Critical Play Interfaces

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This essay explores two recent game art works by Iraqi born artist Wafaa Bilal. In these projects Bilal adopts play as a conceptual and formal means for artistic and political intervention. The means and ends of linking play, creativity, and politics are theorized by Hakim Bey as Immediatism, that is "unmediated play" situated as "Temporary Autonomous Zones" (TAZs) or spaces that are both contingent to and outside the control of the prevailing order. In as much Bey's concepts and Bilal's practices converge in the dialectics of alienation and mediated experience, they also affirm the potential use of media for liberatory ends. It is useful to keep this seemingly paradoxical position in mind throughout the discussion.

Bilal's works combine net-based-performance and détournement of simulation technologies, game aesthetics, and public spaces for provocative ends. Détournement denotes subversion of both the source and the meaning of the original work to create a new work, as defined by Guy Debord. Bilal's projects connect conjectures of play and war in simulation products for entertainment and the military with formal perspectives on coexistence and conflict. The focus of these projects is on revealing the oftentimes atavist ideologies underpinning mainstream militaristic videogames, and their repurposing as critical play interfaces for protest.

For *Domestic Tension* (2007), the first game by Bilal and collaborators, the artist installed his living quarter at Chicago's Flatfile Gallery. For thirty-one days viewers could peep in on him anonymously via a live webcam and chat with him online. A rifle-sized paintball gun affixed to the camera allowed viewers to shoot at Bilal, or anything else in his room, twenty-four hours a day.

The gallery's press release states that the project attracted participants in over 130 countries. Bilal's site received 80,000,000 hits, while 60,000 paintballs were shot. Responses ranged from attempts at hacking the server to increase the frequency of shots, to counter-actions by participants taking turns to aim the gun away from Bilal. Technically trained participants volunteered their skills in devising continual readjustments to users' behaviors. Bilal kept his identity and motivations ambiguous throughout the project. In subsequent interviews the

artist discussed it as an experiment addressing political, personal, and artistic concerns. He says that the idea was conceived while watching television,

> I was watching the news — in fact, ABC news, when they had an interview with an American soldier sitting in a base in Colorado, and she was firing missiles into Iraq after being given information by American soldiers on the ground in Iraq, and when asked if she had any regard for human life, she said "No, these people are bad, and I'm getting very good intelligence from people on the ground."

Bilal set out to establish a dialectic relationship between the alienating effects of mediated experience and U.S. media's sanitized reports of the Iraq war, which as he states, "consistently excludes images of casualties." "I want it to be far removed," says Bilal, "I want it to be video game-like. That's how we see this war, as a video game. We don't see the mutilated bodies or the toll on the ground." The absence of sound — users cannot hear the shots in the gallery — focus the images as ideologically resonant constructs. The images are conduits of detachment, constructed to position participants in the affective state of the soldier bombing targets in Iraq from a computer terminal in the United States.

Bilal's work posits involvement as an antidote for alienation. *Domestic Tension* is meant as a participatory anti-war statement. Bilal notes that he seeks "to engage audiences that are otherwise unlikely to actively participate in political or cultural discussions because they feel that these issues do not concern their everyday life."

The work's political statement ensues from a perspective of historical conditions as contingent on human actions. In interviews, Bilal relates the project to his previous oppositional artistic practices and status as a conscientious objector under Saddam's rule. He lived in Saudi Arabia's refugee camps for two years while waiting for the granting of political asylum in the United States in 1993 (he obtained a MFA degree in 2003 from the Art Institute of Chicago, where he currently teaches).

Figure 1: Virtual Jihadi

Figure 2: Domestic Tension

Bilal's confinement in a gallery and subjectification as a living target in an artwork dovetails with a tradition of endurance-based performance aimed at challenging conventional views about particular issues. Bilal's charged involvement casts trauma (Bilal's brother was accidentally killed by an American plane drone) as an entry point for countering de-humanizing perspectives about civilian war victims. At the core of these views is the term 'collateral damage,' an euphemism routinely used to refer to civilian casualties in present military, political and cultural discourses. By contextualizing personal trauma within a larger political and public context, Bilal points to the power relations implicit in these discourses.

He re-purposes the tools, spaces, and codes of the dominant orders to 'talk back.' To this end, Bilal circumvents the insularity and sedateness of a typical 'high-art' local and activates it as a site of protest by extending it to the internet. The framing of the work in the tropes of entertainment (videogames) enables a semiotic common ground with audiences conversant in mass-media representational modes, though not necessarily so with a high-art public. Similarly, the juxtaposition of real and virtual spaces in the work calls attention to these spaces as constructs, thereby potentially implicating the postulation of realism as an 'ideology-less' style by popular media as overly simplistic. Bilal's subsequent celebration as an Iraqi born digital artist (he was nominated Chicagoan of the year by the *Chicago Tribune* in 2007) further implicates popular media's spectacular portrayals of 'the other,' as either helpless or irrational, as reified representations (i.e., as hyper-real signs with no reference to 'real people').

In *Virtual Jihadi* (2008) Bilal explores the use of videogames for propaganda. For this project he appropriates an online FPS, *The Night of Bush Capturing* (2006). The game gained notoriety as an Al-Qaeda production (its goal is to capture Bush). This game is itself a mod for *Quest for Saddam* (2003), a commercial game widely praised in the US media for its subject matter — the capture of Saddam, despite of its stereotypical images of Iraqis.

Bilal's avatar appears in the game as an Al-Qaeda suicide bomber dressed in 'traditional' arab warrior garb seeking revenge for his brother's death. "This artwork," he states, "is meant to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi civilians, to the travesties of the current war, and to expose racist generalizations and profiling…games such as *Quest for Saddam* or *America's Army* promote stereotypical, singular perspectives." Bilal's intention with the piece is to expose the violence, racism, and propaganda disguised as entertainment.

The two galleries first showing the work, respectively: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) and The Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, NY, were closed down under the pressure of Campus Republicans claiming that Bilal is a threat to national security. Students, faculty, and Troy residents are rallying to reverse the school and city administrators' censorship of Bilal's work—as an exemplary TAZ their spontaneous actions are organizing themselves around the politics of the aesthetic.

As experiments Bilal's projects are the more compelling in that they perform the difficulty of re-purposing videogames for art-activism, as apparent from unintended receptions. For a significant number of participants the *Domestic Tension* game interface signaled permission to act out disturbing behaviors, and the narrative of *Virtual Jihadi* facilitated recuperation by reactionary forces. Bilal's projects thus problematize the use of videogames for activism vis-à-vis their common connotations as either infantilizing or nefarious entertainment.

References and information are omitted for brevity. Please refer to Bilal's website: <http://www.crudeoils.us/>