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Online Games Grab Grim Reality

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As flames crackled and the wind howled through a gash in the skyscraper's wall, a gray-suited businessman wandered in a daze through the smoke. Unable to find an escape route, he suddenly strode toward the sky and leaped.

This appalling scene appears neither in print nor on film but in a computer game, "9-11 Survivor," that was briefly available this summer on the Internet. Using a mouse, players could move through an animated, three-dimensional rendering of a burning World Trade Center office. Ultimately one might perish in the fire, opt to jump like the businessman or, if concealed stairs were discovered, flee to safety.

"9-11 Survivor" provoked an immediate outcry on the Internet. Infuriated e-mail correspondents accused the game's makers of lacking taste and moral decency by exploiting a tragedy. The game depicts only one scene, and although an online description, at www.selectparks.net/911survivor, makes it seem as if a full product were still coming, "9-11 Survivor" was never planned for commercial release.

It was created as an art-class project by three students at the University of California, San Diego, John Brennan, Mike Caloud and Jeff Cole. They said their goal was to reinterpret a historic moment by transplanting it to the medium with which they were most familiar: computer games. Inured to the distant televised images of Sept. 11, they hoped an immersive, interactive version would restore an immediacy to the day's horrors. Mr. Cole, who examined photographs to reconstruct the scene, said, "The more I delved into it, the more personal it became."

Computer and video games were once the province of futuristic gladiators and soldiers of yore. But as better graphics technology has made games more visually realistic, digital artists have been using 3-D game environments to recreate real places and simulate recent events. In the process they are turning what has been a platform for pure fantasy into a medium for social realism. At the very least the violent action at the heart of many games accurately reflects the world that game players confront when they step away from their screens.

Digital games appeal to artists for several reasons. Their very mass appeal makes them a target for tweaking in much the same manner that a soup can was a subject for Andy Warhol's paintbrush. The opportunity to imagine and build an entire virtual universe can be compelling. And game play generates a live performance with a bonus: audience participation is required.

Some artists construct games from scratch, while others develop modifications, or mods, to existing commercial releases. "Survivor 9-11," for instance, is like a skin slipped over the computerized skeleton of "Unreal Tournament 2003," a top-selling combat title.

Brody Condon, a Los Angeles artist and the teacher of the experimental game-design class that spawned "9-

11 Survivor,” said game mods were rapidly evolving into a new populist art form. He said artists and game enthusiasts were naturally inclined to use them to depict the world, including culturally significant places and events.

People who make mods “probably don’t go to museums,” Mr. Condon said. “They’re not going to paint.” But “they have this immediately accessible tool for cultural criticism, and it has an immediate method of dissemination, which is the Internet,” he continued. “That’s enticing.”

High-tech re-creations of archaeological landmarks like Stonehenge and the Roman Colosseum are no longer news at this stage of digital history. But for many artists adding game-play elements to a virtual reconstruction can convert a preservationist exercise into an involving aesthetic experience.

Rachel Greene, the co-curator of “Killer Instinct,” a game-art exhibition that will open on Dec. 12 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Lower Manhattan, said: “Games allow you to move through space and assume a personality, whether it’s heroic or one of a victim. Those are powerful psychological tools, especially when artists want to connect them to real-world events.”

“Waco Resurrection,” for instance, is a new computer game in which four players assume the role of the cult leader David Koresh in a virtual re-creation of his Texas compound where more than three dozen people were killed in a confrontation with federal agents. From Oct. 15 to Oct. 25 the game can be played at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street in Chelsea, where players must read Koresh’s messianic messages aloud and attract followers to advance. The game, to be put online early in 2004, was created by a Los Angeles artists’ collective, C-level. Its members intend to produce a series of games about ideologues, including the Heaven’s Gate leader Marshall Applewhite and the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski.

Eddo Stern, a C-level member with Mr. Condon, said the commercial game industry has, like the film industry, focused on escapist entertainment. But now, he said, “what we’re trying to do in a sense is create documentary video games.”

Julian Oliver, the director of SelectParks, a media lab in Melbourne, Australia, said game-art projects based on virtual re-creations typically deliver their creators’ vision of an otherwise inaccessible space. They also can be used to alter people’s experience of a public place or a historic moment.

“Normally they’re not just straight simulations where you simply play out the events as they were then,” Mr. Oliver said. “You can revisit those events and play them differently and explore them from many different camera angles.”

With two other artists, he is developing “Escape From Woomera” (www.escapefromwoomera.org), a virtual reconstruction of four Australian immigration-detention centers.

When a prototype version of the game is put online next month, players will have various ways to escape, from asking for legal help to digging their way out. Mr. Oliver said, “We’ve exploded open an institution that is entirely designed to be outside of the public imagination.”

Mr. Oliver and his SelectParks colleagues also are developing “Acmi Park,” a virtual recreation of Melbourne’s Australian Center for the Moving Image that transplants the urban museum to a pastoral setting and adds imaginary features like a virtual concert hall.

When the project is put online in April 2004, players will be able to pop into offices that are usually closed to visitors and collaborate on sound-art performances. The project’s sponsors rejected a proposal that would have allowed players to wreak havoc within the virtual museum.

Mr. Oliver said, “They certainly weren’t interested in people fragging in their office or pulling out a rocket launcher in the public toilets, much to my disappointment.”

Exaggerated gore, a selling point for many fantasy-based games, can become unsettling when applied to

real events still fresh in the memory. This may explain the outraged reactions from game enthusiasts to “9-11 Survivor” when it was put online in June. (The game was removed from the Net in July, not because of the controversy, the students say, but because they got an \$8,000 bill for heavy site traffic.)

Daniel A. Topler, senior editor of a technology-review Web site in Princeton, N.J., was one who objected. In a recent e-mail message, he said, “Although I am an avid fan of computer games, including some violent titles based on World War II and the like, I feel that we must draw the line somewhere.”

The “9-11 Survivor” creators argued that they were trying to show how that line is always moving. Mr. Cole said one friend criticized the game even though the same person had no qualms portraying a Nazi in a World War II role-playing game. Mr. Brennan said 9/11 would inevitably serve as raw material for future games, just as the Titanic and Pearl Harbor became film fodder. Noting the recent increase in games based on the Vietnam War, Mr. Brennan said: “Would it have been appropriate the day after? I don’t think so. But it’s appropriate now somehow.”

One group of hobbyists even plans to develop a game to combat the notion that virtual violence leads to actual bloodshed. In August the five-member Dteam 3D Design Team said it would create “Doom for Columbine” over the next 18 months.

The game, to be set in virtual re-creations of Columbine High School and other schools, will be based on “Doom,” the game once blamed for inspiring the Columbine shooting deaths. Scott Leonard, the group’s founder, said, “Now we’re going to do something on Doom to show them that’s silly.” In this version players will be able to attack monstrous incarnations of bullies and other adolescent demons.

“We’re just trying to make a statement,” Mr. Leonard said. “We’re trying to say, ‘It’s just a game.’ “