# Perspective Engines: An Interview with JODI

Francis Hunger

FH: After "net.art" and "hacktivism" in the last years there seems to appear some kind of new trend in digital art which is to work with ego-shooter modifications. The rotation of the different trends in the yet not established field of computer-based art seems to be pretty fast. Maybe you can describe a bit how you see yourself in the current situation.

JODI: Since two years most of these games come with an editor when you buy them commercially. I've read an article somewhere, where the games industry and the game makers explained that it was better business to include the audience in the creative process than to just release their finished games. They know that most of the public of these games are in general young boys and the boys just like to play with their toys. The industries know that a big part of the public more then just playing also likes to add to the game their own face or their own building or their own monster or their own car. So it does become normal that a game becomes modified.

When we made our modification five years ago we had a total different idea and reason to change the games. There were two games – the first production was the patch *SOD* for *Castle Wolfenstein* and during the next three years we worked on the twelve modifications of *Quake* which we named all together *Untitled Games*. What our interest in modifying the game was, was that we always worked in the style of abstraction. Games in general are the total opposite from that. They have a narrative and they are very figurative, for example, *Quake* monsters they are like caricatures. They are so figurative to have some dramatic impact on the audience – let's say, a screaming monster with a lot of fire and shooting beasts or meat or blood. So they are very explicit graphically and what we wanted to do was in general to erase the story and the figurative site of these games. The starting idea was to find very basic forms like just a line or a square, just black and white, and attach these forms to the behaviour of the code so that we would have a better view on how such a game is
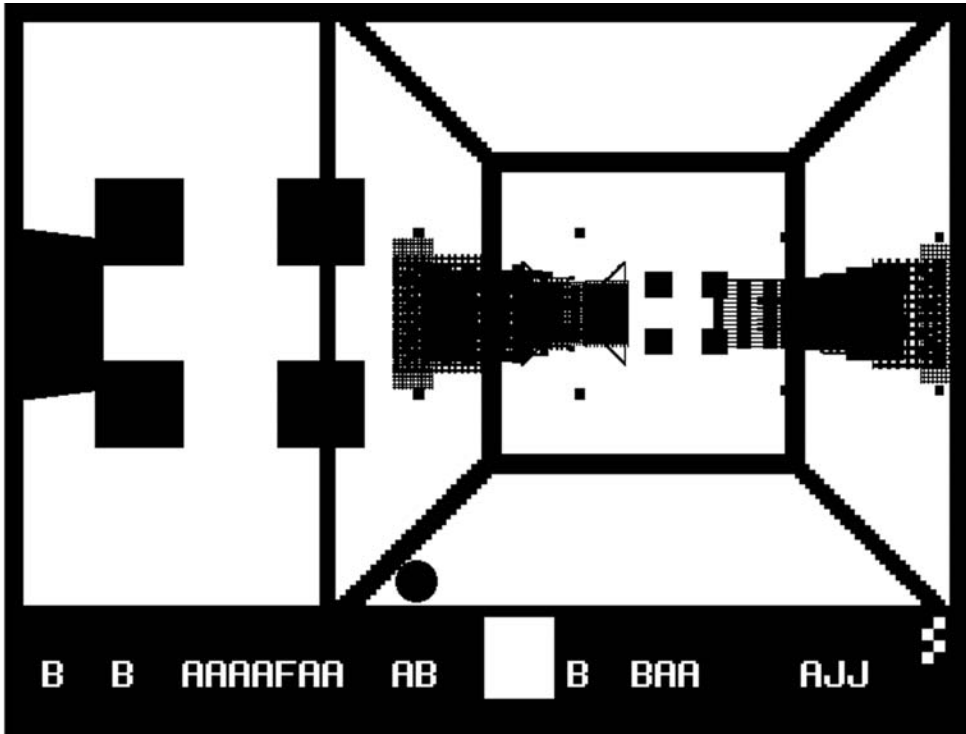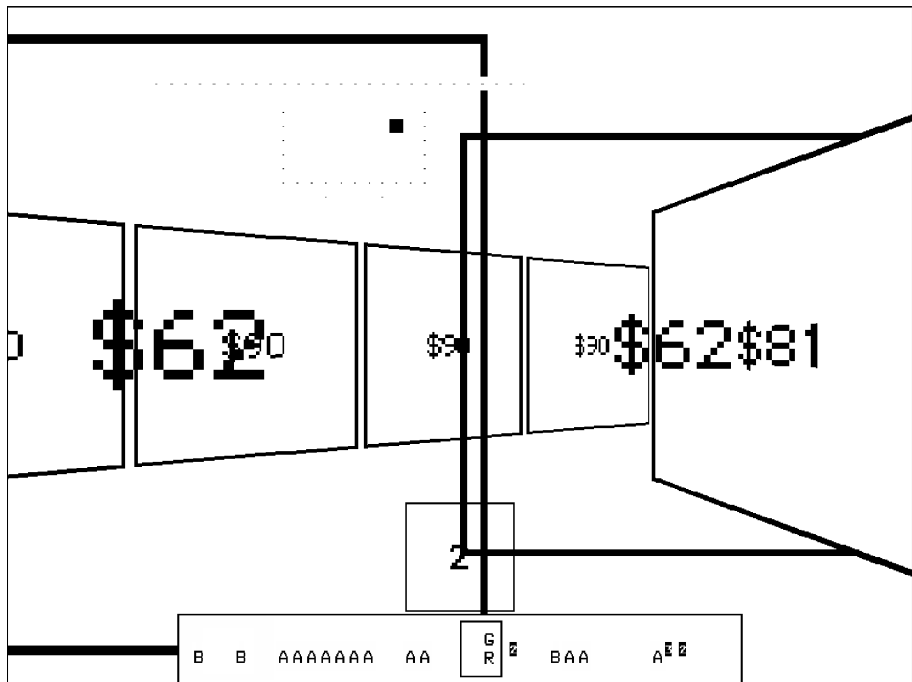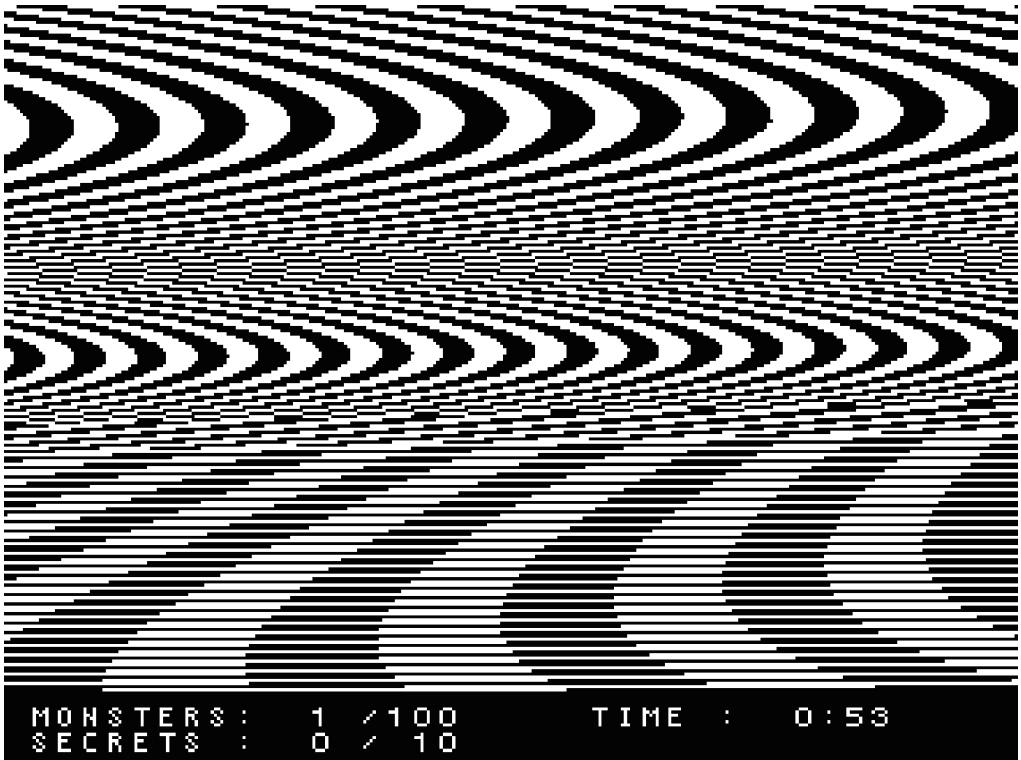
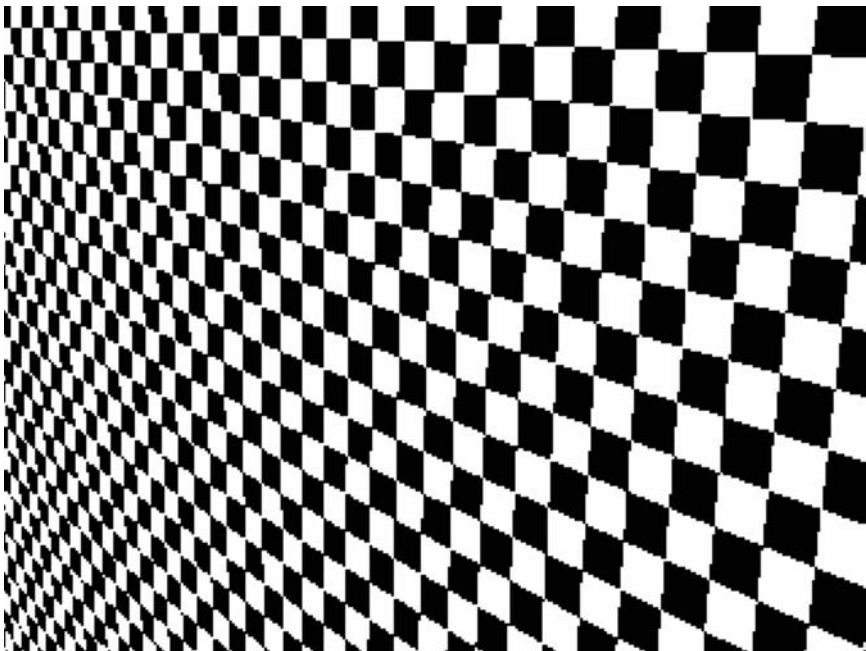*Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans (JODI):* SOD. *(Screenshot).*
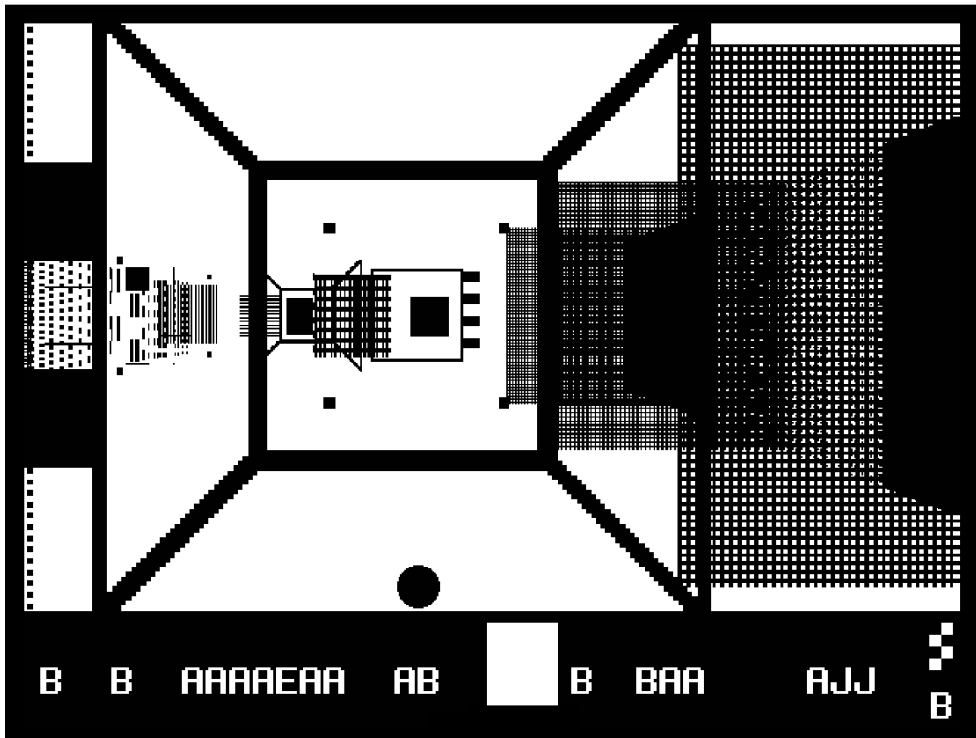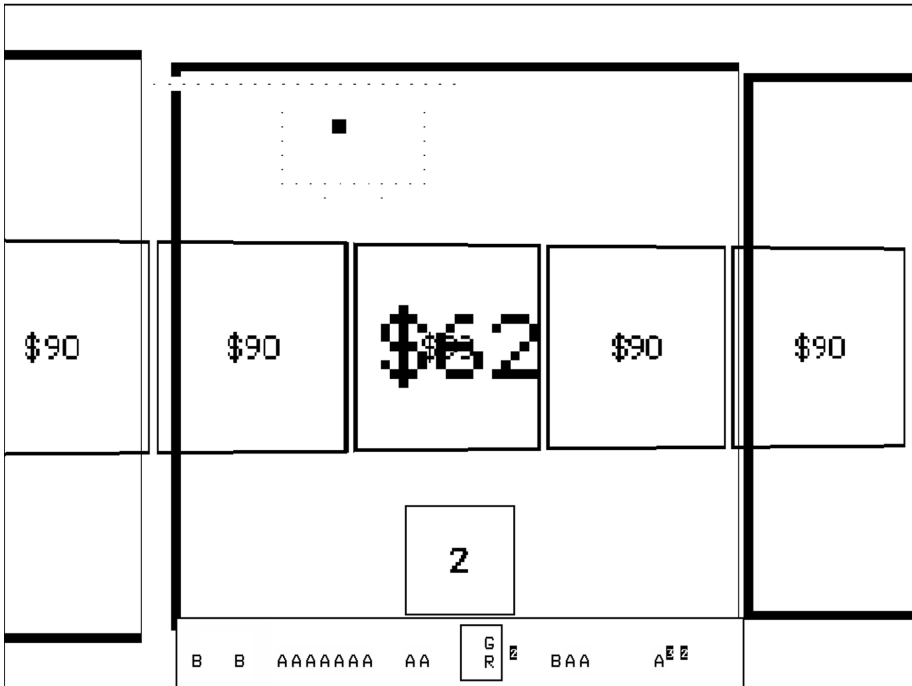
Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans (JODI): SOD. *(Screenshot).*

Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans (JODI): Untitled Games. *(Screenshot).*

driven, what are the dynamics of the game. So it's bringing those games back to the abstract dynamics of it and we were also trying to find out a little bit, how they do create the so-called 3-D space. That's the whole trick of these games, that they are *perspective engines*. All the time they create tunnels and illusions of a 3-D space and that's part of the "kick" you have as the user, that you think you explore and you enter and you move into. In fact, the only thing which is happening, is a perspective which just is drawn all the time – so it's always about graphical tricks.

FH: So you would see these kind of games as architectural illusions and you just reduce the architecture. To what did you reduce it then?

JODI: We reduce it to the combination of the code and the dynamics of the code. A monster, for example, or an enemy are in general programmed to recognize you when you enter into a corridor and come close in a certain radius. So in the whole made-up scenario of figurative illusion all these coded "behaviours" are not so obvious to the person who plays the game. But when you have a white space and there's just a black square and you see that it is not moving for a while and when you come close to it, it comes up to you then you start to understand the simple dynamics, the simple tricks of such a code. On the one side, what we wanted to do was to undress *Quake* from all the skins, the graphics and on the other side we dress up the code a little bit. The code gets "something" so you – as the user – get some kind of idea of what this code is doing. It did not work all the time through this formula, of course. In *SOD* – the *Castle Wolfenstein* modification – it is more or less exactly that. The elements are replaced by simple forms, for every object we made its own very basic icon. Through the graphics in *SOD*, I think you have the feeling that you are inside a perspective engine like a drawing machine, so you really feel that your movements together with the code is drawing all the time according to your movements. We made a big separation between sound and vision and code. We tried to keep those three elements in mind all the time, how they work together. So the sound is not changed and that was just to keep the contrast to our aesthetic, which is like very typical abstraction. You cannot escape the fact that it is related a bit to op art or constructivist type of aesthetics, the typical modern art of the last century. We wanted to keep that in contrast with the horror soundtrack, so this soundtrack is still constantly running.

FH: You mentioned already two threads to art history – op art and constructivism. There is another thread that I would like to follow which is appropriation. I mean the appropriation of code…

JODI: Three-quarters of the work was on the graphics and let's say one-quarter of the work was on the code, because the *Quake* code luckily became open source, so there is a lot of documentation about it online, how to change it and how to recompile it. We are not master programmers, so we need the documentation all the time. For example, to make the total black-and-white version of the game would not be possible without changing the code because the shading effects or the shooting explosions are implemented there. So you cannot just change the pictures. So we had to literally erase a lot in the code. I prefer the word "erase" than "change" because with *Untitled Games* we were taking away all the time. The most extreme version in that sense is the white version, where everything is erased and

this, of course, is just a conceptual statement. But on the other hand we wanted to try other things as well, without putting much graphical décor. That is the big difference between most of the game modifications being done by artist that you see now: That is, that, in general, they put a lot of new graphical elements, so that you are just pleased with the beauty of the new creation, or they work in the existing narrative of the game and they add a subversive narrative to it.

FH: You would not agree to the idea that a subversive narrative overcomes the original narrative of the game?

JODI: I mean it's the choice of the artist to make his point. I cannot speak for the other artists. For example, in the last Documenta there was the *Quake* modification called *Q4U* by Feng Mengbo. There he replaced the soldier with his own face and then put video cameras instead of a weapon. I mean, I cannot judge the quality of this work, but there are a lot of modifications that work in that way. I don't know...

Our approach to the code is – I would say – singular, because when you undress the game and try to dress the code or even keep the code naked – the action of the code becomes a very minimal aesthetic. That why it is important to keep the soundtrack so it becomes another comment on this type of aesthetics and it becomes a type of funky, modernist caricature. It is also almost like making abstract film art with the *Quake* engine.

FH: The media theoretician Claus Pias pointed out the thesis that ego-shooters cannot be understood from their visual representation of violent action, but should be seen more in the sense of optimization of the users' interaction with the machine.

JODI: I've heard a lecture by Claus Pias, so I know his theses. Firstly, I kind of agree with it, to see games as a kind of skills tests. They test your reaction time and your optical skill and recognition. This is already in the direction of the military application of those games which of course exists, because all these shooter games are used for training in the armies. But it is also true that you don't become a better shooter or killer but I'm sure that you become dumb, so that your nervous system is more responsive. Your impulse follows directly to what you see with your eyes. There is no time to think about something. And in this way we understand games being part of the entertainment industry.

And this is another reason why we use abstraction in connection to the mathematics of the code. We are interested in how code does represent an illusion – be it a 3-D illusion or an aggressive illusion or a movement illusion. What I absolutely dislike in modifications are the ones that make beautiful abstraction. There you end up with colours and abstraction and movements, and it overwhelms you. The interpretation must be like "Look what beauty we can make with this ugly software!" I don't trust that too much.

In a different way I like the subversive narrative approach quite a lot. It's not our "style" but I like it in a way more, when it's well done. I think one of the better modifications that were made in this "genre" are made by the Swedish artist Tobias Bernstrup and Palle Torsson five years ago, which is called *Museum Meltdown*. I think it's a good version of this narrative

although of course it's also a cliché to rebuild a museum and to do dirty things inside it – for instance, shooting on artworks – but I think the version they made is beyond suspicion. There are many, many others who did the same and I think it's one of the first reactions of the artist when they think about, what they could do with a modification. Then they make some kind of gallery or museum or art school which they know, and they are shooting or destroying the walls and the art. That's a genre in itself, I guess, but *Museum Meltdown* is more than that.

FH: Let's talk about the art system a bit.

JODI: You know, we come out of the net.art and we never really made the big crossing to the "real" art scene. We are very much on the bridge. We are not regularly invited to make a new work just because we "belong to the crowd" of the artists. So I think the whole digital art scene is in-between. Somehow the time of credits, the time of when it was hip and new, especially with net.art, and now it's more and more focusing on software, but the time of its attraction, through its pure existence, is over. No one really knows what it is now – you cannot take all the people who make digital works and bring them to the art scene. You cannot give all these people money to make new works, not even talking about buying, just talking about giving them a commission or inviting them. On the other hand, the "specialized digital art system" which runs more in festivals and competitions is also still oriented towards a more spectacular type of setting – interaction with the public or technological innovations. So I think the most interesting digital art is not belonging to any of these two support systems. I see some kind of analogy much more to experimental film than to video art. I think that the moment is still growing when a typical digital art will arrive. And it will make its own criteria and standards, which is not about technology or interaction with the public and also not about being viewed as a subdirectory of fine arts. Also it is too big to fit clearly into something and it needs its own sphere. I think the problem is that there is no concentrated critics and curators, but I expect that it will grow very fast during the next few years. As long as you keep in mind that you don't have to choose between the two families, of the big art family and of the big technology family, as long as we the artist who make it can contribute independently to this digital "thing", then I think it will work. It will become something new. Otherwise you'll be included in the already existing, and you start to think about selling and buying and react in it. I don't want to be only in the art world and also not into only technological innovation. I think this will change in the next ten or twenty years – I hope.

FH: So, given the chance to widen the context and not only act as "media-artist", which other persons or artist would you like to include into a hypothetic exhibition of your own works? In what context would you like to put your own works?

JODI: The temptation is always big to just name all the preferred artists I know. I mean, I don't have a direct answer to this. Of course there is an artist that both Joan and I like. But not in the way of being exhibited with, because this is a cliché artist. I just recently saw it in a survey of artists, he is also the number one of many, many artists, so this "choice" is absolutely not original: We like Bruce Naumann. We like him because he made a lot of film work and also the emotional content of the video pieces. But I don't think it is very smart of us to have an exhibit with him, because he uses a lot of strong dramatic elements.

And another film artist Joan and I recently looked at is Stan Brakhage, who seems to be a very important person in experimental film. That's a whole different subject. Experimental film and video art – the way that they went into different directions. Video art by the name itself directed to the fine arts while experimental underground film has stayed this weird category in itself, more or less with its high point in the 60s and 70s and of absolutely no value to the art commerce. Our sympathy goes to experimental film, because they managed to stay in their own medium. We use both these fields quite a lot to think about what we are doing or what would net.art or digital art be. The history of the experimental film and the history of net.art both have similar threads, there are lot of crossovers but they end up differently.

FH: Understanding the past as a key to future developments...

JODI: At the moment we do a lot of efforts to make exhibitions, because we more or less don't have the concentration time anymore to really work on the Net as much as we would want. Also because we've been through the first period of what we wanted, we more or less bled out, we "had it". We don't know what to say anymore since almost three or four years. That was one of the reasons why we started with the game modifications, we wanted to do something different. Installing exhibitions is another way of trying something different.

Videogames and Art

Edited by Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell
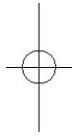
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