# Games Without Frontiers

Video artist Eddo Stern explores the porous boundary between the virtual and the real

by **Ed Halter**  *posted June 4, 2008*

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Eddo Stern's monumental installation *Portal, Wormhole, Flythrough*, unveiled at SJ01 this month, consists of a 17-foot-tall octagonal gate with a circular screen in its center, upon which is projected a looping montage of found video images of motion-tunnel sequences, swirling vortexes, and other abstracted passageways through virtual space. The massive steel-and-aluminum construction suggests the low-polygon 3D graphics of a contemporary computer game; its chunky proportions seem slightly off, as if it were a very small object suddenly made unusually large. More precisely, the structure resembles interdimensional portals found at various spots in the universe depicted in the massively-multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft. A comparable but square entranceway, seething with a membrane of swirling, luminescent color, appears as the login screen every time one of the game's more than 8 million subscribers worldwide decides to enter the game world once again.

*Portal*'s shifting, spiraling tunnel is mesmerizing to watch; its phantom depths feel as though they might swallow the viewer. In this regard Stern's video sculpture partakes in old fantasies of screen absorption. One could cite the hypnotic rotating disks of Marcel Duchamp's 1926 experimental film *Anémic Cinéma* as precedent for inviting the viewer to fixate on illusory depths; another would be Dara Birnbaum's 1980 found-footage remix *Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*, in which a secretary watches multicolored beams of laser light fly into the screen of her personal computer, depicting the cathode-ray tube as a magical passageway to some unknown world. Numerous variations on these themes appear in narrative cinema —*Vertigo*'s swirling Saul Bass animations, *2001*'s deep-space stargate corridor sequence, *Videodrome*'s permeable television screen—each adding varying degrees of menace to their promises of transcendence.

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But in its specific reference to World of Warcraft, *Portal* alludes to the more everyday mode of absorption found in gaming: at this very moment, hundreds of thousands of people are logged onto the game, setting aside their mundane lives for hours at a time to experience another existence within an elaborate sword-and-sorcery society. Warcraft's magical-medieval elf-and-orc-populated world, derived from the mythos of J.R.R. Tolkien and Dungeons & Dragons, recalls the escapist role played by its literary predecessors; the game provides a digital evocation of an existence "beyond the fields we know," to use pioneering fantasist Lord Dunsany's phrase. But with *Portal,* the boundary between the worlds of online fantasy and meat-space reality have been disrupted; whereas we as players are accustomed to projecting our identities into online realms, now an artifact from that alternate universe appears to have manifested itself in our physical world.

*Portal* continues a proposition that has defined Stern's work from the beginning: that gaming does not so much provide an escape from the real world as a commingling of fantasy and reality, one in which the problems and desires of the offline world continue to hold sway in unexpected, transformed ways. In Stern's work, game-world experiences are never purely disconnected flights of imagination, nor simply crude mirrors of reality, but rather something more inextricably complicated and strange. As a gamer himself, Stern has logged over 2,000 hours in World of Warcraft, in addition to monitoring online forums for discussions and arguments about the game. The fruits of his virtual labor include several fan-made videos that he has found online and later exhibited alongside his own work as ethnographic artifacts. In these works of machinima (videos made with documentary and/or staged game footage), players show off expensive armor and weapons, simulate sex, partying, and drug trips, kill off their own characters through virtual suicides, and hold in-game funeral services for avatars of players who have died in real life.

In an example of the latter, *Rest in Peace Ignoramus,* Warcrafters pay tribute to a fellow player (whose avatar went by the handle Ignoramus) by gathering to discuss his memory. Despite the intended gravitas, the proceedings reveal the cramped restrictions of online expression: characters attempt to bow, sob, or kneel in tribute, but can only approximate these gestures through the predetermined actions programmed for their characters—a somatic variant on the way social network sites allow users to express themselves as unique individuals via an ironically standardized set of graphic and textual defaults. One must wonder how well any of the participants could have "known" Ignoramus in a context defined by such limited means of communication—and to what extent their funereal actions constitute mere playacting, staging his memorial as but another game-world novelty rather than a means to process grief.

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This question is raised again in the grimly hilarious *Serenity Now*, which documents a clan of troublemakers who disrupt a similar in-game funeral by attacking the "mourners" (who, in simulation of formal attire, wear robes rather than armor), then mocking the hotly worded forum posts they receive in the wake of the ambush. "I hope [your] dad dies of a heart attack, then at the funeral some guy runs in naked and pushes the coffin over and runs around slapping people screaming LOL OWNED, then releases a video of it," one angry gamer writes.

Stern has created a set of videos from similar discussions exhumed from gaming forums. For *Level sounds like Devil (BabyInChrist vs. His Father, May 2006)* (2007), he crafted a moving three-dimensional head out of a cluster of World of Warcraft icons, leaving empty holes for eyes and mouth. The collage technique recalls Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo's fantastical portraits comprising collections of vegetables, flowers, or foliage. The head's mouth moves in concert with an actor's voice reading a message from a forum writer named BabyInChrist, who asks others, "Should I, as a Christian who wishes to stay in the light, play World of Warcraft?" His father, BabyInChrist explains, disapproves: "He sees nothing but evil and darkness coming from the game." But other players disagree. In responses that Stern presents in typed text, users CyberPaladin and SteelDisciple dissent. "It's not evil," argues SteelDisciple. "The game doesn't even take place in a real reality. The 'magic' in the game has absolutely NO connection to real-world magic."

For another video, *Best... Flame War... Ever... (King of Bards vs. Squire Rex, June 2004)* (2007), Stern created two side-by-side talking heads out of images taken from another massively-multiplayer online game, Everquest. In the discussion, which originated on an Everquest forum in 2004, a relatively new gamer named Leegattenby asks a technical question ("Ok, not to sound like a total n00b, but how exactly does armor class work?") only to be verbally assaulted by another writer, Squire. As their argument escalates, and Squire denounces "meaningless opinions from a n00b," Leegattenby reveals that he's actually a military veteran and current police officer who has "kicked more ass in Real Life and seen more things (some good, some really bad) than most people in two lifetimes." When this fails to quell Rex (who replies that someone at least 40 years old shouldn't be wasting his time on Everquest), Leegattenby offers to settle the score with a real offline fight. "The best places are tough man contests or bars that do ring fights," he offers.