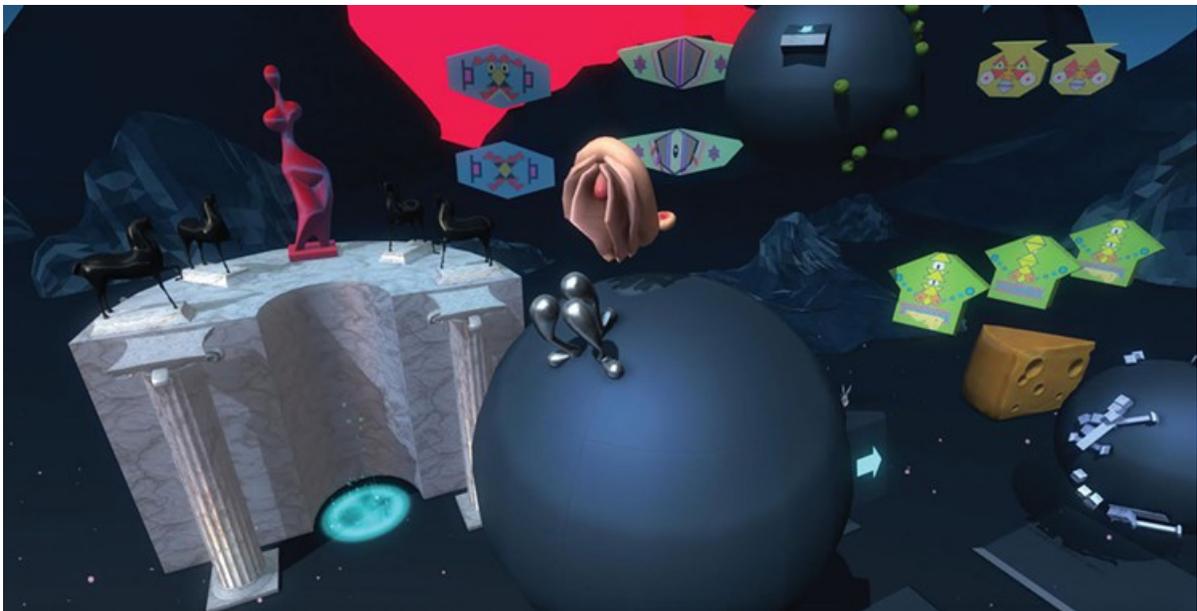


# LA WEEKLY

## An Artist Made a Video Game about her Grandmother—Using Images of Vaginas

By Catherine Wagley



Corazon del Sol's video game Win to Lose, Lose to Win pays tribute to her artist grandmother, Eugenia Butler.

Security is tight at Riot Games' slick West L.A. complex, where company whiskey bar looks like a pirate ship and staffers refer to themselves as "rioters." They all work on League of Legends, Riot's online war game, which draws 30 million players daily. Tight security caused some hiccups on July 10, when Riot hosted an indie game showcase with gaming collective Glitch City, whose Culver City headquarters serves as a hangout and work space for experimental game-makers. Indie designer Oscar Alvarez, who mostly travels by bus, arrived without his ID. Guards didn't want to let him in. Other Glitch gamers, who stood out on campus, had to prove they belonged by showing their stick-on badges.

The event itself was a funny mix: free pineapple pizza in the ultra-clean cafeteria, rioters intermingling with the indie contingent and rows of monitors and joysticks, where gamers ranged from lo-fi to gorgeously produced. The majority of the crowd was male and youngish, between 25 and 40, the typical gamer demographic, though Riot's goal in hosting seemed to be bringing in a fresh audience and maybe acquiring indie cred.

At one point, a girl in a red and black Riot Games uniform got up from playing a game called *Win to Lose, Lose to Win*, in which a three-legged avatar traverses a wide-open, fluidly changing terrain. "What is the point?" she asked Corazon del Sol, the artist who conceived of the game. "There is none," del Sol answered. She and Archie Prakash, co-founder of Glitch City and the programmer who had helped her and designer Alvarez develop the game, would be answering this question all night.

*Win to Lose* had caused some debate in the days leading up to this event. It wasn't quite like the games flanking it, one of which involved sleuthing around an old house and the other jumping from one ledge to another. There is no set path for players to follow, no narrative; just vignettes that never appear in the same order, because each player inevitably navigates differently.

It includes, at one point, a vignette in which cartoonish, disembodied vaginas pulse and float midair. This is what worried organizers. Sure, other games being shown involved violence and profanity, but that was part of gaming's conventional purview. What if someone freaked out? Should there be a warning sign beside the monitor? Prakash said no. Warn players about vaginas, and that's what the game becomes about.

This strangeness was part of what attracted Prakash to *Win to Lose*, which is now part of an exhibition of artwork by del Sol, her mother and her grandmother at downtown gallery the Box. Visitors can use a joystick made of a lever and cigar box to play it.

The form letter del Sol had been sending to programmers described a game based on the real life of her grandmother, Eugenia Butler, who ran an avant-garde gallery in L.A. in the late 1960s. In the game, as in life, her grandmother would become a successful gallerist and then use her cultural status to "systematically destroy the bourgeois structures around her, and ultimately to self-destruct." After her rise to art-world prominence, Butler fell into obscurity largely because of her own behavior – at one point she stole furniture from a snobbish artist's Venice home and sent it out into the canals on a boat, an intentional jab at self-congratulatory art-world privilege.





Wrote del Sol, “I am imagining five levels with a Mario Bros. sensibility translated to crass symbols of art and sophistication.” Prakash was intrigued. He’d become interested in making work, such as his frenetic but ultimately aimless Ferrari Cop game, for gallery audiences, which he imagined as less goal-oriented, more experiment-ready.

“Video games have a lot of art in them, but are they art?” Prakash asks. “I don’t think so.” He doesn’t mean games can’t be art – just that games tend to be made by gamers for gamers and to thrive in entertainment niches. “It’s just commercial media,” he continues, “whereas art is something that changes you in a short amount of time.”

The “can video games be art” debate has a long history. Court cases in the 1980s and early 2000s over whether the First Amendment protected game content deemed games entertainment, not forms of expression. Film critic Roger Ebert said video games aren’t art, because they don’t help us “make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.”

If art is defined as Prakash defines it – as something that changes you – then perhaps it’s the format of a game, in which players move toward some kind of predetermined triumph or goal, that is self-limiting. But even visual artists working in the medium have tended to adopt gaming formulas. Artist Feng Mengbo spent 15 years making his video game Long March: Restart, recently acquired by LACMA. In it, a Red Army soldier battles through a historic Chinese landscape with only a Coca-Cola bottle as a weapon. The visuals are fantastically



lush and layered, putting ancient history, communism and Westernization on a collision course, but the game can be won, when a player fights through 14 stages and lands in front of Tiananmen Square. Journey, designed by thatgamecompany, a collective that has shown work at MoMA and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, was supposed to be transcendent, a kind of self-discovery process. But the point was to reach a mountaintop.

When artist David O'Reilly made his game Mountain a few years ago, gaming forums saw heated arguments about whether it could even be called a game. A mountain grows and changes, and players can rotate it or toy with a piano at the bottom of the screen, but they can't affect the changing of the mountain at all.

The player in Win to Lose can't affect much, either. By the time del Sol started working with Prakash, the game had become less about her grandmother's rise and fall. Instead, the game's avatar became the digital replica of a del Sol sculpture, which appears in the Box exhibition. The sculpture, the three-legged silver creature with no torso and cartoonish feet, came from del Sol's own dreams about a drawing her mother had done of a "chaos character," which was really meant as a portrait of del Sol's grandmother. In the game the avatar, which players control, wanders through vignettes that reference the overlapping histories of three generations.

"I didn't want anything explained," del Sol says. "It was interesting how hard that was to do." She and Alvarez, who helped her render the vignettes, started researching black holes and dark matter while working, to get away from the angular graphic quality of games such as Mario Bros. or Minecraft.

A bunny head, referencing a bunny suit one of Butler's artists performed in, becomes the avatar's head at one point. Marble surfaces from del Sol's dreams appear. The vaginas, originally meant to be more sassily taunting than they are, vaguely poke at a history of sexual oppression that both inhibited and fueled the women in del Sol's family.

The game echoes the sensuality of the Box exhibition, where work from three generations of artists hangs nonhierarchically and nonchronologically. The show is impossible to navigate in a linear way. Viewers have to submit to the experience of it, as they do when playing the game.

"I wanted a place where there's angst and utter beauty at the same time," del Sol says of the game, "where there's all the uncertainty of the psychic space."

