

FIRST ethics

He's one of the cyber world avant-garde's finest—an internationally acclaimed experimental digital artist, author, photographer, high-flying corporate consultant, videogame pundit and creator. So why is it, then, that nobody's heard of **John Paul Bichard**, a visionary so energetic and painstaking in crossing media boundaries he makes Leonardo da Vinci's renaissance thang look both limited and passé?

Words: Barry Gittins

'I have been fascinated with the way that the forensic space dislocates the "familiar". The resultant sterile space, (where every trace of activity, every fragment of debris is given potential significance, where scientists move in to analyse and de-construct the events), is in direct contrast to the first-person shooter game space, where players engage the tropes of massacre and destruction to advance through the level—leaving massive evidence trails, but with no apparent consequence.

'I am exploring what would happen if the game had consequences,' he adds; 'what would happen to the remains once the player has moved on.

'Witnessing the aftermath of the accident brought together a number of threads that had fascinated me for some time. Perhaps the most striking impression was not the mangled bike or the police scientists photographing the scene, but the long strips of fluttering tape that defined the boundary between a bustling Monday morning on a busy London street and the empty, quiet, "frozen" enclosure.

'Everything that exists within this space has potential for meaning, fragments can be vital clues, traces become evidence, but when the tape comes down, they revert to detritus.'

Sound kinda mystical, bordering on spooky? Fact is, Bichard is travelling some fascinating territory between the physical senses—how we interpret empirical data—and the spirit—just how we translate that data in our emotional and intellectual responses. The *Evidência* series gains its ability to move observers—to propel them towards speculation on the sights, the site, and just what went down—through a highly disciplined and rigorous preparation and *mis-en-scene* (setting of the scene).

UK-based John Paul Bichard is a fascinating operator, and if the thumbnail sketch offered neither registers nor impresses then you've yet to encounter his *Evidência* series*: a multi-layered, multimedia mindmelt dealing with death, decay and mystery.

'What I set out to do,' says Bichard, 'was to play with the boundary between the videogame and the real. But what I feel I've succeeded in doing is to subtly change the way in which the videogame space is perceived.'

In the *Evidência* series, Bichard has indeed successfully dragged 'the game' into a lucidly weird half-light between media perceptions of reality (think a gamer's love of high-res battles and the proliferation of TV shows dealing with coronial investigation units) and the layout of FPS videogame environments. The proof's in the more than 15,000 visitors to the installation's site in the course of a few months.

The guy's certainly earned his spurs in an evolving career that's taken him a long way from a teenage geekdom where he played *Pong* at a clapped-out airport. As the inaugural videogames editor for influential *Mute* magazine, Bichard says he convinced 'Pauline and Simon, the owners, that videogames would be a really cool thing to write about'.

'They agreed,' he adds, 'and I spent the next seven years getting weekly parcels of games through the post, playing far too many games and trying to convince the world that videogames were a worthwhile cultural phenomenon.'

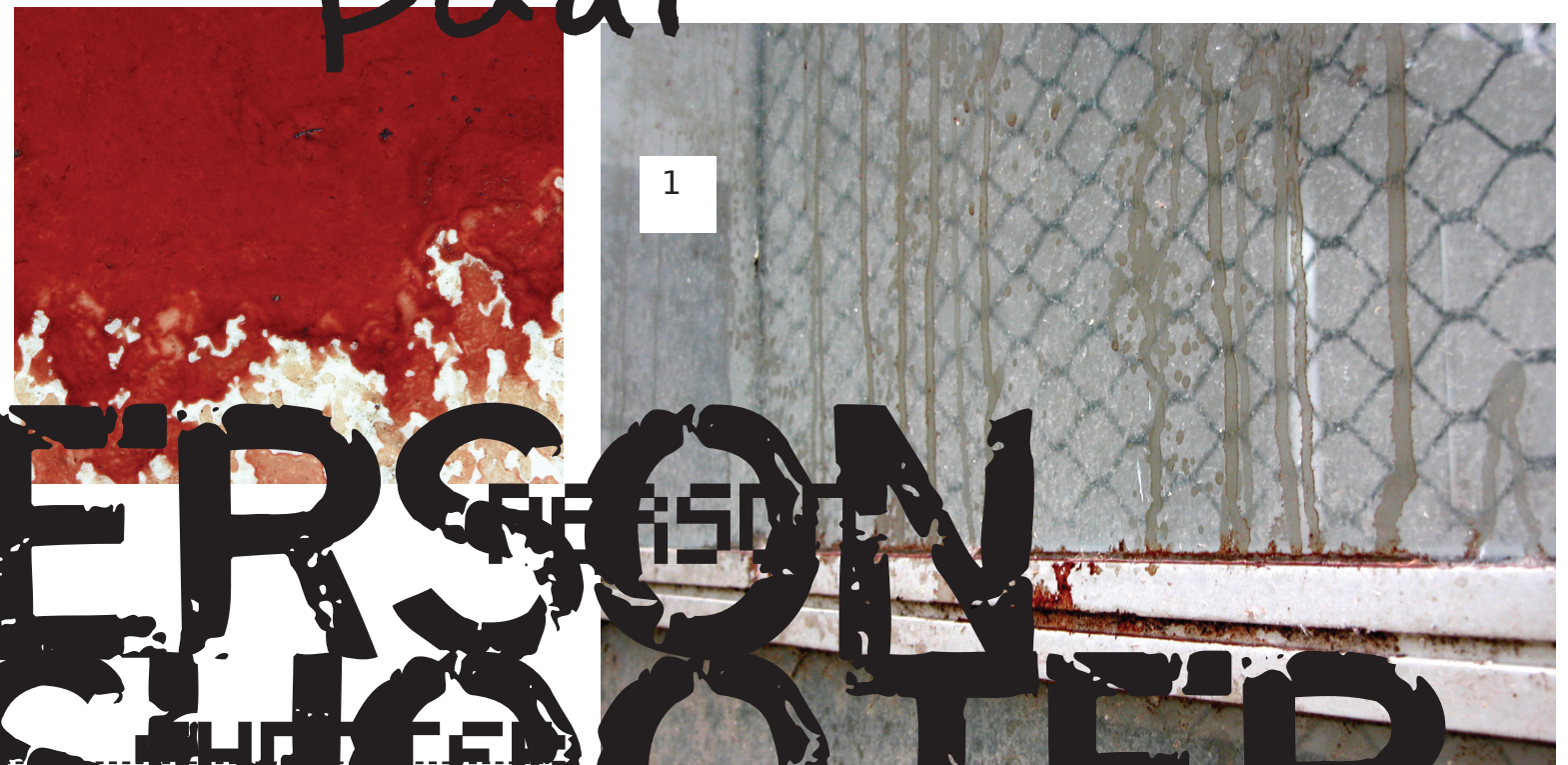
Bichard has won that cultural catfight, as evinced by the success he's garnered and the artistic ground he's travelled. From visual roots of painting, 'through making books to simple computer animation', Bichard spread his artistic wings with a 'country-wide CD ROM/comic/arcade machine art project in 1996' which featured in eight major galleries throughout the UK.

The good times didn't instantly roll on though, which makes the rest of us struggling schmucks feel a tad better about our own creative fiddlings. 'Things slowed to a halt again,' he says, complicated by 'the need to make money, and disillusionment with the London art scene'.

Two failed companies later, Bichard reflects he made it big with *Lone Wolf*, *Harbour Lights* and *Loco*, 'game "doodles" that paved the way for the Staying In To Play exhibition and the *Evidência* series'.

But it was when he saw death in action following a motorcycle accident that Bichard crossed over into his reality/impressionist half-life.

'A busy London street in rush hour was cordoned off [after the crash],' writes Bichard, in his introduction to *Evidência #000*; 'transformed into a silent, macabre "set".'



FIRST PERSON SHOOTER

‘There was no specific research prior to *#000*,’ admits Bichard, ‘but I have been exploring disasters, mortality and the relationship between memory and place for many years.’

‘I arrived at Quadrum, the [Lisbon] gallery, three days before the exhibition’s opening with the intention of installing my then recent *Staying In To Play* de-game. But when I got there, I felt that I needed to explore the space of the gallery and garden, not just set up a projection and sit back. So I spent a day photographing the area, before setting out with a vague, somewhat sketchy notion of what I was going to do.

‘I like working in this way; there is a very direct engagement between my ideas and the surroundings even if it is at times nerve-racking. I couldn’t have pre-planned the installation.’

That said, Bichard’s mind was feverishly grappling with the concept of ‘a creature that had slaughtered an in-game character and was munching the body as it made its way to the sewers...but it was very loose’.

‘I think in fragments: if I’m lucky, they come together as a cogent whole. Of course if I’m unlucky, it’s just a bloody mess.’

Actually, ‘bloody mess’ is a great segue—Bichard went a’huntin’ for the best way to dress up his magical mystery tour.

‘I wanted to use materials that were locally available and familiar—chicken blood from the supermarket, metal stakes from a local metal workshop, cow spine and assorted gore from the local butcher, tape from the hardware store.

‘I wanted the “crime scene” to feel like it could only have happened there in Lisbon. I spent a day running around the neighbourhood with Antonio, Quadrum’s director. Antonio is one of those people who knows where everything is; he is passionate about food, has been an artist for many years and is always open to adventure.’

To enter into the spirit of the installation, Bichard says he dressed ‘all in black, with black industrial rubber gloves and a hypodermic to spray the blood around—it was a performance of sorts’.

‘But the blood and gore were the final part of the preparation. I spent the whole day sweeping and watering the game area and setting up subtle game tropes like leaves around the base of the trees to imply textured planes.

‘The blood smelt but wasn’t so noticeable until the second day—in the heat of a Portuguese summer the blood went off very quickly and by the third day it was unbearable.’

Other aspects of reality also intruded on Bichard’s vision; such as pesky nocturnal carnivores.

‘The installation changed overnight on the second day—foxes ate part of the spine then dropped it into the pond. When I came down in the morning, the spine was white and being nibbled by the goldfish at the bottom of the pond and the scarf had blocked the overflow,’ Bichard recalls.

‘So there was water flowing over the side and down the drain cover—very eerie. One area I wanted to focus on was the sound that came from beneath the drain cover: the sound of water ceaselessly falling into the sewer below. I would like to record that sound some day. It was very simple, quiet and overwhelmingly empty.’

So, in between interaction with the real world and the flow of creative juices, just what role did intentionality play in this artistic ‘massacre’?

‘The intention was to invert the experience of the viewer, to take the player out of the space and turn them into a voyeur or witness. There was a lot that was implied which I felt strengthened the piece.’

Going by the public response to *Evidência #000*, Bichard is by no means alone in his belief. The 15,000 site visits, countless numbers of blogs and traditional print media encouraged Bichard in his production of two more works in the *Evidência* series—*Evidência #001* and *The White Room*.

‘*#001* was literally a moment snipped out of a FPS just after the player had moved on,’ Bichard explains, ‘a patch of waste ground with a tree trunk, a few leaves that had been trodden underfoot and scattered bullet cases.

‘It was a real space cut out and collaged, from grass, wood, moss etc. that could have been an evidence space. At the same time, it was a freeze frame of a typical “in game” action, just after the event, only this time the bullets didn’t fade as they do in games.

‘*#002, The White Room*, was a difficult piece. I was invited to submit a game for the House in The Middle exhibition, a group show of big-name UK artist-photographers that included the likes of Richard Billingham and Martin Parr.

‘I felt that putting a game into a photography show would put too much focus on the technology, would somehow exoticise the piece and I wanted to engage the game space, not digital technology. So I came up with the idea of doing a photo shoot within the game, then outputting photographic prints to go into the gallery.

‘It took several weeks to create the final series of photos: I used a modded version of *Max Payne 2* and played it through three times. I spent hours “painting” the scenes by blasting around the dead NPCs and then used the fly-around view to frame and take the shots—hundreds of images never made it off the cutting room floor.’

The dedication that goes into that kind of preparation; the ‘dead wood’ of creative culverts never fully explored or accessed, makes you realise how much Bichard was gripped by his vision. Ultimately, he says, he sees both works as ‘being different facets of the same investigation’.

‘Whilst *#000* was very direct, *#001* and *#002* have looked a bit closer at the edges that fall between the real and games space.’

The moral and ethical dimensions of Bichard’s works—corpses, the bullet casings and evidence of carnage—don’t really provoke much from the artist, who sees the debate about games influencing behaviour as having ‘run out of steam’.

‘I have little to say on videogame violence,’ he ‘fesses. ‘It exists, is occasionally used with intelligence and finesse and is more frequently misused to cover up poor game design—and,’ he jokes, ‘stops me sticking sharpened knitting needles into the hamster.’

Rightly pointing out the existence of ‘far more disturbing and influential models of violent behaviour and misuse of power relationships’ such as ‘the Gulf War, the Chechyn conflict, the Israeli conflict and West African civil wars’, Bichard goes on the offensive to the ‘magic bullet’ theories that can surround gamers and their communities.

‘How many of the notorious serial killers played videogames?’ he asks.

‘Were the perpetrators of the Beslan School massacre all *Half-Life* fans?’

‘I would agree that violence in videogames



- 1 *Evidência #000.*
- 2 *Evidência #001.*
- 3 *Evidência #002, The White Room.*

is relative to the context in which the violent trope is used. For instance, I think that the internet game *Slap a Spice Girl*, where the purpose of the game was to slap girls’ heads as they pop up, is far more violent than, say, a multiplayer *Return to Castle Wolfenstein (RTCW)* session.

‘The former puts up a known cultural symbol/personality and uses crude “domestic” violence to equalise a perceived power imbalance, the latter, *RTCW*, is more of a challenge in which shooting, flaming and blowing up opponents is a means of outwitting the opposition. The “playing field” is fairly even and the tropes of violence far more symbolic.

‘There is also scope, in games like *RTCW*, to introduce self-parody, i.e. blowing yourself over the roof of a building with a grenade whilst waiting for the game to start... in reality it would of course be terrifying and grizzly.

‘Did you ever think when you took a pawn with a knight in a game of chess that your mounted knight was running a lance through some poor foot-soldier’s neck?’

Bichard’s vivid imagination (probably an interesting bloke to play chess with!) explains his fascination with how we bring the concept of reality to bear in our own lives.

While he lists *Half-Life*, *Defender*, *Quake* and *Return To Castle Wolfenstein* as ‘games that changed my assumptions of what a videogame could be’, Bichard’s all-time favourite is *Morrowind*—a game he says he “lived” in for many months, playing upwards of 70 hours a week, sometimes more.

‘Work became a pause in which I could untangle the web of missions and encounters—I even started eating out of a bowl and would talk to the characters.

‘Two moments really stand out: the first was when, after a lot of walking and running away from wild beasts, I stood on a hill and watched the sun rise over the ocean (it bought tears to my eyes being the romantic fool I am); the second was being able to swim for 20 minutes before unexpectedly coming across an island in the mist. For the first time in a game I felt like it could go on forever.’

That kind of passion and intensity, it’s fair to say, can alienate Bichard’s experience from most of his fellow mortals, even as it entices them to suss out his vision. It’s in entering the artist’s surreal enclosures that you get where he’s coming from—going by the way he works, even Bichard himself doesn’t know completely where’s he heading next. But, whatever it is and whatever form it takes, it’ll doubtless be a head rush, challenging the ways we view both the mediums he uses and the messages he embodies.

* *The first two works in the Evidência series (<http://www.evidencia03.htm> and <http://www.evidencia04.htm>) were art installations in the ‘real’ world, where Bichard says he used ‘videogame tropes and traces to evoke a hybrid game/evidence space’. He will be carrying on with the Evidência series throughout 2005.*

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