

It doesn't take long to find new targets
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Curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight / *isthisit?*

1.

360°s exposed, armed with a KF7, grenades and a limited supply of timed mines, he rotates rapidly testing his luck as guards spawn randomly around him. Having exhausted all other challenges he augments the logic of the easiest level turning it into an arena death match, one where he may test his wits against an unlimited supply of Russian foot soldiers.

This was a long time ago, well before the genre cemented itself as a console staple; before they introduced regenerative shields; before he could pit himself against multiplayer bots and before wave mechanics became an integral part of online play. Circling his vision are two curves, orange blocks of health and blue blocks of armour, each bullet that clips a limb takes an inch that he can't win back. When he's a single shot away from death he'll make a run towards a small bi-plane and watch the end level sequence.

Only when he completes his objective will he know how well he's done: how long he lasted, how many kills, his accuracy, head shots and weapon of choice. He'll check these stats against his personal best and reload, play it all over again, competing time after time against himself. He does this a dozen times a day. Training and perfecting his abilities.

With a friend he turns the settings to 2.3 Domino, dividing control across two pads, a makeshift dual analogue system. One will take charge of movement: forward, back, sidestep left, sidestep right. The other the direction of their head: up, down, left, right and shoot. They load the same level and together, awkwardly, choreograph their movements, like Siamese twins, to hold out a little longer.

2.

Some years later his appetite for pixelated violence had grown; with a new console and a new game he begins building his own levels, his own arenas of combat, where he can rack up a even higher kill-count. On a black and blue grid interface, inspired by architectural plans, he connects corridors to double-height halls, builds stairwells between floors, positions weapons and health kits. He programs his enemy to appear from various directions, converging on his position so he can pick them off, taking head shots, tossing TNT and emptying duel uzis into their compacted hordes.

Freed from the restrictive confines of the developers design, he sets the stage of his own narratives. Exploiting limitations in his enemies AI, he forces them to attack down narrow routes, detrimental to their survival: over the top and into the barrel of a machine gun. Lacking the consciousness required to learn, they repeat the same mistake ad infinitum.

Sometimes he will pit two teams of bots against one another. With a sniper rifle he aims for the head as they distract each other. It's like clay-pigeon shooting, target practice where the enemy dodges and dives but never poses any real threat.

Overtime the traps became more one-sided, simplified and cruel; pits where dozens spawn, stuck below, with basic weapons, unfeasibly trying to defeat a foe who greatly out-guns them. It's ritualised slaughter, flies to wanton schoolboys, a dystopian gameshow with no prize. If he ever falls low on health he quickly retreats into a specially designed panic room, patches up his wounds, re-stocks on ammunition and returns to the fray.

3.

Next he takes to the streets of Liberty City where he cruises for the perfect location to begin a shooting spree. The city is different, it isn't a military installation, stationed by Russian comrades, nor a death match arena, tailored to combat. This place tries to be real. The people in it, try to be real.

They've modelled it on actual locations, stolen the American identity and warped it into an exaggerated version of itself, a satirical parody that plays over his car's FM radio. He'll drive up town and into a multi-storey car park, jump up onto the bonnet and spy through a gap, down onto a populated shopping district. The cops won't enter, their programming fails to permit them, and their helicopters can't angle a shot. So with a high powered rifle he happily pops heads, arms and legs off pedestrians, unperturbed.

The first shot is always easy; they've never any reason to worry. It gets a little harder with the second and third: everyone in the immediate vicinity runs, and sometimes he misses them by a fraction. But soon, anyone outside the radius is drawn in, curious to see what has happened, maybe thinking they can help. Clustered around a body he takes them out, with precision.

It doesn't take long to find new targets; he turns 90° and looks along a different street. The game automatically populates areas whenever you look somewhere new - fresh people, blissfully unaware of what has unfolded moments before. So he's never in short supply thanks to the way the developers dealt with in-built memory.

Another day he might drive over to Shoreside Vale and the airport. Here he can sneak in and steal a small plane. He has to push the nose down towards the tarmac as he builds up speed; at the end of the runway he pulls up, and the little aircraft bounces into the air. Carefully he flies back to Staunton and around the commercial district. With some luck he puts the plane down on top of a casino. He isn't meant to be able to get here, the developers hadn't intended it, but now he's here he can take advantage of the view.

Left and right, in both directions, a long road runs past his vantage point. Targeting a passing car he fires a rocket into its path. Slowly he builds up a road block of burnt out vehicles, it helps prevent the cops from getting close enough to him. When helicopters fly in he dispatches them circling out of control and into the cityscape. When the army finally arrives with tanks, they can do little to reach him.

Eventually he gets bored. Rather than allow them to take him alive, he simply swan dives off the roof. The impact should kill him. Then moments later he walks out of a hospital with all his weapons intact. No harm, no foul.

- Elliott Burns

isthisit? is a platform for contemporary art founded in 2016 by it's current director, Bob Bicknell-Knight. Online, it operates as a gallery creating monthly exhibitions, a monthly residency and a shop. Offline, it has held exhibitions in venues across the UK and in Berlin and is the publisher of the *isthisit?* magazine. The first, second and third issue is available to buy online.

List of Works

1. Viktor Timofeev
Untitled (NOCITY), 2013
Collage on book cover
13 x 17 cm
2. Mathew Zefeldt
Eye Gouge II, 2017
Acrylic on Canvas over Panel
60 x 45 cm
3. Oliver Payne
Candy Crush Collage, 2015
Archival pigment print
43.2 x 36.8 cm
4. Elliott Burns
Bang Bang You're Dead, 2017
Sticker
17 x 15 cm
5. Claire L. Evans
Modern Warfare, 2010
HD video with sound, flat screen tv
4 min 54 sec
6. Jon Haddock
The Screenshots, 2000
Digital print on canvas
75 x 100 cm
7. Stefan Schwarzer
Groggy, 2011
Felt tip pen on paper
Each 21 x 15 cm
8. Marc Blazel and Stelios Ilchouk
Works from Knights of Omikron, 2017
Acrylic, digital print on fabric, wood
Dimensions variable
9. Willem Weismann
Hercules, 2016
100 x 85 cm
Oil on canvas
10. Liv Preston
Honourable Ordinarie, 2017
Aluminium, bootleg The Legend of Zelda enamel pins
20 x 12 x 3 cm
11. Georgie Roxby Smith
Fair Game [Run Like A Girl], 2016
HD video with sound, flat screen tv
13 min 56 sec
12. Michael Pybus
Harvest, 2016
UV blacklight glow paint and permanent pigmented ink on canvas
70 x 50 cm
13. Viktor Timofeev
Untitled (NOCITY), 2013
Collage on book cover
23cm x 15 cm
14. Liv Preston
sword (2), 2017
Bronze, interchangeable handle (half polished agate), cut
2 x 40 x 8 cm
15. Eva and Franco Mattes
Freedom, 2010
HD video with sound, flat screen tv, cable tray
9 min 5 sec
16. Joseph DeLappe
dead-in-iraq, 2006-2011
HD video with sound, kindle fire
3 min

