

Review: Eddo Stern turns viewers into players at Young Projects

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All art is interactive to the extent that it comes to life inside one's head, but Eddo Stern goes one step further: you literally activate his work with a video-game controller. His impressive exhibition at Young Projects not only turns viewers into players, but distills and examines some of the pervasive tropes of video games and their larger implications in the real world.

"Darkgame (v3.0)" is a wall-sized projection of an avatar — a slim, black, humanoid silhouette — running through a partially darkened, indeterminate space. Floating around this shadowy body are clusters of organs — eyes, ears, hearts, etc. — that accompany it wherever it goes. These represent the player's attributes: The more eyes clustered around you, for example, the more of the landscape you can see. You determine your path with a standard video-game controller, as a disembodied female voice directs you to encounter mysterious, god-like creatures that may give you more powers, but might also take some away. For example, if you run out of eyes, the screen goes black and you must don a vibrating headset to "feel" your way around.

As a video game, it's a bit monotonous, but as art, it's an existential exploration of one of the governing tropes of role-playing games — the constant need to monitor and recharge one's vital signs. Of course in a conventional game, this process is a means to an end — achieving the next level of play, being strong enough to defeat the next enemy — but in Stern's piece it becomes an end in itself, and something of a metaphor for sheer survival.

In similar fashion, "Goldstation" allegorizes the notion of progress for progress' sake. Styled like an old school, 8-bit video game, the projection, flanked by walls lined in reflective foil, depicts a large golden asteroid, moving through outer space. The player controls a row of figures arrayed in a production line across the top of the rock. They take chunks of gold that fall from above, smelt them into bars, and send them off on an interstellar horse cart. Every time the horse departs with a bar, the asteroid moves more quickly. If you don't get a repetitive stress injury first, you can get the workers going at a good clip, and the asteroid starts speeding through the stars.

While "Darkgame" focuses on survival, "Goldstation" trains its sights on the phenomenon known as "grinding," or the often highly repetitive, structured tasks that gamers must perform to achieve some goal. However, the only achievement in this case is speed; the more gold you process, the faster you go in an endless cycle of increase. It's an apt metaphor for certain recent, real-world, wealth-generating endeavors, except that in this case, its pointlessness becomes clear right away.

The show also includes a number of older pieces that are more like traditional video art, and also comment on game conventions, in particular war and violence. There's also a selection of curious motorized Plexiglas sculptures that cast beguiling shadow plays onto the walls. They are more primitive fantasy vehicles, but they serve much the same purpose, to highlight the machinations behind the illusion. As all forms of entertainment become more immersive, that kind of revelation — understanding what we actually do when we play — feels more necessary than ever.