

Doom II

## It's Just Like Art: Computer, Class and Cultural Positioning

### INTRODUCTION

... the definition of art, and through it the art of living, is an object of struggle among the classes.  
Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture" (1980).

... the practical guidelines that we will all develop in [electronic media] are unlikely to be much use if they are based exclusively in either the norms of the popular arts or the norms of the canon alone: only some as yet undreamt-of mixture of the two is likely to do the job.

Jeffrey Palmer, "'Popular' Culture and 'High' Culture : The Question of Value." (1994).

A theory of hierarchical culture, ranging from "low" art and popular culture to the "high" art of avant-garde galleries, museums, and theatres has been proposed by different writers with various mechanisms to explain its operation and purpose. Probably the most rigorously materialistic of these theories is that of the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, cultural hierarchies are defined by and help maintain social hierarchies expressed through class divisions and rivalries correlating economic capital with cultural capital but without reducing one to the other. Each social class is characterized by a set of cultural "competencies," a set of intellectual skills and sensibilities acquired through social background and educational environment and expressed through "taste." These competencies distinguish the dominant classes through exercise of their superior "taste" and pursuit of specialized "high art" cultural interests.

Social divisions are theorized as supporting and being legitimated by cultural practices hierarchically organized into those more "serious" and "elevated" and those more "vulgar" and "mindless." The dominant classes maintain their position of superiority by their economic ability to invest time and money in the education and participation required to further refine their cultural pursuits and ensure that they are always sufficiently different to distinguish them from those of the "lower" classes. For Bourdieu, the particular cultural values a class espouses are completely arbitrary and indefensible (apart from the task of maintaining the cultural hierarchy). Thus far then, we are left with a situation in which different social groups are

aligned with their different cultural interests, none of which has any intrinsic value over any other. Although this means that the cultural values of the dominant class are purely "ideological" and have no real superiority to those of popular culture, this position also means that we are left with no basis on which to propose an alternative culture or set of aesthetic values. The classic problems of this radical relativism leave us mute when trying either to explain the development of a particular art form, or how for instance, a new art practice such as that of electronic media could evolve under such conditions. But Bourdieu's materialistic reasoning actually takes us one bizarre step further in describing this organization of cultural power.

The only creative movement of the cultural intellectuals of Bourdieu's dominant class is in internal rivalries generated by promoting the interests of each others' cultural fields, and in further distancing and elevating the taste of their own class above that of lower classes. The chief way of ensuring their exclusivity is simply to increase the difficulty of acquiring the cultural competencies necessary for the exercise of taste, to increase the investment needed in education, experience and social background. Any cultural competencies which require no particular effort to gain, are in a sense easy or "natural" and are therefore not valued and considered to be "barbarous" taste. Dominant cultural values which are comparatively educated, sophisticated and rational are placed in direct contrast to popular culture which are easy, immediate and sensual. So from our starting point based on empirical sociological data we have arrived at a dialectic which implicitly divides cultural competencies between a "natural" state of sensation and simple pleasures and a highly contrived aesthetic of critical intellectual contemplation. Although for Bourdieu these particular sets of values are still meaningless in themselves, this opposition is necessary in his theory of symbolic power to explain the mechanism behind how aesthetic codes are constructed. It would not now be difficult to find examples of artworks that seemed to have properties of both "high" and "low" culture so defined (though the theory is used to explain various conflicts and preferences), but there are areas in the development of electronic media forms where such a contrast of values seems to relate to problems in the cultural positioning of these new practices.



Xaos Software, *Wet Science*,

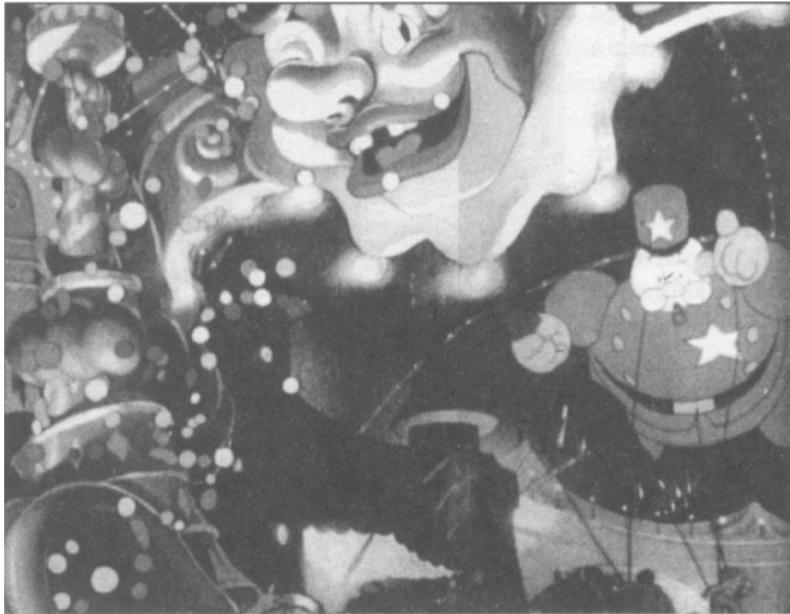
SCREEN GRAB

#### "PURE" FORM AND "BARBAROUS" TASTE

Formal experiment which, in literature or the theatre, leads to obscurity is . . . one sign of what is sometimes felt to be a desire to keep the uninitiated at arms length ...  
Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture" (1980).

A high degree of formal experimentation was encouraged by the nature of music videos: they had to catch hold of the viewer's attention . . . Naturally, the traditional filmic devices of mainstream and avant-garde cinema were available to promo directors, ... but they lacked novelty value. New forms of image technology were to supply the answer.  
John A. Walker, *Cross-Overs* (1987).

In his descriptions of the "popular aesthetic," all formal and experimental aesthetic devices and a desire to anchor any artifact such as an image to a specific "content" or use value. Taking a photograph of a wounded man, for example, the working class respondents to his surveys are concerned with the properties and traits of the particular man depicted and the likelihood of his situation . Middle class aesthetes on the other hand are attracted to stylistic properties of the picture itself. Responses from working class participants tend to refer to



Disney Studios, *Pinocchio*,

FRAME ENLARGEMENT

the possible function of the picture, to an "appreciation of informative, tangible or moral interest." These observations are extended to explain the popularity of narrative forms in which the working class can enter into a participatory enjoyment in a social world that they recognize. Thus far we have had constructed a popular aesthetic that appears to be a kind of utilitarian attitude to culture com-

bined with a demand for a participatory social realism. Despite the problems in defining what is meant by a particular "realist" narrative form

and how it operates, Bourdieu does not at first have any trouble in ignoring a consideration of the ideological function of representation and in reconciling his claim that a popular culture must be immediately accessible to be able to provide the base line from which a high culture can separate itself. Bourdieu maintains that the working class dislikes any formal experimentation in cultural forms, whether it is in television variety shows or the stylistic devices developed in high art circles. But at other points he refers to the base line popular aesthetic as being one of "pure and simple animality, to palpable pleasure and sensual desire." Bourdieu's desire seems to be to identify this immediate emotional and sensual response to texts with that of emphatic narrative identification, but we could also easily argue that such a "primitive" response was equally appropriate to "pure forms" and patterns, such as those of the wallpaper, carpets and textiles that adorn working class homes every-where. The only time that Bourdieu credits a quality of the image in itself is when he notices that sometimes working class people cite color as able to render an otherwise "pointless" image attractive. This apparent contradiction is partly explained by Bourdieu himself when in one passage he states that "The department store is, in a sense, the poor man's gallery . . . because, there, people do not feel themselves measured against transcendent norms, i.e., the principles of the life-style of a supposedly higher class, but feel free to judge freely, in the name of the legitimate arbitrariness of tastes and colors."

It is not, then, the pictorial delights of images that the general public refuses, but the artistic context in which they are sometimes obliged to pay homage to them. This would explain the acceptance of vivid stylistic experiments in TV programming, music videos, advertising and youth culture. As long as they are not aligned with the cultural interests of high art, such graphic devices can be enjoyed for their sheer visual energy. It would also address the popularity of the novel experiments in digital imagery, startling in their visual stridency but estranged from traditional practices and often criticized by cultural commentators both for their lack of artistry and their lack of "content."

Animation has often been considered as special by film theorists for its distance from any necessary link with social narrative caused by the absence of live action recording and freedom of formal invention. Unlike conventional cinema which seeks to efface the means by which it appears "realistic"—its stage setting, editing, cinematography, etc.—animation actively draws attention to its technical means and molds it into a stylistic device. Endlessly formally inventive, animation remains one of the most popular filmic arts, albeit normally relegated to children's cartoons. In the earlier days of cinema and particularly when the Disney studios were just maturing their later style, animations were universally popular to the extent that they were also routinely enjoyed in cinemas by aesthetes from the highest levels of the art world. As described by theorists such as Michael O'Pray,<sup>5</sup> some filmmakers of the time such as Sergei Eisenstein tried to explain this seemingly irresistible appeal by referring to Disney's consummate ability to make all the cartoon characters movements "lifelike" purely through a fluidity of motion, a perfected series of seamless transformations. He referred to this quality as the "protoplasmic," because it seemed to appeal to a psychological recognition of the creation and dissipation of

organic forms and energies, the "omnipotence of plasma which contains in 'liquid' form all possibilities of future species and forms." Although this sounds very metaphysical, O'Pray explains the same effect using Freud's concept of the omnipotence of thought—our desire for an all-powerfulness expressed through a supreme control and virtuosity of forms, as seen in the best Disney animation of the time. When observing the popularity of recent special effects films like *Terminator 2* or even the otherwise mediocre *Lawnmower Man*, it is not difficult to see that their computer animated sequences have managed to combine all the qualities of "protoplasmic" imagery—the "full-frame" metamorphoses and strident kaleidoscopic graphics that are all the more extreme for their claims to portray events "realistically." Special effects computer animation seems to have become the pinnacle of pure formal experimentation, "images beyond imagination," expressed as pure visual technology—captivating and ephemeral.

Electronic media has rendered formal innovation in art trivial by reducing it to a matter of selecting from a series of command options. Bourdieu argues that this is all that the basis of taste is, a set of fundamentally arbitrary decisions about surface effect drawn from a plurality of possibilities. The computer makes this selection explicit, accessible and levelled out into a problem of pure information processing, a displacement of the ideology of representation onto another level entirely. It is as though the drive towards aesthetic creativity has gone out of control, going beyond a poetic purpose and expressing nothing but pure technical agency. It is difficult under these circumstances for art commentators to accept these developments, as popular culture becomes the center of the most unrestrained manipulations of the image surface in an appreciation of the protoplasmic quality of organic libidinal energy. The engine of change is no longer fashion, but is a structural property of media itself. The omnipotence of thought reflected through the omnipotence of technology as pure sensation.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to position new media practices within the cultural spaces of galleries, publications, conferences, or popular entertainments, with so many different interests at work. Electronic media are too new to have a readily defined place in the cultural hierarchy and typically show the traces of many genres in their production, partaking of aspects of both high art and popular culture. As new producers emerge, their greatest challenge is the formation of new audiences, spaces, and support structures. How the forces of cultural hegemony react to these new players will be crucial in defining what is possible and where, far more than their technical facilitation. The need to develop new forms of expression should lead to pressure to combine various traits of both high and low and to overcome their distinctions. But as aesthetic standards are disrupted there are many instances in which new forms of legitimation are emerging, leading to the prospect of certain technologies and practices being declared "artistic" at the expense of others. I will now briefly examine two examples showing how some of these issues are being worked out today.

#### ONLY THE INNOCENT UNDERSTAND TECHNOLOGY

As well as an endless array of new graphic devices, electronic media has extended the range of cultural sites at which its manifestations can be experienced. For Bourdieu the ideal place to reinforce the aesthetic distinction of high art is in the museum where the most ordinary object is elevated to the level of refined contemplation. Electronic media on the other hand has produced a range of eclectic sites in which hybrid combinations of academic research, commercial products, and artistic experiments come together and are questioned from a variety of different perspectives.

In the summer of 1993 two large art shows based on digital and interactive media opened in the United States, similar in content and intentions, but moving in very different directions with regards to the future of how to locate electronic media work. The first year of the MONTAGE '93 show attempted to eclipse all other media festivals in one go by offering such a huge program of exhibitions, film and video shows, seminars, lectures and expositions. One of the largest exhibits was Iterations: The New Image, a show of electronic and interactive installations along with some digital photography, curated by Tim Druckrey and Charles Stainback from the International Center of Photography in New York City. At the very same time on the other side of the continent, SIGGRAPH '93, the world's largest computer graphics conference, saw the opening of Machine Culture, its first curated art show dedicated to interactive media art. Although SIG-GRAPH has featured a juried art show since 1981, its relationship to the many other events, such as presentations of the latest scientific research, courses,

trade shows and technology exhibits has resulted in its remaining low on the list of priorities. This year the art show chair Simon Penny, an electronic sculptor, with his assistant Harry Fozzard, took on the task of fashioning a coherent and artistically credible exhibition that could withstand the concentrated onslaught of over 35,000 conference attendees over five days—an audience ranging from scientists to sales reps to art critics.

Both shows attempted something new in their different ways. Both wanted to try to advance the reputation of art produced using electronic means and to bring it into the mainstream Avant Garde. In this respect, the *Iterations* show was best placed to promote this kind of work to the art world. The Memorial Art Gallery gave all the pieces plenty of space to perform, and its serene calm provided the kind of respectful atmosphere required. But a big factor in SIGGRAPH's favor is its unique position in being able to resource such a massive under-taking as *Machine Culture*, with its incredible total of thirty computer based installations. As Simon Penny<sup>o</sup> states in the show's catalogue, "SIGGRAPH is perhaps the only place that such an event could occur, as it gathers both the technology and the goodwill of the makers of these technologies." Certainly, this is a constant problem for gallery based exhibitions such as *Iterations* that require fast graphics workstations for artists' use. All in all, a staggering two million dollars in loaned hardware was negotiated for the use of the *Machine Culture* show.

But the most important difference was how the two shows negotiated their very dissimilar audiences and situation, especially *Machine Culture*. Many artists and critics already come to SIGGRAPH just to keep up with the latest technological developments, renew contacts or even look for jobs. With the lack of a regular media arts festival in the US this yearly event has been the nearest equivalent on home soil. But this audience forms only a minority among the thousands of computer graphics production companies, vendors, research scientists, engineers and consultants. It was to these people, very unlike the usual arts-going public, that *Machine Culture* would also have to prove itself. For this reason, the work in the show had to be able to engage its audience at an immediate level before anything else, to be able to present a clear opening to its audience on how it is to be approached. The result gave an indication of the possibility of a how a different kind of art event could be made to work.

To answer the problem of how to find an audience for electronic art we have to recognize the fact that such media derives its "mode of address" from many elements of popular media and entertainments rather than those defined within the usual art formats. For non-art audiences that are familiar with technological media through their regular pastimes, its status as art is not problematized in the sense of opposing it to commercial artifacts—they are all part of the same media landscape. This can provide them with a route into "serious" or otherwise provocative pieces, whose qualities are often obscured for a traditional art audience repelled by their technological implementation associated with "non-serious" popular media. But if both art and media are using the same means and are appealing to similar audiences, then how do they now differentiate themselves?

Apart from the academic events and the trade show, there were two other exhibitions at SIGGRAPH apart from *Machine Culture*—*Designing Technology* and *Tomorrow's Realities*, of which the later was an exhibition of new interactive media technologies. The theme of *Machine Culture* was interactive media as well, in particular the exploration of innovations in interactivity as artistic projects presumably in such a way as to overcome the content/technology dichotomy. *Tomorrow's Realities* had in its stated remit to address "social, economic, cultural and political implications" (although how it intended to accomplish this gargantuan task was not clear), and *Machine Culture's* main aim was to explore the "nature of interaction and the interactive interface." There was a sliding scale between the corporate research groups of *Tomorrow's Realities* with their networked flight simulators and the lone artists with their idiosyncratic installations, and this was reflected by the lack of demarcation between exhibition spaces. Both *Tomorrow's Realities* and *Machine Culture* exhibited single independent producers with conceptually multi-layered pieces, but *Machine Culture* just had more of them. Many of *Tomorrow's Realities* exhibitors regretted not being accepted for *Machine Culture*, the implication being that they desired the certain status that they perceived the art show could bestow upon them. But due to the interchangeability of some of the works, the most significant difference between the two shows was the change of

context in which the *Machine Culture* works were to be encountered. It is true that some artists were primarily presenting systems that were designed for future commercial markets. Sometimes this is just because the custom built systems they need are not already available domestically. But for those whose work is ultimately transferable to a standard commercial platform these are irresistible temptations that fuel their future ambitions. In this way some artists' work assumes the role of "blue-sky" research just waiting for the right sponsor to reach its full fruition.

In *Machine Culture* then, the artist appears resolutely as the "maverick" researcher that artist Jim Pomeroy once asserted, a bit like a contemporary figure to replace the lone scientist struggling to perfect his invention that was such an important part of prewar science fiction. But is this artist a true gunfighter living on both sides of the law or merely a forced outsider just waiting for the day when his or her work will be noticed, and rewarded with a corporate research consultancy? Some are eager to be recuperated into the commercial mainstream, flattered by the acceptance of their ideas by the industrial and scientific establishment. Others stay with the traditional avant-garde role of the artist as an oblique commentator through the technology they employ, accepting their function to produce work for the discursive spaces allotted to them by the art-world. And for others still, their efforts will find a place operating in the new cultural spaces opened up by their choice of media, from the rock concert scale performances of Survival Research Labs to an audience composed of uncountable nodes in a net-work designed to distribute multi-layered documents growing in virtual spaces. But for most it will probably be a little of all of these as their lives become a process of continual negotiation for opportunities and identities.

After visiting the stalls of the industry floor to examine newly released products, after listening to presentations of the latest research directions and viewing numerous commercial showreels, attendees would trace their way through *Tomorrow's Realities* and *Designing Technology* to *Machine Culture*, where they would recognize much of the same devices and techniques they had just been evaluating but now used for very different purposes. The effect was to change the perspective of both industry and arts attendees, to see a media arts practice as situated between the realms of commerce, science, and popular culture. Visitors would queue up to "have a go on" the exhibits, their approach derived from a background of gaming pursuits rather than the art museum. Nonetheless, the difference between exploring the cultural implications and aesthetics of interactive techniques themselves, and the value of making a coherent narrative or personal statement was still clear when compared with the intentions of the *Tomorrow's Realities* exhibits. With the help of just a few meters of heavy black drapes, partitions were created in which electronic sculptures like the swaying tubes of Louis-Philippe Demers and Bill Vorn's *Espace Vectoriel*

could sing and flay about to the fascination of audiences. At the other end of the room was a restaging of Agnes Hegedus's *Handsight*, a quieter piece about the eye's penetration into symbolic spaces which survived and indeed thrived in the manic activity on the SIGGRAPH floor, almost by its very contrast. Even very whimsical pieces like the Australian Ian Haig's *Hack* installation (an attempt to "hack" together elements drawn from popular games, comic books and video art) made it apparent how far both computer conferences and art exhibitions fall short in reminding us of the stimulus that electronic media receives from popular cultural forms. Can "serious" issues still be addressed in this kind of environment? If by "serious" we mean the pursuit of certain specialized aesthetics, then the answer is probably "no." A demanding long term reading of a work like Grahame Weinbren's interactive cinema installations would not be possible in a space like this, especially in the open plan unpartitioned areas of the show. Works that came from a more video arts background like Victoria Vesna's *Another Day in Paradise* suffered from the continual interruptions and swarms of people. But if by "serious" we mean capable of prompting just some kind of critical reflection, then it would seem that the answer is a conditional "yes." Certainly even just the juxtaposition of works by artists with works for industrial applications in other parts of the conference proved able to provide an enlightening context for their themes. By comparing the approaches taken by these independents when building their own media, one is more able to decipher the concerns and implications behind the development of more commercial products, and where their intentions might converge as they have done in the past. Otherwise this show was evidence that an unusually wide range of art works can prosper when they are released from the captive safety of the gallery into a traditionally hostile environment.

As well as its vulgar derivations from commercial mass media, a constant impediment to a regular art world's appreciation of electronic art is the level of technological literacy associated with it. Although it is naively assumed that the "content" of a work can be apprehended independently of its embodiment, the mysterious functioning of digital processes cannot be prevented from growing into a barrier of bewilderment and alienation for the uninitiated. It was no doubt this that accounted for some of the reluctance of the invited critics and curators to engage with the work in a receptive frame of mind. As if to caricature this condition, one of the most



Gregory Barsamian, *Putti* (1993) installation detail

PHOTO COURTESY THE ARTIST

confronted with the latest abilities of computer media.

In *Persistence of Vision*, prior knowledge of the medium does not de-simulate the event and the piece retains its magic. In similar works like the computer phrenakistiscopes of Toshio Iwai the technology is less accessible, but this is compensated for by their immediate toy-like appeal. This example gives us an idea of what the experience of computer media should be like in a world of comparable computer literacy to make the technology transparent, or if not then at least the humility needed to negate the feeling of technological incomprehension. For some cultural thinkers, the willingness to adopt Eisenstein's "childlike primitiveness" and acceptance of things at face value means an infantilization rather than an ability to give oneself up to the play, exploration and openness that the high art museums always claimed a brutish public dieting on mass media would never have the sensitivity to develop. For others, the humility to accept what they do not understand means an abandonment of critical faculties. But no one person can "master" the technology now employed to create so many diverse systems and devices (this would be a hopelessly totalitarian task). Instead, for many critics and curators, the reluctance to enter a partial dialogue which they cannot dominate becomes an excuse not to enter the dialogue at all.

## DOOM BUT NOT GLOOM

In Woody Allen's *Manhattan Murder Mystery* there is a scene where he and his wife Diane Keaton are leaving the Metropolitan opera house before the end of the performance. Woody explains "I don't like to listen to too much Wagner—I keep getting the urge to invade Poland." This kind of logic has much in common with frequent reactions to the effects of excessive violence in movies, TV, comics, and now computer games. The software house producing the most extreme examples of the genre of bloodthirsty shoot-em-ups is id Software, and their latest release *Doom* is quite exceptional in the lengths it goes to in order to put you into the most visceral situations. Id's first game in this series was *Escape from Wolfenstein*, released last

year, which centered on an escaped POW running around a Nazi castle and shooting everything that moved. The most striking thing about it was the level of sophistication of the graphics—very interactive, a strong 3D illusion, lots of graphic details and completely over-the-top violence (Nintendo made id tone down the version that it produced for their games consoles). But *Doom* actually goes an order of magnitude higher than this in reaching new degrees of realism and interactive simulation.

The aim of the game is apparently straightforward, simply a question of shooting your way through each level while being chased by an assortment of half human soldiers, demons, and monsters—"You're toast if you get too close to these monstrosities." The excuse for a story is that you are a "tough marine" of the future, sent to Phobos to rescue the moon base from something nasty that has been transported during their experiments in inter-dimensional space travel. "Just a few days ago you were probably swapping war stories with one of these guys. Now its time to swap some lead upside their heads." This scenario is represented graphically using highly sophisticated texture mapping techniques to produce a range of lighting effects, radioactive pools, mountainscapes and interiors from stone dungeons to hi-tech computer display panels. These allow the player to appear to move around both inside and outside the buildings, run up and down staircases, take lifts and jump off walls. The adversaries that you face are also partially intelligent, enabling them to join forces as they pursue you, try to cut you off and ambush you from secret trap doors while the lights are switched off. In some instances they

popular exhibits at MONTAGE 93, was *Persistence of Vision* by Gregory Barsamian, which returned the visitor to a fun fair side-show encounter with new media. In a disarmingly low-tech set up, Barsamian used a sequence of plaster models of objects in different stages of metamorphosis, slowly rotating and illuminated by strobe lights in order to produce a Zoetrope illusion of movement. The squirming lizards perpetually breaking out of eggs, hands scooping sand out of books and angels turning into helicopters

and back again provoked a reaction of innocent awe in its spectators. This awe was all the more potent for the fact that the technical devices that produced it were so obvious and unsophisticated, there-by side-stepping the feeling of enforced ignorance experienced by some when

will get caught in their own crossfire, resulting in them taking time off to attack each other.

*Doom* uses a first person viewpoint, the view on the screen is what the protagonist would see and it changes to mimic walking, turning or running—a "virtual reality" interface without the goggles. Sticking out of the front of the screen is one of a number of weapons that the player can acquire, and the action of firing is portrayed in remarkable detail with blasts, impact explosions and smoke. The result of actually hitting one of your enemies is even more dramatic, involving bodies flying, blood splattering and screaming noises, in some cases bodies completely exploding into charred husks. "Chainguns direct heavy firepower into your opponent, making him do the chain-gun cha-cha." The violence is hyped up relentlessly, the player is exhorted at every turn to get stuck in and start blasting away, and it is highly addictive.

In an interview in a recent issue of *Edge* (the coffee-table computer games magazine), id software's technical director John Carmack describes *Doom* as a graphics system looking for a game. "We designed the user interaction and display technology to be as cool as possible, then worked a game around it . . . *Doom* is just a killer environment with no pretensions of having a real story." Although described as an

"action oriented slugathon," this does not give a clear idea of the attraction of playing the game. The driving motivation for the player is not a simple blood lust, nor even a primitive expression of law-of-the-jungle self-preservation. Because *Doom* is not really a battle simulation, but a cinema simulation, specifically a simulation of body-count cyberpunk movies like *Robocop*, *Total Recall* and *Aliens*. The real thrill of playing *Doom* is roaming around the bizarre scenery of the futuristic moon base, noting the changes in mood as you travel from a flickering computer control room down corridors to a mouldy dungeon surrounded by shimmering pools of radioactive waste. To pass through some doorways you need to find color coded keys. At other times badly needed ammunition lies hidden behind secret doors. The mechanics of locating a secret door do not really require a surfeit of brains, however, just a matter of approaching every wall and pressing the "open" button until one responds. The real point is the tension of searching and exploring the architecture, the same tension one would experience watching a film while waiting for the climax. The greatest satisfaction is in locating a doorway that leads out through a tunnel into an open courtyard, rewarding you with a vista of fractal mountains and an opportunity to view the building from a new vantage point. The feeling when edging around corners or stumbling upon a room full of demons is one of surprise and the excitement of disorientation rather than the exercise of a trigger-happy "killer instinct."

All id's games come with a full music soundtrack as well as the sound effect punctuation. This enormously heightens the effect of being actually inside a movie, and enables it to become totally absorbing. Various filmic references are scattered around the game, such as the opportunity to pick up a chainsaw as part of your weapons arsenal, appropriate enough for a games company that is based in Texas. But the strongest experience in playing *Doom* is the exhilaration of exploring an alien environment which leaves you continuing to run around the corridors long after all the enemies have been disposed of. The violence is so parodied and self-conscious in this Schwarzenegger-simulator that it is not difficult to negate it altogether and to experience the game on other levels.

At the current time, Britain is suffering one of its periodic "moral panics" spearheaded by conservatives who believe that the best way to preserve the nation's moral fibre is to eradicate all references to the contrary. Along with Bulletin Board Services said to "spread child pornography" (always a favorite call to arms), video games have come under attack for their portrayal of horror. The recent controversy over Sega's *Night Trap* console game has also been joined by many intellectuals and cultural critics in journals and newspapers of the libertarian left who now feel that sex and violence in video games represent a menace to the appreciation of serious culture. Although *Night Trap* is portrayed as a stalk-and-slash scenario in which young girls in nighties are molested by alien monsters, the main contention is that the game

pioneered the use of live video clips for graphic realism. This development implied for many left critics a more serious influence on young minds, especially its perceived victimization of hapless women and fascistic blood lust. In fact, if many of the critics had actually seen the game they would have discovered that the female characters were far from helpless and that the level of exploitation was no greater than an episode of *Lost in Space*. But of course, many cultural critics do not like games, preferring to side with reactionary parties who relegate them to the status of the junk culture that serves to make their own cultural interests appear that much more edifying. Computer games do not attract the support of those who so vehemently oppose the introduction of more draconian film censorship for example, for, as everyone knows, film has the status of Art. Apart from an astonishingly naive understanding of how electronic texts function, it seems that the main contribution of intellectuals to the development of this sphere of video culture will be to discourage the interest of people looking for a new medium in which to develop challenging new ideas so that in the future they can complain about any lack of serious intent even more. But fortunately the influence of such concerned individuals is in conflict, especially as an involvement with some form of electronic media is becoming the

only way that the arts establishment can maintain its currency in a society where visual literacy and cultural skills will, in the future, be developed primarily in a haze of phosphor radiation.

1. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," *Media, Culture and Society*, no. 2, 1980.
2. Jeffrey Palmer, "'Popular' Culture and 'High' Culture : The Question of Value." Inaugural lecture, London Guildhall University, 1994.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," *Media, Culture and Society*, no. 2, 1980.
4. John A. Walker, *Cross-Overs* (London: Methuen and Co., 1987).
5. Michael O'Pray, "Eisenstein, Stokes and Disney : Animation and the Omnipotence of Thought." International Animation Studies Conference, West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, 1993.
6. Simon Penny, "Machine Culture." *Visual Proceedings, SIGGRAPH '93*. ACM Press, New York, 1993.
7. "Id Software," *Edge*, no. 9, June 1994.