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Friday, Jan 23, 2004

Visual Arts

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Museum explores junction of technology, artistry

SMALL EXHIBIT AT STANFORD TAKES VIDEO GAMES SERIOUSLY AS MEDIUM FOR STORYTELLING

By Mike Antonucci
Mercury News

Popularity never guarantees respect. Almost anything that's well liked will be accused at some point of merely appealing to the lowest common denominator.

We all know someone who believes that virtually everything on television is evil junk. Comic books are considered literature by some, swill by many others. And video games dwell even lower on the list of most frequently and intensely derided American diversions.

Now comes a techno-slick, visually punchy rebuttal. That's the essence of an exhibit at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University: "Fictional Worlds, Virtual Experiences: Storytelling and Computer Games."

There's only a modest assortment of material, starting in a large room with wall-filling video projection from LucasArts' expansive online game "Star Wars Galaxies."

A few display cases feature a smattering of game art and packaging, and there's a tiny side room containing computer terminals that demonstrate different eras of game design, including a 1980 "text adventure" -- no graphics. There are three flat-panel screens, one showing a Web-linked timeline of game development and two featuring sharp-looking clips of games that illustrate various styles of storytelling.

Last, and perhaps most fascinating, are some prints in the computer room of simulated "screen shots" -- still images from games -- that were created by artist Jon Haddock, portraying famous events as they might be rendered by computer graphics. The depiction of the lone Chinese citizen blocking tanks in Tiananmen Square is transfixing.

The relative slimness of the exhibit isn't a fatal weakness; there's a lot of information in the display cases if you're willing to stand for a while, peer closely and read. There's no missing the idea that games are serious stuff, created in a realm where software converges with mythology, twitch reactions with elaborate role-playing, cult passions with big business.

But the Haddock art is worthy of its own show, or at least some exclusive space, and its impact is diluted by the almost afterthought



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Artist Jon Haddock's "Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine High School Cafeteria" is part of a series depicting historical events.

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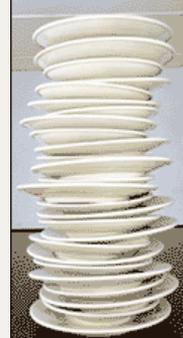
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placement in the little computer room.

The overall effect may strike you as a tease: lots of provocative bits and pieces that spotlight behind-the-scenes game culture as well as some of their notorious social fallout. Ultimately, the exhibit feels more like a pocket reference guide than a gateway to debate and deeper investigation.

The guest curator is Henry Lowood, who teaches a course on the history of game design and is curator for the history of science and technology collections at Stanford University Libraries. Stanford's collections include 25,000 to 30,000 games, and the Cantor exhibit pulls from the research of the How They Got Game project at the Stanford Humanities Laboratory.

Lowood notes that the exhibit, which continues through March 28, is bigger than initially planned. Moreover, it's standing alone at the moment rather than running simultaneously, as first conceived, with a much larger game exhibit that opens Saturday at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

"Yerba Buena will complete the thought behind the original concept," says Lowood, who also is the guest curator for the San Francisco event: "Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts." Lowood uses "computer gaming" as the umbrella term for games played on PCs and video game consoles.

The Cantor slice of the project, Lowood explains, concentrates on the cultural impressions games have made so far. At Yerba Buena, there's an emphasis on the way new art from a variety of mediums has been inspired or influenced by games.

Janek Simon, for instance, is creating "Carpet Invaders," which features a floor projection that simulates the classic "Space Invaders" game. It's described as an interactive installation with game-like components that resemble Afghan rug designs, which reference weapons and warfare.

For game creators, the atmosphere will convey their growing celebrity power. Italian artist Mauro Ceolin will display portraits of game designers and electronic musicians who sample game music; Los Angeles artist Brody Condon will present a 5-foot-tall sculpture of the graphically primitive character, or avatar, that represented programmer John Carmack in his "Quake III" game.

The lead element in the show features "America's Army," a game created by the U.S. military to showcase U.S. Army life. A major piece will be a large model of an Afghan mud-brick fort as it was represented in the game, capturing "the sort of ambiguous relationship between virtual reality and the real world," Lowood says.

You'll also find more of Haddock's work at the Yerba Buena exhibit.

The Cantor and Yerba Buena exhibits are good jumping-off points for anyone interested in an all-day Feb. 6 conference at the Stanford Medical Center's Fairchild Auditorium: "Story Engines: A Public Program on Storytelling and Computer Games." There's no admission fee; call (650) 725-3155 for more information.

Computer and video games as art

Stanford exhibit: "Fictional Worlds, Virtual Experiences: Storytelling and Computer Games"; through March 28; Cantor Arts Center, 328 Lomita Drive; free; (650) 723-4177, www.stanford.edu/dept/ccva

San Francisco exhibit: "Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts"; Saturday through April 4; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Third and Mission streets; \$3-\$6, free first Tuesday of the month; (415) 978-2787, www.yerbabuenaarts.org

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