March 13, 2000

Exploring the outer limits of cyberspace

By Katie Johnston/The Gazette (Colorado Springs)

Eddo Stern doesn't play online video games like most
people.

He delves into virtual worlds with cameras, surveying
cyber-land activities and streaming them live onto his
Web site. He programs his characters to act out
performance art and has a robot-like machine that can
take a human's place at the keyboard.

To Stern, virtual reality is a new palette for his
artistic and computer programming passion.
"The Internet is much more interesting than any art done
on the Internet," says Stern, 28, who teaches film at
the University of Southern California and art at the
University of California, San Diego.

A few years ago, using three computers and three copies
of the game EverQuest, Stern created three identical
characters all controlled by a triple mouse that sent
the same commands to each one. The project, which
allowed for user interaction, ran in a German art show
for a few months. Stern updated it for a transfer to
Liverpool, England, adding a chip that forced the
characters to run laps around the virtual city.

From there, he started setting up "surveillance cameras"
in different games to capture gaming traffic, as well as
his characters stalking others and doing a flamenco
dance, to broadcast on his Web site,
www.summonstosurrender.com. "I haven't seen any
much surveillance of this sort," he says, comparing it to the rather
ridiculous presence of cameras filming the Golden Gate
Bridge or the zoo. "Online gaming worlds are quite fascinating
social spaces."He contacted the makers of EverQuest several
times to talk to them about using their game in his art shows,
but never heard back. He will meet with game designers
to discuss such proprietary issues at an upcoming gaming
conference at USC, and even though he knows that Sony
recently sued a man who wrote software that automated
characters in EverQuest, he's not necessarily concerned.
"As long as they're not suffering market share, I don't

think they care," he says.
Stern's latest endeavor is creating a physical medieval
environment around his game-playing robot.
"I think there's always going to be this impulse to sort
of go beyond the rules," he says.
"It (the Internet's virtual reality) is pretty much
limitless."