Serious Play:
Counter-actions and Interventional Dissent in the Game Space

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For some time now, the art-world and the video-games industry have occupied distinct spheres with a level of mutual antagonism. In 1982 Chris Crawford made the ambitious prediction that, "Eventually, games will be recognised as a serious art form."[1] Over the last decade the distinction has indeed been dislodged. Gaming is not only gaining greater credibility in and off itself, it is also becoming a site and medium for artistic practices and new forms of political art. Political art interventions within pre-existing game spaces often employ subversive tactics, what I call *counter-actions*; "To act in opposition to; to hinder, defeat or frustrate, by contrary agency or influence,"[2] to subvert through inversion. Counter-actions break with previous actions; they disrupt a previous understanding; they work literally *counter* to the play action. The play time and space of pretence becomes pierced by an element of the external world; an element which is not complicit with the legitimate state of play. As a result, when art enters the game-space as a political interloper it does not receive a warm reception. In Crawford's prediction, the term 'serious' butts against the assumed playfulness of play and through these counter-actions it is here argued that seriousness is reaffirmed in alliance with play to realise the concept of 'serious play'.

Velvet Strike: Counter Military Graffiti for CS (2002), by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon and; *Dead-in-Iraq* (2006), by Josephe DeLappe are such counter-actions. Both respond to the war on terror and contravene the propagandistic nature of military simulation games. Both involve players entering a game space with intent contrary to the play action. In *Velvet Strike* players are enabled to spray graffiti tags of counter-military messages onto the various environments of *Counter-Strike*. In *Dead-in-Iraq* DeLappe enters the streets of *Americas Army* as a 'neutral visitor'. With the user name 'Dead-in-Iraq' he takes on a counter-active stance of stillness — a sitting duck — in a space of action. He then appropriates the messaging function to type the name, age, service branch and death date of the entire service personnal who have died in Iraq to date.

In both projects these actions have a predominantly negative effect on the majority of gamers.[3] The last thing many gamers want to see garnishing their game-scape is the slogan 'Hostages in Military Fantasy'. Their irritation is evidenced in the flaming reactions; "what you're telling people to do will ruin the 'experience' for all who play and pay for the game,"[4] framing the *Velvet Strike* team, with their dissident tags, as agent provocateurs. Social commentary is an unwanted stranger to the play and for Dead-in-Iraq the player responses also testify; "Dead-in-Iraq shut the **** up!" and; "Why should we care if an American or two dies."[5] The *Velvet Strike* tags act as offensive visual pollution and *Dead-in-Iraq* is the unwanted town crier to a population who refuses to hear the news. The recruitment strategies of *Americas Army* are more easily absorbed than a political statement from a player refusing to concede to the underlying rules of the game (this is a negative alliance). Such a player is a spoilsport and treated as such — with as much disdain and/or disgust. He is repeatedly shot and his perpetual reincarnation — like the structural repetition of trauma itself, stands in stark contrast to the reality of death which he is calling attention to. These counter-actions threaten the 'sense of carefree pleasure', inconsequentiality and freedom from moral responsibility, by the inclusion of content which runs in a contrary direction to the immediacy and continuity of the gameplay (serious play). *Velvet Strike* is a reference to the 1989 'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia; in which the communist government was peacefully overthrown. The point of this project and *Dead-in-Iraq* is not so much to 'overthrow' the genre, but to gently intervene and surreptitiously subvert the ideologies of virtual combat and their increasing convergence with realism.

Counter-actions establish the game-space as a public arena that holds the potential for alternate meanings to be generated. In this case they draw attention to a global climate of increased militarism hinging on the war on terror. Through such strategies a glitch occurs in the continuous space-time of the game that jolts the player

to a zone unfamiliar to that of play. In optimal terms this 'zone' is a 'think-space', as described by Lee Shuen-shing.[6] However, even though the already converted nod in approval, thought may be negated — as players curse in anger. While the tags of *Velvet Strike* and memoir of Delappe ferment discontent and accusations of 'ruin', they endeavour to act as a deconstruction of the fantasies at play within the militaristic context. To an extent they succeed, they turn the medium upon itself, holding a mirror up to its ideological aspects and all-too-real pretence. Their actions draw the art and game spaces closer together despite the critical risk of the alienation of the indigenous data-inhabitants. Tiffany Holmes argues that the art game "challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner."[7] Counter-actions such as *Velvet Strike* and *Dead-in-Iraq* focus on the former of these capabilities; mobilising seriousness in play to enable alternate and most significantly dissident voices to be heard within *Americas Army* and *Counter-Strike*. In such projects space is created for the emergence of a difference within the repetition, homogeneity and precession of stereotypes characteristic of the majority out-put. They comprise a valuable counter-aesthetic to the dominant ideological drive of the mass-market gaming industry. Successful or not, they provide an antidote to this ideology, as well as an alternate means of communicating serious issues and provoking thought and debate at the nexus between the real-world and the language of play.

1   Crawford, Chris. 1982. *The Art of Computer Game Design.* http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Chapter7.html#The%20Flowering%20of

2   Porter, Noah (ed). 1913. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary.* "counteract". http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/counteract

3   While contemporary art curators are pleased.

4   Anon. *Flamer Gallery.* http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/mailgallery.html

5   Screenshots. *Dead in Iraq*; http://www.unr.edu/art/DELAPPE/Gaming/Dead_In_Iraq/dead_in_iraq%20JPEGS.html

6   Shuen-shing, Lee. Dec 2003. "I Lose, Therefore I Think: A Search for Contemplation amid Wars of Push-Button Glare." In *Game Studies: the International Journal of Computer Game Research* 3 (2). http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/lee/

7   Holmes Tiffany. 2003. "Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre." In *Proceedings of the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference.* Melbourne: RMIT University, p.59.

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Velvet Strike website; http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/recipes.html