Total Refusal: Leonhard Müllner / Robin Klengel / Michael Stumpf

CONTEMPORARY ROADKILL SCENERY

Machinimas and video art on the highways of Los Santos

Introduction

Ever since the game's introduction in 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s digital world has been the stage picture for an increasing number of artistic Machinimas - films made in video games - and an equal number of other video works created with developer *Rockstar*'s game engine. And whoever followed the film festivals and art exhibitions of the last years on the lookout for game-related content, will almost definitely have passed through the gigantic universe of Los Santos - GTA V's main city and fictional take on Los Angeles. In this text, we will look into why Los Santos keeps on drawing in so many film and art creators and why it is a city worth discussing.

Structurally, this text is comprised of two sections: A theoretical part analysing the preconditions of video production in GTA V - including a detour to the practice of modding - and a second part taking a look at the individual creations of filmmakers and their different approaches in working with the game software. While this text could never claim to provide a complete picture of the genre, it does aim to highlight different techniques, possibilities as well as pitfalls.

One central hypothesis explains the remarkably active art production as a consequence of the game's "hyperrealism" - a term that is to be examined in regards to its applicability on the medium of video games, among other things. This hyperrealism turns the game into a tool for filmmakers to negotiate, parody or critique the analog and digital presence: Police brutality, climate change, protest culture, the tectonic shifts caused by late capitalism - GTA V can provide powerful imagery in dealing with all of those topics.

The game's modifiability is another essential factor. Not only can the cityscape be customized using a powerful editor tool and recorded in a convenient video creation mode - the game also supports modifications altering textures, characters, behaviours and gameplay. These "mods" can potentially influence everything from the game's appearance to its core functions. Their importance in video game filmmaking cannot be overestimated, which is why this text will take a brief look into modding as well. Modding opens up the possibility of moving beyond the game's laws of physics, distorting and abstracting images, dramatically expanding the filmmaker's toolset.

The multitudes of useful tools and possibilities for intervention open up the way for different artistic strategies and processes in working with GTA V. One of the central questions in that regard is how the game's aesthetic quality is negotiated. The magic spell cast by the game's spectacular and aesthetically optimized stage picture opens up unexpected possibilities, but also contains a number of pitfalls. After all, nothing could be easier than simply recording Los Santos as the backdrop for arbitrary narration, relegating the game's visual force to a moving

photo wallpaper.

It is therefore important to develop a differentiating view of the video game most frequently used in film today and to critically examine artistic works with regard to the interesting use of the possibilities provided.

GTA V as a hyperrealistic Machinima machine

According to service platform *IGN*, *GTA V* ranks third in the list of top-selling video games, trailing *Tetris* and *Minecraft* with a total of 135 million copies sold and 6 billion USD of revenue generated[1]. In all probability, it is among the most successful ingame-film studios for YouTubers, creative Let's Play streamers, Machinima creators and game artists as well as experimental filmmakers working with this medium. One of the reasons behind this success is *Grand Theft Auto V*'s hyperrealistic game world. On his website *igta5.com* user *TreeFitty* has recorded 159 examples of real Los Angeles architecture recreated in GTA V in various levels of detail[2].

In his article *The Urban architecture of Los Angeles and Grand Theft Auto* Mark D. Theo discusses the case of a production studio picking up the threads of Los Santos' hyperrealism by reenacting ingame choreographies and actions - gun fights, car thefts, the looting of dead bodies - in the physical real world of California. The resulting video makes use of real world environments in order to simulate virtual gameplay[3]. This is done with such attention to detail that viewers may sometimes find it hard to believe that what they are looking at is the physical real referent rather than a digital depiction. Here, the representation of the video game makes us sceptical about the real world. The project simulates a digital icon which no longer refers to its original referent - Los Santos - but rather to the game's hyperrealism itself.

This reveals the video game as a universe full of *simulacra*. Jean Baudrillard characterized the simulacrum as a sign no longer referring to its referent, but rather to itself, thus emancipating itself from the referent. In their text *Virtual World of Video Games*[4] Evgenii Akchelov and Ekaterina Galanina make use of this term in the context of digital worlds:

> "Simulacra as signs having their own existence construct various virtual worlds. They don't just copy reality any more, but they are modeling it. The created has the same status of reality and truthfulness as the creating. This lets us ascertain the ontological status and truthfulness of virtual objects and virtual worlds. So, we can view virtual world as integral space of simulacra which is focused not on determining similarity with referent reality, but on the fact that there's difference. Virtual worlds don't reflect reality,

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[1] Jordan Sirani: Top 10 Best-Selling Video Games of All Time. Minecraft and GTA V have dominated the last decade, but where do they rank among the all-time bestsellers?, IGN, *https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/04/19/top-10-best-selling-video-games-of-all-time* (04.05.2020)

[2] TreeFitty: IGTA5, *https://www.igta5.com/landmarks-and-other-buildings* (01.05.2020)

[3] Mark D. Teo: The Urban Architecture of Los Angeles and Grand Theft Auto. Perth 2015, S. 26, *https://www.academia.edu/18173221/The_Urban_Architecture_of_Los_Angeles_and_Grand_Theft_Auto* (01.05.2020)

[4] Evgenii Akchelov, Ekaterina Galanina: *Virtual World Of Video Games (der Text enthält* *https://www.academia.edu/29429127/Virtual_World_Of_Video_Games* (01.05.2020)

but simulate it."

As described on *igta5.com*, some of the structures in Los Santos are recreations of real buildings, while others - like the city's name, too - refer to specific styles or are inspired by similar architecture. Like Los Santos itself isn't Los Angeles, but rather its digital simulacrum; it is filled with signs which, as a result of their reiteration and variation have developed lives of their own within the pop-cultural sphere. Los Santos takes this quite a bit further than, say, Midtown Manhattan in *Tom Clancy's: The Division*. The latter, while downsizing some streets or replacing a couple of architectures with generic facades, still aims to be a replica image of its real counterpart - albeit in a post-apocalyptic setting following a major pandemic. Los Santos, on the other hand, is a video game city that is much more than mere imitation. It is filled to the brim with pop-cultural references and quotes - a *pastiche* powerful enough that its own quotes have become quotable sources. In this context, pastiche refers to a self-sustaining imitation, requiring players to be in the know about its referents, as its similarity might not always be obvious[5]. Robin J.S. Sloan defines the video game pastiche as something 1) containing a broad area of game references and 2) prompting players to make use of their knowledge about video game history[6] in order to appreciate these references[7].

Another reason for the game's appeal to artists and filmmakers is its diverse gameplay. Story-driven online action adventure games like *GTA V* often offer a much more varied scope of action than loot-shooters like *The Division*, in which, true to the genre name, interaction with the game world is largely limited to gunfights and looting. *The Division*'s Midtown Manhattan thus remains a stage picture, while Los Santos becomes the simulacrum of a city. While *The Division*'s sparse narrative could take place at any given location, as it largely ignores the historicity and narrative power of the game world's referents as well as local phenomena specific to real life Manhattan, *GTA V* specifically addresses the class struggles of Los Angeles. The city of Los Santos can also be explored in a large variety of vehicles, ranging from bicycles to fighter jets and submarines. When it comes to the number of ways players can interact with their surroundings, *GTA V* outclasses most other mainstream titles. An ingame drug, for example, even allows players to spawn as animals.

GTA V's online mode - *GTA Online* - also plays an important role as a social space, as an orchestral hall within the entertainment complex, which is decoupled from the main storyline. It allows players to create their own characters and embark on their individual criminal careers by

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[5] Robin J.S. Sloan defines a pastiche:"In relation to cinema, [Hoesterey] states that contemporary pastiche structuration 'goes beyond mere quotation to comprise a complex medley and layering of different styles and motifs' . From this perspective, we can suggest two criteria for a videogame pastiche: 1) that a videogame pastiche should incorporate a broad range of gaming references, and 2) that a videogame pastiche should challenge players to exercise their knowledge of gaming history to fully appreciate these references." Robin J.S. Sloan: Nostalgia. Videogames as Playable Game Criticism. 2016, *https://www.gamejournal.it/sloan-nostalgia-videogames/* (24.06.2020)

[6] F.e. *GTA V* refers to its predecessors by including *GTA San Andreas's* Groove Street or familiar characters from multiple previous parts (NPCs which look like CJ, Big Smoke, Sweet, Johnny Klebitz)

[7] "[...] we can suggest two criteria for a videogame pastiche: 1) that a videogame pastiche should incorporate a broad range of gaming references, and 2) that a videogame pastiche should challenge players to exercise their knowledge of gaming history to fully appreciate these references."

partaking in repeatable mini stories together with other players.

Another explanation for *GTA V*'s success as a playground for artists and filmmakers lies in its present-day setting. *GTA V* parodies contemporaries like Mark Zuckerberg or private military contractor companies like *Blackwater*. In contrast to f.e. fantasy settings, the modern day backdrop makes it easy to negotiate core questions of our time in art and film creations. This might explain why developer *Rockstar*'s follow-up action adventure *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which takes place in an American frontier setting at the turn of the 19th century, has seen comparatively little use in Machinimas and other video art projects.

Furthermore, the game is appealing to filmmakers as it offers many cinematic tools. The *Rockstar Editor* allows and helps with the sharing of homemade videos. It includes a number of easy to use features, ranging from tracking shots, different camera modes and filters to audio editing. A special *Director Mode* allows for the creation of a custom cast of characters, many of which have to be unlocked by progression through the game's single- and multiplayer modes. This means that the game's reward system has an impact on Machinima video creation. Selected characters can then be placed in the game world and assigned a range of actions. *Rockstar* has managed to organically embed this *Director Mode* into the game without evoking the cumbersome aesthetics of many other game editors and film creation softwares. All its functionalities - from changing the weather to arranging characters and animals - can be accessed via an ingame menu. Film is created by way of playing. In a way, this editor provides an almost intradiegetic film set, never requiring content creators to step behind the stage picture and out of the game.

Hyperrealism and the art of modding

Anne-Marie Schleiner attributes a subversive potential to video game mods and calls games a host in which modders can nest their mods into[8]. In the case of *GTA V*, Los Santos is a diverse arena for sociopolitical images, in which critical and political narratives can unfold. This arena is further developed through the mods of the community, which expands the game in its social aspects, among others. And it is the host for numerous artistic interventions and appropriations.

Using modding tools or by editing the game's code, modders alter games' surfaces and functions. Implementing such changes without an immense amount of complex work is oftentimes only possible if game developers set up their games to support mods - a practice typically followed by *Rockstar Games* or *Bethesda*, while other mainstream developers like industry giant *Ubisoft* publish most of their games without any mod support.

German media scholar Tilman Baumgärtel classifies mods created by the community as

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[8] Anne-Marie Schleiner Cracking the Maze. Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art, 1998, "Other game patches position themselves in a more critical and/or subversive relation to their 'hosts', the official game engines. Rather than situating themselves as a hyperbole to the host game or as a customized simulation, the more subversive patches offer alternatives to the often rigidly defined genres of gameplay and sometimes create new genres that are assimilated into the game marketplace."

"redecorations"[9]. He bases this term on the cosmetic changes to games' appearances, like in the case of character *skins* - alterations of character appearances.

In the hypermasculine wolds of martial video games, one can, for example, come across mods like *Breast Size Scaling for NPCs*, allowing for the customization of female characters' breast sizes. But the creative energy of the community has also resulted in countless humoristic mods, oftentimes creating content that is much more than just decorative. This includes modifications that pacify the martial game worlds - at least by shifting violence to an ironic spectrum. Stephan Schwingeler lists modder *Maggu*'s 1999 *Simpsons Map* for *Quake III* as one of the earliest examples of community intervention, in which the first person shooter's typically grim surroundings are replaced with the candy-colored landscape of the well known comic series: "The genre-defining weapon extends into the perspective view of the image-space as a remainder of the martial audiovisuality of the source material. The rules are the same, but the game's audiovisual spatiotemporality has changed."[10]

In his doctoral thesis *Künstlerische Forschung in Computerspielen* Thomas Hawranke differentiates between community mods and art mods. He refutes the assumption that only the latter category can be of political nature:

> "Both community as well as art mods take critical stances, disrupt the aesthetics of the game or implement new concepts of navigating the three-dimensional space. Modders and artists pursue similar strategies in working with the tools and materials - and partially they share similar options for distribution. In the direct comparison between regular and art mods, the former are often denied a critical stance towards their subject-matter."[11]

One such politically-minded mod is *The Beautifier* for *Fallout 4*, in which the "genre-defining weapon" is transformed into a peaceful gardening tool. Modder *GenghisKhanX* replaced shotguns with seed guns with overgrown barrels, which can be used to cover the ground with plants. Different types of ammunition provide a selection of different plants - one, for example, sprouts a Bonsai from the gun and allows the player to populate the game world with trees. Back in the world of *GTA V*, the *flocraftMod* enables players to fire an infinite amount of vehicles through the streets of Los Santos - and thus almost appears like a subtle and sarcastic critique of the car-friendly simulacrum, potentially turning it into one gigantic traffic jam. The destructive effect individual motor car traffic on a massive scale has on North American cities is also visualized in an amusing manner in *pongo1231*'s *Chaos Mod V* - infecting Los Santos' countless traffic participants with a sort of rabies, leaving them to rampage around the city until their cars have taken so much collision damage that they explode. *benjamin94*'s *RapidFire[.NET]* mod reverts the aforementioned *The Beautifier*: It diverts the purpose of guns by exaggerating their

[9] Tilmann Baumgärtel: Zu einigen Themen künstlerischer Computerspiele, S.6, *http://medienkunstnetz.de/themen/generative_tools/game_art/6/* (25.05.2020)

[10] Translated from: Stephan Schwingeler: Kunstwerk Computerspiel. Digitale Spiele als künstlerisches Material. transcript Verlag. Bielefeld 2014, S.64

[11] Translated from: Thomas Hawranke: Modding. Künstlerische Forschung in Computerspielen. 2018, *https://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/3788/file/Hawranke_Thomas_Modding.pdf* (25.05.2020). Translated by the authors.

effect, making them powerful enough to propel people, vehicles and other game objects against buildings or even up into the atmosphere.

The accessibility of the game's code and the resulting customizability of its rules enhances its sandbox characteristics and opens up new scopes of action. The game's people and requisites keep on acting "normally" - in accordance with the rules of the simulacrum - while being confronted with the quasi-magic powers of modders' humor. The community's resourcefulness in trying to enthuse their fellow players even showcases the potential effects of natural catastrophes and climate change on the capitalist world of Los Santos: In *No Water + Tsunami + Atlantis* by *Script Mods* the ocean is dried out, leaving behind a desert of mud and garbage in the city's many harbours and beaches, while *Bone34*'s *Tsunami* mod drowns the entire metropolis in salt water, with whales swimming between the submerged skyscrapers. In light of such scenes, one can only affirm Alan Butler's classification of *GTA V* as one of the sharpest, most contemporary tools of critique of late capitalism:

> "Engaging with a corporate virtual reality like the *GTA V* [sic] world, was presenting a number (of) interesting propositions. This was around 2014-2016, so the world was changing too. I think the way the virtual world was beginning to erupt, leak and poison the 'real' world allowed for a popular critical use of video game simulations. In the post-truth Trump world, the virtual appears as the real. It makes sense to me that I should go deep into the virtual in an attempt to find a moment of reality. Video games like *GTA* have become these quasi-marxist critiques of late stage capitalist society, so I think they are perfect spaces to examine these ideas."[12]

The game's depiction of violence, car-obsession and neoliberal effects on the lives of different social classes reflects its physical real referents without diverging from them in a perceivable manner. Where the game differs from the physical real is in its gameplay, rather than in its stage picture and tropes. It seems absurd to ride a bicycle on the back of a jumbo airplane - but the cynicism of private security corporations and silicon valley representatives as well as the governmental monopoly on violence don't. *GTA V*'s hyperrealism doesn't merely lie in its realistic and detailed textures, its motion captured actors or its complex and comprehensible world. It's also grounded in the game's political images, referring to real events and circumstances. Additionally, the term of hyperrealism can be a useful tool in understanding the mechanics behind the power of the digital image - much more so than the commonly used term of photo realism. It is quite apparent that the primary objective of most mainstream games is not simply to portray the world as it is. In games, light and weather are used for atmospheric effect, for example. Sunrises and sunsets are colored in intense shades of red and these sometimes melancholic phases of the day- and night-cycle often last considerably longer than would be natural. It's the same story with explosions, splatter effects, the mobility of characters and the proportions and dimensions of natural and manmade structures. And yet, despite all these exaggerations, the digital image appears too perfect and even more real than it is, as Barbara

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[12] Matteo Bittanti: Interview: Alan Butler And The Aesthetics Of The Video Game Re-Enactment, *https://www.gamescenes.org/2017/05/interview-alan-butler-.html* (25.04.2020)

Flückinger notes[13]. The impression of reality is simulated using techniques like volumetric lighting, casting atmospheric *god rays* on the game world[14]. Paradoxically, the implausibly perfect depictions and excessively pittoresk environments resulting from techniques like this produce a comprehensible experience. God rays - rays of light made visible by way of particle-scattering - shine on the physical world with almost supernatural appeal and add to the hyperreal realism of the game - a hyperrealism which invites developers to experiment with the perception of reality.

According to Benjamin Beil, the technological development of video game graphics so far was not primarily focussed on simulating impressions of reality. Rather, the objective was always the "continual expansion of games' depictional repertoire"[15].

This "expanded depictional repertoire" is the magic workbench where the spell of hyperrealism is put together. It's here that a fictitious aesthetic is invented which "has no real template(s) and thus can no longer be (a copy)"[16].

One can determine that the hyperrealism which shapes the aesthetics of many contemporary video games works a particular visual magic, the effect of which sometimes exceeds that of the physical real world. To an extent, the artistic and cinematic fascination with the medium can be explained as parasitic use of this "muscle power" of the video game industry. Building on this, *GTA V*, its *Director Mode* and the game's modifiability open up a versatile space which can be used to negotiate contemporary phenomena.

On the one hand, hyperrealism tears at the fabric of that space, with the realistic graphical depiction sometimes corresponding, at other times colliding with the playful absurdity of many mods. On the other hand, this tear makes room for personal stories or artistic Machinimas in previously unseen forms.

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[13] Barbara Flückinges quotes Virilio regarding the hyper reality of the digital image, which "will once appear more real than the thing it's an image of" (Translation of Flückingers 2008 quote of Virilio, 1993). Flückinger adds that "according to Manovic, images are 'too perfect' and thus paradoxically 'too real'. With human cognition as a frame of reference, an image that is "more real than reality" is inconceivable. Rather, its "too perfect" appearance reveals an exaggerated presence of order, hinting at the image's synthetic genesis and negatively influencing the aesthetic experience [...].". Ibid. 281

[14] In his article *Playing Yesterday: Mediennostalgie und Videospiele* Sebastian Felzmann writes that "the development of video game aesthetics follows a line from originally abstract depictions to the concrete simulation of impressions of reality" https://books.openedition.org/ksp/5139 (Translated, 19.06.2020)

[15] "To make a point: Video game images are primarily not becoming more realistic, but rather more diverse. The technological development doesn't shoot straight for a 'simulation of impressions of reality', it steadily expands games' depictional repertoire."
Translated from: Benjamin Beil: *Avatarbilder - Zur Bildlichkeit des zeitgenössischen Computerspiels* (transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2012, S.23)

[16] "For the first time in history, a machine - the computer connected to a display - can be used to create visual worlds which have no template and thus can no longer be copies."
Translated from: Götz Großklaus: *Medien-Zeit, Medien-raum: Zum Wandel der raumzeitlichen Wahrnehmung in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main 1995. S. 134).

Mods and machinimas: Shaping hyperrealism

Filmmakers and video artists have made very different uses of the creative tools and possibilities of *GTA V*. While some projects simply use Los Santos as a backdrop to tell their stories, others interfere not only with the visual surface but make mods an integral part of their projects.

Jonne Hansson's works are examples for classic narrative Machinimas. In *The Convenience Store* (2019), a bunch of former Swedish art university colleagues meet up at a supermarket near the beach of Los Santos. Clumsy dialogues and the inherent clunkiness of the narrative medium when working with multiple character roles emphasize the awkwardness of the reunion. All three characters admit to struggling with their art careers and having ended up more or less stranded in Los Santos. The meet-up doesn't bring about any changes in their situation; the former colleagues don't have much to say to each other. While there are some hints at the simulacrum of the game, the film's video game setting isn't explicitly reflected on at any time. In *Outcast* (2017), a film created in the aforementioned *Rockstar Editor*, the camera follows a seagull. Blue waves crash against a rocky coastline, the sunlight reflecting in the water and the city of Los Santos is nowhere to be seen. The visuals are overlaid with a voice over based on Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, creating a calm, meditative atmosphere - a gliding flight in the spirit of individualism. The story of the seagull, looking for a way out of the uniformity of the masses by perfectionizing itself, is told using a bird avatar looping through repetitive animation cycles. The film is a paradox search for individualism and uniqueness inside a programmed environment.

While Jonne Hansson doesn't stray far from Machinima conventions in the sense that his films use classic character roles and dialogues and tell a story that is not an inherent part of the game world, he too makes use of mods. For example, the avatars in *The Convenience Store* have been upgraded to make use of lip synchronization to aid immersion. Nevertheless, the director's clear focus is on his cinematic work, and mods are utilized to support that rather than take the spotlight themselves.

This is where John Delappe's *Elegy* takes a very different artistic approach. A mod specifically developed for the project takes the central role, using a live stream of the game to visualize data collected from outside the game. So, in the case of *Elegy*, the video is the direct product of a mod. Furthermore, the artist doesn't counteract the violence typically associated with the medium in order to use it for a peaceful narrative - like Hansson's *Outcast* does, for example. Rather, the opposite is the case: For the duration of a year - starting on *Independence Day* 2018 - Delappe's custom mod made use of *GTA V* to visualize the amount of gun murders which took place over that time period in the United States. For every murder listed in the *Gun Violence Archive,* the mod spawned an NPC - an AI controlled character - in the streets of Los Santos, programmed to gun down other similar NPCs. The ensuing gunfights could be watched as a *Twitch* live stream for the duration of the project. On his website, Delappe categorizes *Elegy* as a pilot project in the field of data visualization within computer games[17]. The video stream is

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[17] *http://www.delappe.net/play/elegy-gta-usa-gun-homicides/* (23.06.2020)

accompanied by the first radio recording of *God Bless America* - sung in 1938 by Kate Smith and played here in an infinite loop. The patriotic background music breaks with the visual layer of the artwork and turns it into a sarcastic, albeit somewhat one-dimensional statement.

At the same time, *Elegy* incorporates the video game setting by interlacing real violence with ingame violence. "It's just a way of ironically using the very systems that people think are contributing to violence and putting something out there that perhaps considers the entire situation from a different angle"[18], says the artist in an interview with the BBC. Discursively, Delappe plays with the simplistic and inaccurate paradigms that keep connecting video games - and *GTA V* in particular - to violent tendencies in society. In that sense, *Elegy* takes a well traveled route.

Nevertheless, this project remains unquestionably ambitious. It transformed *GTA V* into a tool that translated dry data into comprehensible imagery. In principle, modifications are essential creative tools, allowing artists to customize game worlds to their liking and thus inscribe new meaning into them. In the case of *Elegy*, the project they helped create is both video work and long-term performance: A seemingly infinite tracking shot through a city of excessive violence.

Brent Watanabe's *Animal Glitching* also makes use of a mod, which in this case creates a tracking shot travelling through the manipulated game environment, leading to an experimental graphic experience that wreaks havoc with the video game. The artist uses a deer as a host body, whose adventures can be followed through a live stream on Twitch. As if filmed by an animal cam, the video follows the path of the animal from a third person rather than a first person perspective[19]. Its journey takes us not through the forested areas that surround the city but rather through the urban environment. Running across the streets, the deer protagonist, brings traffic to a halt and even gets hit by a car, before resuming its gallop. It bumps into people, lands in the middle of a crow of young men – a gang it seems – which react by opening fire. In this manner, the deer becomes a chaos factor in the world of Los Santos. In an interview with Matteo Bitanti[20], Brent Watanabe explained that the starting point of his project was his excitement about all the potential *situations* that his bot could transform into never ending entertainment.

In an arbitrary situational *dérive*[21] - an aimless exploration - the hoofed ruminant challenges its environment to react, enables us to deconstruct the operating principles of the game. Intrinsically, the deer is a modification coded by Watanabe and released onto the streets of Los Santos. At that point, the artist loses control over the creature – which has its own artificial intelligence. This alien piece of code then triggers humorous and absurd images.

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[18] Michael Baggs: *How this Grand Theft Auto stream is highlighting US gun crime*
In: BBC (2018), *https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44820473* (23.06.2020)
[19] A fixed camera perspective that is placed behind and slightly above the avatar and allows an overview of what is in front of the person as well as the body movements of the avatar.
[20] Brent Watanabe, interviewed by Matteo Bittanti, 2014, https://vimeo.com/169386836
[21] Derive means wandering around the city to explore urban terrain. "Through the tactic of dérive, the Situationists produced mental and emotional maps of urban cities. They promoted a new way of perceiving the city with a rhythm that contradicted the logic of late capitalism.
Andreas Rauscher: Playing Situationism. Ludic Spaces in Transmedia Contexts. 42,
(https://mediarep.org/bitstream/handle/doc/1781/Navigationen_16_1_41-52_Rauscher_Playing_Situationism.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, accesses: 03.03.2020)

With *Animal Glitching*, Watanabe refers to the concept of animal web cams. Their streams allow for a form of animal observation that alters the relationship between humans and animals. Animal cams broadcast touching, melodramatic scenes such as the birth of offspring or the coming of age of endangered species live. Therefore animals do not need to be penned anymore for observation purposes[22]. Brent Watanabe transforms this technological development into an ironic pastiche by diverting the human *desire to view animals*[23] towards an unpredictable bot.

During the interview, the artist reflects on the moment the idea for *Animal Glitching* came to him: the day he saw a deer on the Golden Gate Bridge. Simply through its presence on this man made structure outside its natural environment, the animal became an attraction for passing car drivers. This anecdote calls into memory another video performance embedded in a video game: *Play as Animals (Animals in Traffic),* a film by Thomas Hawranke presented in 2019 as part of a multi channel video installation. Hawranke uses a mod to place an animal on a busy bridge. In turn, the bridge users react to this alien intrusion. The form taken by the animal – wolf, deer, hawk, wild boar or mouse – is constantly altered during the performance.

While in Hawranke's work the path of the bots is clearly directed along the street, Watanabe's *Animal Glitching* gathers its strength from the lack of purpose and direction of its beastly avatar. In Both these video projects, the mod is on the centre stage. It takes on the burden of image creation. Both projects can therefore take a step back and focus on the reactions generated by the interferences occurring in the gameplay. The mods serve an observational approach. Yet, in contrast with the next chapter, these mods challenge the algorithmic regularity of the game, thereby creating absurd scenes.

Watching Los Santos: Observing hyperrealism

The depth of the digital landscape with its long, intense sunsets can pave the way for completely different cinematic approaches. Bar the commentary and Los Santos frequently conveys a sense of melancholy: a hilly, diverse landscape encroached upon by the excessively expanding city. This urban pressure cooker contains the contractions of US-American superlatives: From the super-rich cocooned in the decadent villas of the Richman and Rockford hills districts to the left behind parts of society. Artists such as TTY and Alan Butler are not modders. They do not intervene outside the normal gameplay. Instead, they capture the social distortions within the city and relate this digital pastiche to the real world. Hence, their approach towards the digital world is to observe and document.

In his project *In-Game People of the Twenty First Century. Chicago. Workers's City* the French artist TTY records small protest marches and aligns 4 videos next to one another. Marchers hold up banners with slogans such as "worker's rights are human rights". These political activists are non-playable characters (NPCs). They are extras whose role it is to enliven the

[22] Isaac Rooks: Pandopticon. The Panda Cam & Animal Surveillance. In: Spectator. Technologies of Knowing 36.1 (2016)
[23] Ibid. 43

otherwise vacuous world surrounding them with reasoned actions proportionate to the setting. TTY solely films the demonstrators without adding or subtracting anything, thereby possibly questioning the portrayal of political struggles in mainstream media – notably in video games.

Similarly, Alan Butler documents the simulacrum of social relations in his photos and videographies[24]. In *Down and Out of Los Santos*, he captures images of the marginalised and the politically forgotten using an in-game smartphone camera feature. Like in social reportage, inspired by ethnographic practices, videography works principally through the non-intervention of the author in the scenery. He does not attempt to contact the NPCs, rather he captures their routine. Between 2015 and 2019, the artist uploaded close to 2000 pieces of content – mostly picture and video snippets – onto different social media outlets and onto his personal, dedicated website[25]. Butler describes his subjects – i.e. the homeless, hobos or alcoholics – in relation to their role in the gameplay as "ambient human presence"[26]. He explains his concept as follows:
"Through performative engagement with the uncanny simulations of society's most vulnerable, *Down and Out in Los Santos* aims to unearth the viewer's empathy and humanity through manipulative photographic tropes."[27]

Alan Butler uses the hyperrealistic pastiche of Los Santos to research the effect of media politics on gamers and observers alike. The integration of poor and vulnerable people into the game landscape is not an innocent piece of environmental storytelling – i.e. items describing the state of the world before the intervention of the player. In fact, it fosters anxiety and critical reflexion regarding the world thereby creating empathy.
The two examples mentioned above point towards a fundamental question: to which degree can independent artistic work be generated from showing the pure graphic design of the game's elements? The temptation is huge: a film or art audience with little gaming knowledge might be gobsmacked by a simple *Objet trouvé* showcased in the flamboyant gaming environment. Yet in terms of media theory, these types of projects only scratch the surface. An artistic, media critical approach is required to avoid succumbing to the magic spell cast by the imagery.
Alan Butler's work is a good example of an approach that goes beyond the use of imagery. His artistic undertaking stretches over several years and he makes use of tools emanating from within the videogame. Aesthetically speaking, his work falls within the tradition of social reporting and tenders "[some] sort of social realism for the software age"[28]. Subsequently his

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[24] The technique of "Videography" is described by René Tuma, Bernt Schnettler and Hubert Knoblauch in *Videographie: Einführung in die interpretative Videoanalyse sozialer Situation*en as follows: "The object of videography are social situations. Social situations are spatio-temporal events in which actors are involved. Videography differs from other variants of video analysis in that it focuses on 'natural' situations. By "natural" is meant that these interactions represent everyday situations of certain actors, which are not specifically produced for research. The aim of videography is not to document certain patterns and reactions to stimuli in laboratory situations, but to capture actions and interactions in the fields already discussed, which would also take place if the researcher were not present." René Tuma, Bernt Schnettler, Hubert Knoblauch: Videography. Introduction to interpretative video analysis of social situations. Springer VS Publishing House. Berlin 2013, p.14. Translated by the authors.
[25] https://downandout.in-los-santos.com/ (accessed: 22.05.2020)
[26] Alan Butler's artists webpage: http://www.alanbutler.info/down-and-out-in-los-santos-2016 (accessed: 22.05.2020)
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

observations also carry a performative quality and are embedded in media history and the artistic context.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations (2017) presents a similar approach. The video project is a repetition of Ed Ruscha's namesake series of 1962. In his description of the project, Butler underlines that he has "produced a version of the seminal photography artifact that accepts GTAV [sic] as an exploitable corporate reality, akin to the signs and images that make up our own world."[29]

In a series of black and white video clips, he presents 26 gasoline stations of Los Santos and its surrounding areas. His aesthetical choices clearly take root in the source of his inspiration and create a distance to the surface texture of a video game. Through this piece of artistic repetition, Butler does not only manage to set his work in a historical artistic tradition, but also inscribes the game and its setting in our collective cultural and historical conscience. The imaginary tropes he derives from the videogame - in the shape of video clips - form the motivic basis of films and photographs that, in turn, form the source of imagery for the game.

Thus, Butler draws our attention towards a closed image cycle. Los Santos is not only a pastiche of Los Angeles, but it is also a mash-up of pop culture, artistic, historical and architectural imagery.

Hence the use of existing reservoirs of imagery, their subsequent re-contextualisation grow beyond the observable imagery and transform *GTA V* into a space filled with art historical relationships that could not have existed without it.

The visual magic trap: Using hyperrealism narratively

In parallel with the creation of a tension between content and medium, the way in which film makers exploit the *GTA V*'s sand pit of narratives forms the central challenge of the artistic approach. In turn, this raises the following question: to what degree can the game's visual magic be pierced or broken with by the film?

Ismaël Joffroy Chandoutis' project *Swatted* (2018) presents a case of aesthetics and content intertwining. Without being didactical, this machinima explores the form and content of the output medium. On the narrative level, Chandoutis' film reflects upon the swatting phenomenon, a by-product of the gaming and streaming culture. This "prank" consists in sending a special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team to the house of a gamer during a live stream. Subsequently, the prankster can observe via the live stream feed how the police violently erupts into the real world of the pranked. In the voice-over, swatted gamers talk about their uncomfortable experience. From the graphics perspective, the visual magic is technically deconstructed through a commissioned mod that dissolves the hyperreality into the lines of a technical drawing. Police and vehicles patrol the emptiness of the virtual sky. In this context, hyperrealism exerts the same type of fascination we experience through the weightlessness of dreams. It is precisely this vast realm of possibilities, enabling the creation of hyperreal representations of the supernatural, that sucks the artist and the observer into the medium. One could call it the

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[29] http://www.alanbutler.info/twentysix-gasoline-stations (accessed: 6.7.2020).

esoteric of algorithms which is at the same time used and uncovered by Chandoutis' work. Stephan Schwingeler describes the fundamental attitude of artistic usage towards videogames as a tendency to act "against the effort of the game to be transparent [Transparenzstreben] and blurs the perception [Durchsicht] of the virtual world"[30]. Chandoutis' *Swatted* is a pristine example of this observation, even though in this case, the artistic intervention is not limited to a disruption of perception. *Swatted* does not tip over into the surreal. Instead, the partial dissolution of the gaming environment and its physical laws combined with the coalescence of the narrative, gameplay and reality, create an associative space that enables a far reaching intrusion into the digital world.

In Andy Hughes' ==*Plastic Scoop* (2019)== swimming equates flying, oil equates water. The laws of physics are bent once again and even the earth's surface becomes extra-terrestrial as the protagonists glide across it like swallows. A diver falls down from the sky until his fins touch the tarmac. The small explosions that catapult consumer goods like cans or plastic bottles across the plane call into memory the operating mode of the gaming world.

Plastic scoop is thus an example of a gaming environment being used mainly for its formal qualities. With his plastic gear, the main character dives from one configuration of the virtual world to another: sometimes adopting the shape of an astronaut, sometimes that of a clown. Different soundbites come together in the background - whale songs and old audio recordings praising the virtues of post Second World War capitalism. The soundtrack features *The Kingdom of Plastic* by *Young American films* (1944), NASA's *Skylab 2 Mission* or *Pollution solutions* from the *National Archives & Records administration* of 1988. All these background components form a conceptual veil draped over the powerful graphics of the videogame in order to unify the abstract picture artefacts within an associative narrative. Environmental protection - the main critical focus of the film - is brought forward in those moments when the camera follows an overfilled garbage truck driving through Los Santos spreading pre-coded, infinite amounts of litter in its path. The beauty arises from the absurdity of this unrelenting source of garbage that blows through the landscape – without ever polluting it. Nevertheless, the fluid world of *Plastic scoop* contains enough persistent trash to make up the texture of the streets of Los Santos. The detail suggests that the perfection of hyperrealism is not plausible if it cannot be fouled with filth.

Most of the *found-footage-objects* of this sound and imagery collage are not combined organically but seem to be composed of different superimposed layers. The abstract video layer becomes absurd and optimistic due to the soundtrack featuring hymns to the glory of a consumerist future. The strange hyperrealist imagery crashes against the analogue voices enthusing long faded visions of technocapitalism. Reality is decoupled from the narration. The voices echo in the landscape like the voices of lost preachers. They herald their own perdition in the desert of their future hopes that have now become, decades after their gospel, dystopian realities.

As in Andy Hughes' *Plastic Scoop*, the second episode of Larry Achiampong and David Blandy's trilogy *Finding Fanon* begins with two people falling from the sky into the world of *GTA V*. The

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[30] Stephan Schwingeler: Kunstwerk Computerspiel. Digitale Spiele als künstlerisches Material. transcript: Bielefeld 2014, p. 21

camera switches continuously from one character to the other. The spectator follows the steps of these men as they prowl the empty streets of Los Santos until they meet. Like in a duel, both characters stand apart and stare each other down. Yet no shot is fired, nothing happens. Content wise, *Finding Fanon* focuses on the search for lost plays written by psychiatrist and theorist Frantz Fanon. In his testament, the politically radical humanist and anticolonial pioneer ordered that the text fragments, on which the video is based on, be destroyed. The artists summon this lost "ghost" play in the fictional space of video games and film. The play unravels across the trilogy. It is decidedly political in nature and touches upon a variety of themes stretching from post colonialism and a critique of the capitalist and racist structures of society to themes such as the post apocalypse or the Anthropocene.

> "In our series Finding Fanon, we've been looking at the history of cultures of violence and when we were thinking about taking that into the virtual realm, it seemed to make sense to place that within something that is synonymous with violence."[31]

Thus, in this case *GTA V* was selected as the location for the film because the artists associated this space with violence. This is somewhat remarkable, seeing as *GTA V* could also come to mind for the wide range of actions and interactions offered by the game. Compared to other mainstream games, a significant number of these interactions can be qualified as peaceful. Furthermore, the version of Los Santos presented in the film is almost completely devoid of people and thus of violence. A world free of aggression, a peaceful backdrop, which is described as violent only in the commentary.

Visually, the contemplation of the digital landscape is central to the work. On a metaphorical level it continually flows into the voice-over narration, although it is mainly discussed in a romantic tradition. In one of the scenes, both avatars are standing on a rock in front of the sea with their backs to the camera. They are watching the movement of the water. In an interview, the artists explained that this "vista we find harks back to the romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich"[32]. The detail rich digital world - that goes so far as to model the holes made by sandworms on the beach – combined with the resolution of the open world and the convincing landscape form ingredients that can easily be used to create cinematographic effects. In an interview with Matteo Bittani for *gamescenes.org*, Blandy explains that the digital gaming world presents a "space we can inhabit in order to think about different ideas of the world, […] to create incredibly crispy visuals that would be very hard to render from the ground up"[33].

Apart from the sky fall in the opening scene, the interaction of the characters with their environment is limited to standing and walking. Typical gameplay is excluded - as are the interaction possibilities with the virtual world. In essence, the film shows a walk.

The voice-over, in its quest for Fanon's lost ghostly texts, is only very loosely connected to the events unfolding on camera. The script is dense, poetic, fragmented and decidedly serious.

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[31] Making art from Grand Theft Auto, BBC (2016), https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-36344758 (accessed: 14.05.2020)
[32] Matteo Bittanti: Interview: Larry Achiampong And David Blandy. In: gamescenes.org (2016) *https://www.gamescenes.org/2016/05/interview-larry-achiampong-and-david-blandy.html* (accessed: 14.05.2020)
[33] Ibid.

Sometimes it uses metaphors from the gaming world and hints at the medium: "perhaps he is waiting here, inside the polygons, behind the texture maps, in the fields of algorithms." One can perceive the artists' effort to weave the narration into the fabric of the medium. Nevertheless, a main dilemma cannot be overlooked: the superimposition of text and imagery is only elementary and the connection between both elements is left for the observer to decipher.

The game environment is hardly explored by the narrative. The sight of the camera remains superficial and is content to serve as a backdrop medium for the story. The choreography of political content and pristine aesthetics remains a movement of two distinct elements that barely interact with one another. The narrative potential offered by a synthesis of content and images is confined to theory rather than expressed in practice.

Jonathan Vinel's *Martin Pleure - Friends for life* (2017) also presents an avatar wandering through the hyperreal, lonely world of *GTA V*. Some of the imagery taken in the spectacular sunlight reminds us of the Caspar-David-Friedrich-like image in *Finding Fanon 2*. Albeit, Vinel's machinima presents a very personal, even intimate narration - not a political essay. The story begins with an androgynous character waking up in the seemingly empty world of Los Santos. He is concerned about the disappearance of his friends. During a fit of rage, he smashes the furniture of a room. His wrath spreads across the world that surrounds him. It also affects the fictitious camera and the observers of the scene, whom he kicks and beats. His anger is primarily directed towards himself, yet it spreads like wildfire to the surrounding environment until all is ablaze. However, these excerpts of exploding backgrounds inspired by action-films and video games are not satisfactory. Instead Martin is frustrated by the emptiness surrounding him. He beats passers-by unconscious while the voiceover asks "where are my friends"? Quickly Martin begins to be on the receiving end of violence, his body bleeding where police bullets have pierced him. Yet, like a *bullet sponge*[34], his virtual body seems to remain unaffected by these impacts. The pain endured by Martin is of another nature. The melancholic colours of the sun setting between the scenes underline the lonely atmosphere, which can also be picked up on in the low voice of the character. Jonathan Vinel uses surprising images to picture solitude. Martin projects these images onto himself: during a boat trip to the end of the world, the camera dives into the water, blurring the image into abstraction. The character also likes to play around with the vehicles of *GTA V*: like in a *wheelz 'n' smoke* car rodeo – cars drifting, creating skid marks and smoke with their tires – Martin sits on a smoking motorbike in an idyllic setting going around in circles. In another segment, he takes selfies against the Los Santos Skyline with the in-game mobile phone, begging the question: for whom, if he can't share them with anybody? Sad, Martin aims anti-tank rockets at windmills because one of his lost friends could not stand them. Nevertheless, the windmills are not programmed to have a *damage model* and remain unscathed. Altogether, the digital world surrounding Martin seems to fall to pieces: urban tree planters are placed in the middle of the highway, traffic smashing into the obstacles. And even devotion seems to have left this world alongside with his friends: "dogs scorn affection" declares the voiceover whilst a wolf tries to devour Martin's body lying on the ground.

The filmmaker creates collages by integrating photographs from the physical reality into the

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[34] A Bullet Sponge is a digital body that is little affected by ammunition and is usually unimpressed by enemy bullets due to a high level or good armor.

film. These static images hint at another space-time structure - most likely memories of lost friendships. During the ending scene, we see a picture of two superimposed tattooed forearms reading: "friends for life". A sad image as friendship is unlasting in *Martin pleure*.

Vinel exploits the repertoire of machinimas to its fullest extent by opening up narrative associations through the abstraction of surrealistic pictures of the graphics and modifications. He uses the violent magic spell cast by the graphics to reflect upon its depiction in video games. Martin's world, the game environment, is also his antagonist – the spell of the spectacle machine does not touch him, instead it constricts him. Subtle observations of the operating principles of the gaming world are inscribed into the plot and create its narrative power.

When hyperreality becomes surreal: Beyond hyperrealism

Alexandar Radan's *This water gives back no images* celebrates abstractions derived from the imagery of *GTA V*. In the multichannel video installation different pieces of the graphical universe of the game are aggregated together to form a new organic assemblage. Thereby, the meanings of the different elements create some sort of chemical reaction that cannot be interpreted through a linear narrative. Nevertheless, the images seem to emit a sense of gloomy solitude. The characters are alone, their buildings are isolated, and everything appears to be melting into a shapeless atmosphere. Radan seems to debunk the phantasmagoria of the digital surface texture. He builds a frame in which hyperrealism loses its relation to physical reality. The various reflections of light and water, the vegetation, the palm trees, and the strange and absurd, glitch-like nods of the avatar become part of the surreal setting that transforms the ludic artefact *GTA V* into an abstract, artistic game. Radan addresses the dream-like quality of the medium - an atmospheric flow of visually stunning pictures that is freed from the constraints of physics. Even the avatar oscillates between alienation and familiarity, it seems to be stuck in the role of a disaffected me: "You play a person that doesn't look like you, but is somehow similar. In the dream you see yourself and that is combined with your experience."[35]

A woman with cucumbers on her eyes sits on a bed as if it were a flying carpet. A man's body lacks its texture, he appears to be crafted out of white chocolate. He looks dead even though he is moving. People, relations, nature - all is lost in reverie.

This water gives back no images experiments with the obvious links between videogames and dreams. It thus reminds us of Jon Rafman's works, such as *Dream Journal* in which the artist documented his dreams over the span of one year. He used the fragments he collected to create an animation film, the graphics of which recall the aesthetics of video games. The images produced do not need to be explained, nor are they self-explanatory - because to understand this work of art, one needs to dare practicing oneiromancy. Once again, the aesthetic power outshines the randomness of its structure and questions regarding visual semantics are not even raised. Dreams are intimate, they are not the business of other people. Wrapped in the arms of art they are nevertheless unravelled without any explanation or comment required.

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[35] Alexandar Radan im Interview mit Johanna Laub, Doublefeature, Schirn (2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGwuhsbn0_s&list=PLaZEE9an0D5IeYe4rjlQP--pcr7TGVVg-&index=5 (accessed: 01.05.2020)

Dreams are fascinating because they are impalpable, and because they create a mixture of visual energy that overrides intelligibility – without being disenchanted by the sight or the fussiness of the mind. Dreams and art appear to be related and, when combined, can multiply each other's effects.

In *This water gives back no images*, Alexandar Radan uses a camcorder to record his film; he shoots what he sees on screen. He superimposes the image layer of 1990 VHS camcorder onto the seamless interface of the machinimas. This varnish coat added from outside the computer creates a distance between the raw material and the resulting medium, thereby reinforcing the surreal quality of the images. On the one hand, they are brought closer to the physical world through the graininess of the image. While on the other, the absurdity of the visual magic is reprocessed through the catalyst of rational aesthetics, increasing their uncanniness. As described in the study *The uncanny Valley. Effect of Realism on the Impression of Artificial Human Faces*[36], the uncanniness of images grows the more they are associated with real imagery. Hence, what at first sight appears to be a cheap aesthetical thrill reinforces the structure of the cinematographic intention.

The same mechanics are at play in *Steckbrief Natur – Folge 1 – Der Waldkauz (The Tawny owl)*. Once again, Radan films his screen with a camera. He employs the methods of the wildlife documentaries in his use of picture and sound. The film shows a kiosk in the middle of the woods. In the narration, this alien object is presented as a natural element of the setting. The bright structure set in the undergrowth stands out like a white elephant, yet the narrator does not seem to notice its alien quality. It is only when it turns out to be a wormhole into a nightmarish parallel world that the narrator becomes sceptical and develops a delightfully expectable mistrust in regards to sound and images.

The visual magic of games that annuls the laws of physics and even enables the representation of almost anything is met, from the beginning, with an *enjoyable mistrust*. Even images that are bound to reality – a specific pastiche – can suffer from a glitch, a programming error that breaks the consistency of the imagery narrative and tips into the surreal.

In regards to dreams and the dreamlike quality of films, Stefanie Kreuzer notes how surrealism "clashes with mimesis and chronology"[37] and how the tale and story relegate the dominance of the images. A transgression is initiated "through alienation, being out of place, A-logical games, and absurdity. [...] It confounds space and time and ultimately blurs the boundary between dreams, daydreams, reality and hallucinations (or visions), even perceptions and memories flow into each other"[38]. Alexandar Radan's out of place artefacts - not only the kiosk in the woods but also the eerie apartments in *This water gives back no images* – are absurd contra-sense images, going beyond any plot and having a dreamlike and hallucinating effect. This shows that it is the video games, these world creation programmes, that enable a simple, effective break from

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[36] "In addition to the emergence of the uncanny valley, Mori assumed that the level of impression is zero (i.e. neutral impression) when the realism of robots is extremely low (e.g. industrial robots) and highest for perfectly realistic human appearance." Jun'ichiro Seyama & Ruth Nagayama: The Uncanny Valley. Effect of Realism on the Impression of Artificial Human Faces. In: Presence 16 (2007), p. 4.

[37] Stefanie Kreuzer refers to the four characteristics of Isabel Maurer's film aesthetic and hereby quotes Lommel, Queipo and Roloff. Stefanie Kreuzer: Traum und Erzählen in Literatur, Film und Kunst. Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2014, p.119. Translated by the authors.

[38] Ibid.

viewing habits: and that is the digital images that we mistrust even as they are enshrined in reality.

Conclusion

There are few video games that offer such a large array of interaction, modification and intervention possibilities as *GTA V*. Consequently, the game contains huge potential to subvert the content in order to tell, for instance, personal stories or create small parallel universes within the huge narrative cosmos of Los Santos.
The frequent re-appropriation of the game environment can be explained, in no small part, by the fact that the game is grounded in a contemporary setting. It gives players a space to reflect upon the social issues of our time. Hence, *GTA V* is not simply a fun and entertaining machine that allows for a broad range of experiments and mischief, it is also a medium that can be used to formulate socio-political critique.
The plasticity of the medium is expressed through the remarkable plurality of themes and methods available for the production of outputs. This observation is especially true in regards to artistic interventions such as modulations and extractions. The game's malleable nature transforms some players from passive consumers into constructive *prosumers* and generates a community culture endowed with creativity and inspiring amusement. Their knowledge and skills invite artists to cooperate, as both the community and the film and art professionals create machinimas and mods.

Nevertheless, a critique of the way the setting is overused can also be formulated, based on the observation that certain means of design are repeated again and again. Artists and filmmakers should go beyond being astonished by hyperrealist surface textures. The cinematic and artistic use of video games as material demands a media-reflexive, possibly self-ironic approach that addresses the setting and its particularities. The in-game tools, which constitute the medium, want to be used. In the sandbox of *GTA V*, using its modifiability and film tools, lies a narrative as well as artistic potential that is far from being exhausted.

There is a need for more games that artistically stimulate the community, film and art professionals by permitting them to approach the medium in a playful way!

Translation: Stefan Askew, Michael Stumpf, Robin Klengel, Christoph Hüttmannsberger