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Far left: The Knowbotic Research installation at Open\_Source\_Art\_Hack. Views from the Zenith Lounge (middle and right). Below, right: "Anti-Wargame," 2002.

## HACKING THE MATRIX

Social consciousness meets new media at the New Museum's "Open\_Source\_Art\_Hack"  
by Scott Tillitt

[www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org)  
[www.netartcommons.com](http://www.netartcommons.com)

The word "hacker" in the mainstream mind usually conjures up thoughts of geeky pranksters or cyber-terrorists or sophisticated thieves. When applied to artists, however, the connotations change. Rather than a criminal, the artist becomes a political subversive or simply a social critic.

Case in point: "Open\_Source\_Art\_Hack," a recent exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York at [www.netartcommons.com](http://www.netartcommons.com). These are not hackers of mischief (well, not solely anyway) or malevolence. These are "hacktivists," hacking through the firewall of social programming. These are media artists, collectives, designers, filmmakers and even old-school hackers and activists from the U.S., Switzerland, Denmark, New Zealand and the U.K. using hacking (as well as the ethics of the open source movement) as a "creative electronic tool to examine institutional, governmental and corporate influence on identity and privacy in contemporary culture." In simpler words, they're trying to free our minds.

New Zealander Josh On of San Francisco-based Futurefarmers hacks the current war on terrorism with his piece, "Anti-Wargame" ([www.antiwargame.org](http://www.antiwargame.org)), a political video game where the player-president leads the U.S. into never-ending battle. Why? "I think that war is an extension of the economic competition that exists between nationally aligned corporations in the global marketplace, into the military realm," he explains.

On is no hacktivist newbie. He has been getting recognition for a previous project called "They Rule" ([www.theyrule.net](http://www.theyrule.net)), which visually demonstrates the bed-hopping among some of America's most powerful corporate executives—or as On calls them, the ruling class. It recently snagged a Golden Nica (the top prize) for the Net Excellence category in the prestigious digital arts competition Prix Ars Electronica and was selected for this year's Whitney Biennial. (On isn't the only current Golden Nica winner in the bunch: "Carnivore" from Alex Galloway of international collective RSG and Rhizome.org was chosen for the Net Vision category.)

Most of the pieces in the show are highly conceptual. You need to be not only socially aware but also technologically savvy to understand the message. On's piece (as well as "They Rule"), on the other hand, is more accessible. It's a video game, after all, (built in Flash MX) with whimsical 3-D graphics (using 3D Studio Max). While he designed "They Rule" to resemble a Fifties corporate diagram (a satirical homage), he wanted "Anti-Wargame" to be somewhere between Civilization and Mario Brothers.

The open source and hacker movements are at times both controversial and contradictory, and no exhibition devoted to them would be complete without these elements. On and his Futurefarmers crew, for example, work on commercial, for-profit projects for large corporate clients like HP, MSNBC and Nike and also create the experimental, nonprofit artworks that, well, critique them.

So what of this irony? All professions deal with contradictions of the system. On, too, struggles with the moral questions and personal conflicts. "We have to come together to resolve them," he pleads. "We should not run away from the contradictions, or deny them, but identify their source and confront them in a united fashion." He also adds, "Perhaps we could escape the contradictions by living a truly alternative lifestyle in the woods, but I think that we would be less heard, as we would be spending a lot of our lives trying to sustain ourselves."

And the controversy? The "Minds of Concern: Breaking News" installation from Swiss digital artists Knowbotic Research (a past Golden Nica winner) was yanked offline shortly after the exhibition began. The work's central feature, port-scanning software, conducts surveillance of outside computers, a violation of the "Acceptable Use Policy" of the museum's ISP. (The work's Web site stayed live, however, and the gallery installation just ran locally.)

The social truths these artists are exposing may not be as mind-blowing as those that consciousness-hacker Morpheus showed to Keanu Reeves's consciousness-savior Neo in *The Matrix*, but there certainly are parallels. "In an age of increased surveillance, rampant commercialization, and privatization of everything from language, to biological entities, to supposedly personal information, hacking—as an extreme art practice—can be a vital countermeasure," reads the curatorial statement.

So basically, if big, bad business and the governments they increasingly control are hacking into our consciousness, the "Open\_Source" artists are just hacking right back—sometimes even the hand that feeds them. PIX



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