

# GAMESCAPES

VIDEOGAME LANDSCAPES AND CITIES  
IN THE WORKS OF FIVE  
INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS

CORY ARCANGEL / MAURO CEOLIN  
JONATHAN HADDOCK  
EDDO STERN / CARLO ZANNI



**Galleria Civica, Monza**  
**13 - 29 October 2006**

Tuesday to Friday 15,30 -19,30  
(morning visits for schools and groups,  
booking required)  
Saturday and Sunday 10,30 -19,30  
Monday closed

Exhibition curated by Rosanna Pavoni

Technical Committee:  
Rosanna Pavoni, Matteo Bittanti, Domenico  
Quaranta

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# Introduction

by Rosanna Pavoni

Anyone who has played a videogame needs no explanations.

For those who have never played, we could start by saying that a videogame is something you buy (on or offline) thinking that it is a pastime, and then you find you can't keep away from it or get it out of your head for months (the number of months depends on how cool it is, according to the gamers – and sometimes it can be an endless thing).

Because videogames are teeming with attention-grabbing scenarios, fulfilling roles, adrenaline-packed competitions, absorbing projects, intriguing situations and challenges that you just can't let go of. It's not all shooting, either. Or all competition. It is a world that is neither bland nor neutral. It exists "elsewhere" but you end up taking it and all its baggage with you, like a snail with its shell. It has its own form of beauty, which is technological, playful and artistic.

The study and critique of videogames in terms of their semantic, textual and aesthetic complexity is an academic discipline with a wide, complex literature of its own.

And now videogames (above all the most

popular ones, which boast hundreds of thousands of players around the world, and which have now become icons in their own right) have been chosen by a new generation of artists as fertile terrain for experimentation and creativity.

Five international artists - Cory Arcangel, Mauro Ceolin, Jon Haddock, Eddo Stern and Carlo Zanni - who have been working this "terrain" for years, have been invited to offer examples of their creative processes, and the results accentuate the differences in their *modus operandi* and approach to the videogame. This points up the extraordinary potential – instrumental and narrative – that this realm possesses.

This show is dedicated to the role of muse, advanced technological tool, scapegoat and all the others that the videogame has acquired in the hands of Italian and international artists. It has a variety of aims: as a confirmation and reconfirmation of the efforts of those who work in game art; to provide new connections and stimuli for those who play; and to introduce those who up till now have occasionally

given videogames as Christmas presents, to a different form of artistic expression.

# Videogames as a mean of transport

by Matteo Bittanti

Videogames have profoundly altered the contemporary media panorama. First and foremost videogames are a means of transport that project us into alternative dimensions. The theories of narrative are of little use when attempting to understand their nature. It is much more relevant to look to architecture or urbanistic studies. “Cut” Vladimir Propp, “Paste” Le Corbusier. Videogames are a style of representation, a system of socialization and a simulation of a journey. An exploration, a wander, crossing space. And their spaces are by definition transient, ready to be configured and explored at will. In a certain sense, they do not differ radically from the modern world. A cognitive map of the digital era, videogames introduce new geographies, topographies, places and hyper-places made of numeric sequences sheathed in texture. In the virtual journey of a videogame the player acknowledges and accepts his or her own precarious status and fragility, journeying into the unknown, aware that during the trip he or she may die and be reborn dozens of times. Press “X” to *respawn*<sup>1</sup>. Setting out on a virtual journey means being open to the concept of plurality – *artificial* plurality, in the case of non-player characters – or *concrete* plurality

– in multiplayer games and MMOGs<sup>2</sup>, where behind the image there is *meatware*<sup>3</sup>. In this case videogames propel us into an ‘authentic’ encounter with another being, and the film-like narration merely simulates that encounter. Videogames require us to get our hands dirty; at the movies you can keep your gloves on. As the simulation of a journey, videogames resist attempts at generalization and defy classification. The journey experience is in fact subjective, individual and personal, even in the era of virtual mass tourism. My trip through Vice City in *Grand Theft Auto* is both similar and radically different from that of any other traveler. Landscapes in videogames are a work in progress. We are always “in transit”. Videogames can only be frozen when paused, or in *screenshots*. To paraphrase Godard, we could say that if videogames are reality at 30/60 frames a second, screenshots are reality at one frame a second. *Mais le “screenshot” c’est ne pas le jeu video*. Screenshots – fragments of the gaming experience – are the virtual heir of the postcard. Their function is to bear witness to the trip, to capture the flow in a single image. Like non-places, videogames’ hyper-places give rise to a series of performances which recall

the practices involved in travel, consumption, exchange. Playing means taking part in a performance within a flow of images. Videogames are played and measured in units of time. The record of a videogame is a mere question of aesthetics. Videogames redefine the concept of space, creating new layers of reality which add to, replace (in the most dangerous forms of addiction), or overlap with our more immediate ones. Videogames give the player the chance to live out alternative experiences vicariously, thus transforming carrier into player, but only thanks to the mediation of the screen, as both *interface* (monitor) and *protection* (shield).

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Respawn: Spawn (or respawn) is a term used in videogames which indicates the creation of an entity, which may be a playable character, a non-playable character or an object. Respawn-ing is a further act of creation of a player or enemy after death, destruction or at the end of a level.

<sup>2</sup> MMOG: Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Games are computer role playing games played online. Thousands of players can interact, interpreting characters which evolve together with the persistent world that surrounds them, and which they inhabit.

<sup>3</sup> Meatware: The term meatware indicates the integration between the physical construct known as the central nervous system and the mental construct known as the human mind. The concept represents an application of the hardware/software dichotomy conceived for electronic machines to human beings. One of the first people to popularize the term was the sci-fi writer and university lecturer Rudy Rucker in his 1987 novel of the same name.

# Cities of bits

by Domenico Quaranta

«My name is wjm@mit.edu.» These are William J. Mitchell's opening words in *City of Bits* (1995), his classic exploration of the evolution of the concept of city in the internet age. It is a line which reveals not only a new identity, but also a new form of citizenship. Ten years on the American artist Cory Arcangel performed his public "Friendster Suicide", removing himself from one of the biggest online communities: maybe not a very spectacular "suicide", but not for that any less painful than the real kind. Between these two extremes, the revolution we are experiencing has rewritten a number of concepts that had remained unaltered in our culture for centuries: landscape, the city, life, identity. Alongside the tangible landscape there is now the information landscape; citizens have become netizens, and while our concrete jungles are being dug up to accommodate the information highway, we spend less and less time there, preferring the isometric gardens of *Sim City* or the 107 million inhabitants of mspace.com. It is time to update our concept of life, and has been since the advent of *Second Life*, while the idea of identity is still reeling from the complications heralded by nicknames, aliases, IDs, accounts, profiles and avatars.

Videogames play a central role in this process of transformation. On the one hand their iconography, like that of all popular phenomena, infests our urban areas, while on the other computer games peddle their own urbanistic theories, offer development platforms for new urban sites or types of communities, reflect our grandest utopias (or our worst dystopias), and train us for life in real cities. It comes as no surprise that social life and urban space, along with gender issues and the hot question of violence, are all central in game art. To date there has been no meticulous exploration of the results of this work, but it would necessarily include the works and artists presented here. In *Super Mario Movie*, Cory Arcangel, playing with the bits of a Nintendo cartridge, appears to delight in destroying the underlying social model present in all the *Super Mario* games, that someone called the "yuppie-style level climbing": the self-made man of the 80's - progressing alone on his way to fulfillment - here plummets downwards through a shattered psychedelic 8-bit city. In *Average Shoveler*, Carlo Zanni draws on a similar aesthetic to tell the story of your average citizen, forced to process mountains of information that he

is seldom capable of filtering, understanding or using, to form an opinion about the world around him. The contrast between the retro look of the game and the constant stream of news updates and hyper-realism of the CNN website, juxtaposes two different rhythms.

The first (ours) is blocked, while the second (that of the flows of information) is frenetic. The approach adopted by Jon Haddock is diametrically opposed to this. His *Screenshots* use conventions of the gaming world to explore a present which is already history. On the one hand he reveals the lack of difference between reality and art, history and entertainment, and on the other he demonstrates that videogames have become a mature, pliable tool for representing reality. But, as Mauro Ceolin appears to respond, games are also capable of creating a version of reality which is tangible, solid, inhabitable, as worthy of artistic representation of any urban or natural landscape. And as the works of Edo Stern point out, this is a world with its own fashions and styles, like the neo-medievalism which is all the rage in multiplayer online role play games, which the artist sees as the result of Western civilization looking to its roots to justify its hold over the world.

# Cory Arcangel

## BIOGRAPHY

Cory Arcangel, born 1978, is a digital artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. His work is concerned with the relationship between technology and culture. Cory's best known projects probably are his Nintendo game cartridge hacks and his subversive reworking of obsolete computer systems of the 70's and 80's. Arcangel frequently talks about his early collaborations with Paul B. Davis, as being very important to the development of his own work. In 1998 they founded BEIGE, a programming ensemble with other friends from Oberlin Conservatory. Cory's work was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, and has also been exhibited in the Guggenheim Museum and MoMA.

Link: [www.beigerecords.com/cory/](http://www.beigerecords.com/cory/)

## ABOUT HIS WORKS HE SAYS...

«...My work is inspired by and functions as a means to understand my own media-saturated existence. Since the present and future is filter-ed through the past, my work with digital media technology is directly informed by my time spent with the likes of television, music, video games, and early Macintosh computers... I like the idea of making things out of trash [one can easily find an NES in a dumpster these days], and I like the idea of actually having to break into something that I find in the trash even better. The only way to make work for the NES is to hack and solder a cartridge. To do this, I will clip off the program chip from an actual Mario cartridge, burn my new information [the output of this code compiled] to a chip, and solder it in the place of the old one... Ever wonder why Mario and Zelda were little squares? The Nintendo can only display graphics in 8 pixel by 8 pixel squares, and can only hold 8k of graphics in total... These two hardware limitations defined the aesthetic of most early 80's video games on the Nintendo, and making "art" for this system is a study of these limitations...»

## THE WORK ON SHOW

«...it is a hacked 8bit *Super Mario Brothers 1* cartridge. I will hack the game cartridge and totally reprogram it... so when you put in THIS cartridge, instead of the game, you are presented with a 15 minute movie using all original graphics from the game [without actually altering the original factory soldered graphics ROM]. This is similar to my cloud cartridge, but 40 times as awesome. The movie is gonna be about how *Mario's* world is falling apart. Like mad max, but in 8bits. Picture title screens, messed up fantasy worlds, castles floating on rainbow colored 8bit clouds, waterfalls, underwater dungeon nightmare rave scenes, dance parties, floating/mushrooms level scenes, Mario alone on a cloud crying, fireball flicker patterns, and video synth knitted 60 frames per second seizure vidz. Each scene will also have music. & All being generated by this one 32k 1984 cartridge!!!!!!!!!!!! basically it is *Mario Brothers* totally rearranged into this amazing impossible 8bit world...»  
(C. Arcangel)



*Super Mario Movie*, 2005.  
Screenshots from the  
video, courtesy of the  
artist.

# Mauro Ceolin

## BIOGRAPHY

Mauro Ceolin lives and works in Milan, where he was born in 1963. One of the leading international game artists, Ceolin depicts himself as a painter, even when he creates banners, animations or videogames such as *GOOGLE-Battle.03* (2004), a paintgame on Google's epic struggle against all other search engines. Using a revisited painting technique, he creates vectorial images using an optical pen and a palette of flat colors; the images can then be reproduced in various sizes and techniques, from acrylic painting to photographic printing. The subjects of this never-ending work are found images, fragments of the pop culture but, above all, icons of the videogaming culture, from landscapes to cosplayers, from game designers to 8-bit musicians. His works have been on show in various exhibitions, among which the milestone event "Bang the Machine" (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco 2004)

Link: [www.rgbproject.com](http://www.rgbproject.com)

## ABOUT HIS WORKS HE SAYS...

«...I work mainly with two genres: landscape and portrait. These two fields allow me to find points of contact with the past, but also to relate to the future.

...The "familiar" horizons that appear inside videogames are part of a panorama I want to represent. My aim is to elevate what is currently dismissed as a mere setting for a market of game fanatics into an art form. Who knows what Canaletto would have plumped for, between a gamescape in *Project Gotham Racing* and a bucolic scene from *Zelda*. *SolidLandscapes* records the unique physiognomies of polygonal landscapes, which at times feature characteristics similar to those of real landscapes. In the continuity of artistic research into landscape, *RGBproject's SolidLandscapes* is another spatial aspect of the contemporary scene. These landscapes, transported worlds waiting to be turned on, are part of our imagination as "digital beings" and are now so familiar that they have become part of the contemporary landscape genre.»

## THE WORKS ON SHOW

*RGBInvaders*

«...with coin-ops, at the bar I was one of the best, my favorites were *Donkey Kong* (1981), with an average score of 4000 points, and the fantastic *Space Invaders* (1978). But the latter, because of its "visuality" remained linked in my memory.

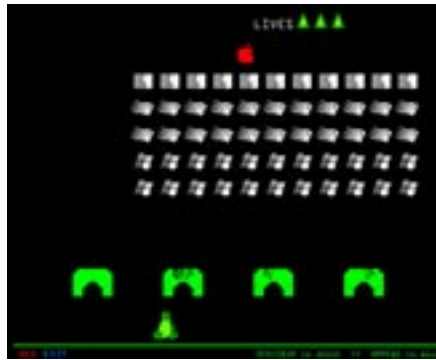
...2003 *RGBInvaders* is the third paintgame (a videogame used to reproduce an event of contemporariness) of the online project *RGBproject*, and the first in which the interface does not offer a score but the gamer's activity becomes a painting performance.»

*SolidLandscapes*

«...probably landscape painting was created also by looking outside the window. Well, *SolidLandscapes* move the point of view from the window frame to the monitor frame, thus electing to genre a secondary element of a videogame such as the landscapes on the background of the gaming performance. *Press start to continue...*».

(M. Ceolin)





*RGBInvaders.03*, 2003.  
Interactive Flash object,  
520 x 400 pixel, 42 KB,  
courtesy of the artist.



*SolidLandscapes.kirby.04apl*,  
2004.  
Acrylic on plexiglas,  
151 x 71.5 cm, private  
collection (Monza, Italy).



*SolidLandscapes.theSims.04*,  
2004.  
Photographic print on  
plexiglas, 100 x 60 cm,  
unique sample,  
courtesy of the artist.

# Jonathan “Jon” Haddock

## BIOGRAPHY

Arizona-based artist, Jonathan (“Jon”) Haddock was born in Sacramento, California, in 1960. He achieved his B.F.A. at Arizona State University in 1986, followed by Master’s degrees in drawing and painting at the University of Iowa in 1991. As of 1996 Haddock began intensively to ponder the portrayal of violent events in the news media as a formative influence in his own life. He took up this theme through the hobbyist subculture, building and collecting miniatures, then he moved to videogame aesthetics: the result was *Screenshots*, a series of works that debuted in September 2000 in the Experimental Gallery of the Arizona State University (ASU) Art Museum in Tempe, Arizona. *Screenshots* was presented in major galleries and museums across the United States.

Link: <http://whitelead.com/jrh/>

## ABOUT HIS WORKS HE SAYS...

«...Intellectually, there is a huge difference between a real and fictional event - but, at least for me, not so much emotionally...

...I don't intend to minimize the tragedy of the real, but I want to point out the power and influence of fiction. And, in most instances, my experience of these events was through the same medium - television.

...For me there is something about all these events that I don't really understand or accept. Looking at them from the perspective of control is an attempt to understand or, at least, try to contain them... [this perspective, the god-like perspective] emphasizes our relationship with these events as a culture. We create them, just as they create us... It also provides some emotional distance from the original event or image...»

## THE WORKS ON SHOW

*Screenshots* is a series of twenty drawings from an isometric perspective, in the style of a computer game. The subject of each drawing is the image, or images, that created a popular cultural event. Historical and dramatic events (like the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lorraine Motel or the massacre at the Columbine High School, Colorado, enacted by two young killers) are used interchangeably with fictionalized events (like the picnic scene in *The Sound of Music*).

«On one level, *Screenshots* is an attempt to come to terms with the experience of violence that has made me who I am.»  
(J. Haddock)



*Quang Duc commits suicide to protest Vietnamese War (Saigon, 1963), 2000.*  
Photoshop screenshot.



*Rodney King beaten by LAPD officers (Los Angeles, 1991), 2000.*  
Photoshop screenshot.

# Eddo Stern

## BIOGRAPHY

Eddo Stern was born in Tel Aviv in 1972 and currently lives near Los Angeles. His work explores new modes of narrative and documentary, fantasies of technology and history, and cross-cultural representation in film, computer games, and on the Internet. He works in various media including computer software/game design, kinetic sculpture, performance, and film and video production. His short *machinima*<sup>1</sup> films include *Sheik Attack*, *Vietnam Romance* and *Deathstar*. He was co-founder of c-level (2001-2005), a cooperative media lab in Los Angeles' Chinatown; he co-produced the physical computer gaming projects *Waco Resurrection*, *Tekken Torture Tournament*, *Cockfight Arena* and the internet meme conference "C-level Memefest".

Link: [www.eddostern.com](http://www.eddostern.com)

<sup>1</sup>...*Machinima* stands for "machine cinema" or "machine animation": the first meaning indicates computer-graphics movies created using 3D videogame engines; the second animated movies.

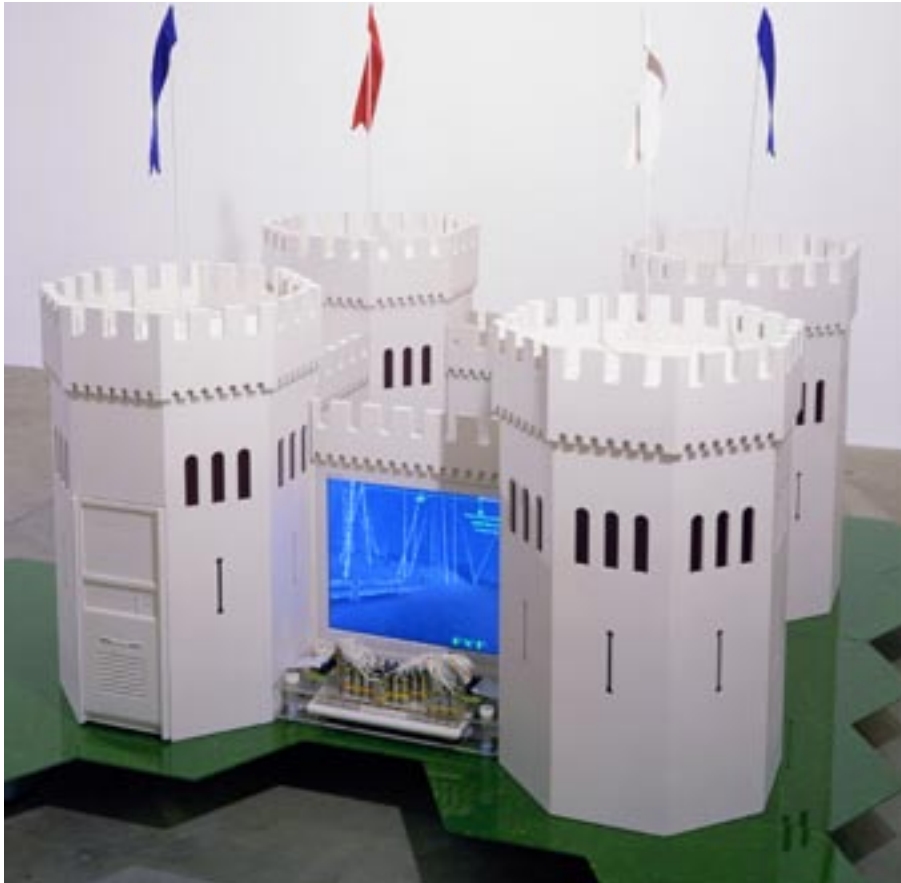
## ABOUT HIS WORKS HE SAYS...

«...The Internet-mediated arenas for the hugely popular gaming environments known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) ...are prime loci of our new 21<sup>st</sup> century's version of neomedievalism. The range of historical and cultural influences on the fantasy game mise-en-scene includes a wild amalgam of Celtic, Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance combined with a deep commitment to a Wagnerian, Tolkienesque, Camelotian, and *Dungeons & Dragonish* verisimilitude....

.... In this conflation of alternate fantasies a strange hybrid artifact is created, as MMORPGs replicate a pre-industrial world using the most advanced post-industrial tools. Tech-savvy game-players make demands for cyber-cultural privileges such as post-human speed, permutable identities, endless virtual regeneration, tele-presence, and access to non-Cartesian space; all the while desiring the experience of a nostalgic fantasy of forgetting in a magical medieval playground...»

## THE WORK ON SHOW

«*GodsEye* is borrowed from the computer gaming term God's eye perspective which positions the player as a God/General/Wizard floating above the world - awarded total control over cities, armies and minions. *GodsEye* consists of several computer sculptures that make up a techno-/neo-medieval landscape built around the functional hardware elements of a computer desktop environment: keyboard, mouse, monitor, tower, etc. Formally, it draws from the subcultures of custom computer case modifications, hardware hacking, computer game modification and sampling»  
(E. Stern)



*Fort Paladin:*  
*America's Army, 2003.*  
Installation, 182.88 x  
182.88 x 152.4 cm,  
courtesy of the artist.

# Carlo Zanni

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Italy in 1975, Carlo Zanni lives in Milan and New York. His work is set at the intersection of computation and representation, fusing new and old media (drawing, painting, Internet) to shape landscapes and portraits, confronting themes such as real time/real life; fiction/information; social economy/special effects. Carlo Zanni's practice finds its roots in Sol Lewitt's work and in his sentence: "The Idea Becomes A Machine That Makes The Art". His first retrospective was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) of London, when the book *Vitalogy* was published. The documentary *8-bit*, directed by Marcin Ramocki and due to be presented in October 2006 at the MoMA, New York, will include an interview to the artist.

Link: [www.zanni.org/average](http://www.zanni.org/average)

## ABOUT HIS WORKS HE SAYS...

«...networking processes or interactions don't add any kind of value to a thought or to a work. They are just simple tools, just like a paintbrush and I can use them as a paintbrush if I need their specs to build my project. Speaking in absolute terms, it's wrong to confuse or identify the quality and the importance of a work with its tech content. Technology is an ongoing process; art is the end of a process. So they are opposites, and often they attract each other. There isn't any kind of relationship between tech content and quality... Usually I program portraits, I mean, all my web projects are linked to that particular subject (not only people's portraits but also portraits of our times, of our society). I think today the only possible form of portrait is a web project where the person is not important. The important thing is the personal mental identity: e-mail, avatar, DTP icons, ftp login, nicknames, emoticons etc., which could describe better "now-people" than their physical aspect. I'm obsessed by the idea of recording, mirroring changes. My daily job is working as an employee. I wake up in the morning and I press REC. You play the game. I read the scores...»

## THE WORK ON SHOW

«Inspired by the graphic layout of *Leisure Suit Larry I* (1987), *Average Shoveler* is an online game challenging the boundaries between photo, painting and short movie. The location is the NYC's East Village. It is snowing, and you have to keep your way cleaned. Each flake of snow contains images taken live from Yahoo's news feed while people tell you top stories in cartoon bubbles gathered from same sources. All this is set to music composed by Gabriel Yared, award-winning composer of scores for movies such as *The English Patient* and *Cold Mountain*.

...*Average Shoveler* is another attempt to describe our society, our daily city life, our fight with information and disinformation, and many other themes more or less hidden in the game. Another very important aspect of this project is the collision between the fictional environment in which you are immersed and the real and shocking feeling driven by the online feedback you are playing with.»  
(C. Zanni)



Average Shoveler, 2004.  
Screenshots from the  
Flash game commissioned  
by Rhizome.org, New  
York. Courtesy of the  
artist.

