

THE ART OF DISRUPTION

an interview with Joseph DeLappe

by Natasha Chuk

Joseph DeLappe is a disruptor.

Working with digital media since the early 80s, he's completed dozens of projects designed to stir curiosity and question the status quo. His work stretches between the virtual, networked, and physical realms with remarkable fluency. He entered the video game art scene early, pioneering the use of multiplayer video games and virtual worlds as palettes and stages for his performances, interventions, and political and social critiques, pushing the boundaries on what these digital spaces could or should allow. He's recited the entirety of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in a popular online video game; reenacted Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful march of protest of 1930 by walking 240 physical and virtual miles; used the U.S. Army's online video game recruitment tool to memorialize fallen soldiers of the Iraq War; orchestrated the enacting of a gun homicide for each one committed in the United States for a full year in one of the most popular first-person shooter video games in the world; and many others. He continues to experiment with new ways to engage his audience and make trouble, focusing on subjects once considered too serious or too close to reality to enter video game and online social spaces.

He's currently Professor of Games and Tactical Media at Abertay University in Dundee, Scotland — the video game capital of Europe — after directing the Digital Media program at the University of Nevada in the United States for 23 years.

We met remotely from our homes in Dundee and the Catskills in New York, respectively, to talk at length about how it all got started, influences ranging from Tehching Hsieh to Andy Kaufman, and third-person shooters as staging grounds for protest.

Our conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.



The artist standing in front of *Cardboard Gandhi* (2008-09).

NC: I'd like to start with how you got started. I'm curious how you got into being at the intersection of art, performance, interaction, and video games — how that came to be.

JD: Well, let's see. I played some video games — probably the original *Pong* — in the late 70s. Some friends had that set up. It was, you know, like *Pong*. And in the 80s, I played some arcade games. When I was in the dormitory in college it was the *Star Wars TIE Fighter*¹ game and that original tank game. I can't remember the name of it now, but the one with just basically wire frame tanks going at each other. *Battlezone*, maybe?

NC: Yes, *Battlezone*!²

JD: I got a little obsessed with them for a while, but I really came back to video games in the mid 90s. It was funny because being a university professor and working with students, I saw that they were really into it. There was a lab I ran at the university with 24-hour access for the students, and they were having LAN parties³ after hours thinking they were breaking the rules and stuff. And I was like, eh, that's fine. I don't mind.

But what got me into video games was a kind of curiosity. That was a time when ordering equipment for the labs — before the Apple store and all that — involved going through these physical catalogues like *MacMall*. We had a Mac lab, obviously. So, I would order things for the lab: monitors, keyboards, that kind of thing. And they would send whatever I ordered, but they would also send about a year out of date CD-ROM with games on them. Just freebies, and one of them was *Marathon*⁴ by Bungie. It's one of the first 3D environmental kind of shooter games, and I still remember the first experience of that and going into that sort of 3D space. It's a typical first-person shooter experience — trying to escape from aliens. I don't even remember the narrative, really. But it's weird. We're so used to this kind of thing now, but going into it, I remember I couldn't sleep that first night. I couldn't get the images out of my head, that kind of movement through 3D space. It was really kind of disturbing, in a way, but also very intriguing. From there, I started checking out other games, like *Quake*⁵ and that type of thing.

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¹ *Star Wars TIE Fighter* (Lucasarts, 1994) is a flight simulator and space combat game. It remains critically acclaimed, often listed as one of the best video games of all time. *Game Byte* magazine's review of the game by Phil Sander states, “The ‘meat’ of Tie Fighter exists inside the simulation itself. Once you drop into that cockpit, you are transported into the Star Wars Universe, an as yet unsurpassed medium of (though I hate to say it) virtual reality.” Sander's “single complaint” about the game is its “weak, anticlimactic ending.” (<http://www.ibiblio.org/GameBytes/issue21/editor/tierev.html>: accessed July 5, 2021).

² *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980) is a first-person shooter tank combat game that featured wireframe vector graphic tanks in a three-dimensional environment. It's considered the first successful first-person shooter and was a huge 3D success. It was initially released as an arcade game but was eventually ported to various systems, including the *Apple II*, *Atari 2600*, *Commodore 64*, *IBM PC*, *ZX Spectrum*, and others. Based on its success and potential for realism, Atari and one of their lead designers of the game Ed Rotberg were approached by a group of retired U.S. Army generals to design a version of the game for military training. This led to the creation of two prototypes of *Military Battlezone*, initially dubbed *The Bradley Trainer*, in 1981. The project didn't go any further, but Rotberg left Atari shortly thereafter and started his own studio and signed a licensing agreement with LucasFilm to work on the *Star Wars* video game. (<https://archive.org/details/nextgen-issue-26/page/n49/mode/2up>: accessed July 5, 2021).

³ LAN stands for local area network, which establishes a connection between devices using a router or switch. LAN parties pre-date online gaming as we know it today, and involved the gathering of users, along with their bulky computers, to host and play multiplayer computer games.

⁴ Released in 1994, this is the first of three games that would make up the *Marathon* trilogy, which is regarded as the spiritual predecessor to the *Halo* series, which first came out in 2001. It's worth noting certain levels of *Marathon* contain self-intersecting geometry, referred to as “5D space” by the game's developers but otherwise known as an “impossible object”. Impossible objects are optical illusions, like the mathematically inspired work of M.C. Escher, which features irregular perspectives and objects caught in the illusion of a perpetual ascent or descent. The *Marathon* games were widely praised for their multiplayer mode and had levels specifically designed for multiplayer gameplay. *Marathon* offered alternatives to the standard deathmatch and introduced the now common real-time voice chat during multiplayer sessions.

⁵ *Quake* (1996) is the successor to id Software's *Doom* series, offering major improvements and a massive contribution to the 3D first-person shooter experience with the development of the *Quake engine*, a dedicated game engine featuring the first true 3D real-time rendering that managed to reduce processing speed using a sophisticated three-dimensional map system. *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a story about the game on its 20th anniversary, arguing it “set the template for video games” and “paved the way for *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, *Overwatch*, *Skyrim*, and even virtual reality by plunging the player into a fully realized 3D world, and simply allowing them to look around freely.” [<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/how-quake-changed-video-games-forever-187984/>: accessed July 5, 2021.] *Quake* also made groundbreaking contributions to multiplayer gaming and the then nascent modding community by supporting a hacker ethic with in-game modification tools. The latter helped usher *Quake*-focused game creations — the most popular being *Team Fortress* (1999) — and encouraged the rise of machinima and “*Quake* movies”, the use of altered gameplay and assets to produce short films. Finally, perhaps somewhat famously, the music and sound design for *Quake* was created by Trent Reznor and Nine Inch Nails, crystallizing its edgy, avant-garde, 90s feel.

NC: How did you begin thinking about games as environments for performance art pieces?

JD: Truly, the catalyst that probably got me into the engagement of games beyond entertainment and distraction was, well actually, I have it right here: it's my artist's mouse.⁶ I was doing a whole series of works making objects out of discarded computer mice that had died in the computer lab. That's the one that was actually functional. I made that and realized a first-shooter game would make the most interesting marks. So, the first game art I made was playing *Unreal*.⁷ It was a series of drawings where I replaced my mouse pad with drawing paper and played levels of the game. It was really quite interesting to see how it was tracking. I wasn't walking, but it's amazing how physical the game is. And with this device, not only does it add weight, but it adds friction with the pencil. My arm would ache. And it made this sound — like clunk clunk — when you're moving it around. It was, in some ways, like punishment for playing because you had to almost earn it with this sort of physical exertion.

I used it for everything, eventually, on the computer: playing games, writing papers, creating student work, surfing the internet.

I think *Quake III Arena*⁸ was probably the first online game I started playing. That's where I got the idea for performing in these spaces, seeing how people communicated across the internet while they were shooting each other. It seemed so fascinating but also kind of anachronistic, in a way. We were using this 19th century invention of the keyboard to text in-game. That became the basis for the first performative intervention, which was *Howl: Elite Force Voyager Online* and the *Star Trek: Voyager — Elite Force* game. It was an experiment. I wondered: what would this be like if you went in there, and rather than shooting and participating in the mayhem, do this other thing? At the time, I probably thought it was pretty silly and kind of stupid, but that was really intriguing because it just didn't seem, at all, like a place where art could exist.

NC: Yeah, absolutely.

“I wondered: what would this be like if you went in there, and rather than shooting and participating in the mayhem, do this other thing?”

⁶ In 1998, DeLappe created *The Artist's Mouse*, which he describes as “an appendage for my Apple desktop mouse to allow me to attach traditional art making tools... literally mapping all my mouse activity through a variety of creative experiments” (<http://www.delappe.net/sculpture/the-artists-mouse/>: accessed July 5, 2021).

⁷ The *Unreal* and *Unity* game engines are the two most popular game engines available. Even I sometimes forget that the *Unreal* series (Epic Games, 1998) is the impetus for the engine's creation. *Unreal* is a first-person shooter and one of the first games to use detail texturing, which makes the surface of objects appear more tactile. Reviewer J.C. Herz describes for *The New York Times* how this effect verges on the cinematic, writing, “Despite what it says on the box, this world isn't unreal. It's hyperreal. Everything you see and hear has been sharpened. Crystallized. Heightened. Torch flickers seem more flamelike than real fire. Water is more watery. Footsteps are crisper. Large exhaust fans are backlit with just the right amount of dust in the room so the blades cast perfect cinematic shadows.” The review goes on to gush about the game world's vastness, “It's a huge world. If you fire your gun across a chasm, the bullet takes a long time to hit the other side. If you drop something off a cliff, it takes a long time to smash on the ground. And you hear it a split second after you see it -- light travels faster than sound. Sound acts the way it should in this world. It bounces differently indoors and outdoors, in tunnels, over water and off stone walls, taking into account the number of obstructions in a room.” More importantly, this game, like many at the time, was experimenting with multiplayer, modification options, real-time engagement, and all the other possibilities afforded by networks and remote player communities. Herz ends the review in awe of what this game has wrought, “[On] any of the big on-line game servers, new pieces of this world are being uploaded, downloaded and swapped daily. Players are pulling together Unreal instant messaging lists... People are giving one another construction tips and suggestions about the feng shui of virtual buildings.... You can pick up new objects for your game space or see how other people are using texture and lighting effects. In 10 years, Martha Stewart will be selling wallpaper this way. We will all be able to fly through her well-pruned gardens. With automatic weapons. Death match at the Stewart manse. We have the technology. Dare to dream.” (<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/06/circuits/game-theory/25game.html>: accessed July 5, 2021.)

⁸ *Quake III Arena* (id Software) is a multiplayer-focused first-person shooter released in 1999.

JD: I had no idea if anyone was doing anything else. Game art wasn't a thing, as far as I knew. But I discovered there were other people doing really interesting stuff in games. It was truly an experimental whim and a kind of intervention that I came back to for other projects. This eventually led to *Quake/Friends*,⁹ *dead-in-iraq*,¹⁰ and then the Gandhi walking piece.¹¹

NC: There's a sort of a split, too, between modders who intended to make games that everybody could potentially play, and modification for the purpose of breaking the game and doing something completely different with it.¹² Conventionally, video games are for play, leisure, escapism. I wonder how that informs the social and political discourse that your work is often charged with. What do you think about that relationship and some of the pushback you've gotten through your interventions?

JD: I would say one of the things that really intrigued me with the modding community — it must have been when *Unreal* first went online, or maybe it was a *Quake* experience — was coming across custom-made maps made by regular gamers. There were a couple of them that stood out: one had carefully created a reproduction of a suburban kitchen, but you were playing in it as the size of a mouse running around in a domestic battle. I thought, wow. This is truly outsider artwork. It was something made for other purposes. That really inspired me to start thinking about those spaces differently.

It was during my first sabbatical leave when I did the *Howl: Elite Force Voyager* piece.¹³ I had worked seven years after getting out of grad school, I had the university position, got tenure, then got a sabbatical. I remember collecting all of these books on theory and art that I was going to read while I was on sabbatical, but I consciously looked at all those books and decided I didn't want to read any of it. I was so exhausted.

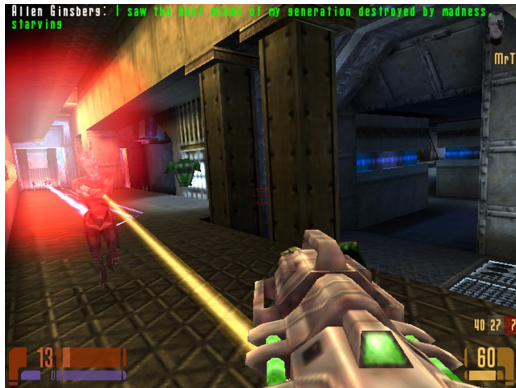
I hadn't read fiction for years, so I started reading fiction and biographies, and one of them was a biography about Andy Kaufman, the comedian. I remember growing up in the 70s and seeing him on various talk shows — *Saturday Night Live* and all that. As I was reading the biography, I couldn't deny that one of his pieces made me think of these game spaces as a performative environment. It was his piece where he was at a university in the Midwest, and he did a verbatim reading of *The Great Gatsby* from start to finish rather than performing comedy. He literally came out on stage and decided: Okay, I'm going to do a reading of — and he read the whole thing. They say, by the time he finished around 4 A.M., there were maybe two students left in the audience. I thought that was brilliant! I already had an interest in performance art and people like Linda Mary Montano,¹⁵ Tehching Hsieh,¹⁶ Laurie Anderson,¹⁷ and others, who also did some interventionist things back in the 70s.

⁹ *Quake/Friends* (2002-03) is an in-game performance event that “involved 6 performers connected to the same ‘Quake III Arena’ first person shooter server online to reenact an episode from the popular TV sitcom, ‘Friends’.” The episode was recreated word-for-word using the game’s messaging system with each of the six participants performing as the characters on the show: Phoebe, Ross, Monica, Joey, Chandler, and Rachel. “The performers functioned as passive, neutral visitors to the game — constantly killed and reincarnated to continue the performance.” (<http://www.delappe.net/game-art/quakefriends/>: accessed July 5, 2021)

¹⁰ *dead-in-Iraq* (2006-11) is a game-based performative intervention. This work began roughly at the beginning of the U.S.-Iraq conflict in 2003 using the free, online U.S. military recruitment game *America's Army*. DeLappe entered the game to “manually type the name, age, service branch and date of death of each service person who has died to date in Iraq. The work is essentially a fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed in this ongoing conflict.” As in *Quake/Friends*, DeLappe stood in position in the game until his avatar was killed, then he hovered over his avatar's dead body and continued to type. Each round allowed for the avatar's reincarnation, which permitted him to continue the cycle. (<http://www.delappe.net/project/dead-in-iraq/>: accessed July 5, 2021)

¹¹ *The Salt Satyagraha Online: Gandhi's March to Dandi in Second Life* (2008) took place over the course of 26 days, from March 12 to April 6, 2008, during a residency at Eyebeam Art and Technology Center in New York City. Using a customized treadmill, DeLappe recreated Mahatma Gandhi's 1930 Salt March — in which he famously walked 240 miles across India as a peaceful protest against the British salt tax — and walked both in the physical world (using a treadmill) and in *Second Life*, represented by an avatar created by DeLappe, MGandhi Chakrabarti. DeLappe's treadmill was programmed to control the movements of his avatar, enabling a physical and virtual synthesis of movement, and two corresponding reenactments of the march. DeLappe walked more than 240 miles physical miles, as he was subjected to occasional system glitches that lost some of the progress he made on his virtual walk in *Second Life*. I had a chance to visit Eyebeam (back when it was still located in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan) to see this project unfold in person and witness the artist at work: both physically on a modified treadmill and projected on screen as an avatar in *Second Life*. *Second Life* is an online, three-dimensional virtual space that launched in 2003. (<http://www.delappe.net/game-art/mgandhis-march-to-dandi-in-second-life>: accessed July 5, 2021)

¹² Today, modding is a huge part of video game culture. Mods, or modifications to video games, are in many ways another way of referring to hacking, which is a central feature of peer-to-peer sharing and development in computing. Mods are largely the byproduct of technical allowances made by the developer, who determines the flexibility of their software, like creating customization options and allowing the ability to record and share aspects of a game with others. *Lode Runner* (Broderbund, 1983) is noted as the first game to allow players to save and share levels with other players on the same computer. Although id Software didn't officially design mod capabilities into *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), the game was flexible enough for players to design additional levels and modify the game's content. This inspired id to design *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996) to be easily modifiable, even going as far as including map editing tools.



¹³ Using *Star Trek Elite Force Voyager Online* as a kind of stage, *Howl: Elite Force Voyager Online* (2001) involved DeLappe's recitation via game text messaging of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), one of the most famous and widely read poems of the 20th century that was initially considered obscene by the establishment. DeLappe's recitation took over six hours to complete. (<http://www.delappe.net/play/howl-elite-force-voyager-online/>: accessed July 5, 2021).

¹⁴ Andy Kaufman (1949-1984) was an American performer and comedian who was sometimes referred to as an anti-comedian and thus challenged traditional methods of joke-making, storytelling, and humor.

¹⁵ Linda Mary Montano (b. 1942) is an American performance artist who participated in the first-wave feminist dialogue of the 1970s and detailed how to perform living art in her 1981 book *Art in Everyday Life*. She is best known for her elaborate endurance-based works, including *Art/Life: One Year Performance* (1983-84), in which she and the Taiwanese performance artist Tehching Hsieh spent a year tied together with an eight-foot rope.

¹⁶ Tehching Hsieh (b. 1950) is a Taiwanese performance artist best known for his durational works, including several one-year performances, such as *Art/Life: One Year Performance* (1983-84) with Linda Mary Montano, and my favorite, *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, in which the artist punched a time clock every hour on the hour and took a single photo of himself, resulting in a six-minute video that documents his repetitive act and physical transformation over the course of a year.

¹⁷ Laurie Anderson (b. 1947) is an American avant-garde multimedia artist and pioneer of electronic music who began as a classically trained violinist. Her performance art pieces stretch across a variety of mediums, venues, and often collaborators, including performing in one of my favorite works Nam June Paik's *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), an international satellite art and live performance installation event. In 1974, she created *Self-Playing Violin*, a violin that contained a small, concealed speaker inside its body and played pre-recorded music on a loop to accompany her playing live using its strings. In 2017, she created a VR-based work, *The Chalkroom*, in collaboration with artist Hsin-Chien Huang, a truly meditative experience with her voiceover accompaniment. The breadth of her work over the years is vast. She's also been a children's book illustrator, comic book artist, poet, composer, photographer, and art critic. In short, Anderson is a fixture of the avant-garde art scene and a New York City staple. I had the pleasure of being part of a week-long master class she led when I was a graduate student at The New School in 2005.



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM):
The Artist's Mouse (1988);
screenshot of *Howl: Elite Voyager Online* (2001);
screenshot of *Quake/Friends* (2002-03).

JD: It seemed these game spaces were considered kind of edgy territory where kids were engaging in violent behavior that was polluting their brains. I looked at bringing poetry into that space as a kind of counterargument to those environments, or to what was going on in them, and think of them differently. The first four or five pieces were a bit more theatrical, performative as a kind of cultural criticism. In 2004, I did a deeply political but absurd reenactment¹⁸ of each of the presidential debates between Kerry and Bush¹⁹ in different game spaces. There was quite a bit of pushback on some of those. Depending on people’s political bent, they would be really upset or really supportive of which candidate I was reenacting.

The *dead-in-Iraq* piece was when I really took the plunge into overtly political action. I remember when the *America’s Army* game²⁰ was released in 2002, just a year after I did *Howl*. I remember thinking: whoa, this is a serious game. The idea for *dead-in-Iraq* started to germinate. Less than a year after the Iraq War started, the results from the competition for the World Trade Center site were published on a website where you could see all five thousand-plus entries. I remember thinking about how many more civilians had died in Iraq already than died in 9/11. It’s, of course, appropriate to memorialize what happened, but then I started thinking that we’re working towards the next Vietnam Veterans Memorial²¹ after the Iraq War is over. I wondered if there would ever be a memorial to the many thousands of civilians being killed. My initial thought with *dead-in-Iraq* was to go into the *America’s Army* game and type in the names of Iraqi civilians who had been killed. But, of course, we didn’t track those, so there wasn’t a database of that information. There still isn’t an accurate account. Some estimate over a million people. I also backtracked from the idea of putting the blame squarely on American soldiers for those deaths, because it’s us — collectively. I did a separate project, iraqimemorial.org, that was based on memorializing the civilians.

dead-in-Iraq focused on American military casualties in Iraq. That game space — which is government-funded, so it’s like you’re going on a military base when you play that game, essentially online military territory — seemed like the right source to protest to, directly to that context. My intentions were equally to protest and to say, “Hey! Think about this! This platform’s here to get you to join up! This isn’t play.” I wondered what the consequences of that could be. The pushback in the game and outside the game was difficult but informative and motivating. I’m a rather stubborn person, and in some ways, it steeled my determination to keep doing it. It seemed to be reaching people. I think that’s when you’re doing something that is protest. You’re not necessarily trying to make people happy. You want to get under their skin and get them thinking about what’s going on. It seemed to accomplish that.

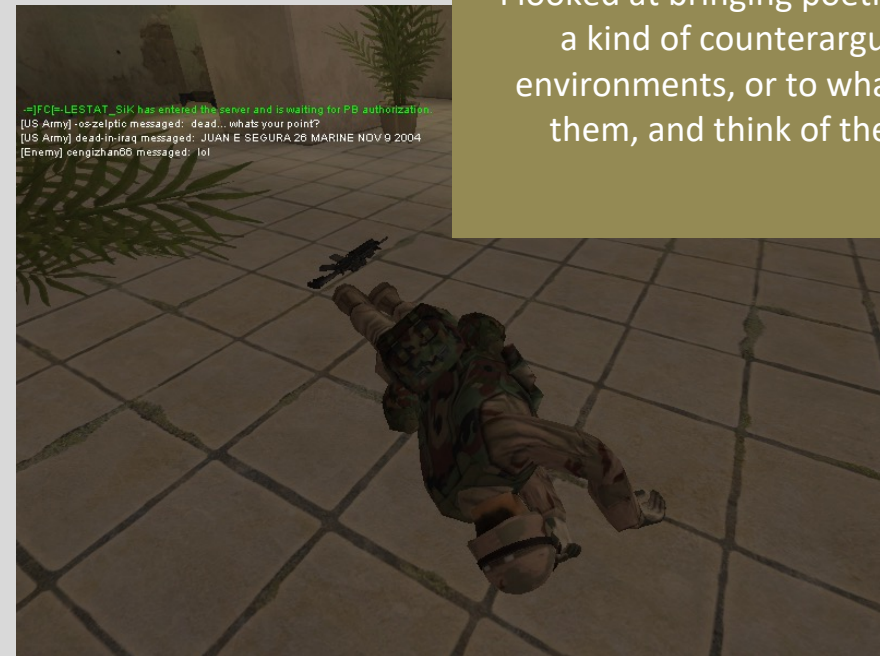
Some of the pushback included things like, “Well, what if you were playing a tennis match, and I came in and started bashing your ball around? Would you like that?” To that question, I felt like I would be curious why you were doing it!

¹⁸ DeLappe’s *The Great Debates* (2004) was a game-based reenactment performed in three parts and on three multiplayer video game stages: *Battlefield Vietnam*, *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, and *The Sims Online*.

¹⁹ In 2004, the U.S. presidential contenders were Republican incumbent George W. Bush and Democratic candidate John Kerry.

²⁰ *America’s Army* (2002), built on the Unreal game engine, is a free, online multiplayer first-person shooter developed and published by the U.S. Army as a recruitment tool.

²¹ Located in Washington, D.C. and completed in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a two-acre site that honors U.S. armed service members who fought in the Vietnam War and features a black granite wall designed by American artist and sculptor Maya Lin (b. 1959), which is engraved with the names of service members who died in the war. A political artist in her own right — she’s known for her historical memorials and more recently has made work concerning the Anthropocene — it’s easy to make comparisons with some of DeLappe’s work. As a designer with an architecture and computer programming background, Lin’s work concerns the implications of public space, social interaction, history and cultural memory, much like DeLappe’s.



Screenshot of *dead-in-Iraq* (2006-11).

“I looked at bringing poetry into that space as a kind of counterargument to those environments, or to what was going on in them, and think of them differently.”

NC: And if the protest was directly related to tennis, you would want to know why.

JD: Exactly! If tennis players are being killed or something. I think from the get-go, doing these in-game performances was a way of thinking about these spaces as a new type of public square. If you need to reach people, you need to go where they are. Some of it was motivated by things like protest was being disallowed in shopping malls because it's considered private property. Some public advocates noted this is where people are. In so many American cities, this is the one place you can be around people who are not in their cars. As things went on [with *dead-in-Iraq*] people were responding to various news stories and contacting me directly, and that became important both in terms of helping me figure out the work, while I was making it, and as an opportunity for dialogue, extending beyond the work. I look for that, as much as anything now when I when I do these kinds of things. It becomes very central to have an opportunity for discussion, or to share after the fact, like continuing to talk about *dead-in-Iraq*²² now. It's been ten years since it ended.

NC: That piece still feels relevant in terms of how we engage these spaces. Your work is very provocative, on one hand, but it also feels like a conversation. You are open to feedback and discussions with complete strangers, who are sometimes attacking you, but I also see the work as a dialogue within itself. I'd like to know how you approach allowing the work to take on a life of its own. It has all these tentacles with you adding different components to it. How does it start from being an intervention within this game world, and then stretching beyond that, where you have all these other outlets for it?

JD: It is organic in a way. When I was doing *dead-in-Iraq* and people started to become interested in exhibiting it, I had to think about how I would do that, like recording a session of it. I think of it almost like falling upstairs, with some intention. You kind of discover these things as you go. I'm trying to remember the first article about the work. I want to say it was Marisa Olson²³ who wrote a post on *Rhizome*²⁴ about *dead-in-Iraq* that then attracted some other news from Salon,²⁵ who did the first article about it. The comments on that story were really, really brutal. Some say you shouldn't read the comments, but of course I did. This led me to realize, "wait a minute, this person doesn't get it," or "wait a minute, this person's saying something really completely wrong," or something I completely disagree with. Do I engage? Or do I just sit back and let this conversation happen? But it was so heavily dominated by negativity, that I decided to register on the site, use my name, and go in and have a conversation. It was this kind of reacting to what was going on: putting the work out there as a catalyst for something to happen. You hope something will happen. You're not sure what will happen, but then trying to react to those things in a way that isn't completely shooting from the hip. Trying to keep it as smart and compassionate and have that carry through every aspect of how the work evolves. I like doing things and seeing what happens when I put it out there. It's an active process, for sure.

²² *dead-in-Iraq* ran from 2006-2011.

²³ Marisa Olson is an artist, writer, and media theorist who has been an editor and curator at *Rhizome* and helped establish a vocabulary for new media criticism.

²⁴ Founded by the artist Mark Tribe, *Rhizome* is an organization and online hub that "champions born digital art and culture through commissions, exhibitions, scholarship, and digital preservation." Since 2003, it has been affiliated with the New Museum in New York City. (<https://rhizome.org/about/>: accessed July 5, 2021).

²⁵ Rebecca Clarren wrote an article for Salon titled "Virtually dead in Iraq" writing, "To protest the war in Iraq, a media artist infiltrates the U.S. Army's popular online video game and gets himself shot. While angry gamers, soldiers and even some peace activists call him a nuisance, others say his message hits home." While readers' comments are no longer available online, the article includes some feedback from a number of critics, including 17-year-old Texan Robert Kirby who says, "I already think about my friends enough who died, and the ones who are over there right now. I really don't care to see someone like [DeLappe] trolling in that server trying to stir up emotions like that." By contrast, a supporter of DeLappe's piece, member of the antiwar group Military Families Speak Out, and mother of a soldier who was killed in Iraq says, "I've always believed when people participate in virtual violence, it makes the victims of violence become less empathetic and less real, and people become immune to the real pain people suffer. This war is real blood, and it's real families that answer the door to learn that their loved ones have been killed." (<https://www.salon.com/2006/09/16/americasarmy/>: accessed July 5, 2021).



Screenshot of *dead-in-Iraq* (2006-11).

NC: There's a lot of fluidity, too. How do world events shape your practice? How does an event, or something that's going on in the world, become a focal point, or a subject, in one of your works?

JD: That's definitely a challenging aspect. When first I moved to Scotland, I remember a friend asking me how this was going to change my work, which is about American politics and militarism. I didn't know. I was here in Scotland looking for a place to live, to move in January 2017, when Trump was elected. I was here on election night. I think I went into shock, like everybody else, and felt it was very difficult to make any work about him. I think a lot of artists tried and just couldn't. I think I was anxiety-ridden, depressed, and saw such a rapid shift to this authoritarian. I didn't do any work about him at all. I'd say those first few years here, during the Trump years, were a bit challenging. Oddly enough, it also led to the work *Elegy*, which was, in a way, a reaction to Trump. That work was looking back at America, even the formal quality of it has a backward tracking camera. I think it was a bit of a swan song, for me, moving abroad.


The pandemic has been interesting because I know many artists who have been really active during this time. For me, it's been really difficult to make much. I've been thinking a lot, and I think one of the challenges of doing political art, if you're reacting to what's happening in the now, is sometimes you have to be really fast. You have to be accepting of the fact that the work probably exists in a certain time frame. You may not be making work that's going to be relevant 50 years from now. I've gotten to the point where I'm okay with that. I don't want to see us in this situation in 50 years.

It is challenging. I will oftentimes have ideas for works about a current thing that really gets under my skin, but often, a few weeks later, in our very short attention span culture, it sort of disappears. Like NFTs.²⁶ I had some initial thoughts about reacting to them, but I don't think we care that deeply about that kind of stuff.

NC: Right, not enough to formally react to it.

JD: Yeah, like there are bigger issues. One of the challenges I've had is an unstable internet connection here, so it's been very difficult for me to even think about doing any sort of major online works. I think my interest remains connected to exploring militarism and violence but also focusing more on the environmental and climate crisis. Right now, I'm in the process of writing a grant with some collaborators on an exciting project exploring environmental issues through XR technologies and gaming. It's focused on a very sensitive environmental site that no one should visit. So, the question is, how do you tell stories about that type of thing? But it has a nine-month review process for the grant. You basically submit these things, and then you're plotting out doing your work in a year from now. This is strange for me, because I'm the kind of person who says, "Oh, here's an idea. Let's do this!" I try to balance that with other things, like *Elegy*. That was definitely a response to a political situation.

²⁶ NFT stands for non-fungible token, a unique token using a cryptocurrency blockchain, like Ethereum. NFTs can be anything digital (music, video, images, etc.). Because they are certifiably unique, they offer a smart way for digital artists to sell their work. Artwork can be bought and sold as a unique digital object, and ownership can be tracked using the blockchain. Their popularity has boomed in recent months, but they have made headlines for at least two reasons. First, some crypto art has sold for millions of dollars, establishing a bizarre value system for items that are questionable as works of art, like Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey's first tweet, or viral videos that have lived on YouTube for over a decade. Second, many have raised concerns about the negative ecological impact of NFTs. Though the precise data on this remains unclear, it's already well known that mining cryptocurrencies is incredibly energy inefficient, as it unavoidably involves the release of large amounts of gas emissions into the atmosphere.



"You have to be accepting of the fact that the work probably exists in a certain time frame. You may not be making work that's going to be relevant 50 years from now. ...I'm okay with that. I don't want to see us in this situation in 50 years."

NC: *Elegy* is not only relevant but also provocative in this way that we've been discussing. I'd love to hear more about how it came together.

JD: It was in January of 2018 when I went to Los Angeles and worked on a low-polygon cardboard sculpture that was meant to be a kind of memorial to victims of mass shootings. It was an enormous sculpture of an AR-15 assault rifle called *Thoughts and Prayers*.²⁷ After that, there was a horrible massacre²⁸ at a high school in Florida. In response, Trump made some comments that violence in video games was partially to blame. It was that same old argument.²⁹ A local newspaper here in Dundee, *The Courier*, contacted our university, which is the top games university in the U.K. and Europe. They were looking for a comment from a games expert about Trump blaming video game violence for what happened in Florida, and they put me in touch. Before I talked to the reporter, I did a little bit of research. American gun violence is so apparent: it's just there when you're in the States. Looking at it from here, it seems different. What jumped out at me from the research is, first, there hasn't been a proven connection between video games and violence, or real-world violence. I wouldn't say they're not formative, in terms of our thinking or how they shape us, but they haven't made that direct connection any more than we can make a connection between violent films in Hollywood and all that. That's another discussion. There's also a website called the *Gun Violence Archive*,³⁰ which basically keeps a daily tracking of gun violence in the States. In 2018, I was looking at the total numbers from 2017, and it was close to 15,000 people killed in gun homicides. I thought that was crazy because during the entire Iraq War, there were less than 5,000 American troops killed. If you count in suicides, it's more than doubled. It was just this moment of clarity, feeling like this is actually quite extreme. When I was working on *dead-in-Iraq*, one of the ideas I had was to include a kind of casualty counter. In pretty much all shooter games, if your avatar gets killed, it usually lies in state for a few minutes, and then it conveniently disappears, sort of vanishes. But I wondered, what if you could make them all stay? And the bodies just piled up?

NC: Yes, to visualize those deaths.

JD: Yeah, and that was the initial concept for *Elegy*,³¹ using *GTA*.³² It's such a perfect kind of representation of Los Angeles, the American city. And plus, that was where moving to Scotland kind of came into play a little bit as well. *GTA* came from Dundee.³³

Natasha Chuk: It all came together!

JD: In fact, it was made mostly by game designers who had never been to the States, and they based their game off watching American gangster movies.

NC: Yes, full of stereotypes.

²⁷ DeLappe collaborated with artist Pete Froslic to make *Thoughts and Prayers* (2018), a massive (20-foot) low-polygon cardboard sculpture of an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. "The work is meant to physically and symbolically represent the seemingly intractable issue of gun violence in the United States while at the same time providing a rebuttal of sorts to the 'thoughts and prayers' so often expressed after each seemingly inevitable mass shooting." (<http://www.delappe.net/sculptureinstallation/thoughts-and-prayers/>: accessed July 5, 2021).

²⁸ On February 14, 2018, a 19-year-old gunman opened fire on students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, USA killing 17 people and injuring 17 others.

²⁹ The debate over whether violent video games lead to real-world violence has raged on since the video games industry began in the arcades. Perhaps the catalyst for this in the United States was the game *Death Race* (1976), which was inspired by the film *Death Race 2000* (dir. Paul Bartel, 1975) about a dystopian future in which automobile races are organized as a sport to run over pedestrians, with each kill category worth a different number of points. Though the arcade game was graphically abstract and lacked narrative context for what was happening in the game, i.e. running over innocent humans, it included a realistic steering wheel as the main controller. Since then, concerned parent groups and conservative politicians alike claimed video games were the latest negative influence on society, and worse, one of the reasons behind violent behaviors and actions, especially among children and teens. The mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, USA in 1999 felt like the straw that broke the camel's back when it was discovered that the teen shooters, who died by suicide as part of the massacre, played *Doom* and *Duke Nukem*, two video games known for their graphic violence, advanced visual realism, and first-person perspective. On one hand, we have a history of moral panics, that gravitate toward hysteria when it comes to youth culture, especially concerning newly introduced fictional media. On the other hand, popular media demonstrate a high tolerance for violence and valorize it in all its fictional and fantastical possibilities, moving the needle on what's considered going too far, not only in video games but other media as well. This can get confusing, especially for young players who often cite violent video games as an outlet for aggression.

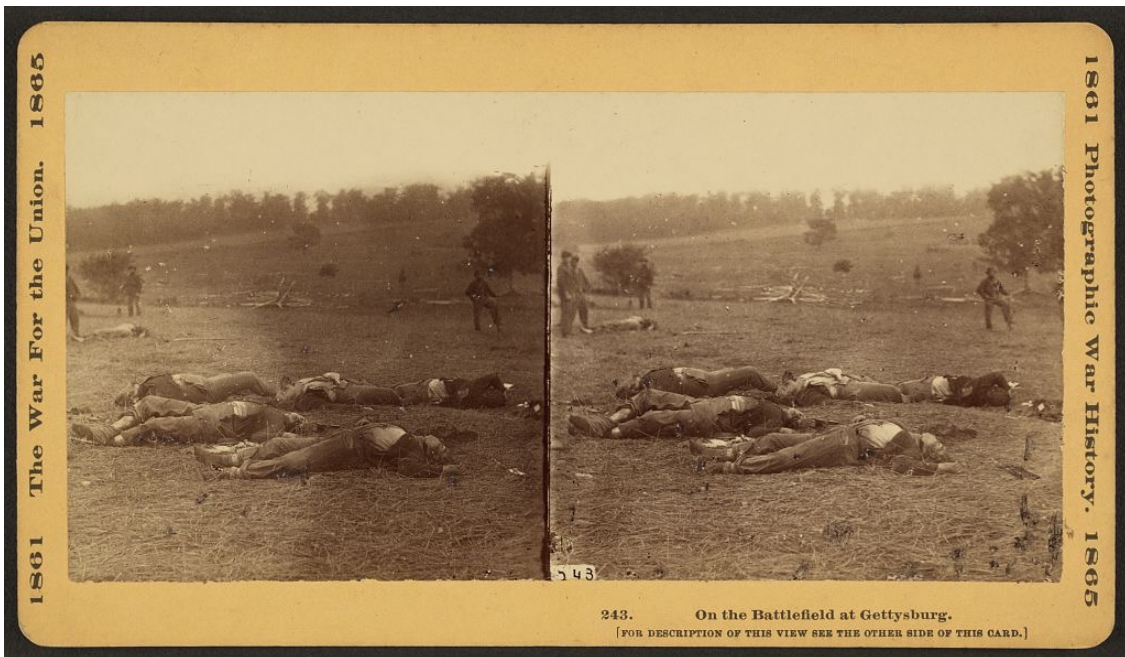
³⁰ The *Gun Violence Archive* (GVA) is a not-for-profit corporation that formed in 2013 "to provide free online public access to accurate information about gun-related violence in the United States." The archive collects data from "over 7,500 law enforcement, media, government and commercial sources daily" and is "an independent data collection and research group with no affiliation with any advocacy organization." (<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/about>: accessed July 5, 2021).

³¹ DeLappe's *Elegy: GTA USA Gun Homicides* (2018-19) is a game mod for *Grand Theft Auto V*. It scrapes data from the *GVA* to visually illustrate via in-game enactment gun homicides in the U.S. as they are happening in close to real time. Looped non-diegetic music accompanies the work: a crackling first radio recording of *God Bless America* sung by Kate Smith in 1938. The game mod ran for a full year from July 4, 2018 to July 4, 2019 (Independence Day). Seen as still images, *Elegy* bears an eerie resemblance to documentation photos taken of American Civil War battlefields.



³² *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) is the fifth game in the *GTA* franchise and is set in the fictional state of San Andreas and the city Los Santos, designed to look and feel like Southern California and Los Angeles, respectively.

³³ With a major video game franchise credit like *Grand Theft Auto*, Dundee has without a doubt made a name for itself on the global stage, but more than that, it's considered the video game capitol of Europe. It's the go-to place to study video games and to make them: Dundee is home to dozens of video game companies and start-ups and numerous sophisticated university programs in video game design. Abertay University was the first in the world to launch a video games degree program in 1997 and has ranked first among other university programs in Europe for nearly a decade. They recently launched a partnership with neighboring Scottish universities, Dundee University and the University of St. Andrews, to expand their video games research and development offerings. Dundee's successful tech industry is the result of a gradual transition over the years from an industrial economy. In 1982, Dundee was home to a factory that assembled and packaged the *ZX Spectrum* home computer (Europe's equivalent to the *Apple II*). Rockstar North, initially DMA Design Limited, was founded there in 1987. In 1991, they developed the popular puzzle game *Lemmings* and eventually the first *Grand Theft Auto* game in 1997, which was of course a huge success and resulted in the creation and release of the second installation of the franchise just two years later in 1999. Rockstar North is behind such notable games as *Manhunt*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *Max Payne 3*.



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM):
 Screenshot of *Elegy: GTA USA Gun Homicides* (2018-19);
On the battle at Gettysburg (1863), photographer James F. Gibson, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

JD: And San Andreas, they say, is actually St. Andrews, which is nearby.

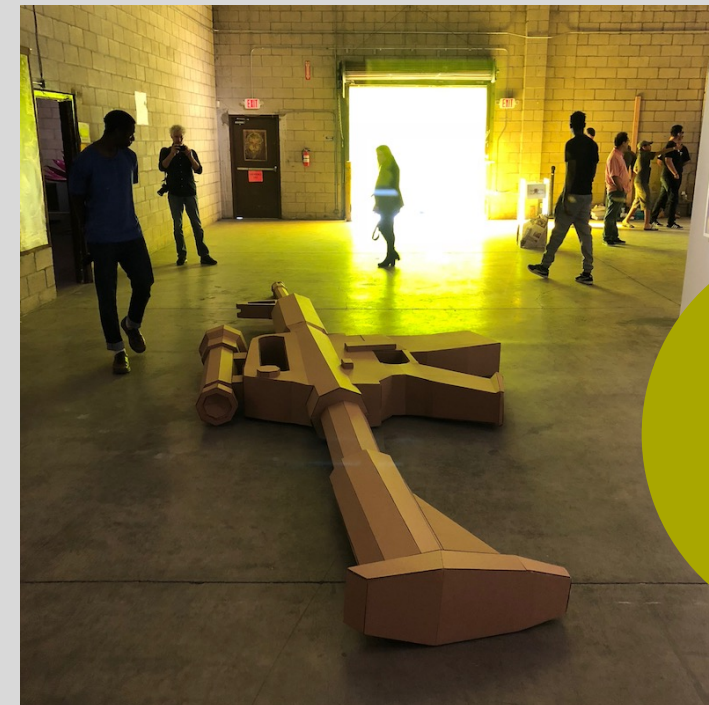
In early 2017, I got a Guggenheim fellowship, which was amazing. It was this wonderful shot in the arm and also cash, which allowed me to support doing some work. I used that to hire a coder who worked with me on the programming for *Elegy*, which took us through a process of elimination because I wanted to be able to let all the bodies pile up. The question was: can you have 15,000 bodies building over a year in this game space? We discovered that, in fact, you can't because there are restrictions built into *GTA* that only allow for something like 256 NPCs in any given space or territory. It's a memory thing. It can only represent so many at a time. So, we had to decide how to represent this number of deaths occurring over time, and also, could we scrape the data in real-time from this gun violence archive? Because we didn't want the NPCs to disappear after they died, we thought maybe it needed to be a moving experience through the game. So that's what we did. The first experiment was with a forward-facing view, which just wasn't quite right. It felt too familiar. Turning it to a backtracking view was just perfect. My immediate response was just — sometimes you just know. For me, it was like you know when you're watching a film towards the end, and all of a sudden, the camera shifts in a different way, and you know that means it's ending? It was that. It was just like that, but it was constant. Then adding the music, *God Bless America*,³⁴ tied it all together.

NC: Yeah, I thought that was a nice touch.

JD: It took months to make, and it made sense to spend that much time on a work because of the timeliness and the timelessness of it, sadly, because we knew this problem wasn't going to go away. It was something that was there, and it's even worse now. With the pandemic, the violence has gone up dramatically. If I had my druthers with that piece, it would still be running now. It was an interesting shift for me, because most of the performance work I've done has been very physical: typing, walking, or this kind of thing. This was in some ways a response to that. When I was doing *dead-in-Iraq* and was in *America's Army*, the only time I broke out of character, if you will, was when someone would say something like, "Oh, it's just a bot" typing in these names. I'd type, "No, I'm not a bot. I'm actually here." But what if this was a bot? What would that be like? That idea germinates in *Elegy* because it was an automated, self-playing game that removed me from that process entirely. Except that I became a 24/7 babysitter of this PC running at my studio that I was remotely checking on to make sure it was working, and then rebooting it when it crashed. It crashed about three times a day because of the intensity of it. So, it was this weird, durational partnership with this system. There is something rewarding about doing that. Keeping an artwork going for a year? I find something really engaging in that process.

NC: Absolutely!

³⁴ *God Bless America* is a patriotic American song written by the composer and Russian-Jewish immigrant Irving Berlin in 1938 as a lead-up to World War II. He wrote an original, comparatively more somber version in 1918. According to historian Sheryl Kaskowitz, *God Bless America* has undergone numerous interpretations by various groups throughout history: "I found uses of it in labor rallies, union protests. Early on in the civil rights movement, it was often sung... It was really the Vietnam War that solidified its more conservative uses, as upholding the status quo. Counter protesters at peace rallies would sing it to represent the administration and support what they were doing." Even during its initial release, there were contrasting criticisms of the song: the great American folk singer Woody Guthrie "thought it was a whitewash of everything wrong in America" and "it was boycotted by the Ku Klux Klan and by some domestic Nazi groups" because Berlin was a Jewish immigrant. Despite these criticisms, in 1938 the power of radio during WWII helped cement the song as a rallying tune for freedom and unity and helped raise money for war bonds. Following the 9/11 attacks, the song resurfaced as a symbol of American patriotism and strength in the face of defeat and became a staple performance at all major league baseball games in the United States. The use of this song in DeLappe's *Elegy* references this entangled history and represents the complicated relations Americans have with the ideas of freedom and patriotism, and perhaps what they're willing to do to protect both. From an aesthetic standpoint, it stands as a sonic counterpoint to the visual depictions of violence, and its melody acts as a complement to the continuous backward moving tracking shot of the piece. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Bless_America + <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/04/625980953/encore-for-god-bless-america-a-long-gestation-and-venomous-backlash>: accessed July 5, 2021).



Installation view
of *Thoughts and
Prayers* (2018).

JD: But that's got to be the darkest piece I've made. Even darker than *dead-in-Iraq*. I remember a friend saying, "There's no light in this piece." It was just so dark. There was a writer who wrote about it, who framed it as having a weird, almost dark humor in it. There is an absurdity in watching bikini-clad beachgoers shooting each other, or the suburban setting. The avatars are very odd in those spaces, and there's a very disturbing racial component as well. You really couldn't look away from it if you were watching it. This is what you want, because then it gets under people's skin. Hopefully, they start thinking about the enormity of what's happening. It's a way to sort of make it real and use the game to point back out at the world, where the violence was actually happening, rather than keeping it internal.

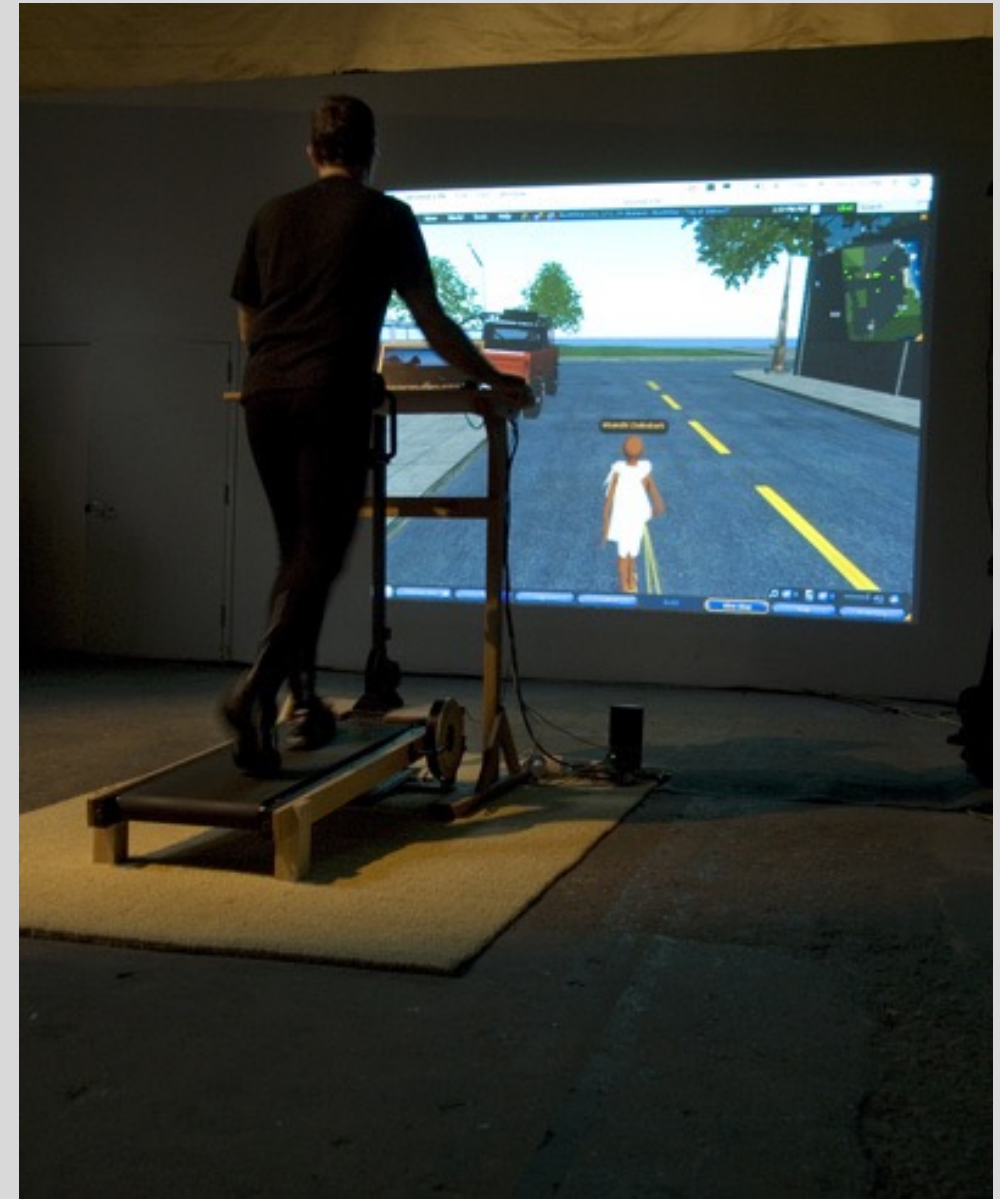
NC: And expose that excess in a way that's meaningful, that doesn't just leave you feeling complacent again. That can become a pattern.

JD: Yeah, exactly. I think that's one of the reasons I find games interesting for addressing these kinds of current events or history, for that matter. They can give a different perspective or way of kind of looking at these things, a fresh way. Because how do you take 15,000 homicide gun casualties and make that seem visceral and real?

NC: I'm really interested in how you bridged virtual violence with real-world violence. We can have a conversation about violence in either space, but this work really occupies, or inhabits both spaces simultaneously. I also really appreciate the technical limitations, some of which you can exploit and some that you manage, as part of the process. I wonder if we could talk a little bit about that, because you've had to reboot, or restart, and lost content or information in some cases. Was there anything else that stood out about *Elegy* that sort of speaks to this?

JD: It's the first piece I've ever live streamed using *Twitch*,³⁵ which was quite something. I think we ended up getting about 235,000 views, which compared to some Twitch stuff, that's nothing. But I found, particularly in the first weeks of the piece, when it was getting some good press, there were people checking it out. It was another point of being able to have some dialogue over the chats, though very difficult to have extensive dialogue. It would come and go, and it doesn't save itself during a livestream. But there were a lot of interesting questions coming in, including from some confused gamers, who were like, "Why are you pointing the finger at video games? Everybody does it!" I had to respond with something like, "Please go to this link and read a bit about it before you make up your mind." And, "It's actually doing something different than ordinary video games." Again, it was an opportunity to have a bit of a conversation. I think Twitch is an interesting platform. There are a lot of artists using it, at this point. There's some real potential there for reaching non-art audiences, and almost getting into a different kind of context. That was definitely key to that piece, how people were seeing and experiencing it.

³⁵ Launched in 2011, *Twitch* is a live streaming service that focuses on video games and the video gaming community with broadcasts of esports competitions and live streams of individual game play, among other things. In 2014, it was bought by Amazon.



The artist during the performance of *The Salt Satyagraha Online: Gandhi's March to Dandi in Second Life* (2008) at Eyebeam in New York City.

JD: When I was at *Eyebeam* in New York doing the *Gandhi* project (and doing *dead-in-Iraq* at the same time), I remember a very high-powered curator came in from a New York gallery and was talking with some of the residents there and to me about both projects. One of the questions they asked was, “How many people are watching you do this *Gandhi* thing at any given time?” Like wondering how many people might be in *Second Life*. A region in *Second Life* had a limit at that time, something like 60 avatars. But there was also a question about *dead-in-Iraq*, about how many players there are at a time. I said it was anywhere from 12 to 18 players. And I remember him thinking that’s not reaching a lot of people. I remember afterwards being sort of angry — and I didn’t respond well to it when he asked — and thinking, so what? Maybe you have 12 people come through your gallery in a day, and that’s okay?

NC: Who may not even be engaged.

JD: Yeah! He seemed to be missing the point.

NC: Yeah, and misunderstanding the platform and how fluid it is.

JD: Yeah, and the reach beyond that through the videos, the press, and all of that, potentially reaching millions of eyeballs. Those kinds of things are always intriguing to me.

NC: It just goes to show how differently we regard some of these spaces today. When you refer to *Minecraft*,³⁶ for example, it means something different than what it meant when we talked about *Second Life* at that time, even though they have many similarities.

I’m interested in the idea of an intervention and its impact in these spaces as well as how this relates to performance art. You mentioned earlier there’s a kind of torture to it. I think of the treadmill you used in the *Gandhi* piece, which was at one time a kind of torture device, designed as a form of punishment.

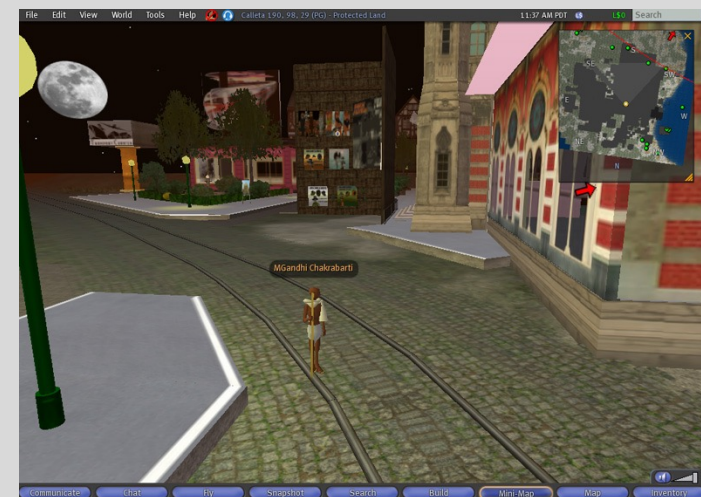
JD: Yeah, a prison.

NC: I find this overlap interesting: you’re putting yourself through so much within these spaces. You’re fielding questions, you’re correcting wrongs, you’re trying to set the record straight on what you’re doing, and you’re also at the receiving end of criticism, or just misunderstandings, and so on. That’s an interesting aspect of this real-time engagement.

JD: Yeah, definitely. When I was doing the Gandhi walk, I was reading Rebecca Solnit’s book, *Wanderlust*.³⁷ She has that wonderful chapter on exercise, gyms, and treadmills, and talks about the treadmill being an invention for, I think it was British prisons.

³⁶ *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2009) is a sandbox game that allows users to explore a procedurally generated 3D environment in which they can locate or extract raw materials and build things. It offers different gameplay modes — survival, hardcore, creative, adventure, spectator, and multiplayer — to satisfy just about any kind of gaming experience imaginable. It also has an in-game time system, which follows a day and night cycle, lasting approximately 20 minutes of real time. Space in *Minecraft* is meant to feel limitless, but of course it isn’t. Creator Marcus “Notch” Persson wrote a lengthy blog post addressing terrain generation in the game and its technical limitations: “First of all, let me clarify some things about the ‘infinite’ maps: They’re not infinite, but there’s no hard limit either. It’ll just get buggier and buggier the further out you are. Terrain is generated, saved and loaded, and (kind of) rendered in chunks of 16*16*128 blocks. These chunks have an offset value that is a 32 bit [sic] integer roughly in the range negative two billion to positive two billion. If you go outside that range (about 25% of the distance from where you are now to the sun), loading and saving chunks will start overwriting old chunks. At a 16/th of that distance, things that use integers for block positions, such as using items and pathfinding, will start overflowing and acting weird.” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110312082752/http://notch.tumblr.com/post/3746989361/terrain-generation-part-1> accessed July 7, 2021).

³⁷ *Wanderlust: The History of Walking* (2000), written by the inimitable Rebecca Solnit, traces the history of walking and its relations to culture, politics, and ways of being in and exploring the world. Walking, for Solnit, isn’t always freely exercised, available, or desired in our day and age, troubled as it is by our increasingly individualized and withdrawn sense of self and preoccupation with the destination rather than the journey. She has a way of thinking about walking the way one thinks about life itself, encouraging her readers to join her in contemplating what it means to walk. At one point, she invokes the 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s tendency to walk to consider the ways walking enables possibilities that feel self-contradictory in a manner that can be advantageous: “A lone walker is both present and detached, more than an audience but less than a participant. Walking assuages or legitimizes this alienation: one is mildly disconnected because one is walking, not because one is incapable of connecting” (p. 24). Walking in digital environments seems to heighten this affordance.



Screenshot of the artist’s avatar MGandhi Chakrabarti walking through *Second Life* in *The Salt Satyagraha Online: Gandhi’s March to Dandi in Second Life* project (2008).

NC: I think so, yeah. All this circles back to my interest in walking, and wandering in general, in digital spaces. A lot of your work involves walking and moving on your part, not necessarily expecting participants to have that sort of agency. I wonder if you think about that relationship, between what you're doing and what others are allowed to do. Participants can chat, make comments, but they're not necessarily interacting with the world that you're creating, or with the intervention, necessarily. What are your thoughts on that relationship?

JD: In *Second Life*, I did walk and navigate toward other residents, invited them, then gave them a gift of a walking stick. So, I had people walking with me, but they were doing it on their keyboard. It was still great. There were some people who walked with me for several days. They would find me each day, and then come walk, and we'd have a conversation. All text-based conversations. That was a way of creating a kind of temporary community of friends and supporters that was important to that project.

What I'm doing in many of these other spaces, it's a bit more of a solo performance. The participants in *Second Life* were participants, but they were also an audience. I remember finishing the Gandhi walk in New York, and I was totally exhausted. It was 26 days of mostly walking on that treadmill and looking at the projection for that in a way that really was mixing up my reality. But it was curious, because at the same time I was doing the walk, the Phillip Glass opera, *Satyagraha*,³⁸ was playing at the Met.³⁹ I'd really wanted to go see it, but I didn't have time. About three days after the Gandhi walk ended, there was a real-world Gandhi walk in New York, which was connected to Glass's opera. I can't remember if it was Gandhi's birthday or something, but there were three marches that were all going to converge on the Gandhi statue in Union Square Park.⁴⁰ One of the starting points was a few blocks from where I was living during my six-month residency. But I am much more reticent, or shy and introverted, in those kinds of public situations. I was nervous about going by myself, but I went. It's funny, because in *Second Life*, I was chatting away and talking to people, saying "Hey, what's up?" But doing this, it took probably a couple blocks of walking before I started having some chats with people, including the performance troupe⁴¹ that made all the giant puppets — they did the horse for *War Horse*. They've done these amazing props that are human operated. That informed how I made the giant cardboard Gandhi.⁴²

Since then, I've become much more outwardly interested in working with people in real life, especially crowd-sourced projects, outside of gaming, or building sculptures on-site, and that type of thing.

NC: In what platform are you interested in working next? What are you interested in trying out, from an experience perspective?

³⁸ *Satyagraha* (1980) is an opera written in three acts for orchestra, chorus, and soloists by American composer Philip Glass (b. 1937), with a libretto co-written by American artist and writer Constance DeJong (b. 1950). Glass's style is often described as minimalist, which in musical terms mainly refers to the heavy use of repetition and simple structures. I knew his work first through the film *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982), a deeply intense feature-length experimental film that examined the entangled relationship between natural life and technology. Glass composed the musical score, and it took on a life of its own outside the film. Glass's *Satyagraha* has been credited with introducing minimalism into the world of opera. (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-la-opera-satyagraha-review-20181021-story.html>: accessed July 7, 2021).

³⁹ *Satyagraha* was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in April of 2008.

⁴⁰ A group based in New York City called the Satyagraha Forum organized the silent walks for peace being led by Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, which were scheduled to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s peace march and Gandhi's peace march. Other related activities were scheduled during the month as part of this event. (https://www.cb5.org/cb5m/resolutions/2008-january/o_namaste/: accessed July 7, 2021).

⁴¹ DeLappe is referring to Handspring Puppet Company, a puppetry performance and design company based in Capetown, South Africa. They are widely known for the life-size puppets they created for *War Horse*, a play based on the book of the same name, which premiered at the Royal National Theatre in London on October 17, 2007. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handspring_Puppet_Company#War_Horse: accessed July 7, 2021).



Installation view of *Cardboard Gandhi* (2008-09).

⁴² *Cardboard Gandhi* (2008-09) is a monumental polygon sculpture, a 17-foot recreation of DeLappe's *Second Life* avatar MGandhi Chakrabarti made of cardboard and realized in three different versions using adapted Pepakura (paper) techniques. Cardboard Gandhi is the same height as Michelangelo's marble sculpture David (1501-04). (<http://www.delappe.net/project/cardboard-gandhi-2008-2009/>: accessed July 7, 2021).

JD: The experience of being so tied to our screens for the last eighteen months, I think I'm striving to get off the screen. There was a project I did after *Gandhi*, *Project 929: Mapping the Solar*,⁴³ which was a physical bike ride. It was meant to have a virtual component. I found the Gandhi walk so inspiring; that durational aspect of using my body was really fulfilling and changing in a way that I didn't anticipate. I remember being on the Gandhi walk and thinking the treadmill's really interesting, but would it be possible to have an avatar doing the opposite? Like, you would be walking in the real world, and then you would have an avatar walking in a virtual world at the same time?

I had read a quote by a scientist from the Union of Concerned Scientists who said that the solar farm in the American southwest, that was a hundred-mile by a hundred-mile square, would provide enough energy for the entire United States. I thought, that sounds reasonable. I was living in Nevada at the time, and it just so happens that the Nellis Air Force Base is about that square footage. It's the largest peacetime military base in the world. It's where the Nevada Test Site is, Creech Air Force Base, Area 51, et cetera. I did a project where I set up a bicycle — very similar to the artist mouse — that was dragging pieces of chalk. I wanted to draw a circle around the military base, saying this could be used for other purposes, in a kind of demonstration, or protest. It was sort of a lame concept, but at the time, there was an avatar system created for *Google Earth*, which almost turned it into *Second Life*. You could design an avatar and point to where you wanted to go, and the avatar would walk. There was an artist who used it and did a tour of Fukushima⁴⁴ after the nuclear accident, touring the destroyed areas. I got in touch with the group that created the system and told them I was doing this project. I suggested we set it up with a GPS system, so that we could have a virtual avatar in *Google Earth* following me as I rode my bike.

We designed the avatar, we got the system going and all that, and it sort of worked, but the GPS thing and their system didn't quite match up. The GPS would track, and then it would find a point a half a mile up, and it would jump. But I had a graduate at the university in Reno tracking me and doing it physically. But I'm really curious about maybe doing some real-world walks with an avatar following along. And how would you do that? I'm very much just kind of reading, researching, and thinking of how to approach this at this point. We'll see what that becomes.

NC: Sure, it raises questions about the limits of technology and trying to find the workarounds. I'm sure that's a big part of your process.

JD: Definitely. I usually come up with an idea of something that seems impossible, or difficult, and then think about how to get there. Sometimes it backs you off, but sometimes you end up in more interesting places.★

⁴³ *Project 929: Mapping the Solar* (2013) is a 460-mile bike ride conducted by DeLappe that dragged a piece of chalk to delineate an area large enough to both create the world's largest solar farm and provide enough energy for the entire United States. (<http://www.delappe.net/intervene/project-929-mapping-the-solar/>: accessed July 7, 2021).

⁴⁴ A 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck the northern region of Japan in 2011, causing a tsunami that damaged a nuclear plant in Fukushima and killed more than 15,000 people.



TOP: Screenshot of video documentation of the artist dragging a piece of chalk for *Project 929: Mapping the Solar* (2013); BOTTOM: Geographic map delineating the route the artist biked for *Project 929: Mapping the Solar* (2013).

All images courtesy of the artist's website unless otherwise noted.