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**CRUST SHMUP // TOTALLY FUCKED //  
CHOP SUEY**

In the Gallery



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For anyone whose parents ever told them that playing video games was doing nothing with one's time, the debut show of the new SMILERS exhibition space offers three charming variations on that notion. The most obvious of these comes with *Totally Fucked* (2003, pictured at top), the only piece of the three that isn't quite a video game. The artist Cory Arcangel has made numerous video game hacks that transfigure games into video art as a result of their subsequent un-playability. In *Totally Fucked*, the still-iconic 1985 incarnation of *Super Mario* stands atop a ?-block in front of a bland blue sky. He occasionally shifts from looking left to right. The piece goes on forever, or perhaps until you turn off the TV because of it being fucked.

You can hang any metaphor you like onto *Totally Fucked* in a way you couldn't achieve with the use of another video game, but Oliver Payne's shooter *CRUST SHMUP* (2023) is decidedly more specific. Despite riffing on the simple shooter controls of the arcade classic *Galaga* (1981), it was predominantly inspired by the album art of the legendary grindcore/crust punk metal band *Napalm Death*, particularly their debut album *Scum* (1987). The game is every bit as loud as that

band's name would imply. SMILERS has set up the monitors and controllers to play the game in a small side room that's ideally suited for having multiple games going at once and making a real ruckus. There's no guidance provided for the seemingly straightforward controls that only require you to use a joystick to move and a button to shoot enemies. Explaining its potentially game breaking loophole, which is rooted in punk ideology, would spoil the fun of trying to figure it out for yourself, but it's worth noting that the game remains very difficult even if you pay attention. I only made it up to Level 9 of 26, and one of the staff members hadn't even gotten that far.

Theresa Duncan's *Chop Suey* (1995) is considered one of the greatest games of the CD-ROM era—no small feat for any game, but especially unusual for one aimed primarily at young girls as part of the “games for girls” movement of the 1990s. It's every bit as punk as *CRUST SHMUP*, but the sensibility is more in the vein of the Ramones when they were imitating poppy Motown girl groups. Duncan was involved in the D.C. punk scene of the 1990s, and received help from two of its very finest: Ian Svenonius, of *Nation of Ulysses*, was one of the illustrators, and Brendan Canty, of *Fugazi*, designed the game's sound in addition to composing its delightful musical ditties. (One in-game song about pickles could fit right onto a *Beat Happening* album.) She also managed to get voice-over from David Sedaris before he was famous. He reads the everyday storybook adventures of two young girls exploring Cortland, Ohio in the game. Not much actually happens or develops throughout—you can click on things to see silly animations or character interactions, enjoy the eye-popping artwork and funny narration, and eventually quit once you've clicked on everything. It's all very droll and charming, with a real specificity to its locale and a lack of concern for video game traditions. If one is going to do nothing, this game is a good way to embrace it.

[CRUST SHMUP](#) // [TOTALLY FUCKED](#) // [CHOP SUEY](#) is on view through February 22 at SMILERS.