

# POSTMASTERS

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## “That Big Red Button Was Irresistible”: Play Station at Postmasters

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Carla Gannis and Peter Patchen are colleagues at Pratt Institute where they are Assistant Chair and Chair, respectively, of Digital Arts. artcritical let them loose in Play Station, the exhibition of artist-made video games, curated by Marcin Ramocki and Paul Slocum at Postmasters. True to form, the venerable professors soon adopted avatars from Street Fighters II in a series of tweets and SMSs on the show. What follows is the edited version of their exchange.

**Chun-Li (Carla Gannis):** In high school for two days or so I had the top score in Pac-Man at my local arcade. I played home console games too, but public gaming spaces really appealed to me. Competing and having fun was a different experience from my painting and piano classes, where I was expected to be serious and thoughtful and focus on “Capital A Art.”

The Postmasters opening last Thursday night, touted as “fun, exciting, post-video game, interactive,” whether it was or was not, provided its own counterpoint to art in all caps, and a relief to the after taste of Miami Basel blue chips and over-priced cocktails.

The cacophony of sound and action, of hands wielding controllers and keyboards, of voices shouting

in victory or sighing in defeat, transported me back to a pre-internet '80s arcade, then forward to a post-formal art space where notions of precious art are subverted by prescient ideas.

**Ryu (Peter Patchen):** Nostalgia was certainly in the air at Postmasters. I felt like I was carried back to a 1990's LAN (local area connection) party, video games on all of the walls, projectors everywhere and everyone seemed to have brought their own wonky computer. Beeps and squawks, guns, fighting noises and...was that a cowbell?

I expected to see another showdown with Feng Mengbo in Q4U (2002) but it was you in Street Fighter II (Travis Hallenbeck's contribution to the show).

**Chun-Li:** Thursday night definitely was bonus round night, including not only the PlayStation exhibition, curated by Marcin Ramocki and Paul Slocum of 12 digital artists (Mike Berardino, Mauro Ceolin, Mary Flanagan, Travis Hallenbeck, Jeremiah Johnson, Ernesto Klar, Joe McKay, Jason Rohrer, Rafaël Rozendaal, Eddo Stern, and CJ Yeh) but BYOB (Bring Your Own Beamer), where ten artists (Chris Burke, Zach Gage, James George, Travis Hallenbeck, Matt Parker, Billy Rennekamp, Erik Sanner, Alan Shaffer, Paul Slocum, and Charlie Whitney) brought their own games pieces to project.

The "salon style" installation of video projections and screens in a packed house made it difficult to find a focus at first. One piece from the BYOB group of artists that really stood out to me was Erik Sanner's piece *The Problem With Destruction Is That Once You Destroy Something, You Can't Redestroy It* (2010). A video of an orange traffic cone was projected above an enticingly big red button. Upon pressing the button you shot the traffic cone. Press it repeatedly and you could shoot the cone to bits until the video looped and you shot it all over again. I compulsively pressed the button again and again until a friend intervened, assuring me I'd never get a vote from him for president.

**Ryu:** That big red button certainly was irresistible. Sanner's idea of recursive destruction as a creative act kept the crowd busy all night. I don't think there were 5 minutes without the Sanner family gunshots ringing out. This piece stood out as an artwork from the rest of BYOB projections that were straight-up video games like *Street Fighter II*.

**Chun-Li:** It seems that your suggesting straight-up doesn't represent "games as art." I found it refreshing that some pieces, such as *Street Fighter II*, were ready-mades so to speak. And James George's *ShudderShutter VS* (2011) part of the BYOB crew, certainly crosses into the realm of art. In his words it's an antagonistic mobile game. The gist is two players compete against each other by violently shaking their respective iPhones while live feed video of them is projected from both phones. A shudder is rapidly closing over both projections and the more aggressive "shaker" distorts her footage but keeps her image on screen longer. (I use the female pronoun here because I remember beating you in this game Ryu).

**Ryu:** Winning and losing aside, no, I don't think all of the BYOB pieces were "games as art." The dividing line for me is whether or not the work engages any concepts beyond gameplay.

**Chun-Li:** Right, that said the dividing line for "art" has become so much more about price tag, status, and where an artist earned his/her degree. The works on display opening night and in the official exhibition appealed to me because they did not seem to embody art ideals established by the "1%."

The pieces on view, and in use sans tokens, provided platforms for social critique, personal narrative, or as in Rafaël Rozendaal's *Finger Battle* (2011), an impetus to explore one's own OCD behaviors. There was a resonance in the physical juxtapositions of old, new and hybrid hardware and software. I don't think you could achieve the same affect online.

**Ryu:** I still contend that there is a divide, an interesting one, between art and game within the game context. You can't deny a stark contrast between Street Fighter II and Mauro Ceolin's RGB webdroids 2 (2009). While both are "video games" webdroids 2 comments on current socio economics while Street Fighter II just lets me body slam you Chun-Li!

**Chun-Li:** Touché Ryu. I'll admit Thursday night felt more like the "party til it's 1999." When I returned to the gallery on Saturday I formed different impressions for quite a few of the pieces.

**Ryu:** I agree about the return trip. On closer inspection each game had it's own sense of time and distinct place in time. While some games like Rozendaal's Finger Battle used the very contemporary iPhone, most had a sense of nostalgia ranging from Atari or Nintendo controllers to familiar game tropes like asteroids or missile defense. I think the quiet gallery helped the more contemplative pieces like Mary Flanagan's [domestic] (2003).

In contrast to the arcade quality of the main gallery, Ernesto Klar's Luzes Relacionais (2010) provided a more contemplative space. While Klar's work is more contemporary, technologically speaking, than many of the nostalgic pieces in the front gallery, Luzes hearkens back to Anthony McCall's Long Film for Four Projectors (1974)– 16mm film wedges of smoke-filled light ending in interactive minimalist lines create a wonderfully simple work. By the way, what exactly was I breathing?

**Chun-Li:** The back gallery offered full immersion. I stood under one of the triangles of light and asked Scotty to "beam me up."

It's interesting that Klar pays tribute to Lygia Clark, but not to McCall. I wonder if he is aware of the McCall work? I wasn't, prior to your mention. A lot of earlier installation and digital art has only begun to be re-examined.

**Ryu:** The question is, are the interactive elements in Klar's work sufficiently unique to make it significantly different from McCall's installation?

**Chun-Li:** I think context is significant. McCall would have probably incorporated interactivity in his earlier work had there been the technology to do so, but there wasn't. When we see a photo of the McCall and the Klar they seem almost indistinguishable, and this is when experiential aspects really come into "play" (pardon the pun).

**Ryu:** Of course, McCall's work was also interactive, that is, people interrupted the light and changed the installation through physical interaction. With digitally mediated light, there are more possibilities or variations but the question of whether it significantly changes the concept remains.

**Chun-Li:** I don't see a problem in an artist expanding upon the ideas of earlier artists. Honestly how can it be avoided at this point in history? A more interesting aspect of the installation, in the context of the Postmasters show, is its inclusion of Luzes Relacionais as a game. Organic lines of light, both independently expressive and responsive to our gestures, and sound as an amalgam of integrated algorithmic and biological participation– these aren't elements we commonly find integrated into game engines. The curators' extension of interpretation excites me.

To that point I did feel a dichotomy in my own reactions to the broad spectrum of gaming that the works represented. Mary Flanagan's [domestic] for example I watched, interpreted, and even while "playing" I absorbed meaning. On the other hand in Joe McKay's Swatter (2011), an insect killing game, I figured out the mechanics and played for the high score. The physical interface was certainly novel; the player directs his aim with a wooden knob and smacks a fly swatter on a DIY table to

shoot projected insects crawling down the gallery wall. A blue emergency button sometimes worked to save you from the onslaught of bugs.

**Ryu:** I find Flanagan's [domestic] to be a very different experience from the other pieces. The work is a large video projection of a "house" on fire with a video game controller hanging from the ceiling of the gallery. As the game controller slipped into my hands I automatically began moving quickly through the space as though something were chasing me. It was a very visceral response that works against the contemplative content of the work. As I explored the game controller, I discovered I could shoot a green glob at most any surface that would turn into a romance novel. While the piece was rendered in a video game engine and controlled with a game controller, the work is actually an interactive exploration of Flanagan's memories of a house fire. In order to really see the work, I needed to slow down and read.

**Chun-Li:** Yes, it took a while to slow down my reaction time to all of the works. What I appreciated was that there was no "false advertising" in the show description. Flanagan's [pileOfSecrets]: Jump + Ascend (2011) was the only spectator piece, where a viewer couldn't also be a player or user. Quite a counterpoint to the Social Media show a few months ago — a rather static show about online social engagement. There was very little representation of "real" virtual engagement within the exhibition.

**Ryu:** Mauro Ceolin's RGB webdroids 2, an Asteroids style shooter game is a good example of this kind of engagement. With the Happy Mac startup icon replacing the spaceship blasting the logos of E-bay, Skype, Facebook, Flickr, Youtube and my personal favorite, Wikipedia. I think Ceolin was smart to leverage iconic game play that we all know to comment on the relentless data noise of the Internet. Of course, along with the game trope comes the concept that you can never win.



*Ernesto Klar, Luzes Relacionais, 2010. Interactive installation using relations lights, dimension variable. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery*

**Chun-Li:** I'm very competitive as you might have noticed when we competed against each other in Finger Battle, Street Fighter II and Shudder Shutter, but I take perverse pleasure in interactions that are recursive and inconclusive, like RGB... or Jason Rohrer's Inside a Star-filled Sky (2011). Oddly or not Charles and Ray Eames' Powers of 10 came to mind with Rohrer's piece. The work "Playing a painting", a fully functional Atari 2600 painting, Mike Berardino's Electric Paint 2.0 (2011) had its conceptual and perceptual charms.

**Ryu:** You are competitive! Four Finger Battle defeats and you kept coming back for more. After your run in with shooting Sanner's pylon, I was almost afraid to win... almost.

**Chun-Li:** Despite my losses to you, my right hand did beat my left hand in Finger Battle. There were two Zork-like games. One, Jeremiah Johnson's Void Gaze (2011) I found engaging and an evolution of the original platform. Through the right keywords you could unlock images that expanded the narrative and aesthetic experience. Travis Hallenbeck's RPG (Random Party Game) (2011) I found somewhat frustrating. The set up—"Dec 20th, 2012 at 11:30pm"—conjured up all sorts of narrative potential that felt thwarted once I began to interact with the AI.

**Ryu:** As I mentioned before I found it interesting that each game had its own pacing. The older the game was, the slower the tempo seemed to be. I couldn't focus at all on RPG or Void Gaze at the opening. The next day, in the serenity of the quiet gallery, I felt transported back to the 80s and actually slowed down enough to explore the work.

**Chun-Li:** Indeed the opening night was frenetic. I'm looking at a photo of you from the evening leaning over a keyboard, shoulders hunched, mouth agape, glazed over eyes and your fingers are a blur. Let's not talk about the photo of me trying to obtain the true secret to happiness by jumping towards the Google+ block in CJ Yeh's Happiness X 100 (2011).

No digital conversation is complete without keywords. Here's one that I know will put you on the defensive. Nonlinear.

**Ryu:** n.o.n...um...linear?

**Chun-Li:** Yes! N.O.N. L.I.N.E.A.R. as in nonlinear narrative.

**Ryu:** O.K. Chun-Li, I accept your challenge.

**Chun-Li:** Nonlinear narrative — "disjointed narrative or disrupted narrative is a narrative technique, sometimes used in literature, film, hypertext websites and other narratives, wherein events are portrayed out of chronological order. It is often used to mimic the structure and recall of human memory but has been applied for other reasons as well."

That's what Wikipedia says.

**Ryu:** Wikipedia!?! Where's the RGB webdroids 2 Asteroids blaster when you need it?

Each action, idea or thought comes in a linear progression. An ever-new idea is understood only by comparing it to previous experience. While we may take different paths or revisit an earlier stage in a work or game, we can't un-know what we have already experienced. This is as true in Jeremiah Johnson's text-based Void Gaze as it is in Jason Rohrer's Inside a Star-filled Sky. Iterative, recursive, multi-pathed, yes, but nonlinearity doesn't exist for humans. Take that! Right(2) Forward Back Square! (Not Forward Right(2) Square Back).

**Chun-Li:** It exists for humans with short-term memory disorders. (I'm cheating).

**Ryu:** No fair! We call that insanity.

Chun-Li: I think it's an issue of semantics. I think linearity connotes a direction that doesn't diverge from one path. I think of nonlinearity as multi-pathed, as a branching form. I suggest the inherent nature of the Internet is nonlinear, where one always has multiple options (trajectories) instead of a single one. Flanagan's [domestic] provides a nonlinear narrative. The user is provided the agency to experience the work out of sequence.

**Ryu:** Tomato – Tomato eh? O.K. I block your semantic punch and answer with a ludology/narratology combo!

**Chun-Li:** Ah game theory! Ludology as I understand it focuses on the rules of play as the central aspect to gaming. Narratology posits games within a tradition of other narrative and expressive forms. Finger Battle could be favored by a Ludologist for example. Eddo Stern's Earthling (2011),



with its suggestive keywords: road work, survival of the fittest, progress to the right, perhaps would appeal more to the Narratologist.

**Ryu:** Why are these mutually exclusive? Shouldn't the gameplay be informed by the narrative? It seems to me that context is key in understanding any narrative and gameplay is certainly context. This also seems like a very one-sided debate. as I doubt that the Ludologists named themselves this.

**Chun-Li:** "Ludologistlovestoriesto: notesfromadebatethatnevertookplace"

**Ryu:** Nice kick Chun-Li, I stand corrected.

**Chun-Li:** I got a few good kicks in by the way, "for a girl." Which does bring me to the point that out of all the artists in the Play Station show and the BYOB, there was only one woman. Is there an elephant in the room anyone? (Of course one in full-on matrix kick suspension)

**Ryu:** I noticed that too. Gaming seems to be one area in which women haven't gained much ground. I think the numbers of women in interactive art programs are on par with men. Maybe the disparity is just on the game side and not art/tech in general?

**Chun-Li:** On par if not surpassing in school enrollment numbers. But certainly within the commercial game industry there is a dearth of women.

**Ryu:** There are some pretty significant female role models in tech– like Rear-Admiral GraceHopper, co-inventor of COBOL – that are getting more attention now. In gaming do you think that has to do with opportunity or the relative maturity of young men versus young women?

**Chun-Li:** I think the game industry can be comprised of more than men in extended states of adolescence. Brenda Laurel, Theresa Duncan, and Flanagan come to mind as women who have made or are making inroads into games for girls and getting women involved in gaming as "players" (in both senses of the word). I'm optimistic about women being involved in innovative forms of gaming, and as one potential, the extension of passive narrative forms into participatory experiences.

**Ryu:** Interesting, I think the extension of classical narrative forms and not just gameplay is a key feature in a game as art. Of the works in the Playstation show, I think the more successful artworks transcended time. Mary Flanagan's Pile of Secrets for example used clips that ranged from Mario Brothers (1983) to Oblivion (2007). These edited clips of Flanagan playing 1st person shooter games follow characters across multiple games performing the same actions and reinforcing the same limited patterns no matter which game it is.

Jump. Shoot. Punch. Kick. Run. Kind of a sad list in regards to human potential.

**Chun-Li:** Yes, but her other piece Ascending is more aspirational. [Insert smile emoticon].

**Ryu:** I think it will get better soon in the arts. The technology is making its way into the hands of artists who are interested in more than just the technology. The question is, when will the collectors of interactive arts become sophisticated enough to see past the eye candy to the content (or lack thereof)?

**Chun-Li:** What's exciting about the Postmasters show, particularly following the Miami fairs, is that you and I are compelled by the work to ask so many questions, and that there are so many tangents to them. There are not a lot of other art experiences that excite me, rile me, or force me to ask questions about my own preoccupations with art and technology.