

Gaming the Pop Culture Fantasy of the Vietnam War

by Allison Meier on July 16, 2015



Pop culture fetishization of war and violence of video games are explored with vivid watercolor-based animation in Eddo Stern's Vietnam Romance, on view at Postmasters gallery in Tribeca. Artist and game designer Stern's multichannel game stretches 36 feet across four screens, where visitors can interact with environments set in both 2015 and 1965.



Three preview levels were showcased in this past February's Indiecade East at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, and components were also projected outdoors at last month's Northern Spark in Minneapolis. However the experience of the game at Postmasters is really stunning, with the wide panorama enhancing the color and depth of the animation, all based on hand-painted illustrations. Unless you have a lot of time on your hands, it's not possible to play through all nine "scenes" while in the gallery, but there's an option to watch a non-playable version. Each scene is named for some cultural relics associated with the Vietnam War era, such as "Fortunate Son" and "The Deer Hunter," and through the play various other elements emerge, like a statue homage to Willem Dafoe's arms-outstretched death in Platoon and Private Pyle's bathroom suicide in Full Metal Jacket, even MIDI versions of the Mamas And The Papas and Jefferson Airplane appear as a soundtrack.



As Vietnam Romance's tagline goes: "If you hated the war, but liked the movies, you'll love this game!" One scene has a bow-wielding Sylvester Stallone from Rambo III hunting in a fictional nature park that transplants deer from Pennsylvania to Vietnam — a reference to The Deer Hunter, which was filmed in the wilds of Pennsylvania. Much of the imagery is cobbled together in this way, with Stern culling material from film, comics, music, online tourist data, and eBay listings for war memorabilia. The game starts with the purchase of a "Passage to Vietnam" deal, where four seats are available on an exclusive nostalgia trip:

The Vietnam Romance company has recently acquired a wooden casket found buried under Hoa Lo prison. The contexts of which will be revealed only to the four winning travelers who may bid in person for ownership in situ.

This Vietnam Romance eBay store is a main source for the game's literal and figurative ammunition, with an ear from

a Viet Cong soldier offered alongside gun cartridges and a Jefferson Airplane cassette. Whether Vietnam, or the US Civil War and World War II, war memorabilia has this tangible, obsessive role in the ongoing interpretation of war memory. Vietnam in particular may be better known through its movies, which tell the stories of fictional soldiers more vividly to a greater number of people, than its real hell. And as Stern's game shows, this melding of historical fact and narrative fiction makes for an imperfect collective memory.



Eddo Stern, "Vietnam Romance" (2015) at Postmasters (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Cards from Eddo Stern's "Vietnam Romance" (2015) at Postmasters (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Eddo Stern, "Vietnam Romance" (2015) (GIF by the author via [Vimeo](https://www.vimeo.com/))