***Grand Theft Reality* (Tolgahan Gücüyeter, Kevin Michael Miklos Spina)**

*Grand Theft Reality* is an experimental machinima made inside a heavily modded *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that reworks John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) as a game-archaeological inquiry. Alternating sequences in color and high-contrast monochrome, the film follows CJ as he encounters a church raid, wanders into the cordoned space, and discovers discarded VR headsets that fracture perception, revealing a second layer of the city in which coded directives are written into the fabric of the urban plan: its billboards, its architecture, the logic of the street itself. As CJ follows this perceptual rupture, the environment shifts from backdrop to evidence field: the game's own seams — warped perspectives, the engine's brittleness under pressure — gradually expose how control is not applied to the world but *built* into it.

*Tolgahan Gücüyeter and Kevin Michael Miklos Spina are architects and scenographers whose practice interrogates how digital environments produce — and conceal — the conditions under which space becomes ideological. Educated at the University of Applied Sciences Stuttgart and Istanbul Technical University, they work professionally in architecture — in exhibition design and on transformation projects — while developing raumschrott.xyz as an experimental platform for game narration and counternarrative, treating constructed spatial storytelling as a form of situated critique. Working primarily across machinima and modded game environments, they translate data-driven worlds into scenographic propositions that test the threshold between simulation and documentary argument.*

*Interview questions: Matteo Bittanti*

At MMF MMXXVI, your work appears in a program titled *Grand Theft Cinema*. When did you first encounter machinima, and at what point did *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* reveal itself to you as a medium rather than a source, a method rather than a format? Where do you want this unique approach to filmmaking to take you next?

Our first encounters with machinima go back to the early 2000s, when many creators started experimenting with games as filmmaking tools. For us this really became visible with the machinima scene around Grand Theft Auto IV, where the integrated video editor and director tools allowed players to stage scenes and capture footage in ways which felt very different from traditional gameplay recordings. This opened up the idea that games could function not only as something to play, but also as environments in which stories could be produced.

Our relationship with *San Andreas* goes back even further. As teenagers ourself we spent a lot of time in San Andreas Multiplayer, where a large ecosystem of servers and communities encouraged players to differentiate themselves. Many of us did this through modding - creating custom player skins, modifying assets, or experimenting with changes to the game world. This was probably the first moment when the game started to feel less like a finished product and more like a medium we could work with.

During our architectural studies, curiosity about technology and new media led us to experiment with other game engines such as *Unity* and *Unreal Engine*. At some point we then returned to *San Andreas* and realised that its world could be approached almost like an existing urban structure: Instead of building a new system from scratch, we could intervene in something that already had rules, histories, and certain spatial logics. In that sense we often compare our approach to architectural transformation/renovation: working within an existing framework, identifying its limitations within, and extending its life cycle by changing how it is used. In this light modding can be seen as a form of architectural transformation.

What interests us most is the possibility of treating spaces as an interactive device. Game environments allow spatial ideas to become experimental and performative rather than just representational. They invite people to spend time inside them, to move through them and to test their and reveal underlying rules. Moving forward, we are interested in continuing to explore how machinima and game engines can function as spaces for architectural thinking - not as tools for representation, but as environments where spatial, social, and narrative questions can be explored and experienced simultaneously.

Your film argues that the city, even as a virtual construct, is a designed system of control, its spatial grammar encoding ideology before any individual act of resistance. Yet you are also two architects, people professionally trained in designing spatial systems. When you work inside San Andreas, who is the author of the control, and who is the author of the critique, and how do you hold those two positions simultaneously without one neutralising the other? What is your process like?

As architects we are already trained to think about space as something that shaping behaviour. Architecture is never neutral; it always organises movement, access, and visibility. At the same time there is a long tradition within architectural discourse of critically examining these

mechanisms. The architectural critizism of *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown already suggested that architecture should not only design environments but also analyse the cultural and ideological systems embedded within them. More recently, discussions around defensive architecture have shown how spatial design can be exploited to exclude or redirect certain groups of citizens. In that sense architecture is always caught between balancing control and critique.

When we enter the world of San Andreas, a similar dynamic appears: The initial structure of control is authored by the game's creators: they design the city, its scripts, missions and mechanics, which define how players can move through and interact with the game world. These systems shape behaviour in very concrete ways, much like urban infrastructures do in real cities. At the same time the player occupies a position of interpretation and intervention. Players decide how to approach missions, whether to follow the intended narrative or to deviate from it, and they can modify parts of the system through mods or cheats. In that sense the player becomes a kind of critic itself operating from within the structure.

Our own process moves constantly between these two positions. We work with the spatial and mechanical logic that the developers established, but we also try to reframe it - sometimes by modifying elements or simply by using the system in ways it was not originally intended for. A important point is that neither position ever becomes fully dominant. Even if you attempt to change the game through modding, you eventually encounter technical limits set by the engine. That tension between structure and intervention is precisely what interests us. It turns the game world into a space where authorship and critique are continuously negotiated rather than clearly separated.

*Why Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* now, rather than a more contemporary platform? Is the "archaeological" angle partly about the game's age, its visible seams, the way the engine exposes itself under pressure when you mod it into new perceptual regimes?

We were interested in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* precisely because it is not a contemporary platform. Its age giving the world a certain quality: the seams of the simulation are still visible. When you start modifying the game or pushing its mechanics in unexpected directions, the underlying structures begin to reveal themselves. In that sense our approach is partly archaeological. Rather than building a new digital environment from scratch, we are excavating the layers of a world that already contains its own cultural and spatial logic.

At the same time the game captures a very specific moment in the cultural imagination of Los Angeles. The city is saturated with satirical billboards, fictional brands, and exaggerated advertising, which reflect the complete commercialisation of urban space. In that sense it, again, resonates strongly with the observations made in *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi and Scott Brown, where the city is described as a landscape of signs and symbols. The game extends this

logic even further through ideologically influenced radio stations, parody media formats, and systems such as algorithmic policing that regulate behaviour inside the city.

What interests us is the tension that emerges when this early 2000's simulation is confronted with contemporary realities. By introducing present-day themes and perspectives into the narrative of San Andreas, the temporal gap becomes productive: an older digital city starts to comment on current social and political conditions. The distance in time allows us to see certain mechanisms more clearly, almost like looking at an urban model that exaggerates the logics of the real city.

John Carpenter's *They Live* imagined control operating through television, magazines, and billboards, a mass-media apparatus that, from here, looks almost quaint against algorithmic tracking, state-platform entanglement, and the consolidation of the mediasphere in the hands of a handful of individuals whose political ambitions are no longer even concealed. Carpenter's response to that earlier configuration was to choose a disreputable form — the B-movie, cheap, fast, and culturally dismissible — as the vehicle for an argument that prestige culture would not have allowed him to make in the same way. You have made a comparable choice: machinima, a vernacular form born inside corporate entertainment, operating below the threshold of institutional visibility. Is that formal modesty a political position in itself, and do you think a work made *inside* the system it critiques carries more force than one that addresses it from outside, or less?

We believe that working from within a system can carry more force than addressing it from the outside. *They Live* is a good example of this strategy. Carpenter chose the format of the B-movie - a fast, inexpensive, and culturally underestimated genre - which allowed him to articulate a critique of consumerism and mass media that might have been difficult to realise within a more prestigious Hollywood production. At the same time, this choice was also defined by practical realities: available budget and production conditions inevitably influence the shape a project takes.

Our decision to work with machinima inside *San Andreas* operates in a similar way. The game itself is one of the most commercially successful cultural products of its time, part of a massive entertainment industry built around consumption and spectacle. Using this environment to reflect on the logic of consumer culture therefore creates a certain tension. The critique emerges from within the very system it addresses.

In that sense machinima's apparent modesty - its position somewhere between amateur practice, fan culture, and experimental filmmaking - is not only a limitation but also a productive position.

It allows us to appropriate existing media infrastructure and redirect it. The project operates inside a corporate entertainment platform, but it reframes its images, mechanics, and narratives in order to question the cultural and economic structures that produced them in the first place. Working within that framework does not resolve the contradiction, rather, it makes the contradiction visible.

In his monograph on *They Live*, Jonathan Lethem argues that the film is primarily a class document, that Nada, the protagonist, is not an ideological subject who needs the glasses to see straight, but a dispossessed worker confronting an economic arrangement that was never actually hidden, only ignored, because looking directly at it is unbearable. On that reading, the famous fight scene is not about forcing someone awake; it is a brutal act of solidarity between two men who have nothing left to offer each other except the truth. Your film operates in a very different political moment, one in which the consolidation of media, capital, and state power in the hands of a few individuals whose ambitions are no longer even disguised has made Carpenter's mass-media apparatus look quaint. What did you want to keep from his structure, and what needed to be broken open? Is your CJ closer to Lethem's dispossessed worker or to Carpenter's newly-sighted subject, and does that distinction matter to the film?

The headset in our film is not meant to function as a literal technological solution. In cinematic terms it operates more like a narrative device - almost a *McGuffin* - that allows the story to reorganise perception. In that sense it works similarly to the sunglasses in *They Live*. They are less a realistic instrument - more what could be described as an epistemological plot device: something that changes how the world is perceived and interpreted.

We find Lethem's reading very interesting, especially the idea that the economic structure confronted by the protagonist was never completely hidden but rather collectively ignored because facing it directly would be unbearable. At the same time, we're living with systems that are far harder to grasp - algorithmic infrastructures, platform economies, and diffuse networks of power that rarely feel fully visible or understandable. In this context, the headset in our film also points to how little transparency there often is in the systems that shape our everyday lives.

The device therefore functions less as a promise or device for pure revelation than as a mechanism that introduces a shift in perspective. One could loosely compare this to the logic of the cave in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, where the act of seeing differently creates a tension between the comfort of familiar routines and the possibility of recognising the structures that organise perception. Whether CJ is closer to Lethem's dispossessed worker or to Carpenter's newly-sighted subject is therefore not something the film tries to resolve completely. Both readings remain possible. What matters more for us is the cinematic function of the device: it

opens a space in which perception can be questioned, rather than providing a final position from which the world suddenly becomes transparent.

Slavoj Žižek's reading of *They Live* — developed in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012) — refuses the film's apparent logic. For Žižek, the sunglasses do not reveal reality beneath ideology: they *are* ideology, made suddenly visible. We are already wearing the glasses all the time; what Carpenter's device literalises is the symbolic order we inhabit naturally, without friction, as though it were simply the world. If Žižek is right, *Grand Theft Reality* faces a problem. The VR headsets your CJ discovers are not a neutral perceptual instrument but a commercial technology sold explicitly as a total immersive experience, designed to replace one managed reality with another. The ideology they supposedly pierce is already built into their form. So here is the question: are you sure your film is about awakening, or is it, despite its intentions, a film about the seduction of a better-designed illusion? And does the fact that VR headsets, unlike Carpenter's found sunglasses, are a failed consumer product — a technology that promised perceptual sovereignty and couldn't deliver it — make the film more pessimistic than you intended, or exactly as pessimistic as it needs to be?

Žižek's reading is interesting for how to perceive the film. He argues that in *They Live* the sunglasses do not reveal a hidden reality but make visible the ideology we are already immersed in. In a similar way, the VR headsets in *Grand Theft Reality* are never neutral instruments. They are commercial technologies, part of economic infrastructures, designed to immerse and structure perception rather than simply reveal a truth. In that sense, the film occupies a tension between two positions: technology as a tool for understanding, and technology as a medium of control.

The film does not attempt to resolve this tension or to offer a clear answer. It is neither fully optimistic nor fully pessimistic; preferably, it tries to open the space in which we can reflect on our relationship with the systems around us. In this sense it resonates with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where comfort and pleasure function as mechanisms of control, and the question of awakening is never straightforward. The story stages a negotiation between the possibilities of agency and the constraints of the infrastructures we inhabit. Our goal is to make these tensions perceptible: how we perceive, how we interpret, and how we respond.

In that sense the headsets are less about awakening in a traditional narrative sense and more about producing reflection on our engagement with environments that are always partially mediated. The film works precisely in this space between promise and limitation, between

liberation and capture, leaving it open to the viewer to navigate the ambiguities of perception and control.

*Grand Theft Reality* remakes both a commercial game and a cult film, neither of which you authored. How do you think about the question of ownership — of the city, of Carpenter's imagery, of CJ himself — when the work depends so completely on material you've inherited and appropriated rather than made? Do platform governance and technical constraints shape what kinds of authorship you can claim?

Working with material we did not create ourselves - the city of *San Andreas*, the similar plotline of *They Live*, and the character of CJ - shifts the notion of authorship toward something more curatorial. We like to compare our process to working on a film set: the buildings, props, and actors are already there, but the director arranges them to tell a story. Similarly, we take existing elements and reframe them, making contrasts, emphasising certain features, and producing a narrative that is uniquely ours. In that sense, images in the game or film function are much like words or letters, as Jacques Prévert once suggested: everyone uses them, but meaning emerges from the way they are combined.

Platform governance and technical constraints are part of this curatorial process. The game engine defines what is possible: how spaces behave and look, what interactions are available, and how mechanics respond to player intervention. These limitations are not obstacles but guidelines - they shape the way authorship is performed. Much like contemporary experiments in AI and generative media, our work becomes an exercise in selection, framing, and recombination rather than in absolute creation. The project exists in a dialogue with inherited structures, and the act of appropriating them is itself a way of asserting agency and critical perspective.

You both come from architecture and scenography. Lethem describes Los Angeles as a city that trains perception toward selective blindness: you look at it long enough and you stop seeing what it is actually built to do. San Andreas, by your account, works the same way. What does machinima give you, as architects, that spatial practice cannot — the ability to *reframe* an environment you cannot physically alter? And where does it push back, or refuse your intentions entirely?

As architects, we are used to work with spaces that must be physically built in order to be experienced. Architecture is always material, tied to cost, time, and regulations. Machinima, on the other hand, offers a kind of experimental laboratory: it allows us to intervene partially in a pre-existing environment and explore dynamics that would be impossible to realise in the real world. In *San Andreas*, this includes the simulation of social behaviour and the reactive

relationships between spaces and their inhabitants. Game mechanics act like a set of social rules or constraints, revealing how the city is structured and how certain behaviours are encouraged or restricted. In that sense, Machinima allows architecture to become performative: we can test, experiment, and see spatial logics in action.

Modding in games can be compared to what we sometimes call “space modding” in architectural discourse: the transformation of existing spaces rather than building from scratch. City fragments can be reordered, narratives recomposed, and hidden structures can be exposed. Machinima enables a shift in perspective, both literally and conceptually, encouraging the swap of roles, new viewpoints, and critical reflection. It is less about creating a conventional plan and more about opening a discourse - a tool of speculative design and critical spatial practice.

At the same time, the system pushes back. The engine imposes constraints: mechanics, physics, and scripted behaviour resist total control, reminding us that even in virtual worlds, structures of authority and limitation are present. That tension we see as productive: it makes invisible layers visible, allowing us to uncover the frameworks that shape urban life, both in the game and as a lens onto the real world. Machinima functions not only as a medium for storytelling but as a tool to experiment with spatial and social dynamics, uncover hidden structures, and explore how both - virtual and real - environments shape behaviour, perception, and interactions.

*Thank you for your time and consideration*