



## GAMMA: experimental video game exhibits

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### 1. Exhibition Concept

From 2006 to 2010, experimental game collective Kokoromi hosted their unique annual curated video game showcase, GAMMA. These “New Arcade” (experimental art game) events were free for anyone to enter, presenting independent designers with constraint-based challenges and a public play environment that push the boundaries of game-making. Each GAMMA was initiated with an open call for new work, giving game makers around the world two months to create a game conforming to a specific design constraint, such as using a single on-off button as the only game input. GAMMA encouraged creators to answer these design challenges in unexpected but deeply-considered ways. Our goal as a collective was to encourage experimentation in a medium where so much is possible and yet so often, creators tend to fall back on familiar patterns. The four GAMMA themes were:

**Gamma 01** Audio Feed Games driven by live audio input, coming directly from the DJ’s music in realtime, to create gameplay-relevant elements in each game (such as asteroids created by musical frequencies, which the player’s ship must avoid)

**Gamma 256** Games with extremely small pixel dimensions, and prioritizing the smallest and most unusual screen aspect ratios. The smallest game was 8x8 pixels.

**GAMMA 3D** Games using and exploring the functional limits of red-cyan stereoscopic 3D. Normally, a 3D effect is used only to reinforce the sense of depth, but game creators were asked to design content in which the game was impossible to play without stereoscopic glasses.

**Gamma4:** [One Button Games] Games which restricted input to a single button press. In addition to the main video game event which drew over a thousand attendees, Kokoromi teamed with CreateDigital\* to stage an exhibition of hacker-artist **One Button Objects** at San Francisco's Grey Area Foundation for the Arts

## **2. Reception**

From year to year during the four years of the showcase, GAMMA grew in creator participation, in reknown, and in launching the creative careers of participating artists. By the final of four events, artist participation had increased more than tenfold, and attendance on opening night was over one thousand visitors. To this day, Gamma is cited by artists and cultural observers as a foundational event in the history of experimental games as an art form and an expressive medium.

## **3. Exhibition Design**

For each Gamma event, the four members of Kokoromi curate a selection of the submissions in a one-night-only showcase, and then make the games available online. At the events, all games are projected around the venue, while live music and lighting design creates an atmosphere more like a nightclub than a "white box" gallery. Clear explanatory texts and diagrams accompanied each game.

## **4. Visitors Approach-Activation/Participation**

From its inception, GAMMA was designed as a mass audience participatory event, featuring playable games on giant screens so that non-players could watch, and learn how the game was played before trying it themselves. A casual environment encouraged all visitors to become teachers to the other players. Thematic music and dancing were also an important element of the cultural appeal to expose experimental games to new audiences and take them out of the home and off the computer screens into the social arena.

## **5. Conclusion: in respect to the COP1 and COP2**

**Toolkit 1** – to make Europe visible (COP1) – Not particularly applicable, although a good number of participating game makers (and some curated games) originated from Europe and Scandinavia.

**Toolkit 2** – integrating cultural Europe (social arena): (COP2) - Not applicable, as the event took place in Canada.

**Toolkit 3** – activation, participation and & role modification: (COP2) – The intention of the event was to engage young urbanites in the exploration of experimental games, attracting them with regular nightclub features such as music, and drinking, to reveal games as a visual art form. (rather than the



preconceptions at the time that games were played only by a small and insular fan group of teenaged boys). The event was extremely successful at this goal, by bringing trendsetting young people in contact with new and original game content.

**Toolkit 4** – synesthetic translation of perspective (COP1) – Not applicable. Though games are inherently synaesthetic (perhaps the most synaesthetic of all media), the intention of the exhibition was not related to any particular national perspective or lack thereof. If anything, GAMMA demonstrated the global reach of game culture in the developed world. Unfortunately, one constant disappointment of the curatorial team was the lack of female artists in the medium.

**Toolkit 5** - Social web and interaction: (COP2) – The events took place mostly in the pre-twitter (and in some cases pre-facebook) time period. In the first year Kokoromi's web site used a Forum application to ease inter-communication of participating artists, and in every year, the collective publicized the event using current tools reflecting the changing landscape of the internet from year to year. In 3 cases out of 4, all of the participating games (not only the ones included in the gallery exhibition) were shared after the event on the web site. The announcement of the selected games was usually met with significant online social reactivity.



**Image 1:** Tristan Perich's *Kill Jet* played at Gamma 256, Societe des Arts Technologique Foto: Conception Levy 2007.

**Image 2:** Mark Johns's *StdBits* at Gamma 256, Societe des Arts Technologique Foto: Conception Levy 2007.



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