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Anne-Marie Schleiner

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Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art

Anne-Marie Schleiner on Jul 16 1999 **issue 12**

Curated by Anne-Marie Schleiner
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If you've spent time working in, say, Microsoft Office, or with any piece of software that acts as if it knows what you want better than you do and does it for you, hiding every trace of code through which you might be able to set things right, you'll appreciate the can-do attitude embodied in game patches. Where a "patch" is a piece of code inserted into a program to fix a bug, a game patch is an alteration or add-on to a computer game, usually unsanctioned. Unlike ordinary software patches, game patches don't correct code behind the scenes, smoothing over something broken. And unlike patches of cloth, they don't just mend rips already made. No, the very concept of game patches implies and includes the act of tearing open a finished program to get at the underlying code.

How deep into the host games do patches go? Some, like Sonya Roberts' "Female Skin Pack Excerpts," mapping female "skins" onto the muscled male figures of "Quake," skim the surface look of the game (though looks can be deceiving). Others, such as Jason Huddy's "Los Disneys," dig deep, appropriating the game engine without the content, creating a new game of the hacker's own devising.

But depth can also be measured in other ways.

In her notes on the patches, curator Anne-Marie Schleiner calls RTMark's "SimCopter Hack," a "deeper level hack than your typical patch. . . ." Depth in this case is not just a matter of structural relations, how far into the code and function of the game a patch goes. It's also a matter of process, intervening at the level of production. Created by the hacktivist collective RTMark in alliance with one of the game's programmers, this patch infiltrated the shrink-wrapped product as it was being made.

Game patching in this sense, as a subculture, is deeply embedded in the host system, commercial computer games. Patches are produced to a large extent by game programmers, or would be programmers, and game companies have been quick to harness the practice of patching as a marketing tool. The guest/host dynamic here is complex, twisted like a mobius strip.

There are patches that have no apparent host at all or adopt a host from outside the field of computer games, orphan hacks such as mongrel's "BlackLash" and Natalie Bookchin's "The Intruder." These, clearly, are straight up culture hacks whose mere existence underscores the viability of this subculture, its affinities with other parasitico-critical practices, and the robustness of its freeware economy, a marketplace-bazaar for codes of all kinds.

In this bazaar, today's guest is tomorrow's host, as can be seen in the case of Robert Nideffer's "Tomb Raider I and II Patches," which Schleiner describes as "patched patches." That is, they are patches of the original "Nude Raider" patch,

which is rumored to have been released as a marketing ploy by the game's publisher. Nideffer characterizes his patches as a Duchampian reappropriation, "hosting" one might say, the false "guest" that "Nude Raider" seems to have been.

What's reappropriated by Nideffer is the practice and culture of game patching -- as a vehicle for creative and critical expression on the part of artists/programmers, as a means of talking back to the industry and as well as amongst themselves, and as an alternative gift economy flourishing in the crevices of the dominant consumerist system.