The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader
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New Work for PCs and *Unreal Gallery*

Morgan Oliver

New Work for PCs (2007) is based on a simple scenario. A visitor walking into the gallery triggers a motion sensor, which prompts the generation of a random character in the video game projected on the wall. The video game space mirrors the actual space, but in the virtual gallery no visitor ever leaves voluntarily, so the population of the virtual space increases with every new visitor. Eventually the game is slowed by the computer's need to calculate all these virtual bodies, creating a lethargic slideshow of unpredictable polygons and clipped geometry. There is, however, a solution to this virtual population explosion. One press of a button on the wall of the actual space blows the characters into chunks of digital flesh. Another button unleashes a series of monsters into the game space, creating a flurry of noise and action as the gallery-goers leap into defensive action.

New Work for PCs is moronic reduction of video game logic to its most basic functions: spawn/kill. It's not likely to immerse you in its lifelike depiction of gallery activity. In fact its goal is to create a kind of Brechtian alienation effect, to make the game look strange, to allow the observer to be consciously critical of both the game space and the actual space. It fosters a distancing between the viewer and the work that resists the exacting verisimilitude of modern gaming, which has immersion as its highest goal. Yet the depictions are real enough to induce a healthy sense of unease. White cube gallery spaces are custom-made for virtualisation. In a sense they already are virtual—mutable and experimental—separate from the everyday. So despite the heavy-handed cartoonish violence, we still find ourselves looking over our shoulder when shots ring out.

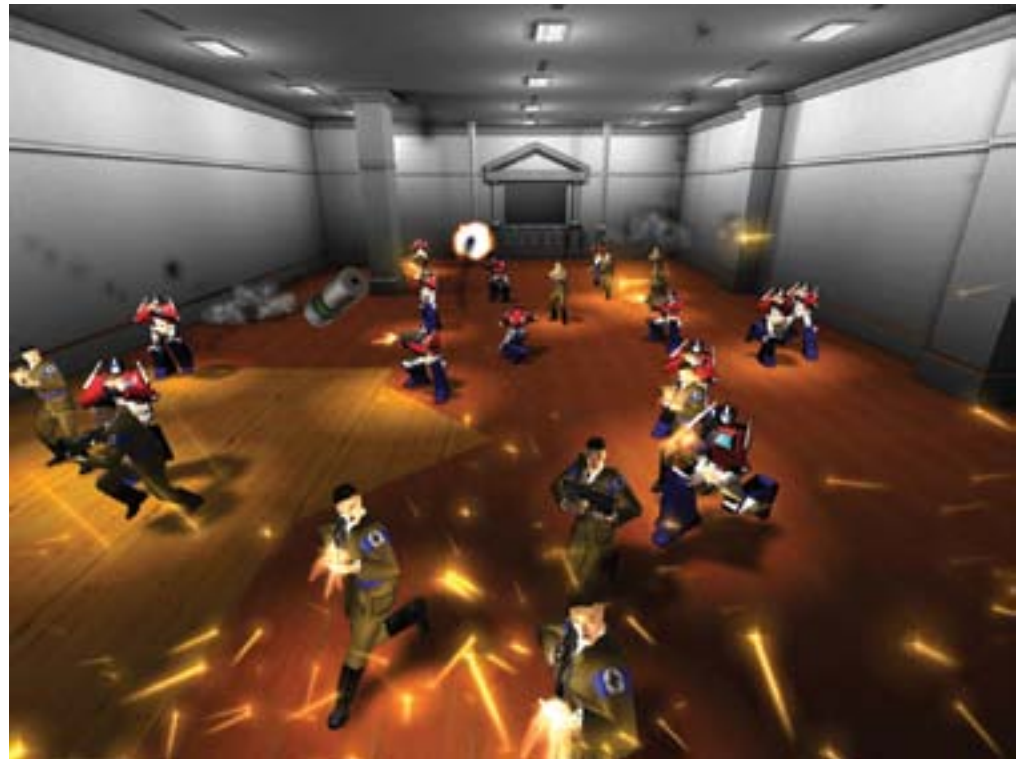
Another context for these works is the community of game modifiers, who exist largely outside of the borders of contemporary art. Each character used in these works represents a member of the modding community. I received permission from each modder to use their avatar in art projects, enabling me to build up a visual cross-section, a collection not only of homebrew avatar creation, but also of pop-cultural signifiers close to the hearts of gamers.

Unreal Gallery (2007) was made for a group show called *Play* at the Blue Oyster Gallery in Dunedin. It thus begins with a performance based approach. Again the gallery is reproduced as a 3D landscape in an off-the-shelf first person shooter PC game. Prior to the show, students were invited to participate in a day-long fight to the finish within these virtual gallery walls. Players come and go as they please, the action ebbs and flows. Some participants investigate the space, hiding out, exploiting software glitches to spawn multiple identical characters, or using bullet-hole decals to graffiti walls. Duels take place while onlookers and players explore the range of avatars on offer.

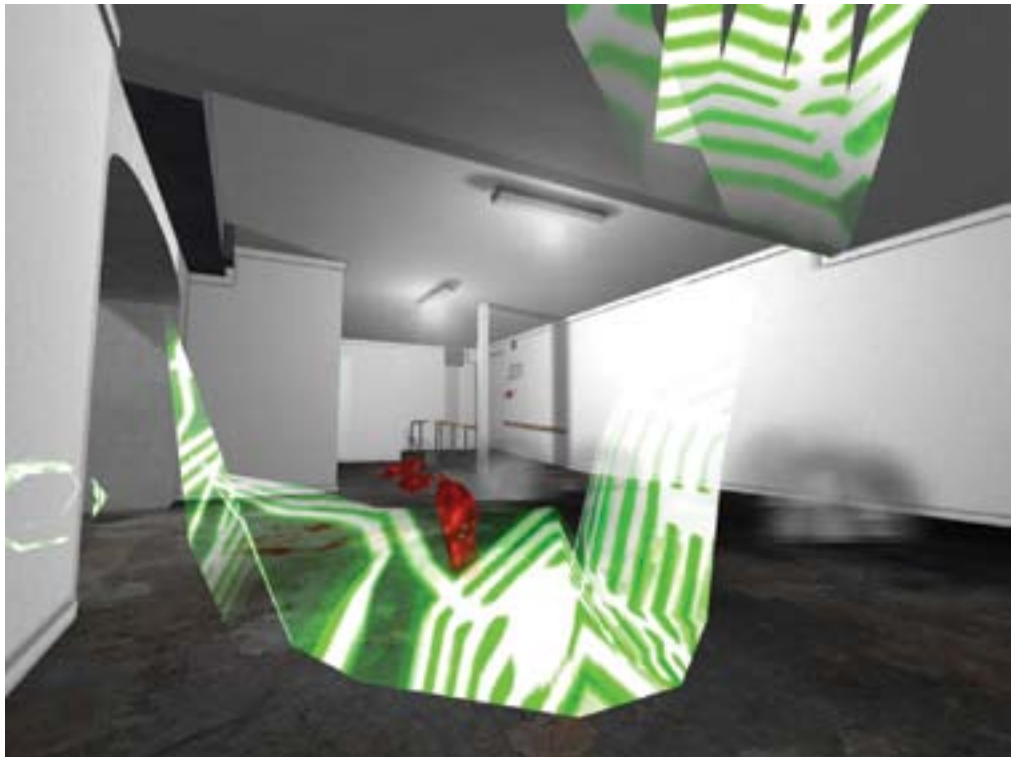
Over the course of the day, the game engine maps and records the movements and actions of every player. After the melee ends, these files are played back in real-time, projected into an alcove in the gallery. A button on the wall allows viewers to cycle through the first-person points of view of the players, as well as the records of static cameras situated within the game. Because of the length of the game, its looped playback, and the number of participants over the game's duration, what is created is a never-ending, never-the-same video.

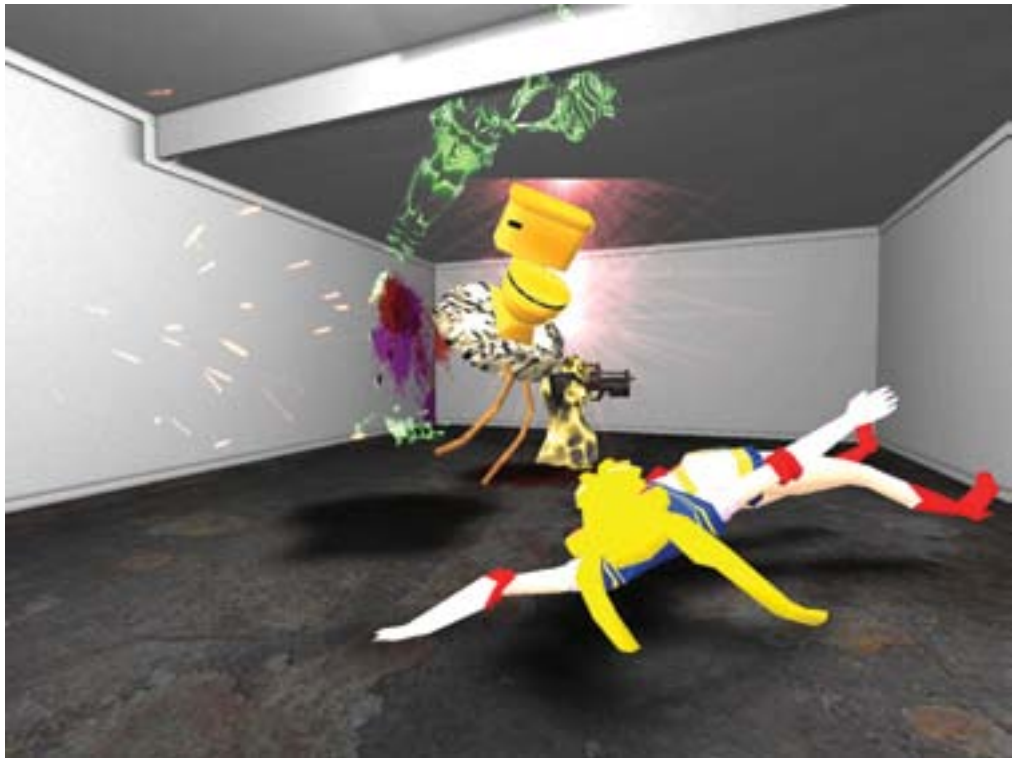
Unreal Gallery is a critique of verisimilitude using the gallery as a test environment. There is a gap between the virtual yet apparently 'real' gallery and the scruffy menagerie of homemade characters populating it. Over the course of two weeks in the actual gallery, viewers were liable to have quite different experiences with the work depending on the time of day and camera view.

As an artist, I see videogames as image-makers of great complexity, tools for creating autonomous digital constructs. Game software can create navigable spaces and draw lifelike images dozens of times a second. The at-times frenetic pace and cartoon ultra-violence of these games leaves some viewers breathless and disoriented. But *New Work for PCs* and *Unreal Gallery* aren't critiques of videogame violence, they are transparent models of games; a demonstration of the potential of play to become art.



Morgan Oliver, *Unreal Gallery*, 2006, real-time projection, game mod.





Morgan Oliver, *New Work for PCs*, 2007, real-time projection, game mod.

1980s Home Coding: The Art of Amateur Programming[1]

Melanie Swalwell

Writing code oneself was a key part of the reception and culture of early home computers; systems such as the BBC, the Spectrums, the TRS-80, the Atari, Commodore and Amiga ranges, and the Sega SC3000.[2] In the 1980s, home coding was a significant use of these computers, both in terms of the numbers of people who dabbled at coding, and as a mode of engagement with a then–new technology. A highly experimental practice, it presaged many of the contemporary practices involved in digital culture, the often-discussed phenomena of appropriation, modification, and remixing. Yet while the 'advent' of Web 2.0 has raised the profile of productive consumers, remarkably little attention has been paid to the earlier practices of home coders.

This essay focuses on the *experimental* basis of home coding in the 1980s, drawing on archival and interview-based research into the New Zealand reception of computers and digital games during this decade.[3] This research into home coding enables us to develop a clearer understanding of the uses that people made of home computers. After the French theorist, Michel de Certeau, I suggest that we know very little about what people actually *did* with these early items of digital consumer technology.[4] Though some accounts do exist, these tend to be more concerned with either the spectacular (hacking) or the feared potentials of the 'computer revolution', such as job losses, thus they provide only partial understandings of early engagements with digital technology.[5] One reason why home coding may have been overlooked is its *everydayness*, its homeliness, if you like. Even today, those who dabbled at writing software at home—after school or on the weekend—typically consider that their activities were unremarkable, expressing their sense that 'everyone was doing it.' Unfortunately, this popularity does not guarantee that home coding will be remembered; indeed, many of the creations of this era—dubbed 'hobbyware' by one of my informants—have already been lost.[6]

I have conducted in-depth interviews with people who were active home coders, and in this essay I blend extracts from the accounts of Katharine Neil, Mark Sibly and Simon Armstrong, Fiona Beals, and John Perry, with material from other informants (including the founding editor of *Bits and Bytes* magazine and technology journalist, Neill Birss) and archival sources. I focus here on the twin issues of how my informants learnt to code and what it was that they wrote. In many, if not most cases, the simple answer to the question of what they wrote was, 'games.' I have pursued informants who are knowledgeable about early games, because games were often a key reason why people purchased or otherwise acquired a computer. An important driver not just of the development of early home computers—or 'micro-computers', as computers for the home or office user were then called—games also drove the uptake of many early home computer systems, as Neill Birss observed. Though they are often deemed unworthy of serious consideration, digital games are significant in the histories of both home computer use and amateur coding.

1. This research was made possible by grants from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the University Research Fund, Victoria University of Wellington.

2. This last system attracted immense interest in New Zealand, probably because there was little commercial English-language software available for it, at least to start with; because of this gap, people rose to the challenge and wrote their own. Collectors have compiled a list of literally hundreds of software titles that were locally written. See A. Wheeler and M. Davidson, "SC3K Tape software list," *Sega Paradise*, 28 May 2005. http://homepages.paradise.net.nz/atari/sc3000lists.html. This system is the focus of a pilot project by VUW's NZTronix research team, of which I am a member: we plan to port and re-distribute an early locally written game title for use on a mobile phone platform. For more information, see http://www.nztronix.org.nz

3. New Zealand is a specific case in the reception of early home computers with its own idiosyncracies. Research indicates that the advent and arrival of early computers in New Zealand was uneven *vis à vis* the rest of the world, both in terms of the systems that were brought in and the issue of delay or 'lag.' Nevertheless, a number of similarities exist between the New Zealand reception of home computers and that of other geographic contexts. Some of the research detailed here will, therefore, resonate with the histories of computing in other locales. See Melanie Swalwell, "Early Games Production in New Zealand," paper presented at *Digital Games Research Association Conference,* Vancouver, Canada, 17 June 2005, and Melanie Swalwell and Loyer, "Castoffs from the Golden Age," *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular* 3, April 2006. http://www.vectorsjournal.org