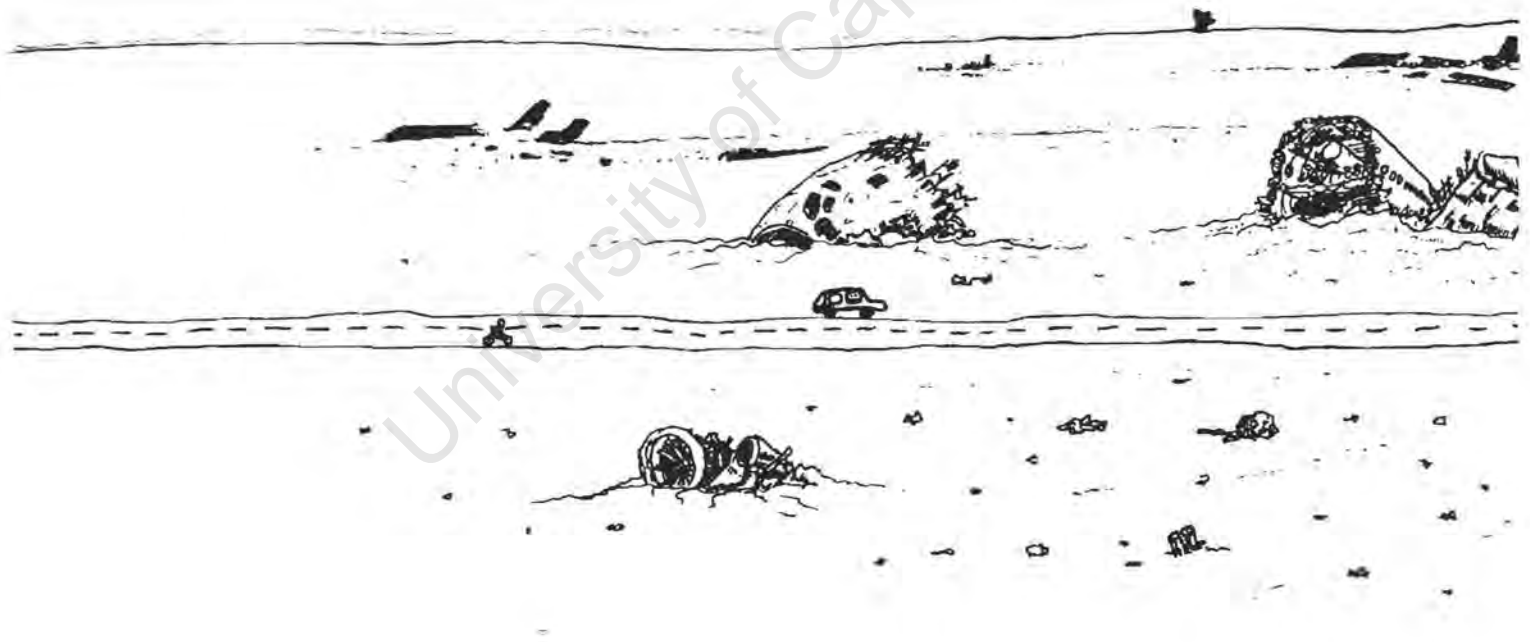


The Road to Heaven

By David Scadden



December, 2009

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The Road to Heaven

David Scadden 2009

Declaration

This work has not been submitted previously in whole or in part for the award of any other degree. The work is my own; each significant contribution to, or quotation in this dissertation from the work or works of other people has been acknowledged through citation and referencing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution to this paper: Andrew Lamprecht, Catherine Ocholla, Johann van der Schijff, Bianca Kloos, Damien Morrison, Brendan Murray, Eeshaam September, Daniele Tripepi, Dylan Edy, Tertius Nel, Ed Young, Robert Sloon, Matthew Partridge, Linda Stupart, Stuart Bird, Anthony Tyron, Ryan Griffiths, Rick Hunter, Wayne Barker, Moeneeb Dalwai, all the staff at Michaelis, Starscream, my brother, sisters, and Mom & Dad.

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1. Introduction

Drones since the dawn of time, compelled to live your sheltered lives, not once has anyone ever seen such a rise in pure hypocrisy. I'll instigate, I'll free your mind, I'll show you what I've known all this time... God hates us all.

(Slayer, *God hates us all*, 2001)

Growing up, I used to have a book called *The Unexplained*, and inside it was a picture of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch's paintings were full of weird and wonderful animals coupled with hundreds of naked men and women in what looked like a garden party of the most exotic kind. To imagine such a place was arousing; to imagine a place full of fruit and naked people should turn everyone on, regardless of sexual preference. He created a visual world that was disturbing and captivating and this was the beginning of my fascination with alternate spaces, the overarching, very real influence of the surreal, psychological, intangible, virtual and unreal.

2. Religion, War and Virtual Space

'If you were an atheist, Birbal,' the emperor challenged his first minister, 'what would you say to the true believers of all the great religions of the world?' Birbal was a devout Brahmin from Trivikrampur, but he answered unhesitatingly, 'I would say to them that in my opinion they were all atheists as well; I merely believe in one god less than each of them.' 'How so?' the emperor asked. 'All true believers have good reasons for disbelieving in every god except their own,' said Birbal, 'and so it is they who, between them, give me all the reasons for believing in none.'

(Salman Rushdie, 2008:44-45)

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament prophesies the second coming of Christ, hinting that on the day, all Christians will be shipped off to heaven while the Earth is plundered and overrun by demons, who will kill (maim or torture) all non-believers before they and the world are passed on to the four horsemen of the apocalypse¹ (Revelation, 6:1-8). Generally, the Old Testament shows God taking an active interest in human existence² - he often intervenes and showcases his powers³ - while the New Testament focuses more on following Jesus into a second, better life after death⁴.

Catastrophic events involving death and torture are rife in the Bible, so it is not too farfetched to say that faith [in God] is disguised fear that has been programmed into people over centuries and resulted in a view of death that directly impacts on the real life 'lived'. Fantastical stories feature prominently in the Bible, from talking bushes of fire to plagues, floods and apocalyptic visions, largely reminiscent of an extreme Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (L.S.D) trip. Imagining this fictional world is based on the [Christian] collective's understanding of the real world. This would explain the vehement opposition

¹ Interpretations vary.

² Like the great programmer of some bizarre computer game.

³ E.g. when the Pharaoh refused to let Moses go, God decided to set ten plagues on the Egyptians, killing all their first born children and animals, while the Israelites remained safe. After crossing the Red sea, Moses led the Israelites to Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the laws that the Christian God would have mankind live by.

⁴ Those who do not conform are sent to hell.

to a scientist/philosopher such as Galileo who turned convention upside down by proposing that the sun remains still, and the earth moves around the sun, not vice versa. For his blasphemous discovery Galileo was tried for heresy in 1633, banned from publishing and placed under house arrest until he eventually died in 1642⁵.

To be fair, Religion does create feelings of hope in times of hardship and serves to explain (to some) why things are, and Christianity, as with other faiths, has its own answers for science, creation and purpose. The architecture of some European churches and their acoustics render the idea of some divine commandeering presence believable. In more communal animated domes, there is characteristically an audience whipped into a trance by the combined effect of the environment, the act of standing, singing and praying, and the religious fervour (or frenzy) of the preacher. This compares favourably to a virtual space, which differs completely from anything going on 'outside' in the real world. In the face of such simulacrum, Darwin's book on *The Origin of Species* was unsurprisingly the most controversial book of its time. I think you could call it a religious catastrophe, a collision between faith and reality.

Reality in Darwin's sense is often denied in religion, which ironically propagates something it cannot prove. The idea that organisms evolved into what they are today over millions of years – and proof of this – did not (and still to a large extent doesn't) fit into the story construed by the Church. Darwin had created a new way of thinking that favoured science and challenged the indoctrinated belief systems of all religions.

Since Darwin, the world has accelerated and changed significantly. This time the 'evolution' has been brought about by technology. The foremost theorist on this topic is the French author, Paul Virilio. Raised as a devout Christian, he believed that he was 'born of fire'⁶ (Redhead, 2004). He studied and documented all the bunkers and anti-aircraft placements that were left behind all over Europe after World War II. Later on, he focused on the Gulf wars, writing about how warfare had changed and believing that the

⁵ www.wikipedia.org/wiki/galileo last accessed: 10-10-2009.

⁶ I refer here to an interview where he spoke of being brought up in Nazi-occupied France, where he became fascinated with war-influenced architecture and technology.

World War never really ended. According to him, the only thing that really ended was Hitler's reign.

In his writings, he expresses fascination with warfare and argues that it is in our nature to constantly find a faster way to remove all that might threaten us. There is some truth to the argument that most of our technology is a direct descendant of military research and warfare. The net result has been the birth of cyber culture, which Virilio claims to be a danger that is unique to modernity. Mass media informs us of events as they occur, instantly broadcasting images of supposed events all around the world, and this, he claims, removes events from time and history. Virilio talks about how war is the real driving force behind human development. Before World War I, wars were waged with maps - landscapes and landmarks were painstakingly rendered (topographically) so that artillery could be directed. Unfortunately the artillery tended to destroy these landmarks, making it difficult for the infantry to orientate themselves. Therefore photographic mosaics had to be constantly created to reorient the soldiers and prevent needless casualties. Aircraft were first only used to observe the battlefield and take pictures. The same applied to balloons with cameras, which were also used to take photographs of enemy lines (Virilio in Redhead, 2004:63).

Right now, old processes (such as film) are slowly dying out. Concurrently, digital photography is becoming cheaper, meaning that almost everyone can afford to have a camera. Images can easily be transferred or communicated using the Internet, particularly because of links with other kinds of technology (such as cell phones⁷). Therefore, virtually everyone can capture or record events in their everyday life and share these with others.

There is, however, a human tendency to want to see catastrophe more than tranquillity and beauty, whether people would like to admit it or not. Like religion, key features in most pop culture today often dwell on themes of death and rebirth. John Taylor is a photographic journalist and author of the book *Body Horror*, in which he discusses mankind's fascination with looking or staring at a horrific scene and the conflicting

⁷ Almost all cell phones have a digital camera as a standard feature.

morals some feel. While some might think it is rude to stare, a photograph frees us from our conscious guilt or the perversion of staring; in other words, the photograph offers opportunities for different types of looking (Taylor, 1998:12-13). However, unlike the text in the Bible which has only been represented visually through artists, photographs of the real remove the fantastical element. Taylor mentions that the viewers and witnesses suffer side effects. It could be that they come face to face with their own mortality, yet they are still drawn to it (Taylor, 1998).

In the case of 9/11, the incident was broadcast live across the world, with news reporters and specialists insinuating possible reasons for the attacks. It was propagated that the whole world, and particularly America, was a target and under attack by religious Islamic extremists. Instilling fear in a population and then providing a solution in order to get support is common practice in propaganda. Thus, what preceded the American invasion of Iraq were the rewards of their technology. After 9/ 11, the extremists, in turn, also made use of the media: cable television and the Internet ensured that we could all watch 'home-made' decapitation videos made by alleged terrorists. The insurgents would use the Internet to show the world what they do to infidels, and people would watch these videos out of human curiosity rather than sympathy (despite the fact that they were highly graphic). The victim was usually kidnapped and forced to beg his⁸ country to stop the occupation. Some days later, a video would be released of their decapitation.

But, also with respect to technology, most people forget that there were rumours that *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (Microsoft, 2000) might have been used as a tool to aid the terrorists in their attack⁹. The game has detailed maps, which include New York City and included the twin towers. Recent publications of the game exclude the twin towers. This is an example of how actions in the real world affect the landscape of the virtual world. Microsoft had to release a patch to remove the twin towers from the 2000 version of the game¹⁰; they claimed it was out of respect for the victims. However, what I see is an

⁸ They were mostly soldiers and later captured western civilians would suffer the same fate.

⁹ Windowsitpro.com/article/articleid/22488/Microsoft-flight-simulator-in-terrorist-controversy.html (September 17, 2001) author : not known. last accessed 16-03-2009.

¹⁰ Flight Simulator 2000 Patch - Remove WTC (World Trade Centre) Towers www.microsoft.com/downloads/. Last accessed 16 March 2009.

action in the real world with the same destructive effect in the virtual world. Why could the towers not stay in the 2000 edition? Their action brought the reality of a catastrophe into the virtual world, indirectly proving that some man-made actions go beyond their intention. The reality of the real was, in this case, replicated in virtual space.

Jean Baudrillard is a French author and theorist who has also written many essays on topics around mass media, simulation and semiotics. Baudrillard was controversial in his writing, especially in his book on the Gulf War, *The Gulf War Did Not Happen* (1991). This book is actually a collection of three essays, the first written during the build up to the war, *The Gulf War Will Not Take Place*. The second was written during military action *The Gulf War Is Not Taking Place* and the third was written after the action, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. These were originally printed and published in *Libération* and *The Guardian* between January and March, 1991 (Butler, 1999).

Baudrillard discusses in *The Gulf War Did Not Happen* how there was no actual war in the traditional sense but rather a massacre on a virtual plane as the allied forces dropped 10000 tons of bombs daily (using the technology that Virilio theorizes makes killing more efficient). He also explains how what we understand of the Gulf War was only represented through the media and news channels, suggesting that our opinion of the conflict was governed by the visuals the media showed us. Baudrillard states that the media would repeatedly show the same visuals, thus creating the illusion that fighting was actually happening in the traditional sense. He therefore generally questions the reality of these events as they occur within the sequences chosen or showcased by others; the true or 'real' reality of these events is removed as a result of digital manipulation.

Baudrillard writes about the use and effects of simulation in his 1988 paper *Simulacra and Simulators*. Simulation and machine vision offer us simulated versions of reality, and Baudrillard mentions that simulation is an illusion that replaces the world in its own image; we do not experience things as they happen originally or realistically, but only as a copy of something else. Thus simulation is not only the loss of reality but also its very possibility (Baudrillard, 1988).

Earlier, I mentioned that our virtual actions have an effect on the real, and so it is true to say that the allied forces were mainly fighting a virtual war against a technologically disadvantaged enemy. The image of the Gulf War was heavily edited by the media to create the illusion of a war on the ground (Baudrillard, 1995:69) and perhaps "...it is with the same imperialism that present day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models" (Baudrillard, 1988:146).

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3. New Media and Personal Iconography

The term 'New Media' emerged during the last century, and it has become increasingly relevant in our explanations and understanding of contemporary art. The words themselves refer to new technological influences and the manipulation of 'Old Media'. By 'Old Media' I refer to representation by means of static photos (film), audio and print media. In a manner of speaking, 'Old Media' is traditionally considered to be a more 'pure' form of artistic representation without digital manipulation.

New media is a collection of elements that requires or involves the physical and technological manipulation and assimilation of everything, from music to film, using traditional methods and new digital innovations. The Internet has become this media's biggest source of information: artists can now find images, film, audio and other material instantly and without having to leave their homes. These elements can then be forged, plundered, faked or devalued - what some people fear is undermining our pictorial patrimony and cinephile universe. Everything can be combined and connected through physical construction/deconstruction and digital representation, with endless results.

Perhaps the best understanding of what New media is explained by Lev MANovich in his book *The Language of New Media* (2002). He Defines the principles of new media on five points. Manovich states that 1. New media is a format that can be represented numerically in the form of data. 2. That different elements of New media can exist independently from each other. 3. There is the Automation of new media objects that can be created and modified automatically. 4. That new media objects can exist in multiple versions thus they are variable. 5. Transcoding that new media objects can be converted into other formats. (Manovitch, 2002::49-65).

There is still uneasiness in terms of its acceptance as an art form. The genre has been dismissed in the past as an art form that leeches from the very life it resides in. This, I feel, is its main feature. new media, in this sense, draws from artists such as Duchamp and Warhol. The readymade can be redone and re-rendered multiple, if not an infinite, number of times. As a concept, it has also pushed the boundaries of all copyright,

brazenly side-stepping what can and cannot be used. Who has the rights? And should artists be allowed to re-use anything they believe to be source material?

What follows are five different examples of New Media that have had a profound influence on my personal iconography as well my methodology.

3.1. Rambo



Figure 1: *Rambo: First Blood*, 1982, directed by Ted Kotcheff

It is very difficult for people who have suffered trauma to be reinstated into normal functioning society, and usually this antisocial behaviour is attributed to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D)¹¹. This condition was only taken seriously after the First World War when patients (soldiers) underwent multiple sessions of psychiatry. P.T.S.D is

¹¹ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to one or more traumatic events that threatened or caused great physical harm.

featured in *Rambo: First Blood*¹² (1982) [Figure 1], a particularly violent film with Sylvester Stallone cast as John Rambo, a Green Beret who returns from a tour in Vietnam. The Vietnam War was a media sensation, and the vets did not return home as heroes but rather as 'baby killers'.

While being beaten, ridiculed and humiliated by the police, we see flashbacks of John Rambo in a P.O.W. camp in Vietnam. The deputies decide to give Rambo a shave and he freaks out, believing that he is still in the war, beats up all the police and escapes into the forest. The sheriff and his men shoot, drawing first blood, and Rambo, armed only with a knife, reverts back into the soldier he was in Vietnam and resorts to violence to make his point clear. He easily manages to outwit and successfully immobilise all the police (rather impressively without killing anyone), and leaves the sheriff for last with the stern warning, at knife point, "I could have killed them all... I could kill you right now... in this place I am the law, if you want a war I'll bring it to you."

Those of us growing up in suburbia often don't take in how easy our lives are, even while surrounded by millions of displaced, unemployed and destitute people. It was only when a dear friend of mine (featured in *The Road to Heaven*) decided to live on the streets of Durban that I became aware of our poor (or total) inability to empathise with other people. By disassociating himself from his surrounding environment and associating himself with the character of John Rambo, my friend saw himself through and ensured his own survival. He would often refer to Rambo whilst he was homeless, saying (in all seriousness) "this would not bother Rambo".

¹² A film based on the novel by David Morrell.

3.2. Star Wars



Figure 2: Concept art by Ralph McQuarrie for the *Star Wars* films

Techniques such as sound effects and lighting are employed by movie directors to immerse us in a story. Visually, we make the connection between scenes while our ears fill in the rest, thus creating the illusion of placement in the world of the movie.

On the subject of immersion, fantasy is the most popular of all genres because it provides the easiest form of escape. Like small children, we all fantasize - everyone takes a minute of their day to wish they were something else - but these fantasies are mostly not shared for fear of ridicule. These are realistic fantasies; much more fantastical are the alternate worlds created by science fiction artists. The most successful and well known of these would be George Lucas's *Star Wars*. Unlike many previous sci-fi movies, *Star Wars* set the benchmark when it came to visual effects, from Ralph McQuarrie's painting to computer-generated effects. George Lucas created an extreme world, one that captured the imaginations of countless generations. To this day, *Star Wars* has an amazing following. In fact, this following has now grown into what is known as the *Star Wars* universe - an alternate world represented in computer games, books, comics, toys, spin-offs and parodies. *Star Wars* fans even have their own *Star Wars* set in the online game

Second Life where fans gather and role play.¹³ *Star Wars* fans, particularly in the United States, annually have gatherings in real life where they dress up as their favourite characters and re-enact scenes of their own choosing. Like a recreated religion, fans take their roles in this imagined fiction extremely seriously.

3.3. Comics



Figure 3: Simon Bisley's cover for *Slaine*, 1991

The comic book industry varies from region to region, but generally there is one country that excels in the super production of the medium, that being Japan. Japan is responsible for the phenomenon known as *manga*.¹⁴ The medium became one of the largest industries in Japan and quickly spread across the world, leading to entire channels, both Internet and otherwise, dedicated to *manga* and animation (Kinsella, 2002: 98-128). The Japanese art form of *anime* is a widespread subculture that takes an in-depth look at social situations

¹³ When people get together and create fantasies around alter egos based on the imagined roles of a fictional world. Dice and rule books determine the outcome.

¹⁴ Japanese comic books.

(much more than traditional western animation), particularly with the *otaku*¹⁵ culture in Japanese society. Kinsella writes in her book *Adult Manga* about the effects Manga has had on younger generations. The word *otaku* is slang for someone who is an outsider, antisocial and usually a hoarder of *manga* comic books. For a while, there was concern over Japan's younger generations: *manga* was frowned upon and said to cause moral decay while de-socialising youth and trapping them in the world of fantasy (Kinsella, 2002:124-133).

Akira (Otomo, 1988) was probably the first film that focused the western world's attention on Japanese animation. The film deviates slightly from the storyline in the original *manga* comic book. The story centres around Tetsuo, a young boy in a motorcycle gang. He is the weakest member of the gang and is best friends with the gang's leader, Kaneda. The events take place after World War 3 following a cataclysmic explosion that destroyed old Japan, and the new city - Neo Tokyo - is where the gang resides. Tetsuo deals with the frustration of always having to be helped by Kaneda, which humiliates him. Eventually Tetsuo harnesses telekinetic powers which give him the abilities of a god; he destroys most of Neo Tokyo and his powers eventually overpower him, resulting in his death and rebirth.

Comics require the reader to visually engage in the storyline or narrative. In actual fact, the act of reading a graphic novel is not as simple as it would appear. The artist is in complete control of how the environment is rendered. Readers automatically animate the scenes as their eyes flow over the illustrations; in other words they 'render' the fictional worlds and the events. *ABC Warriors* (2000 AD, 1990), written by Patt Mills and illustrated by Simon Bisley, is a world created about a group of "out of commission war robots" who have to serve in the world of chaos¹⁶. Like most science fiction, the boundaries of their reality do not have the limitations of ours. It is up to the reader to interpret the course of action between the frames. Comic books are not taken seriously and are considered a degeneration of literature.¹⁷ This is a poor judgement call because

¹⁵ "*Otaku*" in direct English translation basically means nerd (Kinsella, 2002:128). *Otaku* is brought to light because it is a phenomenon that only recently exploded across the globe.

¹⁶ In the story of the ABC Warriors, they have to restore chaos in order to restore order.

¹⁷ Every teacher and parent has told me this throughout my life....

comic books should (perhaps) not be seen as literature but rather as virtual and visual representations of popular/mass culture.¹⁸ In the case of a 'normal' book, we all have to imagine the world through text alone, and there is no real criticism unless the actual story is bad. We cannot judge what we cannot see; books are free of visual reference, meaning that everyone is guaranteed their own personal experience. The same does not apply in the case of comics because of the visual experience on offer.

3.4. Facebook

Facebook allows users to post information about themselves on personal profile pages and share photos, their status, etc., with other 'friends' over the Internet. Although most Facebook users think that their information is private and that they control who gets to view it, this assumption is naive. An article by Chris Soghoian (at www.cnet.com) highlights certain concerns about Facebook privacy. Facebook allows users to download applications that enhance their Facebook experience. He deconstructs these applications and makes note of things that users neglect to read when installing them. For example, in order to install and use the applications, users must allow them to access personal information:

Facebook may... provide developers access to...your name, your profile picture, your gender, your birthday, your hometown location...your current location...your political view, your activities, your interests...your relationship status, your dating interests, your relationship interests, your summer plans, your Facebook user network affiliations, your education history, your work history,...copies of photos in your Facebook Site photo albums...a list of user IDs mapped to your Facebook friends.

Facebook's Web site and lengthy application terms of service curiously fail to mention something rather important. In addition to providing the application developer access to

¹⁸ I say this because comic books are produced all over the world and it requires some knowledge to know how to read them.

most of your private profile data, you also agree to allow the developer to see private data on all of your friends too. (Soghian, 2008:Online)

Facebook does allow users to set their profiles to private, which gives the user greater psychological reassurance that their information is safe, but the above quotes suggest that they should still be worried. With fears of terrorism and the hike in Internet-related crimes, countries like America and Great Britain are implementing strict policies that allow their security forces to closely monitor information on Facebook in order to aid in crime prevention. Jacqui Smith¹⁹ (www.thisislondon.co.uk) states that more must be done to monitor the information exchanged between Facebook users in order to combat crime. This was concerning to Facebook users because they felt that it was a violation of their rights. But as we can see from Soghian's article, it seems that users waive their rights when they join in the first place. Crimes mentioned by Jacqui Smith range from murder to online paedophilia. The need to monitor Facebook when things like crime become involved is understandable, but only as long as the information doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

3.5. Happy Slapping

YouTube is a video content site that allows members to post their videos on personalised profile pages or channels that can then be viewed by millions of people. It has become one of the most important developments in Internet culture. Occasional controversies do pop up: some of the content is considered unfit, humiliating and sometimes offensive, e.g. *'Happy Slapping'*,²⁰ a craze that started in schools. The loser is humiliated publicly and virtually after the video gets emailed to all his/her friends or posted on YouTube.

Another super underground phenomenon that started its own video series on YouTube is *Two Girls, One Cup*. It was a meme, and was circulated amongst social circles purely for

¹⁹ She was a member of parliament in Britain from June 2007 to June 2009.

²⁰ Happy slapping was a fad in which someone assaults an unsuspecting victim while an accomplice records the assault (commonly with a camera phone or a smart phone) [www.wikipedia.wiki.org/happy_slapping] last accessed 26-07-2009.

the reaction it might evoke in someone who had never seen it before. The video is only one minute long, and shows two girls defecating into a cup, before they start eating the excrement like ice cream and vomiting on each other. The video was immediately proclaimed shocking and unfit for viewing²¹. Most people who have seen this clip are not people who personally have an interest in this 'field'. The phenomenon now lies more in filming other people's facial expressions when they first view the clip, which in turn has sparked an underground video genre of people who rate this stuff. The most famous is a clip of Kermit the Frog²² and his first exposure to *Two Girls One Cup*. Much has been said about the content of the film, most of it is hyped up, but it does test the moral limits of all who have seen it.

²¹ Great advertising.

²² The Muppet.

3.6. Vernon



Figure 4: Vernon Koekemoer

Advances in New Media combined with cell phone technology and growing interest from younger generations have turned digital manipulation into a popular hobby. For example, it has been a long standing practice to place someone's head on another's body in an incriminating situation (in an image) and post it around school or work. Sometimes these pranks can have the opposite effect: - enter the era of Vernon Koekemoer, now an international superstar. As a prank, someone Photoshopped a picture of Vernon²³ and posted it on Facebook.

²³ His real name is Cassie Booysse.



Figure 5: Vernon at H2O rave in Boksburg (the photo that started it all)

Vernon first appeared in a photo holding a whisky at a H2O rave in Boksburg in March, 2008 [Figure 5]. He was sporting a mullet and wearing an outfit very opposite to the fact that he clearly worked out. A group of people then decided to create a website that allowed people to Photoshop Vernon in various historical, fictional and humorous contexts, and these images were passed around, emailed and posted on blogs, eventually ending up on a Facebook fan site. Fans started creating a persona for Vernon²⁴ that turned him into a cult super hero. Some of the sites were eventually closed by the people who started it all because Vernon was a real person and they were worried that he might get upset. Eventually newspaper articles appeared asking ‘who is Vernon Koekemoer?’ and would he ‘please come forward’. When Vernon did come forward, he was actually very happy with his new reputation and has now appeared in Nando’s²⁵ adverts and as a cameo in an episode of *Isidingo*.²⁶

²⁴ E.g. comparing him to Chuck Norris²⁴ and suggesting that they name a Steers burger after him.

²⁵ Nandos is a fast food franchise.

²⁶ *Isidingo* is a local soap opera.

Move over Chuck Norris – SA has its very own Mr Cool. But despite astounding facebook fame, his true identity remains a mystery, and everyone is asking...

Just who is Vernon Koekemoer?



CREATIVELY DRESSED: Digitally manipulated images of "Vernon Koekemoer" are being passed around via e-mail.

Figure 6: Photoshopped images of Vernon that appeared in our local paper 'The Star', March 20th 2008

Currently, he is travelling and doing public appearances and supporting local projects for the upcoming FIFA world cup 2010 event.²⁷

²⁷ Information is available on the websites: www.ramboguy.co.za and www.watkykjy.co.za.

4. Alternate World Syndrome (AWS)

4.1. The Age of Gaming

Computer games and home consoles have taken the art of home entertainment to unprecedented levels when measured according to the time and effort involved in their production. Proponents would argue that video games are one of the most advanced and complex forms of artistic expression, an artistic enterprise that requires hundreds of artists, animators, designers, musicians and programmers (Juul, 2005). Games today are more visually attractive, and the programming so precise that virtual world environments almost render reality. Painstaking research is done on everything, from architecture to the bark and leaves on trees. Physics and realism have also become next generation on modern-day platforms. This is surprising because computer games are a relatively new medium, having only been around for some fifty years compared to other creative industries such as film, art, music, photography and literature. Despite this, gaming is also one of the fastest growing industries and has even been known to tip the movie industry.²⁸ At this moment, millions of players are online in these virtual worlds, living out their alternate realities. There are so many people logged onto some servers that they should more accurately be described as populations.

Most of the attraction lies in the relationship between the gamer and the virtual space. Graphics have grown more intense, and even though they are presented in front of the player, a great deal of imagination is still required to interact. Computer games depict possible realities and/or areas that are entirely fictional. There are rules that determine what gamers can and cannot do. As Juul explains in his book, there are two types of games, *progressive games* and *emergence games*.

Emergence is the primordial game structure, where the game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations for which the players must design strategies...

²⁸ In 2008, the release of *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rock Star, 2008) earned \$500 million dollars within the first week of its release, which is more money than any movie has ever made (Rolling Stone Online Magazine, 2008).

Progression is the historically newer structure that became part of the video game through the adventure genre. In progression games, the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game. One feature of progression games is that it yields strong control to the game designer: since the designer controls the sequence of events, progression games are also where we find most games with storytelling ambitions. (Juul, 2005:5)

The still popular game *Pong* (Atari, 1973) is a game of *emergence*. *Pong* is simple in design and requires players to bounce a ball to each other. No two rounds can ever be the same.²⁹ *Chess*, the board game, would also be an example of *emergence*. A more modern game of *emergence* is *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000), a multiplayer game where players have to invent strategies to outwit the other team. The game is played in rounds, and like chess, all the pieces are reset to their original positions at the start. There is no real beginning or end, and it can be played over and over with multiple outcomes. Games of emergence usually have very little narrative, while games of progression tend to be adventure-based. *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), for example, brought about a revolution in new media (which I will explain shortly). This game required the player to explore landscapes and spaces while solving puzzles. *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) is more recent, and is also revolutionary because of its levels of interaction in the first person shooter genre. However, the game has a one-line storyline that, once completed, leaves very little reason to play it again.

I would hazard to say that were it not for the game *Myst*, new media would not be what it is today. *Myst* was a revolution in adventure gaming. It combined amazing illustration with photographs, 3D and video sequences, a combination that has grown highly influential in my work. The game is very static and not much happens, and it uses very simple forms of still animation with a few video-cut scenes. It was, for the time, one of the most immersive virtual worlds ever created and very realistic. Although it was static and only required the use of a mouse, it allowed people to explore hi-definition spaces; the greatest contributing factor was the quality of the art coupled with a brilliant sound score, which gave the impression of a very realistic and believable fictional world.

²⁹ Like tennis.

3D Gaming was heavily influenced by the game *Quake* (id software, 1996). This game was a benchmark for everything that came after, for it was the first game developed in true 3D. The source code was also released so that people could modify the game as they wished. What made it a revolution was that it had built-in Internet technology which allowed people to play against each other - almost overnight, the Internet was flooded with quake servers, and the next phase of virtual reality had begun.

Of course, *Quake's* popularity is steeped in players' fascination with war. Warfare (see Section 2) has been father to all our technology. It has also become the most popular genre in computer games. Within these online virtual campaigns, players can experience accurate accounts of warfare, from smart bombs and AK47s to close-quarter knife combat. Death is also an important theme. Video games have set rules that dictate the life expectancy of the player, and in online games, these circumstances are decided by other players. This is particularly true of *Quake 3*, a first person shooter (or FPS) that requires good hand-eye co-ordination. The game requires one to shoot anything that is not you (death match). When a player dies (there are rules to this as well), they simply resurrect and return to the start of the game after a certain amount of time. The game itself creates a tournament-like world reminiscent of the old Roman Coliseums, where people were persecuted for sport. When the game is complete, the gladiator (player) is shown a clip of themselves turned into a statue.³⁰

What this shows is that virtual spaces successfully provide a place where one can interact with architecture, weapons and vehicles in any manner they wish. The benefit and otherwise of these spaces is that there is no consequence or punishment for crime; when online, one can break all Ten Commandments and feel good about it. Where most non-gamers see an object for its primary function, gamers have already thought of multiple alternative functions. Take, for example, the recent game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008). This game has the largest virtual space ever created, spanning fifty square kilometres and boasting an exact replica of Washington DC. The game is so vast, detailed

³⁰ In ancient Rome, the winning gladiators were set free and a statue was made in their honour. Coliseums today arguably exist in the form of stadiums - sport fields that replace our inherent blood lust with rugby, cricket and soccer

and intricate that it is said to be a 'post-apocalyptic simulation'. *Fallout 3* is set in a possible future where a nuclear war had broken out years ago, which set mankind back into a world of chaos (a very common theme in games, movies and graphic novels). The rules of the game dictate the outcome of events according to the decisions made by the player. The designers have developed a world where you, the player, can decide how to take on the hostile environment. Much like in real life, actions have consequences and the programmers have created a virtual version of karma. The level of karma the player has depends on how many good or evil deeds they have performed. Good and evil karmas have their pros and cons - there is also a neutral karma state - and all three states allow the player to access unique upgrades. Essentially players can develop themselves as good or evil. Unlike most games, this game is not gender specific, and your first choice when the game starts is to choose either 'male' or 'female'. This first choice also dictates how other non-player controlled characters interact with you.

In the game, there are many items that appear to have no function, such as a motorcycle gas tank. By itself, this item is just extra weight, but when combined with other items, such as a lawnmower blade and gas pump, it can be transformed into a flaming sword. Apart from real world weapons, the player is allowed to salvage junk and create his or her own personal items of destruction. In the real world, when friends and I share our experience of *Fallout 3*, we inadvertently exclude anyone who hasn't experienced this virtual space. This adverse effect is not unique, as it is also encountered in the most recent phase of 'gaming' which does not focus on war, but on life. Specifically in alternate worlds like *Second Life* (to be covered shortly).

4.2. AWS

Even while some games, like *Chess*, can improve problem-solving skills, there are those games that have an adverse effect on the psychology of some people.

“In August 2005, 28 Year old South Korean Lee Seung Seop died after playing *Starcraft* for 50 hours straight.”³¹

Games in general can also affect real world relationships. Two games that I have specifically chosen to discuss here are *EverQuest* and *Second Life*.



Figure 7: EverQuest's game cover

EverQuest is a mass multiplayer role-playing game that requires team-based strategies to finish tasks; at any given time it has a population of 20 000 gamers. As with anything that gives one a sense of pleasure, take gambling for example, an online gaming addiction is always possible. In November 2001, 21-year-old American Shawn Woolley committed suicide after what his mother claimed was an addiction to *EverQuest*. Woolley's mother stated, "I think the way the game is written is that when you first start playing it, it is fun, and you make great accomplishments. And then the further you get into it, the higher level you get, the longer you have to stay on it to move onward, and then it isn't fun anymore. But by then you're addicted, and you can't leave it."³²

³¹ *BBC News*, 2005/08/10, <http://bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4137782.stm> last accessed 15-08-2009

³² CBS News, 2002-09-18. <http://wap.cbsnews.com/site?sid=cbsnews&pid=sections.detail&catId=TOP&index=1&storyId=525965&viewFull=yes> last accessed 29-10-09.

Shawn Woolley may have been so strongly involved in his virtual space that he couldn't bear the thought of his real life existence, where he could not live out his fantasies, and this may have led to his final drastic act.

Second Life is not a role-playing game, but rather a virtual space completely dedicated to social gatherings. Here you can download the software for free, register, and start creating your ideal persona. In reality, *Second Life* is also responsible for many divorces. Below is an extract from a blog that is a support group for women who have significant others addicted to online games.

Hey Martina,

SL is basically a social hangout. People date, have jobs, buy homes, GET MARRIED, HAVE AFFAIRS, etc. If he is hiding it from you then chances are he is getting friendly with a female or females and doesn't want you to know. I let the WOW slide far too long in my home, but if my s/o started with SL he would see a whole new side of me. I would go ballistic (sic) on him. We have had at least two GW members divorce their s/o due to SL. Hope this helps. (gamerwidower.com, posted by Sirena on Sun Feb 01 2009, 12:34 am)

This example highlights the crossover between real and virtual spaces. In *Second Life* it is possible to have an affair that can affect the marriage of a person in real life. Should this be taken seriously? Surely not grounds for a divorce? It is, after all, only an alter ego. In a more extreme case in Russia, there was an altercation between two guilds in the game *Lineage II* that resulted in the two teams meeting up in the real world and one man getting beaten to death³³. Some online adventure games sell virtual items for real money. *EverQuest* is known for this; players can purchase items for the characters to improve their abilities.

Because items can be traded within the game and also because of illegal online trading on websites, virtual currency to real currency exchange rates have been calculated. The BBC reported that in 2002 work done by Edward Castronova showed that *EverQuest* was the 77th richest country in the world, sandwiched between Russia and Bulgaria, and its GDP per capita was higher than that of the People's Republic of China and India. In

³³ www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_controversy last accessed 21-09-2009.

2004, a follow-up analysis of the entire online gaming industry indicated that the combined GDP of the online "worlds" populated by the two million players was approximately the same as that of Namibia.³⁴

The same goes for *Second Life* which allows one to trade in game currency against real world currency using the LindeX.³⁵ In 2006, *Second Life* had its first millionaire; below is a quote posted on Businessweek.com:

Anshe Chung's achievement is all the more remarkable because the fortune was developed over a period of two and a half years from an initial investment of \$9.95 for a Second Life account by Anshe's creator, Ailin Graef. Anshe/Ailin achieved her fortune by beginning with small scale purchases of virtual real estate which she then subdivided and developed with landscaping and themed architectural builds for rental and resale. Her operations have since grown to include the development and sale of properties for large scale real world corporations, and have led to a real life "spin off" corporation called Anshe Chung Studios, which develops immersive 3D environments for applications ranging from education to business conferencing and product prototyping. (Hof, 2008)

This is an extreme example of someone who has made a lot of money by developing virtual real estate. By all means, this should be considered absurd. Because virtual space has 'really' become worth something, it is now effectively real. In *Second Life* anything is possible, much like and yet completely unlike real life. People live in this virtual world in a universe parallel to their real world and one that only exists for them online (as the name implies, although it also appears to refer to the 'second life' of religion). The world of *Second Life* is vast and truly beyond comprehension - everything from product placement to a Star Wars set in the sky. Companies also set up virtual offices so that they can conduct business wherever they are in the world. There is even a South African presence in *Second Life*³⁶

³⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1899420.stm>. Ania Lichtarowicz, last accessed 7 October 2008.

³⁵ The LindeX or Line Dollar is the currency in *Second Life* and can be traded or exchanged for most real world currencies.

³⁶ See <http://www.uthango.org/news/1/33> last accessed 29-10-09.

To surmise, the people that socialise in *Second Life* do so because they can pretend to be anything they want and explore their alter egos. Some take it very seriously and spend more real time in virtual time. When not online, they spend most of their time imagining what to do next when they get back online.

Generally, time in virtual space is accelerated, an aspect that Virilio's theories on time, space and speed can attest to (Redhead, 2004). Take the game *Stalker* (THQ, 2007), for example. *Stalker* boasts real-time weather and light, meaning that there is morning, noon and night, which adversely affects the player and the NPC³⁷ characters. Four hours in the primary world is equal to one day in *Stalker*. The story is linear (meaning the player can not deviate from the plot or final outcome) but it is up to the player how long and/or what they want to do to achieve the main goal; thus the experience is never the same. The game is therefore one of *progression* and *emergence*. If Virilio's theory of accelerated perceptiveness is put into practice in a safe virtual environment, as in the case of most FSP³⁸ games, to be surprised would also mean death. In virtual spaces, time and events are accelerated in order to keep people entertained and logged on. If we had to examine the time within real world games like *Stalker* and *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 2001), for example, an hour in GTA is one minute in the real world. Thus a one minute walk in this virtual space would take you a distance of a hundred meters down the street; in the real world it would theoretically take a real person an hour to walk the same distance. So theories of time and relativity come into question. In an interview with Paul Virilio about "Cyber war, God and Television" in *Digital Delirium* (Wilson, 1997:41-49), Virilio says: "...the simulator quickly became a simulator of accidents, but not only that: it started simulating actual flight hours, and these hours have been counted as real hours to evaluate the experience of pilots."

These examples illustrate that for many people playing video/computer games, the worlds that they explore are an escape from the real world they live in, yet they are not entirely disaffected by it (the virtual does cause real side effects). Hence the idea of *Alternate World Syndrome*, which is a term that was coined in 1994 during tests in virtual reality:

³⁷ NPC stands for non player controlled.

³⁸ First person shooter.

“Alternate World Syndrome (AWS) is an acute form of body amnesia which can become chronic Alternate World Disorder (AWD)” (Featherstole, 1995:67).

The syndrome, as it is known, was first realized during virtual reality experiments and was first noticed in pilots who had used training simulators (Heim, 1998). Effects included disorientation and nausea caused by a form of motion sickness as the pilots’ bodies adjusted to the virtual world. Essentially, the cyber body and the real body were suffering from conflicting notions of movement. After a time, these effects generally disappear. According to the author Michael Heim, AWS is a sickness that is caused by switching from primary to virtual worlds: “The ontological oscillation creates a nervous state that makes one hypersensitive to sights and sounds and prone to make mistakes in mismatched contexts” (Heim, 1998:182). The experience could be compared to the effects of hallucinogenic drugs which can often send a person into an alternative-world-like experience (Leary, 1997). Games and drugs have a connection; the time spent in these realms comes from the same inherent desire to escape from the real. In more serious cases of AWD, people confuse their real and virtual identities and dramatically increase their chances of human error. These alternate worlds have such a profound impact on people’s lives that people who do not even interact with them believe them to be real. Gamerwidow.com is proof of that.³⁹

When heard, the phrase “it’s just like a video game” should therefore cause some concern. This simple phrase indicates that a person clearly has experience in a virtual space, but if the situation is indeed “like a video game”, is the person a ‘good’ player or a ‘bad’ player? Take, for example, the famous Columbine High School Massacre - it was said that the two kids involved were obsessed with the game *Doom* (id software, 1990).

³⁹ Gamerwidow.com is a website that provides a portal/network for anyone in a relationship with a video game addict or anyone who wants to learn more about this problem (<http://www.gamerwidow.com>, last accessed 16-09-2009).

4.3. First Life

Some gaming developers are racing to create a virtual world that completely mimics the visuals and physics of real world. Although not all games are about graphics, the similarities are evident. The more alluring a virtual space and the more real it appears, the more likely AWS will become evident. Daily events, anything from a sound effect, phrase, color, or a car driving into a pole, are replicated in the virtual worlds, and when witnessed in the real world, begin to be looked upon with indifference.

Other gamers, developers and artists are pushing concepts of realism the other way by actually blending the virtual and the real. During my research, I came across a book by T.J. Taylor, *Between Worlds, Exploring Online Game Culture*. In this book, she provides a detailed account of the experiences she had with the game *EverQuest*. Her account can be classified as a situationist form of Alternate World Syndrome. She discusses her real world experience at an *EverQuest* fan fair hosted by Sony Entertainment in Boston,⁴⁰ describing how people attending the event use the online aliases on their name tags instead of their real names. The subscribers therefore take on their online personas as opposed to their real world personalities. Added to the name tags are server names. Taylor (2006:47) notes how clever the organisers are by encouraging server members to sit together, as players do not all play in one world, but are scattered across different versions of the game that reside on separate servers.

During her experience at the EQ fair, she participated in an offline real world experience of the game. The organisers of the event construct and co-ordinate an offline version of *EverQuest* in which all the fans take part. Everyone is split into teams and sent on a quest through the hotel - the hotel changes into a game space as all the participants run around (like in the virtual version) on a treasure hunt (over the course of a weekend). Included are people who dress up and act like the NPC (non player controlled) characters.⁴¹

⁴⁰ In the United States, regular fairs and events are held for subscribers to the game.

⁴¹ People essentially act like artificial intelligence to convey similar characters in the virtual game.

In terms a social interaction within the fair, conversations centred around the adventures within the virtual space and how these blurred and crossed over between the real and non real worlds. During the event, someone was handing out roses to all the women at the event; apparently this was something this person does online with virtual roses: "I notice how he is mimicking his online identity and actions, how he is performing a kind of offline incarnation of his online persona..." (Taylor, 2006:5).

Taylor's research provides us with a snapshot into the dualities of a gamer in her descriptions of her online and offline experiences. Evidently there are people out there willing to take their online experience and apply it to the real world environment without question, like an accepted cultural practice. In South Africa, such fan fairs are limited and not organized on such a grand scale. South Africa does have an organised 'Lan Party',⁴² know as *Organised Chaos*⁴³ where all the geeks gather and play games against each other in tournaments, and I assume that a lot of them also take on their online identity while playing.

Another important cultural evolution that I came across is the phenomenon of virtual Diasporas. This involves virtual communities and the migration of players from one virtual space to another. When a person travels overseas, let's say to Japan, they might suffer some jet lag but will ultimately experience a new culture, and upon their return, bring back some of that culture with them. The same can be said for people that spend their time in virtual spaces; many people share their virtual events with others in the real world. Around the world at the moment, more and more people are indulging in virtual spaces, and although players might never meet in the flesh, they create memories and have experiences within their virtual reality or alternate worlds. The art in these games stems from the many cultural experiences the world has to offer, from graphic novels to war, books, music, fantasy and events in everyday life. The main difference is that restrictions governing the real world do not apply.

As noted earlier, the game *Myst* was an extremely popular single player game that spawned multiple sequels until eventually an online sequel RPG was created called *Uriz*.

⁴² An event where computer gamers gather and network to participate in gaming tournaments.

⁴³ See www.oc.co.za

which allowed multiple players to share the experience for the first time. It had a following of 10,000 players, but was unfortunately shut down due to financial problems. All the players instantly became virtual refugees. In Steven Jones book, *The Meaning of Video Games*, he cites research by Cilia Pearce who documented the movement of the destitute players and their integration within *Second Life*. This immigration is not unlike that of displaced peoples in the real world; destitute players from the game *Uruz* brought their culture with them to *Second Life*. The fan base of *Uruz* reconstructed scenes and events within *Second Life* in order to recreate their lost experience and thus resume their game, not as the original developers had intended, but as a community of fans of the original title (Jones, 2008:43). This is an interesting example of a community recreating their lost virtual space within another virtual space. The reconstruction here is not driven by profit, but rather by the fans' dedication to the original ('lost') virtual space.

The *Ludic Society*, an art game research project founded by Margarete Jahrmann and Max Moswitzer based in the United Kingdom, is a group of artists who together have created a 'real world' game. The only information about them is online. Their premise is to turn the real world into a game space. When you start this game you play as yourself; there is no virtual world. Players are sent on missions around the city using modified game consoles [Figure 8]. The game has no rules but does have a defined mission. Players have to navigate the city to find, replace, tag and locate objects:



Figure 8. Modified game console from Ludic Society

Real Players get a flexible tool-kit suitcase, containing stencils, stickers, a RFID syringe set and zero RFID tags. A Real Player is personally tagged by an RFID implant. This is necessary to access the personal upload map. Online, an individual street art graph is generated algorithmically over a satellite online map. Slowly the Google map is overwritten by more and more player squiggles.⁴⁴

More detailed information about the *Ludic Society* is on their website, www.ludic-society.net. This game could be defined as a computer game save for the fact that it takes place in the real world, where the consequences are a reality. Players actually have to implant themselves with a chip in order to start the game while not knowing what their missions are. Their antics contain semblances of situationists' ideology: players must navigate the cities using specially designed WiFi tool kits and not GPS; instead of street names on their maps, they only have WiFi hot spots; and it is only through these spots that they can navigate their way through the game. Players are given modified game consoles to use with the Nintendo DS console. This device is linked to their server. The first mission started in 2005, but the history of the game remains obscure. Other articles I found on this movement are less than vague. Because it is not an online game in the true sense, the only way to experience this group would be to actually take part in their movement; according to their website it currently only has 52 official members, and it is not even clear in which part of the world this project is based.

DEVART was founded by Maurits Kelder and Sarita Dev. They created a work called *Himalaya's Head* in 2004, a multi-user installation that places the viewer in a virtual space. Using multiple projections to create the virtual space, users are given a helmet with an infrared LED that gives them control over a virtual snowball that they can control with the movement of their heads [Figure 9]. They quickly find that there is a fundamental difference between the movement of the virtual object in virtual space and

⁴⁴ <http://www.ludic-society.net/tagged/> last accessed 29-10-09.

their real time actions: “*Himalaya's Head* is an interactive multi-user installation about mismatches between images on the retina and head movements.”⁴⁵



Figure 9. Himalaya's head. Image courtesy of Devart

The intent of this work is to create an awareness of one's virtual self and one's real self. There seems to be no real goal or mission in the sense of a game, but the fact remains that the work itself is playing with the brain's lack of experience and understanding of the movement that it receives from the retina. The physical movement the brain receives gets confused with ocular information from the virtual movement, which creates a similar effect to what military pilots experience in flight simulators. This work plays with Alternative World Disorder and can lead to motion sickness.

France Cadet is a French artist/robotics teacher. She has done many interactive works using robotics. Her works raise questions about science, human intervention and possible accidents. *Sweet Pads*, 2004, is an installation that allows four players to play the game *Quake 3 Arena*, but instead of using the conventional controls (keyboard and mouse), she has replaced them with devices that she invented called *Sweet Pads*. Design-wise, the pads need to be caressed gently in order to be able to control the games' characters, and this completely negates or nullifies the original experience of a game that is supposed to

⁴⁵ <http://www.devart.nl/projectHH.htm> Author unknown date unknown last accessed 5 October 2009.

be fast and aggressive: players have to be gentle and patient in order to manipulate their character in order to play [Figure 10].



Figure 10 *Sweet pads* installation.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG was created by Danny Ledonne and released in April, 2005. It is a role playing game based on the events that took place on the 20th of April, 1999, in the US (i.e. the Columbine High School Massacre). The game is highly controversial because players take on the role of Erik Harris and Dylan Klebold [Figure 11] and re-enact the events leading up to and during the massacre. Most computer games are centred on more hero-like characters, but in this case the protagonists are the sociopaths responsible for the deaths of innocents. Reaction to this title is conflicting. The game starts on the morning of the 20th and players are required to complete tasks that preceded the events, which means making bombs and preparing weapons. Like all role playing games, much exploring has to be done within the game space to activate actions within the story. Between scenes and plots, players see flashbacks of Erik and Dylan being bullied and various other events showing them as victims. When the action starts, the game goes into first person, showing the enemy according to his or her stereotype

(e.g. Jocks⁴⁶). The player can then choose to engage in manual or automatic combat. Eventually the massacre starts, and the game ends when the player gets the option to end his or her own life. The end sequence is fairly disturbing because it shows reels and images from the actual event.

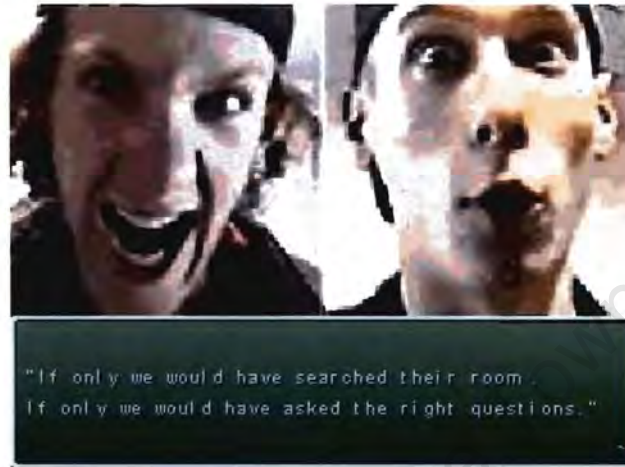


Figure 11 screen shot from game.



Figure 12. Screen shot showing the combat style.

⁴⁶ A jock is usually a person who plays some form of sport in school, usually rugby in South Africa.

4.4. The Next Frontier

An important future subject relating to gaming, as seen by me, is machine vision. Machine vision is typically: what the machine sees and how this is displayed to us on a monitor; the interfaces that we use to guide our vision to get these machines to work for us; and how we interact with them. These are all products of warfare; for example, the Gulf War was a testing ground for smart bombs, which are operated like a video game – one can't tell the difference in their interface between a game and reality. This development in technology has separated soldiers on the battlefield; precision bombing means that the interaction between opposing forces is kept to a minimum.

Timothy Leary and R.U. Sirius wrote extensively about the human merging with the machine. In *Designed for Dying*, Timothy Leary specifically talks about the progression of our consciousness through the use of technology. Leary was well known in American history for his promotion and use of the hallucinogenic L.S.D. He claimed that the controlled use of this drug could expand the mind; the drug itself is said to turn on all the sensory areas of the brain causing visual hallucinations. Considered mind altering and dangerous, the drug became illegal. He wrote about the use of computers and the level of immersion that the individual must undertake in order to have an alternate world experience. What machine vision has done is replicated the idea of a hallucination by showing us things that we cannot see in the real world. Unlike L.S.D, we have control of these mechanical visions and the degree to which we would like to be immersed.

I believe this kind of idea will gradually take root within the armies of the world. Soldiers today already rely on machine vision to complete their missions. With night vision goggles, soldiers replace their true vision with a virtual representation rendered by a machine (Morse, 1998). The Apache attack helicopters are some of the most advanced fighting machines on the planet, and particularly controversial for their effectiveness at night. I use them as an example because they require a complete awareness of the 3D environment (unlike static winged aircraft which can only fly forward). Both the pilot and co-pilots have to completely rely on the helicopters machine sight; they have to wear

special helmets which project a 3D representation of their surroundings using a system similar to sonar. The pilots of these machines are essentially sitting in a 'virtual plane' on the battlefield. Machine vision is not as clear as human vision so the imaginations of the pilots and their ability to find shapes and forms within the representations are put to the test. This correlates with Virilio's and Baudrillard's ideas about the art of modern warfare, where the soldier has been removed from the battlefield and placed hundreds and sometimes kilometres away from their enemy. Machine vision does not have to be that clear for it to be effective. The quality of the graphics can be simplified and yet still have the same dramatic effect on the real environment (Morse, 1998).

Justin Oliver's *LevelHead* (2007-2008) [Figure 13] makes use of machine vision using pattern recognition, three 3D plastic cubes, a USB camera and a projector. The work is a puzzle game that requires the participant to figure out a 3D maze. On a stand is a plastic cube with a camera facing it, and on the wall is a projection of the cube. The computer renders 3D rooms on the surface, with each surface of the cube having a different room on it. These rooms are not visible on the cube itself. Participants have to hold the cube in front of the camera and use the projection of the cube as a guide as the rooms are only visible through machine vision. The computer uses motion technology to understand the position of the cubes' surfaces and renders accordingly. Within the rooms are doors and inside the cube is an animation of a person walking around. The character moves around each room according to the direction the player tilts the cube. The objective of the game is to direct the character through the correct sequence of doors in order to let him out of the maze of rooms. The plastic cube is just that and only one colour, but when placed in front of the computer's camera, images appear on each of the surfaces of the cube, suggesting that only the computer's sight can reveal what is on the surface.

Another work that uses machine vision is Jeffrey Shaw's virtual sculpture, *The Golden Calf* (1994) [Figure 14]. This work requires the viewer to move an LCD monitor around an empty plinth. When the LCD monitor is placed in front of the plinth the impression is that there is a golden calf sitting on top of it.



Figure 13: Julian Oliver's *LevelHead*. This is a screen grab shot showing how the computer renders the images onto the cube.



Figure 14: Jeffrey Shaws virtual sculpture. *The Golden Calf* (1994).

These works show us how modern technology is now able to render images that fall between the real and virtual. In relation to computer games, could this rendering software be used on a grand scale? Although this technology is not commercially viable in South Africa, could there be a way to use pre-existing structures in the real world to create the environment with which the game could be played? For example, imagine the battlefield at Blood River re-animated through special glasses that allowed the viewers to walk around the battle without harm; a once-off performance would be enough, and the actors wouldn't need to laboriously act out the scenes over and over.

4.5. The MOD Squad

Many game artists make modifications to elements within already existing games, commonly referred to as 'mods'. Virtually every game that is developed is modified by fans, usually at no cost to enthusiasts or on the part of gaming developers. Clusters of computer geeks gather to contribute to these mods, and sometimes these modifications become more popular than the original title. Game developers usually release the tools required for these modifications. *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 1999) is an example of a team-based modification of the original game *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998), whose success was measured by the amount of attention it received on the Internet, and Valve was quick to buy the rights to the game and regulate its use.

Another modification of *Half-Life* is Julian Oliver's *Escape from Woomera* (2002 - 2003) [Figure 15]: "A game-based project that sought to draw a first-person awareness to the inhumane treatment of 'illegal immigrants' in Australian detention centres." The objective is to escape from a prison camp in Australia with a 'stage' modelled on an actual camp, placing the real into the virtual. Julian Oliver is one of a handful of New Media artists that modify computer games to suit their artistic practice. He also used the *Quake 3* game to create a mod that allowed him to paint using his movements through the game [Figure 16].



Figure 15: Screen shot from Oliver's mod of the game *Half-Life: Escape from Woomera*. It is free to download (requires retail version of *Half-Life* to play).



Figure 16: One of Oliver's Quake 3 paintings.

The technique of making scripted narratives within a game space is known as *machinima*. This first happened in 1996 when a group of players on a *Quake* server decided to act out a story that they had scripted (Hancock & Ingram, 2007:12). Instead of playing the game, the players became virtual actors and digital puppeteers. The name of their first movie was *The Life of a Camper*.⁴⁷ Machinima is about hacking, tweaking and reusing video games to make movies. Technically, computer and console games provide perspectives into virtual spaces, and players are basically continuously manipulating different perspectives to mission around the game space; hence the idea was born to make films inside these virtual spaces. Machinima has its pros and cons, the main benefit being that the process of making an animated film is accelerated a hundredfold. Games are already pre-constructed worlds with many virtual objects that can be used as props, and as one would imagine, certain games are better for content than others. They can therefore be modified or hacked to create the desired actions, and cameras can be placed anywhere in the virtual space, much like in real life but without the costs (this is all explained in detail in Hancock and Ingram's book, *Machinima for Dummies*,⁴⁸(2007). Today, there are thousands of machinima films available on the internet made by fans and hosted on countless blogs and all linked to *YouTube*. The main source for thousands of these films is the web site *machinima.com*, where they host, categorise hundreds of episodes organised according to popularity from gamers all around the world. Some of the artists involved even remodel and reanimate the game to acquire the desired effects. The series '*Red versus Blue*' is an example of a long-running and very popular machinima; the actors use the game *Halo* as their stage. The game itself is limited in that its characters cannot express a wide range of emotions, and this is overcome using a technique that is reminiscent of the techniques used in Japanese animation involving the simple *suttel*⁴⁹ movement of the character that is talking. More recently, especially with the guys that make the *Quake* movies, it is more about how to modify the game and its structures to

⁴⁷ Camper or camping is a word used by gamers. A camper is a player who sits and waits in a strategic location rather than perusing the action of a game. Campers are usually frowned upon.

⁴⁸ *For Dummies* is a long range of 'how to' books with many topics on how to proceed when trying to accomplish certain tasks.

⁴⁹ This means that the character has little motion, usually three frames animated strategically to create an animation.

create more visually interesting movies, and this involves reanimation, retexturing and remodelling.

Today we see many fans of such games creating their own 3D environments using source codes from their favourite games. Recently, a local group of South Africans started creating a warfare game based on the historic South African Bushwars (1966-1989). The original game is *Armed Assault*. Like many other games, it is a team-based tactical first person shooter. This time players get to fight in Africa as the South African army or rebel forces. The team have recreated some of South Africa's most notorious military vehicles, such as the 'Ratel'⁵⁰ and even created authentic military uniforms for the troops [Figure 17].



Figure 17: South African mod for the game *Armed Assault*.

The environment is recreated from natural flora and fauna and the weapons depicted were used in the actual war. *Bush Wars* is available free to download from their website www.armedassault.info/_hosted/bushwars/index.html.

Within my work and visual displays, viewers will come across video game visuals: these are direct recordings of my virtual experiences (virtually recorded memories). Recording gaming experiences started out as a source for players to study their matches/opponents like a sport. My recordings are of my experiments with certain friends. I selected one

⁵⁰ Armoured patrol vehicle. Was well known for being robust and extremely tough.

player for most of these films known as 'DogFace', chosen because at the time there was no one else and she had no experience with 3D virtual environments (lack of experience was important). Having done research into AWS, I thought that it would be a great opportunity to study its effects on a player. I decided that I would progress the player through games as they were released, starting with *Quake* and eventually leading up to *Battlefield 2*. As games have developed, so has the level of interactivity within the environments - things have gone from simply run and shoot to all out strategic warfare - meaning that gradual progression was necessary. The player found the *Quake* series the most enjoyable [Figure 18], but it must be said that not even two minutes into *Battlefield*, DogFace had to stop playing as a result of motion sickness; she claims that this was either because of the motion of the aircraft or my bad flying.



Figure 18: Screen shot of 'Dogface' running towards nails in *Quake*.

5. Process and Methodology

Load up guns, bring a friend, it's fun to lose and to pretend, she's overboard and all I know are dirty words (Nirvana, 1991).

5.1. Visual Performance and Make Believe

I reverted back to technology when I started working on a series of video pieces called *Beautiful Shots*. The original idea for this piece was to have B-52 aircraft named after porn stars bomb townships. Visually and conceptually controversial, the message I was trying to convey was that a lot of large corporations make a lot of money from people who already have nothing. To create *Beautiful Shots*, I would make illustrations and transfer them onto a set of mixed film/media using data projectors and video cameras. Later I found myself using these animations as party visuals.

I then wrote *The Road to Heaven* which was based on a story written by a friend - Tertius Nel - entitled *Beer Masters: Volume 1*. Both these texts are about white English and Afrikaans male 20 somethings and their mad journey across modern South Africa. Retracing Tertius' footsteps, I travelled across country between Cape Town and Johannesburg, giving rise to new experimental works in landscape art. I looked at urban and rural paintings in the Castle of Cape Town (Baines) [Figure 19], paintings by science fiction artists (Ralph McQuarrie) [Figure 2], surrealist artists (Dali, Bosch) [Figures 20 & 21], and graphic novelists (Katshuhiro Otomo, Simon Bisley⁵¹ and Frank Miller⁵²) [Figures 22, 23 & 24].

⁵¹ Simon Bisley is an English graphic novelist famous for *ABC Warriors* and *Slaine*.

⁵² Creator of *Sin City* and *300*, both of which became successful films.



Figure 19: Thomas Baines *Baobab Tree*, South Africa. Watercolour painted on the 29th December, 1861.



Figure 20: Salvador Dalí's *Sleep (Le Sommeil)*, 1937.



Figure 21: Hieronymus Bosch - section of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

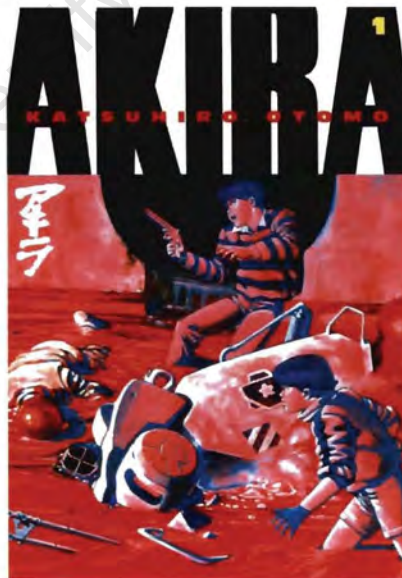


Figure 22: Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira Book 1*, 2000, Dark Horse Comics edition.



Figure 23: Simon Bisley's *Slaine* poster for 2000 AD, 1991.



Figure 24: Frank Miller's *Sin City*, Dark Horse Comics, 1999.

I first set out to recreate my experience of cross-country South Africa with line and full colour drawings of places that could exist. Some locations were recreated and some fictionalised to confuse: the real transformed into the fantastical. An example of this would be the heavy metal strip club in the Karoo desert, 'Glass Heals', which does not exist in reality. Common signifiers in these locations are road signs and petrol companies, for example, to illustrate rival businesses living on opposite sides of the road. Most of the locations portrayed exist in a world of 'sin'.⁵³ In the original works, I explored the idea of the neo-primitive – a person who avoids email, cell phones and technology in general. Their distaste for technology was conveyed in the downed aircraft that littered landscapes, with satellites falling from the sky. The landscapes from this series are apocalyptically futuristic, often featuring decay and post-human wildlife.

Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road*, also began to influence me following the grim realisation that such an adventure in South Africa would most likely lead to the deaths of everyone involved. Crime statistics, the news, global events and war became the greatest sources of my violent inspiration. I even looked at serial killers, discovering that South Africa redefined the American model of sociopathic behaviour.⁵⁴

Before I started work on what followed, I would spend hours 'running around' in virtual spaces, not necessarily following the rules of the various games, but rather exploring the environments and jotting down what had been created spatially and architecturally. The games that I credit most are the *Quake* series and the Russian game *Stalker*. My initial method of production was also partly inspired by performance artists, specifically those in the music industry. Bands like 'Tool', 'Green Jelly' and 'Rob Zombie' come to mind. 'Tool' is a metal band that started out in the early 90s that grew famous because of their artistic approach to their performances. Their music videos are stop-motion animated stories that take place in surrealistic spaces, with songs that include samples from Timothy Leary. They are known to use multiple screens with various animations that are coupled with amazing light and sound effects.

⁵³ Here I am referring to drinking, strip dancers, drugs, rock and roll and generally everything fun.

⁵⁴ Car hijacking in South Africa is more a sport than a crime in South Africa..

These influences, combined with excessive computer gaming and my life as a VJ (see 5.2), eventually led to the realisation that I should combine everything into a single feature. Thus animations, film, music, gaming and live performance all came to be part of the process.

5.2. Video Jockey

“My first attempt to VJ went horribly wrong, nothing worked” (Diamond Ray, unpublished).

Nam June Paik is credited as being the father of video art. He is renowned for audiovisual sculptures and installations that consist of TVs and projectors stacked in every corner displaying different sequences of manipulated video imagery. The influence of Paik’s work in popular culture can be seen in contemporary Video Jockeying.⁵⁵

Since 2006, in order to finance my studies, I have been a Video Jockey at party venues for bands and DJs, specifically in Cape Town (most recently, the Arcade franchise⁵⁶). Our team is in charge of creating interactive displays using video games, multiple screens and monitors. Part of our job is to locate films and images that are relevant to a party’s theme. We make animations, cut clips and recreate narratives, also using live cameras during the event. For example, the inspiration behind one event (‘Slash Dance’) was slasher movies. People were required to dress up as victims, and Arcade also hired professional makeup artists to create realistic looking cuts and gunshots. Before the show, we made a series of films in which the main protagonist kills all the DJs using two D.V. cameras. To make it more convincing, a two minute advert was posted on Facebook and YouTube. During the show, we would play the relevant movie for each DJ as an intro, and the DJ would then walk on stage ‘back from the dead’ and start his set. These parties gave me my first opportunity to create visual performances under a pseudonym.

⁵⁵ A video jockey is a person (at a party) who is responsible for entertaining the crowd with visuals by using equipment that can mix film or images during a live performance.

⁵⁶ ‘Arcade’ run parties around Cape Town.

Visuals are used at these events to enhance the experience of the individual. Time and effort is taken into considering which videos to use. So I credit Paik as the world's first VJ, because when I see his work it reminds me of every party I ever worked at. Below is a segment of an interview I did with one of Cape Town's underground VJs, VJ Bill Ryzer, from 2007:

Scadden: So Bill, what was it that first gave you the idea to start VJ'ing?

Ryzer: I'm not really sure. I kind of just wandered into the profession by accident. I met a sound guy who gave me the idea and was introduced to a person called 'Foxx', who had been VJ'ing for some time. I went around to his flat one evening to talk business. He showed me the most insane remix of film using the 9/11 footage montage with scenes from Robotech; it was the craziest thing I had ever seen and extremely offensive.

Scadden: Offensive...that is all I know about your style. I read the blog of a journalist recently who says he now has a fear of flying because of a show you did.

Ryzer: (Laughter) Yes, Foxx and I like to see what we can do to the crowd...the show I think you are referring to was all about aircraft crashes - the fatal kind. Foxx is also known for sliding in pornography and we both dabble in warfare footage - it's like *Cannibal Holocaust* meets Disney when we work. We even did a show that involved the 'seven dwarfs' in Iraq, but you would really have to be there to understand what we mean.

Scadden: How do people react to your performance?

Ryzer: Some people love it! Sometimes we are told to tone it down, especially when it comes to graphic violence or sex, but that is understandable. We don't take these warnings seriously - it is all a laugh behind the monitors on stage. When I show car accidents in slow motion during a party, I can only hope that it deters any would-be drunk people from driving.

Scadden: I have heard rumours about Foxx being insane. How long have you been partners? And what is the competition like?

Ryzer: I have been working with Foxx now for two years. Foxx is the crazy one; he is a detective for the S.P.C.A and the films he has access to are brilliantly horrific. He even has a live warhead in his flat that he stole from a military base - we used it in a film once, but it freaks me out...he's nuts! The competition: we give them hell; we have better footage, more skills and local animation. We don't talk of the competition, it's not worth it because we are the best and we dominate the market. The best thing about South Africa is that the entertainment industry is tiny, so everyone knows everyone. The role we play is behind the scenes and there is a lot of bitching as to who gets to do what, but nothing too serious, so that's why we play the bad-ass role.

Scadden: You guys are known for some extreme footage. I am beginning to understand now, but where do you source most of your material?

Ryzer: Anywhere that sells second hand DVDs and the Internet, but now there is YouTube. There is a huge difference from before, you know, especially with the rate that technology is evolving. Before we had to cut the clips we wanted and go through endless reams of footage, convert them to size, and prepare them for the event. Now all we have to do is download the segment we want, which has sped up the process a hundredfold.

Scadden: That sounds interesting. Could you explain the process, how this all comes together?

Ryzer: (longest swig of Jack)... well in the old days Foxx and I would meet up after hours with random movies we had bought from the bargain bins in music stores. We have a code: we have to have a bottle of something, usually vodka. We would skim the movies and cut the clips we want - this took hours - then we would convert them into the right format which took more hours, so we played drinking games in between. It really was fun and games, but I feel it is a side people don't see...What we had to do to create our libraries of footage. Now

with YouTube and the Internet we don't even have to meet up anymore; we just download fuckloads of shit and compare it later. The fun has kind of left but we have more time on our hands to practice. The software is also becoming more user-friendly and more compatible - the techno revolution is at least on our side. When we first started, we had no money and I built the first VJ computer we used. It was ridiculous but it worked and could do more than most other VJ PCs. Now we use laptops and hard drives so there is a bit of a techno high.

Scadden: Techno high? Do you see this as an art form?

Ryzer: An art form? At the highest degree we are in control of visuals; it's like science fiction - we control what people see like those dicks on local TV. To be surrounded by screens, imagery, loads of music and free drinks is also part of it, but you have to also remember that people have also made an art form out of taking a shit...



Figure 25: Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming*.

Using techniques I learned from VJ'ing, I found that I could compile video pieces of my own, live, uncut and unedited. In comparison to the hardware demands of a computer, this process was more efficient than video editing software. What I found most interesting was the interactions I could have with myself and friends using a projector and a video camera. While there are many

video artists out there, I feel that the works of the artist Paul Sermons are more relevant to the process and practice of my works. In *Telematic Dreaming* [Figure 25] he uses an Internet connection, a bed and a projector. By projecting one's partner from one bed to another, he creates a virtual entity on a physical object. Sermon has done many other works using cameras and blue screens set in domestic environments, creating virtual spaces and placing them in real settings using televisions and projectors, the likes of which viewers can interact with.

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5.3. The Work

5.3.1. Story Bored

I never believed in aligning scenes to create sense, rather my enjoyment stems from the act of reassembling media to see what comes out. As noted already, the initial idea was to make a film influenced by some of the antics of myself and my friends. Specific scenes were jotted down at the most random times using whatever was lying around. Attempts were then made to make sense of disparate elements, which were later either used or combined in scenes. This included miniatures of bar scenes, water colour paintings, plastic models, photography, cinematography, machinima, live action, etc. The main thread throughout remained the guys featured in *The Road to Heaven* (see 6.2.) travelling through virtual or non-virtual landscapes. At one point, it was thought that I could perform this story in front of a live audience using VJ software and a DJ with live actors, but this fell through. *The Road to Heaven* movie was first conceived as an installation that could consist of up to three screens, each displaying relevant and random images/information running on a loop on either side of the main movie. Unfortunately due to the recession and the ridiculous price of renting hardware, I was forced to condense everything onto one screen.

On the accompanying DVD are behind-the-scenes movies that were made while documenting the process. Most of these films were made using Flash, Photoshop and After Effects. Machinima, which was a later addition, also makes its debut in these scenes (as well as the primary feature). Early experiments with the techniques (as with 'DogFace') required a group of us in the studio to play network games. Instead of playing the game, I would create scenarios that we as actors would have to perform. One individual in the group was the director, while another was the assigned cameraman. The main problem was 'game acting' - trying to replicate action scenes took many outtakes and lots of hard-drive space. *Battlefield 2* was selected not only because it is my favourite game, but also because I understand the limitations of *Battlefield's* particular virtual space. The game is about warfare, meaning lots of tanks, armoured cars, helicopters, and

supersonic jets, perfect for a war movie. The game also features large expanses of desert, which was a primary feature in the film. Some scenes used camera techniques in the virtual spaces to create the shots I needed. Most of the scenes were nothing more than filler shots, although a lot of time was spent wandering around the virtual spaces as a location scout.

Figure 26 is a still frame of the one action scene I tried to direct. All I needed was a car chase with a helicopter in hot pursuit. This took a couple of takes. The scene required DogFace to drive a car down a designated path down a road leading to a bridge (without crashing). I was flying the helicopter after DogFace while my co-pilot, 'Sir Wandsworth', was firing shots at her (without killing) in an attempt to recreate an action packed Hollywood scene. We even had to start like a movie by having everyone take position and then go when 'action' was shouted. All three angles were recorded simultaneously. Later, it was necessary to sift through the thousands of clips on all the computers to find multiple angles of the same scene and edit my characters into the scenes using Flash and Photoshop (I even re-skinned⁵⁷ some of the elements in the virtual space). If one analyzes the final scene in the film, you can see me fly over DogFace and straight into a tree, abruptly ending my piloting career.

The miniature sets we made were filmed and projected on an adjacent wall, leading to the discovery that by using VJ software, this footage could be run on a loop, and with the help of another layer (much like Photoshop), I could add myself to the miniatures and 'hang out' with my characters (e.g. driving around in a tank in the background).

What I enjoyed most about this work was the fun involved in the production. I would invite friends over to my studio for audio recording sessions, and these would become transcripts for potential animations. In a sense, I was recontextualising the conversations of friends into my own invented parallels. To my surprise, all the individuals involved had common interests and they all managed to synchronise their skits, which made recording highly entertaining. The performers often subconsciously made reference to something (political, cultural or social) that I could use in my work.

⁵⁷ "Re-skin" refers to the technique of changing the appearance of an object.

Narrative was also inspired by a lot of animated shows on Cartoon Network, specifically *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. *Space Ghost* is an animated character who interviews celebrities against a backdrop of different media: real miniature sets, 3-D animation with 2-D characters, superimposed backgrounds, real space, etc. Some members of the cast are made up of action figures and toys that I have collected over the years. The questions the *Space Ghost* character asks in each episode seem out of place; he deliberately causes confusing or awkward situations.

Space Ghost is interesting because of how improvised it seems. The people being interviewed often appeared confused or amused because they could not see what *Space Ghost* looked like - he is added in later - and the dialogue was edited in a way that ensured that answers to questions could be subverted. In other words, the original questions and answers could be swapped around to create a narrative that is completely incoherent.

Another example is Comedy Central's *South Park*, an American adult cartoon show that deals with all kinds of socio-political topics that are deemed too controversial in certain circles. Their absurd sense of humour spanning all topics allows them to get away with murder.

The main characters in my film are voiced by two good friends of mine who were provided with visuals (of specific scenes) and props and things they might encounter in suggested scenes. Ultimately, those scenes were to take place in a virtual version of South Africa, which has rather unique street slang. Words are appropriated from eleven other languages in the country, meaning that some people may not understand the dialogue of the characters in the film. For example, the word 'quart' in South Africa is a slang term for a lager (i.e. a normal bottle of beer⁵⁸), while 'loose' is slang for a single cigarette. Linguistic traits vary from city to city, and the intonation in this film is mainly influenced by real 'mates' from 'Durbs'. Later I would sift through all the audio and pick and choose according to what was exciting, funny or necessary, and that is how I came to realize that like *Space Ghost*, the production (on the whole) was improvised.

⁵⁸ A quart is a 750ml bottle of beer.

The journey is anchored by 'Tex', who has multiple personalities, some virtual and some graphic. Originally, the movie's main protagonist was already dead, meaning that we'd only see his point of view as visuals that have been extracted from his brain (this is now used in the credits). The entire story occurs over a period of 'dream time', and the characters that Tex creates are influenced by people that I know. Tex represents the mundaneness of reality, and through him we see how he chooses to ignore his life through his illustrations, which scatter over into animation and virtual space. As the story progresses through the meaningless anti-social antics of the illustrated characters, time is displaced, but the reality of the entire event remains imagined.



Figure 26: Car interior skinned over video game footage.



Figure 27: Riaan waiting for a lift. Photomontage with handmade robot.

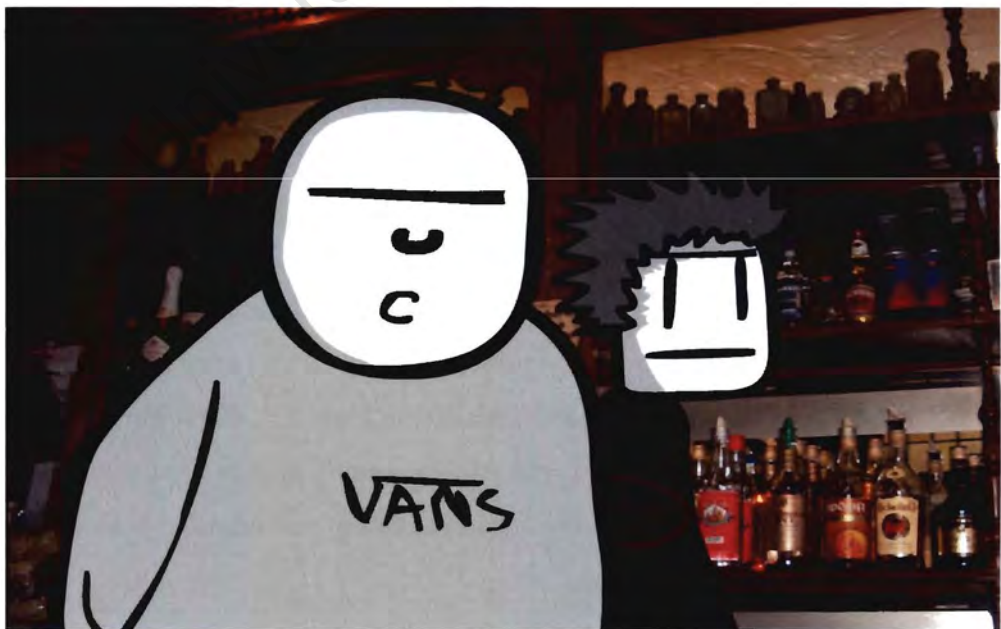


Figure 28: Tones and Daawi at the Kimberley.

Tex's characters embark on a journey across South Africa in the hope of finding a better party. They leave because the country is on the brink of civil war. On their way, however, they are spotted running a red light on a straight road in the desert and are hunted down by a deranged cop. The film is meant to convey the blurring of reality that younger generations have grown to accept as the norm. There is a lot of incorporation of machinima in *The Road to Heaven* [Figure 26]. A lot of the game footage also consists of me and fellow friends engaged in a war so that I could feel that I am part of the film - I appear as a background element on a completely different mission (completing the game task) while my characters are in the middle trying to get a drink and avoid the ensuing chaos. They don't appear to be concerned about the events unfolding around them (e.g. the war) because to them nothing is a threat. They are uninformed and undisturbed by their history, social or cultural standing.

There are also TV sets throughout the piece that feature movies that I made some years ago; the attitude of my actors is indifferent to these as well. Real locations were incorporated on occasion, particularly photographs inside the Kimberely Hotel (in Cape Town), which were later either placed within a virtual space or vice versa. Mistakes were also sometimes incorporated because of my fascination with old eighties cartoons, specifically *Robotech*⁵⁹. I did not intentionally make these mistakes, but felt compelled to leave them in because such mishaps give the work a more casual aesthetic.

The film documents an aspect of youth culture, so unfortunately the events that unfold may require certain threads of experience in the realms of video games, anime, comic books, drug culture, etc. (see 5.3.2.). The content may therefore challenge some, even while entertaining those who are familiar with or relate to the references.

⁵⁹ Sometimes in older cartoons you will notice a frame out of place or colour fills in the wrong frame.



Figure 29: Tim very mad, "... I'll eat your tongues!!!!"

6. The Road to Heaven

6.1. Prologue

The Road to Heaven (see 6.2.) was the primary source of inspiration behind my film. The script was dedicated to a now disbanded group of people. Most of it is based on colourfully morbid theories that pervade popular culture, such as sex, drugs, and rock n' roll, or the live fast, die young philosophy. The style of writing and ideas can be credited to the likes of Hunter S. Thompson and the situationist artist, Guy Debord. Most of the adventures were endured during a highly volatile period in my life. Looking back, it is as though we were all playing a game, a dangerous game for players who exclusively understood the terms. Part of this could stem from gang mentality, the idea that the world was ours and that at every corner we'd successfully meet our imagined objectives.

Upon self-reflection, I realized that we all enjoyed the cartoons we watched when we were growing up in SA. Today, there are not many people who I can have a conversation

with about *Voltron*, *The Transformers* (old), *Contra*, *Robotech*, and *Heavy Metal*. Differences in age sit hand in hand with cataclysmic media sources. Children under the age of sixteen have access to everything, any cartoon and any music they desire. It is obvious that most people under the age of 22 will not remember a time without the Internet and cell phones. I still remember when I had to use a radio to tune into English audio. This bleeds into all forms of life - all information can be accessed through the Internet. But now everyone knows something and refers you to their own ideas or influences. And so there is an endless loop of misleading information.

The ideas for my original digital paintings only included these moments of outer-consciousness; they were my experiments into memory and recall, and my antics were such that I landed up in virtual spaces, places where mindless repetitive things happen. And that is the point: escapism and mindlessness. What video games have taught me is the ability to distract myself to non-distraction. In a virtual space I am safe, provided that I have taken care of my real self. In real life being drunk behind the wheel is a bad idea. In virtual life I can be drunk... and drive a tank.

In essence, *The Road to Heaven* introduced me to my own subversive and imagined reality.

6.2. A Brief History

The social behaviour and dynamics that interest me the most are based on particular archetypes that I came across over the years. In searching for an area of research, nothing interested me more than the people I met living and breathing in this country. A particular collective I came across was a group that called themselves 'The Beer Masters'⁶⁰ - a collective of writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians and one med student. The group was based in Durban, South Africa, and their existence was held together by one person until

⁶⁰ A collective of people who drank as much beer as humanly possible to see what would happen. The collective started in 2004 and ended in 2006.

his disappearance in 2004 - Mr. Nel. I first met the conundrum that is Mr. Nel in Durban in the summer of 2002 as I was leaving a nightclub. I was introduced to him through a skater⁶¹ friend of mine. It turned out that Mr. Nel was a freelance journalist who reported for some local papers and was also a practicing 'Gonzo' journalist.⁶² I was living in Cape Town at the time, so I only ever saw Mr. Nel when I was visiting. Over the years he had built up quite a reputation as a character who got horribly drunk and violent at gatherings (this proved entertaining to some, to others it must have been terrifying). In 2004, I received a phone call from a friend 'Tony' to report that they had just made their first movie - no one was telling me what was in the movie or what it was that they had done.

Here I would like to state that nothing illegal took place, no one was harmed or raped and everyone acting in these skits performed of their own will. Before I was allowed to see the movie, I was told two things by one of the anonymous actors: that there were no women allowed in the movie and that there was no nudity. Their film was entitled '*Club Rape*'. Filmed with a hand held digital camera (by a woman), it had the quality of an amateur porn movie (with no nudity). In essence, the film was about going to a club where whenever someone did or said the wrong thing, they got play⁶³ raped as punishment. The story centred on a gang in a dodgy night club, and there were even costumes and props; everyone in the film was clearly drunk and the acting was terrible. I was impressed with the amount of thought and spontaneous improvisations these guys had used, particularly considering that the whole thing was filmed at one location on a whim. These were the traits that would become the norm for these productions - over the top, using low tech cameras on phones with footage that could later be edited on any computer. My first thought after I saw the film was: "What in the world has happened to these people that would make them do something like this?" My second thought was: "These guys have no idea what they are doing". The film was making fun of a very serious problem in South Africa, and this was only the first in a series. Other films included *Black Magic Snuff*, which was a film about how to hold someone hostage. Gatherings usually took place at the same house on weekends, usually consisting of the

⁶¹ 'Skater' slang for 'skate boarder', a popular subculture with origins in the USA.

⁶² Gonzo journalism was originally credited to Hunter S. Thompson, a famous writer and reporter who frequently practiced his art under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

⁶³ Acting, no one was ever harmed or raped.

same twelve to fifteen members, both men and women, although women were not allowed to perform (only film the events and suggest things). These films were usually directed by the key members of the collective. I personally never performed in these movies; I just observed them. It was the first time I saw people using the fruits of our digital technology and realized that you do not have to have the best equipment to make a film. People can easily make their own films and post them for millions to see. Quality is not an issue anymore, although as the years pass, all this technology will evolve and we will soon be seeing high quality media on YouTube.

Before New Years at the end of 2005, I ended up in a car with a former member of the Beer Masters. We were taking a lift back to town when the driver and an unknown kid wanted to make a stop outside what seemed like a plumbing business. Within minutes we were cornered by a police car, after which we went on a short but comic ride with the police to the station. The place that we thought was a plumbing business was actually one of Durban's most notorious drug dealing outposts, and we had arrived during a stakeout. The two police that had arrested us were in for a promotion, so they drilled⁶⁴ us and constantly reminded us that we were no good and that we should go to church on Sunday. I was clean and not involved; the driver and his girlfriend broke down and told the police everything to save their own skins. The unknown kid was convicted and the former Beer Master took the fall for the driver. They stuck him in a cell and the only way to get him out was to bail him out. I had to empty my bank account and then drive to his house to ask his father for the difference. Later on that day, we had resolved the problem but felt like we needed to escape from the city. I became convinced that what I needed to do was steal a car and drive up the coast, which we did. Six o'clock the next morning, in typical Beer Masters fashion, we made sure that we could not feel anything. We drove out to hide out at a friend's place in Margate; I knew this because Mr. Smith had phoned me a week before to let me know that he was going to be there. The party was going great despite what had happened. Then at about twelve forty five in the morning my father phoned me to tell me he had reported the car stolen and that I had till eight in the morning before he pressed charges. Needless to say, the next morning was a silent and depressing

⁶⁴ 'Drilling' in this context is the constant and non stop battery of questions - a strategy used by police to intimidate a person into making an error that might lead to a conviction.

drive back. We even stopped to have a break at the waffle house (and it really was the saddest day at the waffle house). The world as I knew it had done a 180 degree turn on me. By now, Mr. Nel had successfully escaped the Karoo mission and was living on the streets of Durban. He lived on the streets for a few months, taking shelter in the bird huts in the mangrove swamps. I met him once when he was living in the swamps. He told me it was harsh. Mr. Nel is Afrikaans, which is ironic because the thing he hates the most is Afrikaans, rejecting his own culture, speaking only English to his father and choosing to live on the streets. A few months into 2006, Mr. Nel disappeared, leaving only rumours that he might have gone to Johannesburg.

So I moved back to Cape Town where Mr. Smith helped me out with a place to stay. While DJing⁶⁵ in dirty clubs and doing odd jobs, mainly mobile phone content ranging from pornography to Christian bible phrases, I managed to get a job working for a graphic design company. This was where I learnt that the office world was definitely the end. I started hating the world and self medicated; by midyear nothing was getting through to me. I just wanted to escape in style. I would occasionally bump into Mr. Sloon, a beat up looking guy who (at the time) had just started what is now a controversial art blog (*Art Heat*). He invited me to a show at the Blank Gallery. The title of the show was *It was only a blowjob* done by an artist and old friend, Mr. Ed Young. The show was a performance that involved a person dressed up like a duck in a pink room with the title of the show in white vinyl on the wall. I'm not sure if any blowjobs were available but I was not interested. The work evoked memories of the Beer Masters, especially when Mr. Young told me that he himself hated his own culture. From that day on I could not stop wondering about what became of Mr. Nel, and the rape movies, and his desire to prove that the human race was the most pitiful thing in existence. I wanted to get hold of these movies just to make sure they were real. The problem was that I had a steady job and rent to pay. My only option was to walk out of my job. The next problem was that I had no idea where to find Mr. Nel. Then one day I had a visit from an old friend - Mr. Griffiths. He had an envelope with my name on it. Inside was a letter written by the very person I had thought was gone, Tertius Nel. He was still alive and operating

⁶⁵ DJ is short for disk jockey, a low paying job that requires one to provide musical entertainment.

somewhere in Johannesburg. He had sent me this script based on his real life accounts. They were the last thing I asked of him before he disappeared, and now I had his address.

The political and foreign policies of our country are questionable. It often looks like people are looking elsewhere for answers. Everything is always linked to events overseas and made to sound more important than what is actually necessary. I personally feel that nothing is important and that the values of a situation or movement are only valuable if you are directly involved. Most people around our age watch *anime* and play online games as a form of escapism, although to Mr. Nel these things are a luxury designed to waste your life. I must agree. After 2006, I realized how childish these vices are. I decided to leave Cape Town; I was over my life and decided to reject everything that I had been conditioned to believe in. Months of playing computer games made me realize how there was nothing drastic in my life - the safety of cyberspace bored me and *anime* is for people who wish that they were something else. I realized I needed adventure, so I decided to leave Cape Town with the very real mission of trying to find someone in the real world. Although this seemed strange to my peers, I left without looking back.

The Karoo desert. It took me fifteen hours to get through. It is a hostile place, complete with highjack warnings, extreme temperatures, and monsoons with hail stones that dinged my car.

I drove by myself with no map, destination Johannesburg. I only stopped to rest once, I was drunk with the idea of making it to Johannesburg in one go, I had no time to think. When I finally made it to Joburg, I was greeted by grotesque car accidents and lights that went on forever. I eventually found Mr. Kosloski's place. He said that I could stay with him until I could figure out what it was I needed to do to complete my mission. Mr. Kosloski works for Telkom and with his ability to program machines, is the perfect person for information; he's a small time physical computing artist and creator of the now popular website, *evilsystems.co.za*.⁶⁶ Two days later, I managed to get the phone number of a place where Mr. Nel had been working, thanks to Mr. Kosloski's connections at work.

⁶⁶ *Evilsystems* was a brand created by Koz. The site was shut down as an American company had stolen the name.

6.3. Florida Lake

Florida Lake was where I would find Mr. Nel. The best way to describe the place would be two words, 'Mitchell's Plain'.⁶⁷ The place was absolutely surreal, and I felt strangely comfortable with the surroundings, almost like the environments I had lived in, in cyberspace, only this was real and I did not have a gun. Mr. Kosloski was losing his nerve but never questioned my request to have him take me there. Mr. Nel greeted us on a street laden with broken bottles and hordes of gang members on every corner. It was like a movie; we talked with whisky and beer in true Beer Masters style, a reunion of just the two of us which brought home the rejection of the other members as it seemed I was the only crazy person left in his world. He had been working with the police as a crime scene journalist for a newspaper. Mission one was complete – I had found the missing person. The second mission required me to go with Mr. Nel to document a crime scene the very next night.

I had to change my identity and pretend to be Mr. Nel's assistant photographer. We even made a press card for me. Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. The police had surrounded this night club in the West Rand. At around one in the morning we walked into this place, led by an officer. The lights were on and we could see everyone in the club all sitting on the floor with police taking statements and checking IDs. Eventually we made it into a room where, on the floor, in a circular pattern around a table, lay five individuals with what looked like their brains oozing out of their noses. It seemed peaceful although their bodies were contorted from what must have been convulsions and their spinal fluid was everywhere, so it must have been a violent death. We took photos, Mr. Nel and I posing in some of them and finding aspects of the tragedy funny. Turned out the cause of their death was a chemical called chlorine. These five

⁶⁷ Mitchell's Plain is a notoriously dangerous suburb of Cape Town.

white kids had thought that what they had bought that night was cocaine, obviously not experienced enough to tell that it was 'HTH'.⁶⁸

Mr. Nel eventually moved out of Florida Lake and came with me to a house on a lake somewhere else in Johannesburg; this would be our next adventure. Mr. Nel called it *The Voodoo Hell Session*. Again we assumed new identities, first to get into the estate, and secondly to see if we could rent a speed boat.

6.4. The Voodoo Hell Session

We decided to change our names, and we had a camera. It was Nel, Koz, his lady friend Tammy and I. Koz decided to invite us to his lakeside house in Johannesburg. We had no idea what we were in for. The drive there reminded me of a family trip; everything was fine until Koz started making rules. Rule number one 'don't open the broken window', then later rule number two 'no singing', the whole time being reminded by Tammy which rules we had broken. Nel and I, though the oldest, felt like children. When we arrived, I noticed that we had just hurled ourselves from Florida Lake into high-upper white class society. Amazing houses were everywhere, competing with each other, with gardens arranged like art works, and BMWs in every parking space, second only to the Land Rovers. We passed boats, pretty girls and boys (standard with cell phones and sometimes a quad bike) and the weary eyes of parents. It seemed like a contained paradise. We then arrived at Koz's place, him and Tammy arguing that she'd broken rule number one. Then two BMWs pulled up - Koz's friends who had also decided to capitalize on the situation. Clean cut, similar hairstyles, golf shirts and smart shoes; I failed to remember their names because Nel and I had decided to celebrate. Koz worked for Telkom, Tammy worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or N.A.S.A⁶⁹ and their friends were lawyers and bankers and investors, all with much too much money. They did not join us

⁶⁸ HTH is brand of chlorine used to clean swimming pools.

⁶⁹ Tammy's job was to mark all manmade structures on giant maps for geographical research. She would often use satellites in space to acquire the photos of the areas she was researching.

but opted to sit outside instead with a braai, and almost acted as if we were not there. Nel and I sat inside and pretended to be in a heavy metal band; the sound was coming from an iPod plugged into a shitty TV speaker.

It was dark and Koz had spent the whole time upstairs working on his laptop; the conversation outside was all about sport and school days which then degenerated into an argument. Tammy was clearly the centre of all the attention as she was the only female. We had none of it – we had *Voltron* to discuss. We made sure we had more to drink. Other housemates were constantly talking about us when they thought we had passed out. We peeled ourselves off the furniture and like zombies walked outside. The arguing stopped when everyone saw us approaching the table. We grabbed everything that could be downed, and then Nel vomited all over the place while I was trying to focus on focusing the camera on him. The crowd around us looked disgusted, so we left everyone in stunned silence. Our verbal skills had whittled to nothing but archaic mumbles and grunts, which made perfect sense (to us). We walked to the golf course, beer in hand, cursing into the darkness. Eventually we got to the lake's edge - at least the noise and irritating bastards were gone. In silence we wondered what the hell had just happened, where was the party? What happened to rock and roll? That was when the party boat appeared on the other side of the lake, out of our reach. We shouted in vain, hoping that they might come and pick us up. But it went by and we imagined what must be going on: the best strippers, cocaine, beer on tap, good music and beautiful shots. The lives of rock stars. The energy dissipated by the thought was frustrating. We talked about the experience of being on the boat for ages, and then silently contemplated the reality of our social standing...

End

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shed light on alternate reality as I've experienced it, particularly with regard to our indoctrination of technology and the effects that it has on people, both mentally and physically. From warfare to Facebook, we have created worlds within worlds. Our identities can now be decided anonymously with the aid of technology. As a human race, we are evolving mentally through our interaction with virtual environments, and it is now commonplace to create multiple personas for our own personal entertainment. We are no longer restricted to one identity. We can have the freedom to live out our fantasies in these virtual environments, and many people do. We find ourselves constantly searching for something new in which to immerse ourselves. Alternative World Syndrome is something that has been around since the dawn of time, although I would argue that it is something that only came to light when we as humans started interacting in virtual spaces. We can physically separate ourselves from the virtual world but not from the gravitational pull of the real world. Our physical bodies are the only things that remind us of our mortality. Anything we want is only a click away, so we spend most of our time filtering through the things we don't want. It is almost inevitable that individuals get lured into alternate worlds. Increasingly, people don't notice that this has happened (or is happening) to them, and as in *Ghost in the Shell*,⁷⁰ the spirit merges with technology, and the unreal overtakes the real.

⁷⁰ *Ghost in the Shell* is a Japanese animated film (anime) directed by Mamoru Oshii (1995).

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