Feed
Essay by Claudia Hart

Feed in title is a triple entendre, evoking at the same time an energy flow, a catheter tube and a rather primal form of ingestion – if not cattle chow than at the very least what would have to be an undifferentiated form of gastronomy. As a performance work, *Feed* similarly conveys an equivalent array of references, portraying the death throes of a herd of humanoid clones, to reveal the nihilistic ideology underlying the shooter-game technology used to create them.

To create *Feed,* Kurt Hentschlager used the game engine from *Unreal Tournament*, a multi-player on-line game in which players take on 3-d avatars vaguely reminiscent of Roman gladiators, here articulated as a variety of futuristic but dystopian robot, to battle each other to inevitable death. At this point, in order to elucidate *Feed*, it is useful to take a brief excursion into the history of games, for example *Unreal Tournament*

Unreal Tournament employs the kind of real-time 3D graphics and virtual reality technology first developed thirty years ago by the U.S. military for flight simulators to use for strategic, and more significantly, psychologically engaging enactments for military training. In fact, early commercial game developers often received their first training in the military to later become entrepreneurs of the businesses that both sell and develop these new technologies. From the late nineties, following the end of the Cold War, US government policy shifted to reorient research spending to serve not only national defense but also to cull from and therefore stimulate the development occurring in the commercial sector. At this time, the video-game industry exploded, and the military lost some of its domination. Commercial games became pioneers of a style of action called "first-person shooter" because players viewed the action from an individual combatant's perspective, necessarily enforcing a subjective, and therefore emotional narrative easily accessible to a wide audience. As a result of this historical trajectory, a contemporary "military-entertainment complex" has evolved, producing games like *Unreal Tournament*

Unreal Tournament is a byproduct of the symbiotic relationship that cultivates not just technology but also the social ideology underlying game culture and its function as a less overt but equally influential form of political propaganda. In *Feed*, Kurt Hentschlager harnesses this technology to create a work that is both elegiac and somewhat horrifying. However, in so doing, he does not allow his audience to deny the culture of the technology used to create it.

Feed is a performance without people. It is in two parts: the first is cast by representations of primitive undifferentiated figures, both emaciated and faceless, projected on a large screen at cinematic scale. These are animated in the *Karma* engine, the procedural part of *Unreal Tournament,* used to create the death spasms of vanquished warriors. This engine produces animations that are not key-framed but rather unfold in "real" time, using dynamic simulations. In *Unreal,* dying characters will twitch and spasm when shot to create a sense of a slow and perhaps painful death. In *Unreal* however, as in a campy horror film, the unavoidably serious subject of death is articulated without pathos, the result being camp or satire. Hentschlager instead uses the *Karma* "death" engine to produce emotionally charged imagery, so that ethical judgment cannot be exorcised from it. He has seized upon *Karma* as a metaphor and a commentary, becoming one of the few artists to produce *Machinima* – the term used for animations made by adapting commercial game engines – who have not divorced technological form from its political and social content.

Further elaborating the expressive possibilities of the *Karma* engine as a death machine, Hentschlager has also turned it into the driver of a custom musical instrument made to his own design. In *Feed*, the virtual bodies are tracked within the *Karma* engine and drive software synthesizers producing musical tones evoking the clang of funereal bells emitted by the moving limbs of his eight spasming characters. The sound track is like sober rhythmic bells, the imagery is Gothic, both of them suggesting the entry portal of a cathedral carved in high relief: identically a descent into hell and an ascent to a cloudy heaven. The resulting impression is synesthetic, with sound and visuals apparently creating one another.

The *Karma* engine simulates gravity, giving weight and density to faceless, drone-like characters that float in midair, then drop, bounce, and multiply. They seem to twitch in either agony or ecstasy to evoke "la petite mort," the little death - the literal translation of *orgasm* from the French. The figures inhabit an ambiguous atmospheric space, illuminated by strobing light. Aside from *Feed*, Hentschlager has used the same custom software to create a series of real-time installations specifically entitled *Karma*

The second part of *Feed* can be thought of as an almost ritualistic enactment of the "first-person shooter," in which the viewer experiences "Karmic" death-spasms from the character's point of view. The projected animation fades as the theatre fills with a fog emitted by a barrage of special-effects smoke machines. While the ambient, atmospheric sound produced live by Hentschlager during the first part continues, the animated character's musical "voices," driven by their twitching limbs, is gradually replaced by the amplified and fed-back sound of strobes and pulse lights. Ones surroundings disappear as the lights begin to throb against what is now a dense smoky ground.

The result is an immersive environment of flickering light in which the "real" physical world mutates into a primordial soup of pulsing sound, mist and colored light. It is both terrifying and transportive. We experience the world of Hentschlager's writhing characters and we seem to be similarly driven by an other-worldly physics "engine" in which our autonomic responses are beyond our control. We are in fact physiologically experiencing "sublime light," a light that is truly psychedelic. This is the world as viewed by a dying robot clone from the inside of a Turner landscape painting.

While the first part of *Feed* is twenty minutes long, the surround-environment portion lasts thirty, testing our endurance due to the intensity of the sound and the almost sensationally overwhelming light. As sound and light subside and the smoke ebbs away, we are gradually "reborn" from this unreal death. Hentschlager has spectacularly succeeded in NOT emotionally separating dying from the *Unreal* killing engine that produced it. *Feed* manages to be both a moral allegory, and at the same time, a supremely esthetic experience.