



Breaking

the game

THE VIRTUAL WORLDS OF WORKSPACE UNLIMITED

On the periphery of a multi-billion dollar global computer gaming industry exists an emerging group of impassioned artists, architects, filmmakers, and game enthusiasts who mine, recycle, and modify off-the-shelf videogames and multiplayer virtual worlds with unexpected and sometimes extraordinary results. Conflating the practices of consuming and producing in sometimes-uneasy ways, they exploit the tools, software code, graphics, and even the programming errors of the most popular videogames to fashion new cinematic forms (Machinima), soundscapes, interactive performances, talk show formats, and art installations.

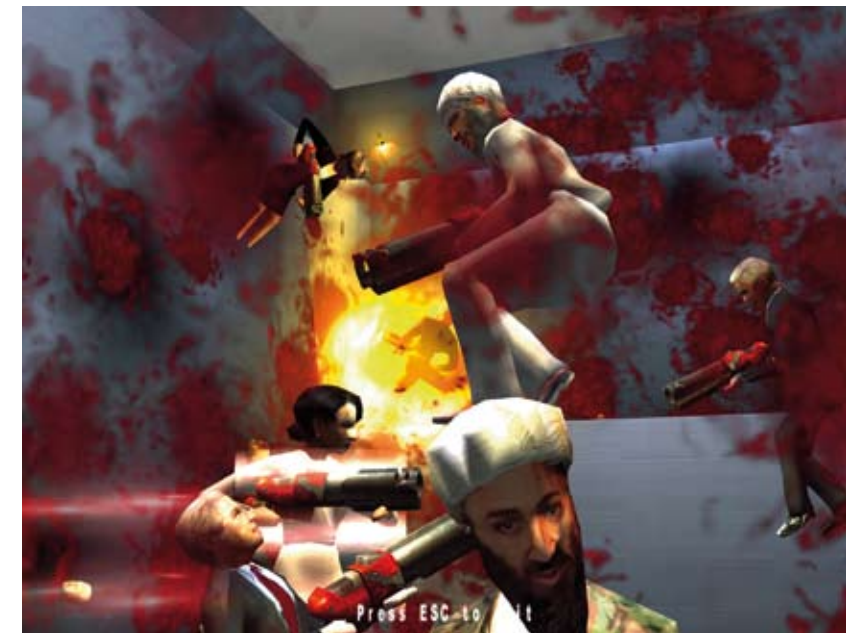
Text by Wayne Ashley, screen Captures and Photos by Thomas Soetens and Kora Van den Bulcke

Workspace Unlimited, a Belgian/Canadian artist collective founded in 2001 by artist Thomas Soetens and architect Kora Van den Bulcke, has been at the forefront of parallel gaming explorations, producing some of the most complex networked virtual worlds in collaboration with an international cadre of cultural institutions, curators, designers, and software engineers. This move to enlarge and amplify its work beyond the boundaries of any circumscribed aesthetic object is part of a larger cultural shift, which for the past four or five decades has aimed at slowly de-materializing the object in favor of process, knowledge and experience, and has been a crucial strategy in the collective's success.

NEW PUBLIC DOMAINS

This shift mirrors both artists' careers. Van den Bulcke left the more traditional practice of architecture, while Soetens gave up a promising career in painting. And though both are conceptually engaged with the materiality of architectural space and urban life, their creative output focuses on the production of electronic 3D interfaces that activate a field of relations-between things, people, buildings, institutions, and the larger environment. For the last five years they have been developing diverse strategies of articulating the new public domains that connect physical urban spaces and the potential public sphere of the electronic networks. What kinds of aesthetic experiences, social networks, and perceptual fields can we create by combining the technologies of information, simulation and physical space? What are the challenges of building multiplayer virtual environments that function as public spaces? What forms might these take? Should the design of these spaces mimic, extend, or parallel the physical world, or be entirely fictional, abstract, or phantasmagoric?

Unlike the game spaces we are accustomed to inhabiting—the gothic, medieval, and futuristic settings of Quake, the surrealistic puzzle worlds of Myst, or the fantasy islands of Warcraft, Workspace Unlimited's



Opposite page:
Diplomatic Arena Tier III, pre-emptive killing in slow motion and no gravity. © Workspace Unlimited, 2003

This page:
Diplomatic Arena Tier I, First of the three deafening and visually bloody tiers depicting the ethical bankruptcy of pre-emptive killing. © Workspace Unlimited, 2002

digital worlds are conceptually tied to and physically installed in real places: EXTENSION (2002) at the Society for Art and Technology in Montreal, DEVMAP (2004) at V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media in Rotterdam, and IMPLANT (2006) at the Art Nouveau building of Vooruit, a performance venue in Ghent, Belgium. Soetens and Van den Bulcke construct each online world by reprogramming and modifying the popular game Quake III, a multiplayer first-person shooter, which allows its users to employ the game's central software engine, change its graphics, sound, animations, and interactive possibilities. The worlds are linked together via broadband Internet connection, special servers, software, and protocols to create a networked social and public space for artistic expression and social exchange. Navigating with a mouse, keyboard, and projected onto various surfaces, visitors in each location together explore a complex, dynamic and continuous combination of many points, spaces and dimensions.



Top, left:
Devmap, 'Theater of subjectivity'
© Workspace Unlimited, 2004

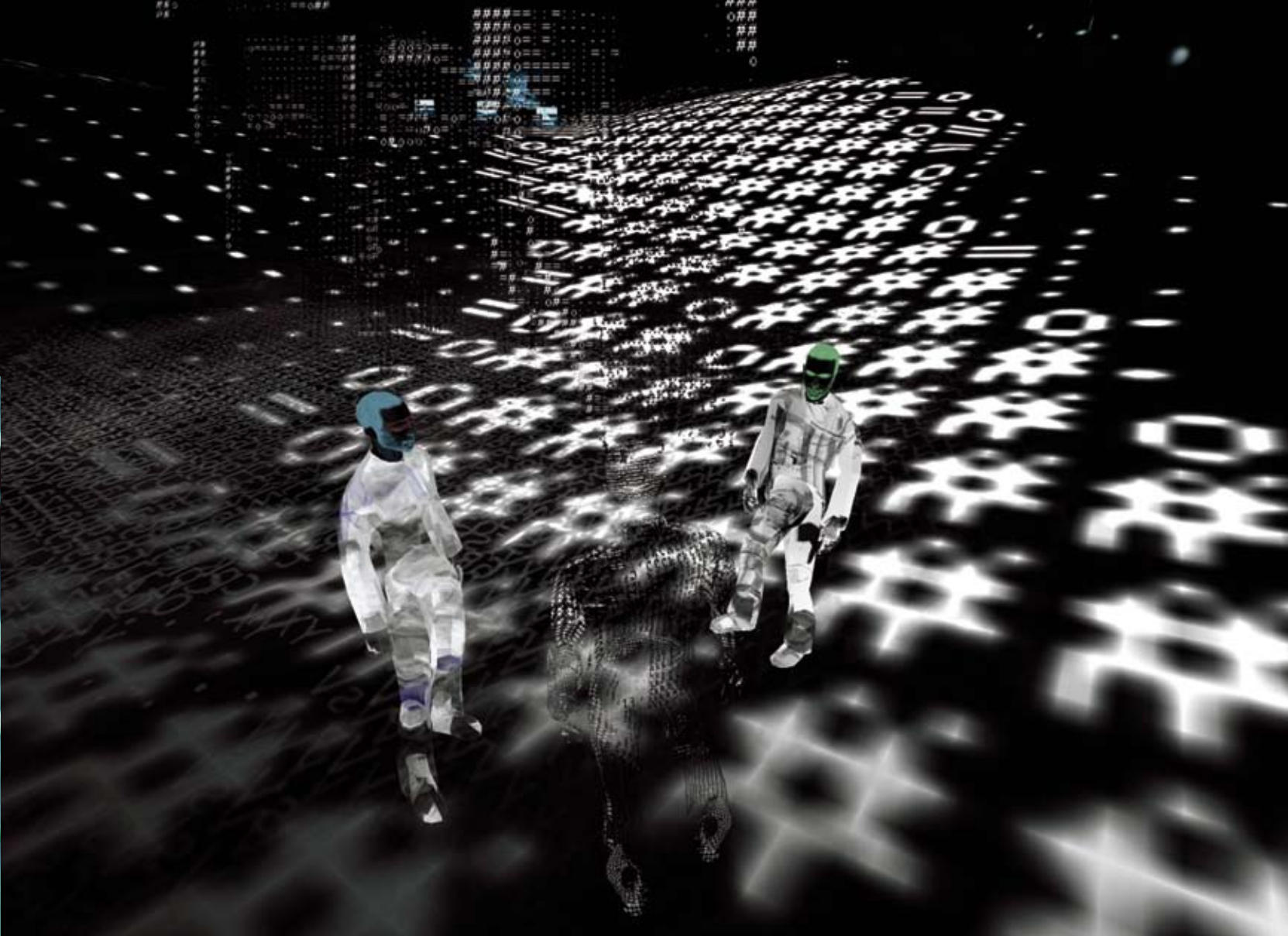
Top, right:
Devmap, visitor in front of a projection at the DEAF04 festival navigating a virtual character.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2004

FUTILE SELF-DESTRUCTION

In EXTENSION (2003), Soetens and Van den Bulcke built an online virtual architectural extension ‘on top of’ the Society for Art and Technology (SAT), which they installed on computers inside the rather unremarkable building located in the cultural centre of Montreal. Visitors inside the SAT, together with a networked public from Rotterdam and Ghent, first accessed EXTENSION by entering a digital replica of the building's ground floor lobby, and were then transported via a fictional elevator to a dazzling virtual glass and steel Zeppelin-like addition. Once inside the extension, users explored a number of interactive digital art installations created with the Quake III gaming engine: Storyscape, a non-linear 3D navigable story whose text and meanings literally distort and shift in response to user's movements; Blind Love, an actual game that requires two people to cooperatively find their way out of a darkened labyrinth. And Infinite 60 Seconds, a dynamic and generative soundscape based on a 60 second recording of a watch. One of most disturbing installations, Diplomatic Arena, consisted of three deafening and visually bloody levels depicting the ethical bankruptcy of pre-emptive killing. Soetens and Van den Bulcke programmed a number of computer-controlled 3D players or ‘bots’ representing political figures in the media spectacle on terrorism to engage in an endless horrific cycle of futile self-destruction. Each time a bot killed another bot, it was immediately resurrected into the same never-ending cycle of retribution. Soetens and Van den Bulcke challenged us to consider how a real building might have an ongoing relationship to its networked and virtual double. They suggest the virtual extension exist simultaneously as a functioning addition to the actual building's artistic programming and values, offering a new networked public temporally simultaneous activities in spatially discontinuous locations.

A POETIC MEMORY

Whereas issues of space and location were central to EXTENSION, it was time that was critical to DEVMAP, a work commissioned by the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival (DEAF) in 2004. DEAF is a biennial



international and interdisciplinary festival organized by V2_ in Rotterdam. In this work the artists asked how a temporary media art festival might be re-coded as a constantly expanding, spatially indeterminate environment influenced and shaped by users' individual paths through real time data. Soetens and Van den Bulcke did not attempt to document the festival, nor try to re-produce it for a remote audience. Instead, DEVMAP produced a poetic memory of the event, full of lapses, mutations, and shifting juxtapositions, a living archive of the event that was fed back to each festival participant as a unique individually created experience. During the festival, a team of technicians captured live webcam images of the events, broadcast streams, interviews with artists, online webgrabs, and reports as they occurred in real time. These were instantly ported to a computer where a modified Quake III game engine continuously retrieved, remixed, and morphed the data, which could be accessed online by participants at the festival or by remote visitors in Montreal and Ghent. As members of an online public moved their avatars through the environment, and choose particular paths to explore, the software responded by transforming and manipulating the data into a constantly morphing fluid virtual world. Moreover, the itinerant paths that users created through this vast dataspace were literally mapped onto their avatar's skins, communicating to others where they've been and what data they've encountered. And where designers of most virtual worlds take pains to create visual stability and consistency so that users see and act upon the same visual cues over time, Workspace undermined this, serving up different versions of the data to each user. So while two visitors may actually see each other's avatars, chat together and be in the same virtual space, the realities they see and hear are completely different, thus simultaneously experiencing unique parallel realities.

TRANSMITTABLE ARCHITECTURE

IMPLANT is the collective's latest work, and is both a networked interactive virtual world and an installation physically situated in the magnificent Art Nouveau building of Vooruit. Similar to EXTENSION, the

Devmap, 'While visitors may see each other's avatars, chat together and be in the same space, the realities they each see and hear are completely different.'
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Top, from left to right:
Extension; online virtual architectural extension -on top of- the Society for Art & Technology in Montreal.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2003
Extension; how a real building might have an ongoing relationship to its networked and virtual double.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2003
Extension; users explore a number of interactive digital art installations created with the Quake III gaming engine.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2003

Above, from left to right:
Implant; re-imagining Vooruit as transmittable architecture, an ongoing and revisable place that does not adhere to our ordinary understanding of physics, nor to the continuities of space and time.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2006
Implant; this architecture is full of perceptual incongruities virtual cameras that allow us to secretly follow other visitors, and project their journeys and activities onto walls in front of us; or we might even walk through the projection and find ourselves together with them in a new space.
© Workspace Unlimited, 2006

artists create a digital 3D version of the entire building and its surrounding environs. Visitors can access and navigate this simulated building on computers from inside Vooruit and simultaneously from the Society for Art and Technology in Montreal, and V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media in Rotterdam. In this way Soetens and Van den Bulke exercise their most compelling gesture: re-imagining Vooruit as transmittable architecture, an ongoing and revisable place that does not adhere to our ordinary understanding of physics, nor to the continuities of space and time. Once logged into one of the locations within the network, visitors explore two co-existing architectures. The first is a sumptuous simulation of the physical Vooruit, a large complex maze of theatre spaces, cafes, meeting rooms, and offices which can be traversed in much the same way we move through physical space—walking upstairs, through doors, down corridors, around corners, inside and out. The second is a hidden hyper-linked architecture that emerges as users interact with the simulation’s various walls and ceilings. This architecture is full of perceptual incongruities and complex dimensions - portals that transport us immediately to continuously shifting destinations within Vooruit according to the position of the visitor; virtual cameras that allow us to secretly follow other visitors, and project their journeys and activities onto walls in front of us.

BREAKING DOWN OPPOSITIONS

Outside on the real street, passersby peer into Vooruit’s glass lobby only to see a projected simulation of the same lobby seamlessly integrated within Vooruit’s façade. Instead of seeing the usual theatergoers purchasing tickets and socialising with friends, viewers observe the goings-on of avatars, real-time graphical representations of actual people in Vooruit co-mingling and exploring the same simulated space with their counterparts in Montreal and Rotterdam. A web cam outside Vooruit captures the scene on the street, projecting the performances of everyday life back into the virtual world for those inside Vooruit, V2_ and SAT to witness. The effect is dizzying as the borders between inside and outside the virtual world become unclear, and who is performing for whom confused. The longer visitors explore IMPLANT, the more layers they encounter. Embedded throughout the virtual world and triggered at various moments users encounter video and sound documentation from a recent online symposium called Breaking the Game. The symposium brought together an international group of competing theorists and practitioners to debate and reflect on virtual worlds, information technologies, and new possibilities for artistic practice and experience. Workspace Unlimited is interested in breaking down oppositions between practice and theory, and seeks to explore creative ways of making virtual worlds that are simultaneously intellectual and poetic, hallucinatory and sensual. #

www.workspace-unlimited.org

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