

History of Artist-Gamemaking: The Art of Tomorrow - Selectparks.net “artists exploring computer games as an emerging, artistic medium”

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ABSTRACT

“Takeover: who’s doing the art of tomorrow” was the theme of 2001’s Ars Electronica Europe’s largest festival for electronic art. In their curatorial statement directors Gerfried Stoker and Christine Schöpf explain that the “the art of tomorrow will be done by the engineers of experience in their workshops of world -invention and world-creation”. (Stocker and Schöpf 2001). Declaring that the new territories of the avant-garde are to be found in the technological transformations being rent by the internet and videogames. Withdrawal to noble minded posturing about fine art will not the warn prevent this media takeover stating; “The inertia of traditional art institutions and the increasing privatization of the funding of art are reinforcing the trend among a young generation of artists to establish their own platforms, collaborative undertakings and business models, whereby the ongoing brain drain into the media and advertising industries threatens to soon leave the art world behind as a ghost town”(2001).

This paper examines the work of Selectparks a collective of Australian Artists whose work embraced the potential of videogames at the beginning of the century. Central to their activities was the creation of selectparks.net a website that formed a hub for artistic experimentation with videogames. Selectparks.net was established in 1998 by Julian Oliver artist and critical engineer who in 1999 invited artist curator Rebecca Cannon to help develop the site as a resource dedicated to artists exploring videogames as an emerging art medium. Oliver’s fascination for software as a medium and advocacy for open-source software underpinned the sites principles of sharing of tools and resources. Cannon grew the site as an art game and archiving project.

Online, the traditional art world gatekeeping could be circumnavigated and new areas for creative practice could be explored. More agile, more niche-focused in their fields of endeavour and able to draw on the combined knowledge of globally diverse communities, the rise of critically vibrant online sites challenged existing institutional authority and blurred institutional boundaries (Lichty 2002; Paul 2007; Schleiner 2003). Selectparks.net featured news, exhibitions, artworks, tools and theory relating

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to the practice of artistic computer game modification and development. It existed as a virtual online organization created by artists interested in games and game technologies to support a new area of creative practice before there was any sustained institutional interest in this work. It featured an exciting mix of work produced by artists, gamers and industry and like many of these early online groups it did not lack sophistication: Whitney Museum curator of digital art Christiane Paul conceding in this era: "It is not unusual that the websites of non-profit organisations are better designed, more comprehensive and technologically more sophisticated than a museum's site"(Paul 2006).

This historical research is focused on a period of design and experimentation before the availability of engines such as Unity and rise of digital distribution transformed levels of access to gamemaking and sharing. These changes not only fostered a further blurring of the fields of artistic gamemaking and art making but shifted the culture further beyond the conventions and institutions of the art world.

Drawing on interviews with creators and curators Julian Oliver and Rebecca Cannon accompanied by an examination of the website - the scene and artwork it profiled - this paper examines the historical significance of Selectparks.net (1998-2008). It explores a historical moment when games and art found themselves meeting at a crossroads offering it as a prehistory to the contemporary artistic gamemaking.

This work in progress forms part of a larger research project into artistic practice in Australian gamemaking. This larger research agenda investigates the cultural and economic importance of 'artist-gamemaking'. Recognising that that role of artistic practice, experimentation, and community collaboration have remained relatively unexplored in game development research to date, due to its limited and economically reductive approaches to understanding the videogame industry. Selectparks.net is an important historical document of experimentation from the 2000s by a community of artists, hobbyist gamemakers and industry insiders. It reveals how this community was having dynamic conversations of the artistic potential of videogames in counterpoint to the increasing formalisation of the global games industry.

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