

# postvinyl

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## **Abstract:**

The history of audio-records, record players and DJs had its ups and downs during the last 6 decades. Vinyl records had their first appearances in the 1940ies, seemed to have gone in the 80ies and reappeared gloriously in the 90ies DJ culture. The re-emergences of a medium is investigated from a media arts historical background and analysed in terms of “media cannibalism”, hybrid forms of media, and “media mimicry”.

Particular interest is given to a computer game about vinyl records: The media-archeological First Person Shooter Game “postvinyl” re-enacts record playing as a game based activity. The Virtual DJ is bound to start and stop records, change tracks and recontextualize record cover graphics and vinyl record surfaces.

The computer game “postvinyl” provides a DJ with the tools to control the visuals and the soundscape of a game art performance via an “Unreal Tournament” modification. Non-standard output devices like MIDI samplers, stage lighting and fogmachines can be controlled live via a computer game which becomes the interface for a DJ/ VJ. “postvinyl” is a game which plays on the ludic elements of live stage performance and a carefully conceived narrative on the history of vinyl records from 1949 to 2007.

## **Keywords:**

Computer-aided DJing, Creative Games, Serious Games, Ubiquitous Computing, Ludology

## **postvinyl: A Narrative on Vinyl Records**

The “postvinyl” computergame, a modification of the “Unreal” First Person Shooter, is a musician’s tool to perform in a 3D environment, populated with vinyl records and the music they contain. It can be seen as a synthesizer for sonic art or as a narrative on the history of vinyl records. On one hand the game might be described as “ludic” in the sense of how Gonzalo Frasca introduced the term. On the other hand it might also be described as “narrative” in the sense of Henry Jenkins’ definition of games [Jenkins, 2006] - as opposed to the understanding of the ludologist theoretical position [Eskelinen and Koskimaa, 1999] [Arseth, 1997]. Obviously the game contains a strong narrative component. The ludic elements are played upon in the improvisational musical sections of the game level, whereas the narration unfolds when walking through rooms and corridors containing signs signifying milestones of vinyl record history. As Sean Cubitt put it, narrative can be marginal and vital for a game. [Cubitt, 2002] This is perfectly true in the case of “postvinyl”. The game can be enjoyed without reading the narrative. In this case the game is just an action-based 3D environment. It can however also been read (and played) as a 3-dimensional storybook. The story told in “postvinyl” starts in 1949 when RCA Victor introduced the 7-inch 45 rpm micro-groove vinyl single and compatible turn table. In 1949 Capitol became the first major label to support all three recording speeds of 78, 45, 33-1/3 rpm in the same year in Jamaica, sound systems developed playing the latest in R ‘n’ B 45s. The “postvinyl” story includes collectors’ item records, extremely rare recordings and popular vinyls like “Hotel California” by the Eagles or “Kiss” by Prince. “postvinyl” also contains music from vinyls which have been recently published by DJs who rediscovered vinyl after the alleged death of vinyl.

## **The Second Life of New Media**

First “Video killed the Radio Star”, then the interactive media made video look blunt, and now computer games seem to be more sexy than any other medium ever has been.

The art community usually celebrates the advent of a new media with the proposition that:

- 1) artists have invented the media
- 2) that they know better what to do with the media and
- 3) that they can tell the future of the media

This happened with photography in the 19th century, with William Henry Fox Talbot having coined the phrase “art of fixing a shadow” to describe his invention of the negative-positive photographic process in 1839. The technology of photography was turned into the art of photography. It happened again with video, Nam June Paik, Woody and Steina Vasulka amongst others, having been declared video pioneers. Video became video art. It happened once more with electronic music: The contemporary grandmasters of electronica couldn’t help paying tribute to the early hisses and scratches of the likes of Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer. Even Kraftwerk pointed out how important Karlheinz Stockhausen was for their music. Something very similar is going on in the world of computer and video games. There is a new beast out there, called game art. I want to suggest in this essay that:

- 1) artists have not invented computer games
- 2) that they know better what to do with computer games and
- 3) that they can live from the past and build the future of games

### **Cannibalism**

In the same way video art cannibalized television, and photography cannibalized painting, game art lives on the remainders of mainstream computer games. Cory Arcangel’s “Super Mario Clouds v2k3” piece from 2002, is a hardware modification of the Super Mario game for the Nintendo NES console.

Arcangel removed the main character, the friendly Italian plumber, and left the white clouds on blue skies to be watched by us. The artistic strategy of appropriation mixed with reduction is well known in other genres.

Martin Arnold, an Austrian filmmaker based in the US today, took a similar approach to historic black and white movies when he removed characters from Hollywood film material to show backgrounds rather than main actors. His filmic production “Deanimated”, based on an American horror film from 1941, is built around careful reduction of foreground characters and shows us the backgrounds of the original black and white movie in all their glory. In both cases, Arcangel and Arnold, the artists spent enormous amounts of creativity, time and conceptual thinking on getting rid of what the original valued the most. Cory Arcangel had to become an expert in hardware modifications, and Martin Arnold had to learn and use a new software tool for months to rearrange the cannibalized material.

Let’s look at another example: The PainStation by German game art group, *//////////fur////*, is an ironic comment on the SONY PlayStation. Cannibalizing the Playstation name and trademark, it ironically comments on play and pain. The game console they designed contains a modification of the historic Pong game. The famous game where white paddles on a black background push a square ball from one side of the computer screen to the other, has been set as a starting point for the Painstation set-up. The artists connected the scoring information of the simple game to electronic circuitry, making an electric current run through the player’s hands. The level of voltage of the electric punishment increases with the score of the opponent. This playfully sadistic element of the game is accompanied by additional physical torture of the gamers. Apart from the entertaining aspects of the installation, Fur cleverly incorporate media history and game archaeology into their piece by cannibalizing forerunners of the genre. It is Atari’s Pong and SONY’s PlayStation which serve as a ferment of the innovative playstation game. Everybody understood the artistic reference and the pun on the PlayStation name, except for SONY Computer Entertainment Corp, who sued the artists for making improper use of their Logo. The artists somehow got away with it, they were forced, however, to change the typeface used for the PainStation in order to avoid “blurring the identity of the text-image brand”. Tilman Reif, one of the *//////////fur////* artists, reports that in their reply to SONY they explained that they merely worked according to SONY’s “go create” slogan, an idea which the marketing department obviously invented with little reference to the legal department’s practice. In retrospective, one

can be as happy as astonished about the fact, that Andy Warhol didn't run into problems with the Coca Cola Company and Campbell's Soups.

### **Remix and Hybridization**

Popular media interact with each other and with elements of social and cultural fields with little respect to consistency or inner logic. So does media art. It has often been observed that television cross-bred with religion and advertisement, with furniture design and the food industry. TV-dinners and TV-preachers are remixes (we could also call them bastards in a positive Deleuzian sense), not originating from a logic inherent to the media, but from the ruthless desire of the television medium to reach out into foreign terrain. Mobile phones, which serve as flashlights or as alarm clocks do the same thing. Refrigerators made in the Loewy design and style, construct weird and irrational hybrids between a hot steam engine and a cooler to keep food cold. Game artists merge cultural fields in order to surprise their audience and in order to cast light on hidden relationships between seemingly unrelated fields.

“postvinyl” is a game, that borrows from and mixes audio technologies, rock music appeal and art history. The game feeds the sound output into a network of guitar effect panels, consisting of phasers, wah-wahs and delays. The gamer simultaneously becomes a player of the game and player of the music. His trigger finger follows the rules of gaming, but his feet control crazy distortions as if he was on a rock stage.

This game – postvinyl – plays the game of hybridization on two levels. On a hardware level it is a hybrid of a digital computer with analogue sound modifications, content wise it is a hybrid of an exploratory 3D shooter with the tunnels and corridors of a DJ performance set-up. The users have to slip into the role of a virtual DJ who can start and stop vinyl records by jumping on the record players, picking up records and placing them on turntables. The users can also look for custom-built sound guns, i.e. weapons that allow for the placement of spatialized sound sources in the performance environment. In this regard, the game once more cannibalizes commercial mainstream games: the concept of the weapon is taken up and transformed into a musical instrument.

### **Media Mimicry**

Jim Morrison stated: ”The old get older, and the young get stronger – may take a week and it may take longer” and saying such he was talking about a generation of young people but also talking about a medium – Rock Music – rebelling against predecessors in music. The young media tend to mimic and then take revenge on the old media. Games imitate and make fun of video, video hates radio, radio hates theatre ... Martin Arnold calls “Deanimated”, a movie mentioned earlier, a “revenge on film history” and shows his admiration as well as his critically subversive attitude in taking the old material serious. Media mimicry does not mean that the old media are overwritten, but that they are kept alive and in remembrance by mocking about them. One of the most interesting exhibition in the field of game art, “Mythos Pong” at Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart, is an homage to the computergame classic Pong. The famous white paddles which allowed the players to bounce a white square across the screen have influenced a large group of artists. Remake-, replay- and revenge-pieces about the simple ATARI game have been conceived by such as Valie Export, Blinkenlights Project, ///////////////fur////, the ASCII Art Ensemble, Time's Up and Niklas Roy

Artistic revenge on a predecessor medium is a give and take. It adds to the predecessor new technology, new storylines, new aesthetics and new content, but it rips the predecessor of its charme, its history and its mythical suggestive power. When Niklas Roy transforms Pong into an electro-mechanical device with a shiny colourful outfit, he certainly enriches the old black and white 2D game. He adds a new dimension, he adds mechanics to electronics, he adds design to simple functionality. At the same time he takes from the old feeble Pong predecessor. He is able to suck the blood and heartbeat of an old machine from the dead body of Nolan Bushnell's Pong, he time-warps it from the past into the present and lives on the bones and spine of a 1972 machine in the year of 2006. This is media vampyrism at its best. It is not plagiarism, it is not a simple homage, and not at all a variation on a theme. It is the transfer of historic added value on art and technology into a contemporary piece. This process is a step in an infinite process of appropriation, which will never end. Like Dracula, the artist-vampyr is never satisfied. His creatures become prey of other

vampires and the process of extraction – creation goes on forever.

### **Technology**

Recently developed features of “postvinyl” allows us to control room lighting (of the physical space) or other MIDI controlled equipment like fog machines and wind machines via the Unreal Engine. This feature has not yet been shown in public, but has been thoroughly tested and will enhance the immersive character of the game performance immensely.

Technically speaking the game is a real time VJ tool with stereo sound output and MIDI control add-ons. The visuals of the game are designed for stage performance and corresponding lighting conditions. Gameplay events like entering a new room, shooting a record on a record player or running through windy landscapes is visually accompanied by real-life para-ludic action like changing the stage lights, starting smoke from smoke machines, switching on wind machines. The main actor however is the Virtual DJ with his fabulous soundgun.

The software developed for “postvinyl” consists of two separate software environments communicating with each other via a TCP/IP interface. The Unreal game engine has been significantly extended by a set of new classes written in UnrealScript. These classes contain code for a new trigger actor which sends TCP/IP messages to an external client on the condition of being triggered in the computer game by an avatar or any other pawn. The messages sent contain information about the time the trigger was touched and the type of the trigger event. Such event types can be “green room lights on”, “start smoke machine”, “wind machine 1 off” or the like. It is possible to run the TCP/IP client on the same machine Unreal is executed at, or on a second computer connected to the first computer via an Ethernet LAN. The TCP/ IP client is a simple application written in Visual BASIC reading incoming TCP/IP data and converting it into MIDI data which is then output to any MIDI compatible external device. In our tests we used an AKAI sampler AKAI S01 and a set of coloured lights controlled by a M2L Pro light controller. For future performances we intend to make use of a recently programmed add-on enabling us to control stage lights and a fog machine.

### **Online Documentation:**

Webpage: <http://creativegames.org.uk/art/postvinyl/>

Streaming video can be found at [http://creativegames.org.uk/art/streaming\\_media/](http://creativegames.org.uk/art/streaming_media/) for streaming video (Java run time engine required)

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