

# EDDO STERN'S EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO GAMES MERGE ART WITH ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING AND VIRTUAL REALITY

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Leegattenby King of Bards and Squire Rex, both better-than-average players of the online role-playing game Everquest, faced off in 2004. Leegattenby wanted to know how something called "armor class" worked, and asked about it on a forum. Rex said Leegattenby sounded like a noob. Leegattenby mentioned that he had spent 15 years in the military, and Rex said he'd like to smack Leegattenby's face silly for "talking tales from the crypt" about his past life. So Leegattenby suggested they meet for a "grudge fight," preferably at a tough-man contest or a bar with a boxing ring. "I have did this before and it is no big deal," he wrote.

Artist Eddo Stern was playing Everquest at the time and watched this war of words unfold. "That was one of the forums I visited every day," he says. He documented the exchange and, in 2007, made the video *Best Flamewar Ever*. It will screen at Young Projects starting June 8, along with other work by Stern that mines the gap between virtual and real life.

In *Best Flamewar*, the real-life Leegattenby and Rex don't appear but are embodied by monstrous talking heads made up of Everquest fan art – Leegattenby has swords sticking out from his temple and a half-clothed lady warrior beside his mouth. Rex has one green dragon on his lower left chin and another on the right side of his head.

Because he needed someone uncontrived to give these characters voice, Stern enlisted his mother, who has a distinct Israeli accent, to play former soldier Leegattenby and asked his wife to play "punk-ass" Rex. But the dialogue feels so overtly, conventionally masculine, you don't notice the feminine pitch in the voices.

"Leegattenby has this more old-fashioned, honor-based idea of masculinity," Stern says. "You could even say it's naive."

He expects respect for his real-life credentials. "There's one point where Leegattenby says, 'It's because of me and my brothers in arms ...' that Rex is even able to be on these forums," Stern recalls. That interested him, the idea that fighting for capitalism and world domination in life would give people the privilege to get lost in these simulated, online worlds.

After Leegattenby tries to set up a tough-man fight, another user calls him a tool and Leegattenby apologizes. Then yet another user "thanks him for his service," and he launches into a heartfelt monologue about a friend killed in action. By the end of the video, Rex has disappeared, leaving Leegattenby with his "tales from the crypt."

Stern, who now teaches art at UCLA and runs the Game Lab there, studied math and philosophy but became frustrated by how cerebral



those fields were; he then turned to art. He worked briefly for a virtual-reality company, though much of what he knows about game- and video-making he's learned through trial and error.

In the early '00s, after graduating with an MFA from CalArts, he worked on games like *Waco Resurrection*, in which players enter the body and psyche of a resurrected David Koresh, the infamous cult leader, by wearing a mask of his face. Sounds of government psy-ops and SWAT teams bombard them and they can access powers Koresh claimed to have by speaking his religious creed into a microphone.

"I'm drawn to the logic of video games but also repulsed by it," Stern says. "The more elaborate or complex, the more total and successful the simulation, the more that line [between life and the virtual] seems to blur." Usually, when you're playing a game, the virtual space is actually taking over. "All of a player's life concerns are manifesting there."



Headsets for Stern's *Darkgame*

*Courtesy the artist.*

Stern wants his gaming systems to cross over into physical experience. Around 2005, he began work on *Darkgame*, a virtual-reality game that uses haptic technology, which incorporates players' sense of feel. Players wear a headset with small motors embedded into pressure points, giving them tactile feedback, allowing them to sense, for instance, that someone is following them. As you play, you can either gain or lose sense of sight, hearing and touch.

The first headset Stern designed included a black head-covering, because images of John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban" who was famously transported with a hood over his head, had seared their way into his memory (though the new headset includes no such covering).

Players who are already hard of hearing or unable to see can opt to give up hearing or sight from the start, in exchange for other heightened senses. The latest version of the game debuts in his Young Projects exhibition, and Stern has been testing this version at the Braille Institute in L.A., where few of the sight-impaired volunteers have ever played multiplayer games that involve a joystick.

Games like that, which dissolve the differences between the senses, just don't exist. But this game has a life outside the screen.