

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Next" competition in 2005, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Next" was juried by Nicholas Baume, Chief Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Holly Block, Executive Director, Art in General, New York City.

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Real Art Ways is a multidisciplinary contemporary space, with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and visual arts, including exhibitions and public art projects, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

Timothy Hutchings



The World's Largest Wargame Table, 2006, in use.

A Player's Game

By Catherine Amidon

In his work *The World's Largest Wargame Table*, Timothy Hutchings playfully muses with history and technology, abstraction and site, while pondering the subject of war. Hutchings's installation is a functional supersized board game table (29 x 27.5 feet) that fits mapping criteria and befits serious game players: a working surface for soldier figurines governed by battle rules. *The World's Largest Wargame Table* was inspired by the 1913 H.G. Wells book *Little Wars*,¹ a slender tome in which Wells systematized his passion for gaming, creating a game scenario and underlying rules that are essentially the same as those coded into contemporary video and computer games.

Wells wrote *Little Wars*, with utopian hopes that war games would replace human conflict, just before World War I forever changed the "big game" into something inconceivably destructive. As Wells stated a year after writing the book, "Nothing could have been more obvious to the people of the early twentieth century than the rapidity with which war was becoming impossible. And as certainly they did not see it [coming]." ² Hutchings's work instigates pondering and debating our century's "it," no more comprehensible today than the actuality of trenches, gas, and machine guns was a year before World War I. In 1913 even the wild imagination of Wells couldn't put those pieces together to conceive the devastation in the name of territorial gain that lay ahead.

Timothy Hutchings was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and now lives and works in New York City. He received a BFA in video from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA in sculpture from Yale University. Tim is represented by New York's I-20 Gallery, where he has had three solo shows. His work has also been shown at PS1/MOMA and the New Museum in New York, the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo and the Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Borusan Cultural Center in Istanbul, and many points in between.

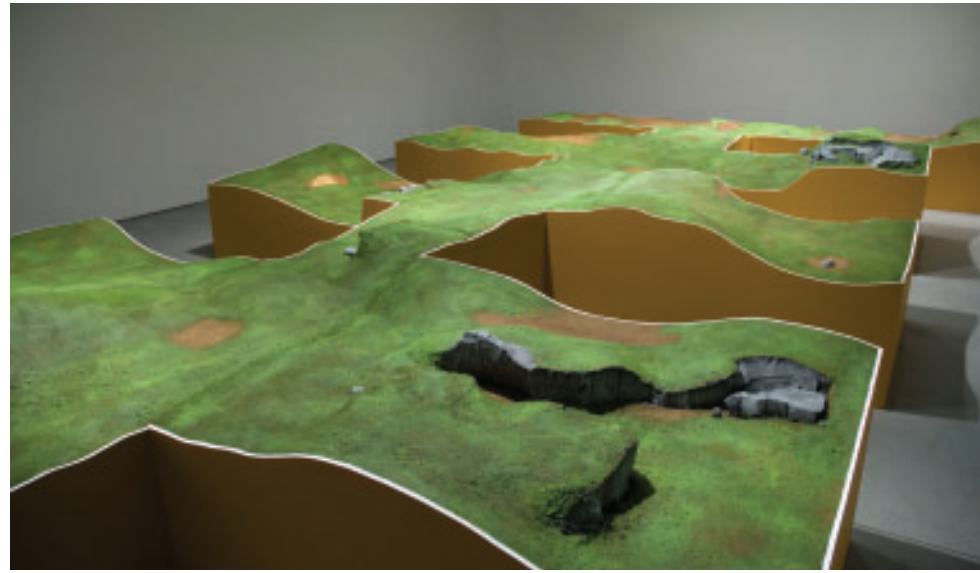
On the cover: The World's Largest Wargame Table, 2006, in use.

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Wells's book codifies time-tested, "prehistoric" little war rules and reflects both Victorian-era grand narratives and Wells's utopian desires. Hutchings's installation corresponds to both the rapid growth of the computer-video gaming industry and the postmodern deconstruction of the narrative, and it conveys skepticism in a country at war with dystopian "terrorism." On one hand, the era shapes the issues; the United States has been "under attack" from terrorism, while attacking Afghanistan and Iraq (and vicariously Palestine) with "rules" unimaginable to the era of Wells. On the other hand, by displaying, literally, an empty playing field, the discourse is shifted from specific conflict to broader territorial issues, perhaps even the planet itself and the "collapse of the environment as we have come to utterly depend on it ... THE national security issue of the 21st century."³ Art-world players can find these metaphors and more; critical theory is implicitly desired from art on display in a gallery space, and, in this case, the depth is warranted.

But *The World's Largest Wargame Table* is also just a gaming surface awaiting action. In fact players visited the exhibition space with their traditional houses, soldiers, bridges, and trees, reinforced with additional gaming apparatus like castles and robots, reflecting the historical pastiche of postmodern games. This assortment of playing pieces contrasts the uniform machine-made plastic soldiers in the game spaces informally created in the yards of America. These "children's games" didn't engage ideas related to the utopian redemption of barbaric warfare; they were for fun and aimless play. They also provided toys for children to communicate about war, for "games are just a way of structuring simulation, just like the narrative is a way of structuring representation."⁴

Writing about gaming has blossomed since the 1990s, in part as a result of politics surrounding the alleged relationship between video gaming and violence. This research has broadened ludology theory through academic inquiry, the kind that sustains "serious art." The origins of the term, however, are far from serious. The aimless play of *ludic* and the impracticality of *ludicrous* stem back to the non-narrative stimulation provided by traditional toys and games. Popular modern games like chess, checkers, Monopoly, and little wars require skill



The World's Largest Wargame Table, 2006, 29' x 27.5', MDF, styrofoam, paint, sand, masonite, wood.

and knowledge of rules and (often) dichotomies. But postmodern gaming, with repetitive motion and fuzzier logic, makes those games less binary- and narrative-driven. Hutchings's postmodern, post-chaos theory installation allows both.

Postmodernism came to gaming through the Rubik's Cube (1980)⁵ and the gobbling dots and power pills of Pac-Man (1981) before they were replaced by repetitious motions for seemingly endless virtual shooting and killing. Although the colorful Rubik's Cube seems innocent, it is mathematically complex. Through twisting and turning the cube, players engage with the nonlinear dynamic system that underlies chaos theory. Strategy for most quickly lining up the colored panels is achieved through intuition and the long hours of playing necessary to figure out the paths and safe zones to success. This game requires a skill set that gives young players an advantage,⁶ as they are quicker and less daunted by the Rubik's Cube's 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 different positions.

That same fast, repetitive motion is required for the now-pervasive computer-video gaming activity (i.e. shooting

down of planes, bad guys) that vicariously engages young players with the military-industrial matrix. Players participate in a cycle whereby military training programs, used to teach war skills to pilots or soldiers, are adapted by the lucrative gaming industry. The gamers (kids), through long hours of practicing skills (playing), know the strengths and weaknesses of the game. In turn, military weapons are being ergonomically adapted and reprogrammed because

of gamers' input (e.g., the toggle wasn't fast enough); hence, gaming influences military products.

This contemporary overlap of the military-industrial complex and gamers conceptually loads Hutchings's work. He gives a space for ludic play, an arena for action, and a territory for theory. War is decided by terrain and troops, the random and the planned; for the game designer, this strategic matrix starts earlier. As Bill Krandorf states in *How to Make Swell Maps in Four Easy Steps*: "Mapmaking is like army-making: unless you can compile, digest, and dispense a mountain of mindnumbing data, it requires a certain degree of artistry ... Unfortunately most wargame designers are neither patient nor artistic."⁷

Fortunately, Hutchings is both and more. Endurance, creativity, and craft drive his work. *The World's Largest Wargame Table* is a continuation of Hutchings's obsessions with the past, ideal places, and the logic of war, without the slick technology of his faux films⁸ like *The Arsenal at Danzig and Other Views* (2001), which was "filmed" in a reconstructed place destroyed in World War II, and *Player vs. Player* (2004), which, through his self-proclaimed "earnest deception" visualized extreme

issues around territorial conquest and winner/loser roles. With this installation, Hutchings has constructed a site of reflection on territory, war, winners, and losers in an era when our fight for survival is against both man and man-made threats that plague the environment. As the gamers play, America fights for both territory and oil.

Wells kept elements of playfulness in his little wars. Describing the Battle of Hooks Farm,⁹ *Little War's* passive narrator transforms into a general telling his war story "a little vain-gloriously."¹⁰ With this shift, Wells softens the line between his narratives (battle plans and utopian desires) and aimless play. That moving, fuzzy, invisible line is essential to appreciating Hutchings's conceptually laden and deceptively meaningless wargaming table.

Catherine Amidon earned a doctorat in European art and politics of the 1930s at the University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, and she has worked at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. A Fulbright allowed her to research in the Baltic States and Russia following the opening of the Iron Curtain. Amidon has curated many exhibitions, including *Different Voices: New Art from Poland and in the fullness of time: island culture and well grounded memory. She is currently director of the Karl Drerup Art Gallery.*

¹ Herbert George Wells, *Little Wars* (1913; Springfield, VA: Skirmish Press, 2004). Citations are to the Skirmish edition.

² H.G. Wells, *The World Set Free* (1914), at "Prose & Poetry: H.G. Wells," <http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/wells.htm>.

³ Jock Gill, *500 PPM CO2 & An Inconvenient Truth*, <http://www.greaterdemocracy.org/archives/000482.html> (posted June 11, 2006).

⁴ Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), http://www.ludology.org/articles/VGT_final.pdf.

⁵ Lou Jones, conversation with author, July 4, 2006.

⁶ In 1981, seven-year-old Lars-Erik Anderson of Norway often solved the Cube, but could not explain how, and twelve-year-old Patrick Bossart published *You Can Do the Cube*; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubik's_Cube (accessed July 5, 2006).

⁷ Bill Krandorf, "How to Make Swell Maps in Four Easy Steps" (1998) at *The Wargamer: Computer War and Strategy Gaming*, http://www.wargamer.com/articles/map_making.asp (accessed June 22, 2006).

⁸ Actually video and digital animation.

⁹ Wells, *Little Wars*, chapter 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.