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THE IDEA OF DOING NOTHING: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOBIAS BERNSTRUP

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Museum Meltdown by Tobias Bernstrup and his collegue Palle Torsson can be received as a game or in more classical terms as a virtual reality. Both rebuild several Museums (Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen 1996/Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius 1997/Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1999) as virtual spaces based on classical computer games. Ego Shooters like *Doom* or *Unreal Tournament*, that basically let you run through endless 3-D corridors and shoot everything that is defined as a target, often provide a special editor program to make own game levels. In *Museum Meltdown* the horrible scenario takes place in museums and the target is art. That art can be a target of destruction is shown amongst others by the action of the Russian artist Alexander Brener who "destroyed" in 1997 at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam the Malevich painting *Suprematism 1922–1927* (a white cross on white background) through spraying a new layer of colour on it – a green dollar sign. What can be understood as destruction can also be read as applying another value to the original work. The same could be said of the virtual shooting in *Museum Meltdown*.

When I met with Tobias Bernstrup for the interview in a café in Berlin Prenzlauer Berg, we began the talk with one of his more recent works. We agreed not to dive into a discussion on the pedagogical impetus of playing Ego Shooters and tried to concentrate on how the production process of the pieces is structured.

TB: The piece is called *Potsdamer Platz Unreal Edit* and it's based on the first *Unreal Tournament* engine, and I made this piece for the Lyon Biennale in 2001; actually, I never showed it in Germany, I showed it a couple of times in France. In showing this piece I tried to come away from the computer screen – I'm using a kind of black box and then project it on a very large scale, and then you have a mouse and speakers and it forms a much stronger atmosphere.

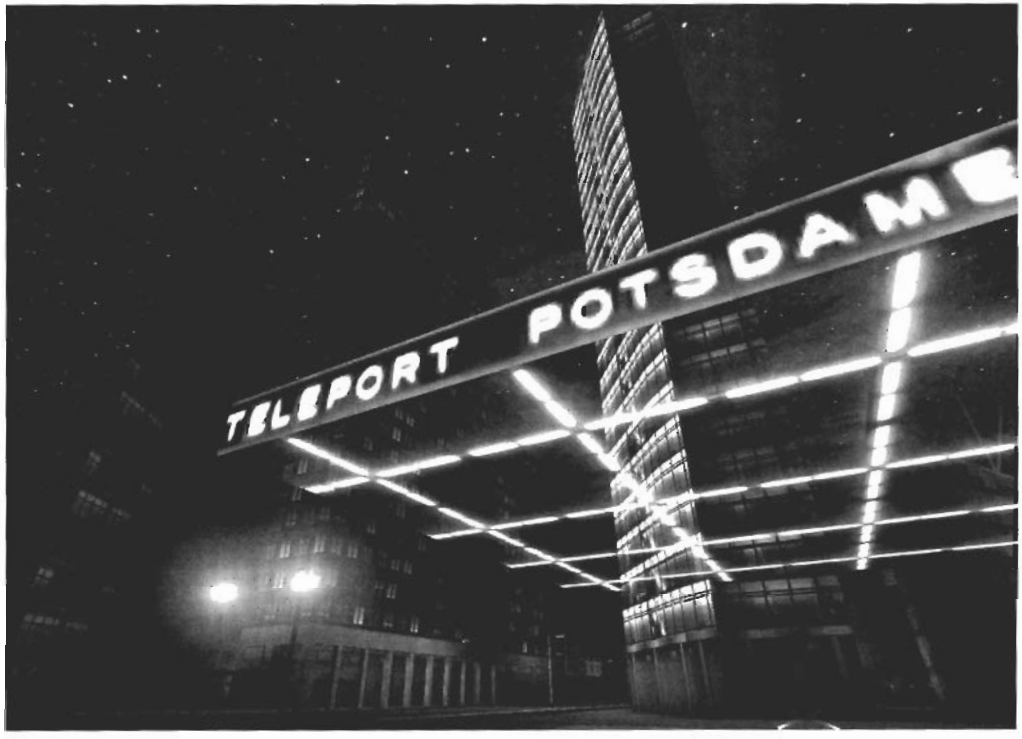

Figure 1: Tobias Bernstrup: Potsdamer Platz (Unreal Edit) *(modification of computer game. 2001), Courtesy: Cosmic Galerie/Andréhn-schiptjenko © 2002 Tobias Bernstrup.*

It was also one of the first pieces that I did when I moved from Stockholm to Berlin, and I was really fascinated by the artificial architecture and also that kind of abandoned space that suddenly started to grow up. Another piece that I did was the Friedrichstrasse Passage. That's where you would find all the fancy stores, with just not enough customers because a lot of people may not usually go there and so they closed it down. It was easy to go there and collect textures, because usually if I go out with the camera, there are people walking in front of the camera and I can't take a picture and I have to make a lot of Photoshop editing.

And then I started with *Potsdamer Platz* during the night. And parallel to it, I also work with sound, so music is almost 50 per cent of what I do and it is an important part of the pieces.

FH: Is it music in the sense of popmusik or is it more a soundscape?

TB: Well it's more inspired a lot by the 70s, like by John Carpenter, for instance. You could almost call it pop music. Its kind of dark pop music with influences from European synth pop and goth stuff and a bit of heavy metal.

FH: What is the role of music in your pieces?

TB: It is very much about having a whole experience, so I like the idea of being able to combine all the things which is really like an important thing to me...

FH: So *Potsdamer Platz* is a night view...

TB: Yes, everything happens during the night.

FH: And what actually happens?

TB: So at this point, what interested me, was the aspect of the unreal in this environment. The place tries to look like a typical skyscraper scenario but the buildings are maximum 100 meter and it looks like a Disney World, and I figured out that everyone looked like a tourist to me, even people that live in Berlin. And in terms of a game, it's not really a game, there is no goal, it's very much about just being lost.

FH: So one just can walk around alone?

TB: Yeah, there are a couple of things that you can do but it is not so important. When I play games, I'm in general more interested in the graphical experience, the way that reality is produced. At the point, when I made the *Museum Meltdown* piece, that was more like an

Figure 2: Tobias Bernstrup: Potsdamer Platz *(Unreal Edit) (modification of computer game. 2001), Courtesy: Cosmic Galerie/Andréhn-schiptjenko © 2002 Tobias Bernstrup.*

action game, I realized that I was more interested in the environment itself than in the game aspect. So, I more and more started to leave the game aspect out, because usually when you play the game, you don't really see the environment – you're really focused on the goal and on staying alive.

[Returning to the screen, he shows the *Potsdamer Platz* scenario. We walk through the towers and wannabe-skyscrapers and move towards the entrance of the subway station.]

TB: This is a teleport so you can go up here.

FH: Ah, okay, so we are on the top of the building now.

TB: Yes, and this is actually the only action that you can do.

[He moves the viewer to the edge of the roof and jumps down. The viewer sees the ground coming near and hears himself cry when hitting the ground.]

FH: So the only action is to jump. How did people in general react in it? Would they complain that there would not be enough interactivity in it?

TB: I think you have two different kind of audiences. One of them, usually the gamer people, they ask "Where are the guns? Can I kill someone?" and actually I figured out, that those people are really scared when they play. They always expect something to show up behind the corner, so they are always super concentrated and tense. And I think the people who are not familiar with games, they are just kind of excited or confused or sometimes they get lost, and I think it's a nice thing that they feel alienated in a way.

FH: I would like to follow another thread. Since the piece *Museum Meltdown: Arken* from 1996 which was based on the *Duke Nukem*–engine the technical possibilities became better towards a higher realism of the scenes.

TB: I think that's one interesting aspects of games today that strive towards realism. For example, when it was possible to have realistic colour palettes, which you hadn't, e.g., with *Doom* in 1993, that had its own special colour palette to save memory, it increased "realism", but still it is dependent on the limitations, like the amount of polygons. So it creates this kind of deformed reality which I find interesting. It's almost perfect but still it's this deformed reality. And I think the first games like *Pong* or *Space Invaders* in a way were more real then *Unreal II* or *Doom III*, the very high 3-D games of today. These old games are so abstract, their only reality is abstraction in a way like pixels on screen. It's so minimal and in a way it becomes real.

FH: All these games, the older and the newer ones, can be conceived as architectural spaces, so what is making your work being art while maybe a model made by an architect is still an architectural model?

TB: That is a very old question. Like in the beginning of the century. Today we don't ask, if it

is art or not, we've already seen the ready-mades. Today I don't even bother with the question: Is it art or not? You can do whatever you feel you want to do.

FH: To turn the question around: What is the interest of the art world in this, I mean why do they invite you to rebuild the museum in the *Museum Meltdown* or invite you to show the *Potsdamer Platz* piece?

TB: For me it was like this: I spend five years in the art academy and after the first year of painting I realized that I was not interested in pushing the idea of painting any further, although still there are some painters today whose work I like. For me, and also in general, I think, painting today is very very difficult in terms of art because it has such a long tradition. You can do very conceptual pieces today and you can also do storytelling today. But painting is too heavy in terms of its tradition.

I used to be a gamer when I was a kid using Commodore C64 writing things in the BASIC programming language, and making these small games. So much later, when I came across *Doom*, I felt like: Wow! And I was told that you can modify it. It was actually one of our guest teachers who told me about it. For one exhibition in Copenhagen that I was invited together

Figure 3: Tobias Bernstrup & Palle Torsson: Museum Meltdown Moderna Museet *(modification of computer game, Courtesy: Andréhn-Schiptjenko © 2002 Tobias Bernstrup.*

with my colleague Palle Torsson, we were invited to show an Internet piece that we made in 1995 and we said: "Oh, we don't see the point to show it in a museum, it was just meant for Internet."

So we came up with another idea and we said to the curator that we could redo his museum in a game and he found that interesting. So we started to build the museum, the *Museum Meltdown: Arken* and from that point we continued. And I felt actually that the culture of game was more contemporary than painting – as a part of the culture that we are living in today.

At that point there was only a couple of people who were doing it. And now it is almost like eight years. There are so many people who are into it now. It's a bit like the boom of video art. I remember, when we started, there were many people who wouldn't get it. And it's always like that. If you want to be a pioneer, you have to accept the fact that no one will understand it or even they would say that this is just a stupid game or a childish joke.

FH: And do you feel like a pioneer?

TB: Yeah, I think so, there weren't so many people at that time. I mean there was this stuff of virtual reality, but using things from pop culture like games, at that point it was something new. After we did a couple of these museum pieces, we got a lot of request of curators to do it for their museums. And we felt that we had to stop giving something that they wanted...

FH: So what was in your opinion the interest of the curators in it?

TB: I think it was just that they felt, wow, that's something new, we must be part of this new movement. And also I think the fact that it always needs some years so that people get used to things and accept that. It doesn't mean still having to stick to these ideas. I don't feel that I have to please the people demanding "Oh why don't you build our museum". Because in the beginning it was more interesting, they were not sure what they would get and we would propose the idea and it was something new and now we still show the old pieces, and to me it's very much like a document, since the technology is a couple of years old. So it became a document of that time and I like to see it from this perspective. So right now we are actually showing in Wien Kunsthalle the last piece that we made for the Moderna Musejet in Stockholm. And now it's funny with this piece because they had to close down the Museum in Stockholm, so our piece for two years was the only possibility to see the museum, because they had merged like fungus in it, so people got sick and they had to close the museum for renovation.

FH: Did you do something to preserve your works in a technical way?

TB: Well, we bought a lot of old computers with Windows98, because on those the games are running best, and the newer computers are getting really warm, because the processors generate so much heat.

FH: When speaking about the operation system it raises the question of which software you use exactly to manipulate the data or to program a new mod.

Figure 4: Tobias Bernstrup: Friedrichstrasse Passage *(computer animation, 6:30 min DVD-loop. 2001), Courtesy: Cosmic Galerie/Andréhn-schiptjenko © 2002 Tobias Bernstrup.*

TB: Usually the game platforms that I was using all had an editor coming with the program on CD. So the editor is the main part in the process and then there is the second part of textures. For the textures we took a digital camera and made pictures and then I use Photoshop to make all the textures repeatable. Usually you can't take a completely straight shot from the object so you have to stretch it in Photoshop to make it plane.

FH: How much time do you put into one texture?

TB: It's hard to tell. There are some textures that I spend four hours with, and on other just ten minutes. I really like "Fummelarbeit". When it comes to working with textures, I really like to get the most out of it with the most minimal memory use, and to make it really sharp and distinct.

So beside the game editor and Photoshop for the textures, I use another software for animations. It's made by some people from Switzerland and called Milkshape which is really a powerful program. You can do low-polygon modelling and it actually supports nearly every format like *Half-Life*, *Unreal Tournament* and so on.

FH: As I understood you put the textures with the 3-D models into a kind of database which is called mod or patch. You also can change the variables of the objects, that determine their behaviour, like being visible or invisible or being open or closed, or if you can pick up something or not and so on. How the objects interact with each other, is determined by the engine that actually does the calculations if there is a collision of objects, for instance. So there is a kind of database – the mod – and on the other hand the engine...

TB: Usually when I do research for finding a new game, I do that usually by luck, and there are maybe five or six games a year that I play through. It's not so many games that are good for mods. Still a lot of people use *Half-Life*, which had a really good editor, it was really easy and there was a lot of supporting programs for making new models, and also for making music and so on. But there was one problem with this program, that it needed to render the map before you could see what you actually had done. So you had to wait eventually during the night if it was complicated, with a lot of light. So I changed into *Unreal* because it's actually more open in terms of the programming. In the editor you can open a script while you working and import sound and graphics, but in *Half-Life* or *Quake* editor you had to use separate programs to make the textures or sound and to convert it specially. In *Unreal* it will do it all automatically, the editor does all the conversions. In the end it writes its own format, but you can do it in one program.

It's based usually on two different kind of entities, the basic architecture usually needs shadow rendering while the other, the animated objects like chairs or persons are threaded a bit differently, they don't respond to light in the same way. In the most recent versions even the animated objects have shadows and, also, you can generate particles like fog or smoke, so it's getting more and more complex. It is more and more comparable to 3-D Max in terms of complexity, but the procedure is still pretty much the same: you work with this three-dimensional object and then you insert the light and put the textures on it.

FH: Do you also need to program yourself or is it all done in the editor?

TB: Usually you don't have to do scripting at all.

FH: So you don't touch the engine itself?

TB: No. I don't really hack the engine. For some of the mods you need to really dive into it, like with *Half-Life*, where people turned the shooter into a football game. For me, it's almost not nescessary. If you want to make an enemy, for instance, you work within the already given category "bots" that is part of the "animated objects", and it will have all that behaviour that I need for an enemy, and I only have to tell what animations to use, what sounds to use, in a very small script. So if you take another category like a weapon, it is another object, but it is also part of the animated objects. The 3-D program writes the script automatically and then you have to change certain values for instance in which frame the animation should start and when it will end for instance.

FH: And it has its own scripting language...

TB: Well among the different ego-shooters it looks pretty much the same, it is some scripting language but on a higher level it comes to C programming. I never have read manuals and it was very easy to understand and I found some manuals online...

FH: So it's a more explorative way of learning.

TB: Yeah – I mean – I learn what I have to learn, and if I had a real serious problem then I would go online and ask someone. I was never interested in learning programming because I feel also that if I should spend time, working on programming, I could spend less time on the more artistic concepts. So I would rather ask someone professional for programming.

FH: So, basically, you edit the given variables, but don't create it as a whole. The engine and also parts of the mods is already pre-produced. How do you see that in terms of artistic creation?

TB: Well, I could say that the outcome is important. I'm in a way changing the behaviour because I don't add all the weapons so in that sense it is not comparable to a game-mod that would have monsters and guns and so. And also with the animations, when you take all that away, it's very hard to tell sometimes what kind of game engine you're using and it's not even clear that it was based on a game. I mean, I didn't change the engine, but I changed a lot of the concept of game. For example, the idea of doing nothing, just walking around, no interaction so you are really left alone and sometimes you even feel lost. Sometimes you have that experience in games too but they deal much more with keeping you busy. I think here you can spend a lot of time, thinking, like, "What am I doing?", "Who am I?"

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