Tolstoy but also rush along as if the nineteenth-century masters were reincarnated as game designers. The image at top right is from E.A. Link, Jr.'s 1931 patent application for a "combination training device for student aviators and entertainment apparatus." The other three images show various sections of *The Freud-Lissitzky Navigator* web site.

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EDDO STERN

Summons to Surrender—Keyboard Castle, E-machine, Internet, EverQuest, Solenoids, Plexiglas and silk, 2000. (© Eddo Stern) A cyberpunk-inspired reality check, the *Summons to Surrender* project introduces science fiction allusions into the persistent setting of nostalgic medieval fantasies. Key features of the *Summons to Surrender* web site include the following: (1) live video surveillance of the networked multi-player role-playing games Ultima Online, EverQuest, and Asheron's Call; (2) computer-controlled sentinels (software bots) that exploit untapped narrative possibilities within these game arenas; (3) archived video footage of historical in-game moments from 1999 and 2000; (4) Detailed backstory and other essays; (5) Fan site links page; (6) bibliography of related medieval texts. Top left: Screen shot of the *Summons to Surrender* web site's live feed of a computer-controlled sentinel in a networked role-playing game. Top right: Installation view of the Keyboard Castle. Bottom left: Detail of the Keyboard Castle. Bottom right: Screen shot of an Eddo avatar in a networked role-playing game.

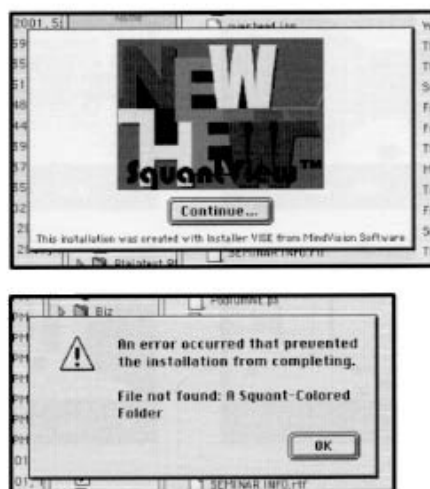
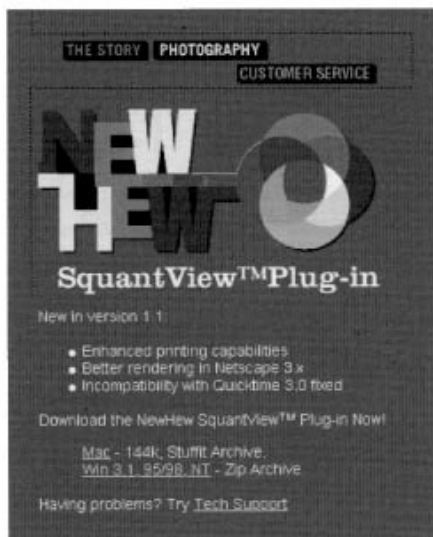
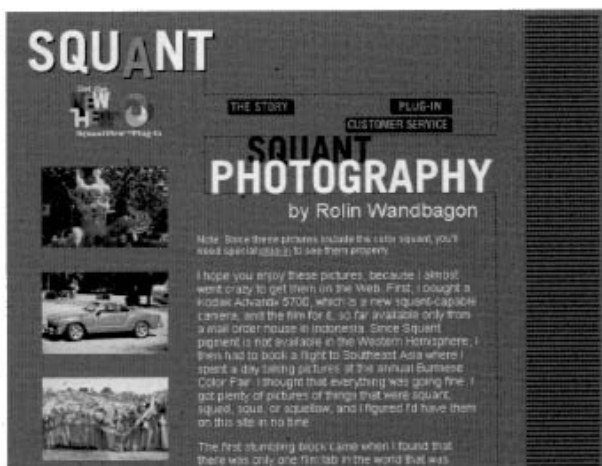
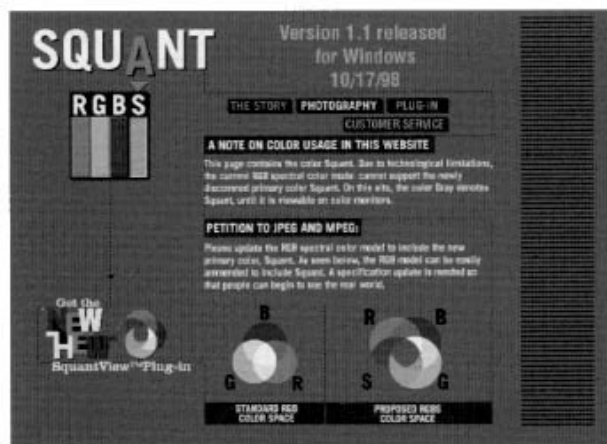
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®™ARK

®™ark web site, 1999. (© ®™ark) ®™ark is a brokerage firm that benefits from limited liability, just like any other corporation; using this principle, ®™ark supports the sabotage (informative alteration) of corporate products, from dolls and children's learning tools to electronic action games, by channeling funds from investors to workers for specific projects. These projects, sent in by anonymous visitors, represent a tremendous wealth of creative imagination, which is why ®™ark project pages are sometimes included in Internet art exhibitions. Some of these art exhibitions, such as SHIFT-CTRL and Paradise Now, are sponsored by corporations that are so widely distrusted that they are unable to advertise openly (their name on an ad would be enough to make the message ineffectual). In order to promote their interests, therefore, they sponsor art exhibitions and the like, even ones that include a percentage of critical content—the idea being to anesthetize the public eye to the general concepts and ideas of their industries. Paradise Now, an exhibit about genetic technology, was sponsored by bioengineering corporations through a foundation innocuously called The Joy of Giving Something (its actual nature was exposed by ®™ark's Biological Property Fund manager, Jacqueline Stevens, on the Web at <<http://www.rtmk.com/paradise.html>>). SHIFT-CTRL was sponsored by defense contractor Rockwell in an only slightly less underhanded manner, and its aims are exactly the same. Shown here are three of ®™ark's promotional posters.

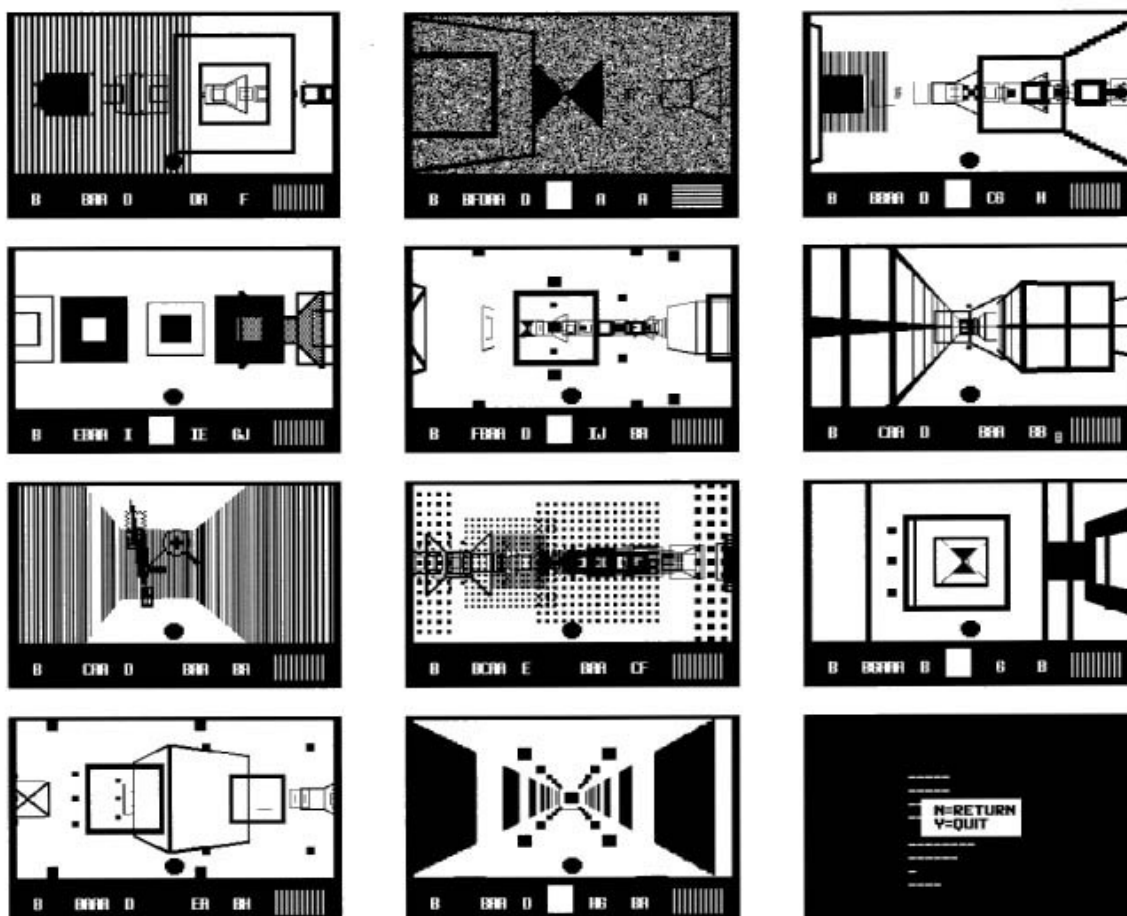
®™ark, P.O. Box 14872, San Francisco, CA 94114. E-mail: <admin@rtmk.com>. Web: <<http://www.rtmk.com>>.



NEGATIVLAND

Squant web site, 1996. (© Negativland) The audio artists Negativland have established a web site to focus on an unsuspected fourth primary color, Squant, reportedly discovered several years ago by Dr. Wohan Squant of the Optical Institute and Shade Company of Mindinaw. Many people don't believe Squant exists, often treating Negativland's presentation as a form of conceptual art. The problem is that with few Squant producers in the world, practically no distribution outside of Asia and a scarcity of appropriate technology in the West, Squant generally gets left out of Western art and criticism. It most often appears as a default gray in U.S. media, whether in computers or in four-color journals or magazines. Not much can be done immediately about the continuing lack of Squant pigment for printing presses, but at the Squant web site, <<http://www.negativland.com/squant/>>, Negativland's customer service strives to help people download and use the SquantView plug-in, which is designed to enable Squant to be seen on Macintosh and PC computer displays. For some users, the plug-in seems to work fine; but others have experienced continuing problems with equipment incompatibility. Negativland believes that these erratic hardware/software problems will correct themselves with time. Hopefully, each new exposure of Squant to a broader group of potential users will spur those in charge of color to finally take down the color barriers, lift all hue trade restrictions, and let Squant flow freely through the world's color markets. Over 96% of the Earth's people have still never seen Squant, and many of those are artists. Isn't this a little ridiculous for 2002? Top left: Squant home page. Top right: examples of Squant-based photography and discussion of the problems of Squant display. Bottom: Stages in downloading the SquantView plug-in.

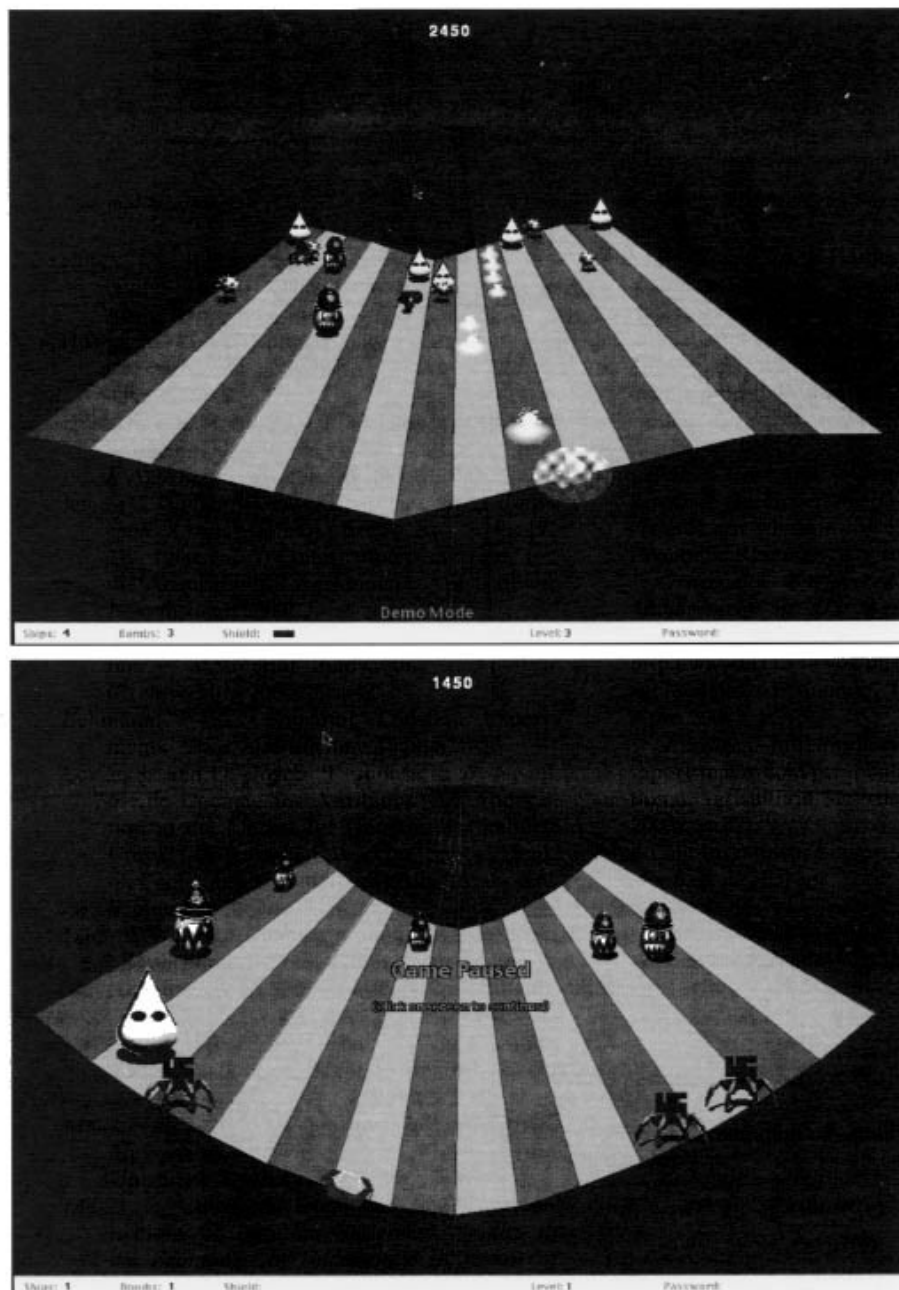
Negativland, 2608 62nd Avenue NW, Olympia, WA 98502, U.S.A. E-mail: <markh@olywa.net>. Web: <<http://www.negativland.com/squant>>.



JODI

Dirk Paesmans and Joan Heemskerk (a/k/a Jodi). *SOD*, Macintosh/PC computer game, 1999. (© Jodi) *SOD* is an extreme modification or "hack" of id Software's action game *Wolfenstein 3D*, in which the goal was to escape from a Nazi dungeon. In *SOD*, *Wolfenstein 3D*'s representational renderings (considered state-of-the-art at the time of the game's release in 1992) have been replaced by pure geometrical forms in a limited palette of black, white and gray. The result is a game space that is loosely architectural and extremely disorienting; it is easy to get lost, and it can be difficult to distinguish the walls from the targets one is supposed to shoot. Paesmans and Heemskerk complement the game-play difficulties with a cryptic interface (setting game preferences is no easy task!) and tongue-in-cheek game instructions along the lines of "If you are tough, press N. If not, press Y daintily." With its stark elegance, *SOD* offers a compelling alternative to the computer game industry's mindless pursuit of representational realism. Shown here are 12 screen shots from *SOD*, which can be downloaded at <<http://sod.jodi.org>>.

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MONGREL

BlackLash, Macintosh game, 1998. (© Graham Harwood) Mongrel is a group that celebrates the methods of London street culture by undertaking a variety of projects ranging from art to software to workshops. The core group includes Matsuko Yokokoji, Mervin Jarman, Richard Pierre-Davis and Graham Harwood. The premise of *BlackLash* is that the filth is still in command of society and the streets, making sure only the selected few can escape the hellhole. The authorities have unleashed their law enforcers to crack down on the undesirables and maintain control of the streets, contaminating all areas with guns and drugs. Players have four characters to choose from as they battle to annihilate the powers that be and win the car of their dreams. Disclaimer: If advocates against reality games take a walk through any ghetto in actual reality, it may better enhance their understanding of what the artists who write these games experience. Upon entering the urban warzone, they would bear witness to the hellish phenomena of crack, soured drug deals, drive-by shootings and empty bottles of booze that litter the streets. Top to bottom: *BlackLash* in demo mode, and shown paused during an actual game.

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