

# “Nowheresville”

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**Thomas Robertello Gallery,**  
through Mar 8 (see West Loop).

In 1851, the founders of Ripon, Wisconsin, decided that six years of living in a utopian socialist commune were enough. Though the living experiment that Charles Fourier inspired came to an end, the French philosopher's progressive ideals have not been forgotten. This provocative multimedia installation by Knut Hybinette and Troy Richards imagines the dystopian world that Ripon might have become had it lasted.

Its centerpiece is *Ripon*, an interactive video game that took the Cleveland-based artists more than two years to complete. Players sit inside a shantylike structure and use a keyboard and mouse to navigate a drab, yet perilous world filled with burning houses, propaganda-covered billboards and murderous people. The player has only one life; it's difficult to get past the six-foot-tall marijuana plants or avoid dying in an icy lake, and scoring enough ammunition to kill anyone is even harder. But it's also



Knut Hybinette and Troy Richards, *Ripon* (still), 2007.

nearly impossible to give up on this intriguing experiment, which argues that even societies with the best intentions end in the grim reality of survival of the fittest.

Drawings, sculpture and other works complement the game. The most striking is *Ripon Industry*, a digital print of an obese couple lying in each other's arms on the floor of a destroyed meth lab, surrounded by garbage bags filled with boxes of Sudafed.

Hybinette and Richards's show is technically and visually engaging, but their work's historical underpinnings—especially its suggestion that idealistic Ripon's failure hints at our own inevitable self-destruction—are what make it impossible to forget.—AE