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Dadaist Game Art: The Digital Ready-Made and Absurdist Appropriation

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Abstract

This paper will look at Dadaist tendencies in game art projects such as Wafaa Bilal's *Virtual Jihadi* and the author's collaborative project *Grand Theft Bicycle*. The focus will be on how certain game art projects borrow from popular games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Quake*, and invert/subvert the meaning of the originals by 'modding' aspects of the original world (i.e. the characters, the sounds, the basic concept), while leaving much of the source (i.e. the background textures, the AI) intact. This paper argues that the game art mod is a digital descendent of the Dadaist ready-made.

More specifically the paper will look at the particular Dadaist-inspired absurdities in *Grand Theft Bicycle* (*GTB*), such as the use of an aerobic-style bicycle to engage in a political battle with world leaders within a vacuous game environment. *GTB* is part of a sub-genre I am describing as 'Dadaist game art.' In short, Dadaist game art uses the forms of commercial gaming, but inverts

normally uncritical game content to include ironic reflections on the culture of gaming. Dadaist game art borrows from game culture, but provides a new take on gaming that is contradictory, provocative and absurd in the Dadaist sense.

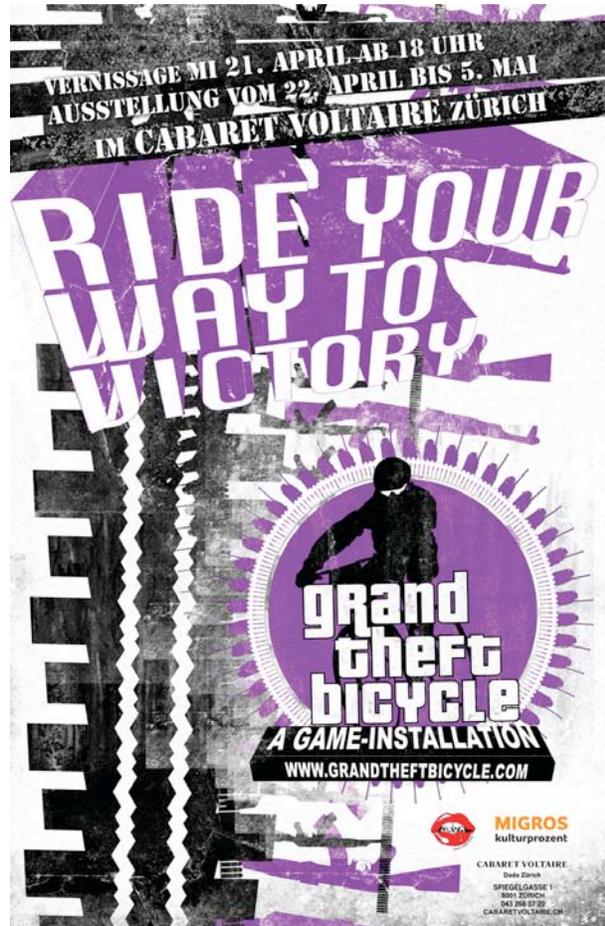


Fig. 1. *Grand Theft Bicycle (Zurich version)*, 2010, Steve Gibson, Justin Love and Jim Olson, Poster for the Cabaret Voltaire exhibition, © 2010, Jim Olson, Used with Permission.

Background

“Today, more than fifty years later, the image of Dada is still full of contradictions. This is not surprising. Dada invited, or rather defied, the world to misunderstand it, and fostered every kind of confusion. This was done from caprice and from a principle of contradiction... Dada had no unified formal characteristics as have other styles. But it did have an artistic ethic from which, in unforeseen way, new means of expression emerged.” [1]

Unlike many (if not all) modernist art forms, Dada had no obvious forebears in Western art. In its unprecedented use of found materials it deliberately engaged in an ongoing provocation of both the art world and the broader culture of the early 20th Century. As Richter points out Dadaist art objects employed no unifying form, but they did share some common characteristics. These characteristics

are hinted at in Richter's identification of contradiction as key to Dada: contradictions between art and anti-art, between the materials of popular culture and the venues of art culture. Dada reveled in the absurdities of these contradictions.

Despite its diversity and even intentional incoherence, Dada is most known for the ready-made and the collage, and both forms clearly celebrate the above contradictions. The ready-made is key to our discussion here because it involves taking materials from the 'real world' or from popular culture, removing them from their original context and placing them provocatively in a new context. "What is a ready-made? As its name suggests, it is an object that is already complete, ready for use, and chosen to be presented as a work of art. The concept not only radically questioned the meaning of a work of art, the criteria that governed its choice and recognition as art, the function of the museum or exhibit venue, and the very nature of human creation; it was also a provocation" [2] It is this aspect of Dadaism along with its celebration of contradiction that provide some key links to a strand of game art.

Dada was also a politically provocative movement and though there were varying allegiances to political forces amongst Dadaist figures, it is fair to say that Dada was more its own distinct ideology, or better yet its own anti-ideology. Certainly Dada was deliberately anti-bourgeois, but this didn't stop it from using elements of popular culture both against itself and as a means of distancing itself from 'high art.' It saw no contradiction in these contradictions. This political anti-ideology is also a key link to certain works of game art.

The Game Art Mod As Digital Ready-Made

In the latter part of the 20th Century artists began to conceive of the game engine as a possible vehicle for artistic intervention. Prior to the release of open-source game engines such as *Half-Life* artists who wanted to use and abuse existing games were obliged to hack existing games using homemade tools to extract and reconfigure game content. Arguably the earliest example of a game art mod was Jodi's *SOD* (1999), a deconstruction of *Castle Wolfenstein*, "which replaces the representational elements of the game with black, white and grey geometrical forms and creates an architecture that challenges both orientation and navigation." [3] Other relatively contemporary examples that use a game engine as a digital ready-made include Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon's *Shoot Love Bubbles* (2002), a mod of *Counter Strike* that allows users to spray anti-war graffiti on walls of the original game. [4] Appearing around the same time, Feng Mengbo's *Q4U* (2002) also establishes some conventions for game art and has some implications for our discussion of Dadaist game art: it shamelessly uses a commercial game engine (*Quake III*) as a source for the mod; it creates an identifiably absurd scenario by populating the game with clones of the artist's comparatively 'everyman' avatar in place of the menacing originals; and it evokes a contradictory sense of both amusement and self-criticism when playing the game. [5] See the following link for several screen-shots from *Q4U*: <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/documenta/11/brau/e-feng.htm> [6]

Feng's use of the *Quake* engine serves as an explicit example of a digital ready-made: the source game was a relatively ubiquitous digital object used daily by a certain social group at the time, and the engine itself is relatively untouched in *Q4U*. There is also a certain anti-art tendency exhibited by using a familiar commercial game engine as the basis for creating a work to be exhibited as art. These characteristics mesh well with the more well-known Dadaist ready-mades

including Duchamp's *Fountain* (a urinal, 1915) and Man Ray's *Fascinated* (a headless mannequin wrapped in rope, 1922). Naturally there are differences between Feng's (and many other game artists') treatment of the digital ready-made and the nihilism reflected in Duchamp's *Fountain*. In its use of a urinal as a ready-made object *Fountain* is the nadir (or the height if you prefer) of Duchamp's anti-art impulses. Its banality as an object is made more so by its placement in a gallery: one cannot help but read the piece as the ultimate statement of despair about the futility of art. By contrast, in Feng's work one can identify a critical sense about the nature of violence in game culture that reveals an element of humanism that is not present in *Fountain*, which reflects "Duchamp's rejection of art and his suspicion that life was without a meaning." [7] However, *Q4U* is deliberate in its use of (almost) all of the ready-made elements of the original *Quake* game (including the violence, the AI, the tools, etc.) In its use of the mod as a digital ready-made placeholder for absurdist provocation and black humor *Q4U* provides an important template for other work in this area, including *Virtual Jihadi* and *Grand Theft Bicycle*.

Wafaa Bilal – *Virtual Jihadi*

Wafaa Bilal's broad body of work is intriguing to consider, and *Virtual Jihadi* (2009) is a particularly effective example of the use of appropriation, contradiction and Dadaist absurdity in game art. It would be over-reaching to claim that Bilal's work is deliberately Dadaist in all respects. There are however aspects evident in *Virtual Jihadi* which show the influence or the legacy of Dadaist forms and attitudes.

Virtual Jihadi occupies multiple layers of appropriation, repurposing Al Qaeda's reworking of an anti-Muslim propaganda tool to create a third more contradictory and less politically certain project than its two ready-made sources: "In the widely marketed video game *Quest for Saddam*, players fight stereotypical Iraqi foes and try to kill Saddam. Al Qaeda did its own take, creating



Fig. 2. *Virtual Jihadi*, 2009, Wafaa Bilal, Game art installation, ©2009, Wafaa Bilal, Used with Permission.

an online video game using the structure of *Quest for Saddam* but adding a new ‘skin’ to turn the game into a hunt for Bush: ‘The Night of Bush Capturing.’ Now artist Wafaa Bilal has hacked the Al Qaeda version of the game to put his own more nuanced spin on this epic conflict.” [8]

In a common technique used by many game artists, Bilal places himself in *Virtual Jihadi*. He appears as an Al Qaeda recruit, but subverts Al Qaeda’s intention of creating loyal foot soldiers in *The Night of Bush Capturing* by instead emphasizing the vulnerability of his character: “I wanted to bring attention to the duology of treatment, to hypocrisy and to games that are used as recruitment tools. That’s one side. The other side – I wanted to show the vulnerability of Iraqis becoming involved in Al Qaeda, because there’s no protection in Iraq, and they switch allegiances according to power switches on the ground.” [9]

Virtual Jihadi is an exemplar of an absurdist set of contradictions: merging an anti-Muslim propaganda tool with an Al Qaeda mod of the same game to create a third more morally complex version is in itself an absurd, almost inconceivable idea. In addition the project itself has some wonderfully absurd on-screen moments, as shown in Fig. 2 above, in which Bilal as an Al Qaeda recruit confronts a fatigue- and tie-wearing Bush. The shot captures the ambiguous nature of the project. Bilal has his weapon down: is he ultimately a bit reticent, or is he about to stab Bush in the back? Even the notion of Bush walking around in army fatigues in a war-zone has an element of the absurd about it, particularly given his well-known ‘escape’ from service in the Vietnam war.

Virtual Jihadi also conforms to the Dadaist idea of provocation as an art form. In a now infamous case, the premiere exhibition of *Virtual Jihadi* was pulled from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) after one day, and then when it was re-scheduled at The Sanctuary for Independent Media it was also cancelled after a single day. [10] This reaction mirrors the reaction to some of the early Dadaist provocations in Zurich such as Tristan Tzara’s infamous false ‘duel’ with poet J.C. Heer, which caused a scandal in the local press. [11] While Bilal may not have been directly intent on causing a public outcry, the result was quite similar to a Dadaist provocation, in which the popular bourgeois press, reactionary elements and even the University administration at RPI were goaded into revealing their ignorance and prejudices (e.g. the then President of RPI Shirley Jackson continually attempted to make legal connections between *Virtual Jihadi* and child pornography as a reason for pulling the exhibit). [12] The following thoughtful documentary by Hudson Mohawk Indymedia presents all sides of the reaction to the premiere of *Virtual Jihadi* (including the artist’s response) and shows some footage from the project: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v42OLzCDr98> [13]

Virtual Jihadi represents a fully-realized Dadaist game art provocation, perhaps the first of its kind to have such a wide impact. In its use of multiple levels of appropriation, its absurdist contradictions and its provocative political agenda *Virtual Jihadi* establishes some obvious parameters for Dadaist game art. At the same time the artist’s intent is perhaps more didactic than one would expect from a Dadaist exhibition. That is not to say that Dadaism was not intent at times on provoking idealistic change, but more generally it proceeded from the viewpoint of irony verging on the caustic. In *Virtual Jihadi* there is a stated agenda present that seeks to educate in a particular manner, and this serves to differentiate it from some other Dadaist game art projects such as *Grand Theft Bicycle*, which I will discuss below.

Steve Gibson, Justin Love and Jim Olson - *Grand Theft Bicycle*

As engines became more sophisticated in the early part of the 21st Century and some developers opened their engines up to ‘modding’ by other programmers, the ground for more complex and immersive game art was established. While there are certainly a number of other projects that continued the trend of using popular game mods and the provocative political content with a somewhat absurdist or confrontational bent – such as Riley Harmon’s *What It Is Without the Hand That Wields It* (2008) [14] – within the limited scope of this paper I will now focus on my own project *Grand Theft Bicycle* (*GTB*).

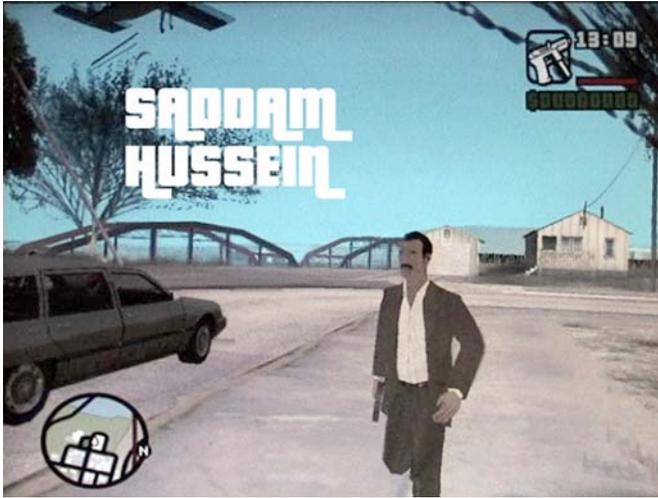


Fig. 3. Screen grab from *Grand Theft Bicycle*, 2008, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson, Photo © 2008, Jim Olson, Used with Permission. Video link: http://www.grandtheftbicycle.com/Gibson-02-Grand_Theft_Bicycle.mov

GTB is a physical game-art installation that uses the kinetic interface of a bike – modified with sensors – to allow users to ride through a 3D mod of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*GTA*). Set in a desert environment, *GTB* immerses the user into a chaotic battlefield. The original *GTA* game has been modified to include political leaders of various stripes who are programmed to fight with or against each other. The invaders include George Bush, Barack Obama, and Tony Blair. The insurgents include Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The user can choose to side with one group of politicians (or not).

“Experience the excitement, glamour, fear, violence and mayhem of a genuine Middle Eastern battle! Better yet, get your fat shooter-playing ass off the console and onto the revolutionary Borgcycle™, a sensor equipped bike that allows / forces users to get a heart-pounding workout while hunting down some baddies.” [15]

As distinct from the projects discussed above, *GTB* is knowingly conceived as a Dadaist (anti-) art game, with stated intentions to provoke, confuse, infuriate and contradict. In its use of a commonplace object (the digital ready-made of the *GTA* engine), in its anti-art sentiments (using a notoriously vicious game as the source for a piece meant to exhibited in galleries) and its general nihilism, *GTB* is quite close to Duchamp’s ready-made, both formally and conceptually.

The initial concept of *GTB* was to create an absurdist mix of aerobics, radical politics and first-person shooter using an infamously violent and nihilistic game (*GTA*) as the basis for a mod. For *GTB* we kept certain-aspects of the *GTA* game intact, including the AI, the general 3D textures, and the overall 3D environment; however, instead of gangsters the characters have all been replaced with politicians, the generally innocuous but juvenile signs from *GTA* have all been changed to reflect aspects of the war on terror and/or capitalist culture, and all goals have been removed (i.e. the user can’t collect guns, points, etc. or win in any manner).



Fig. 4. *Grand Theft Bicycle* installed at Stride Gallery, Calgary, 2009, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson, Photo © 2009, Jim Olson, Used with Permission.

The initial spark for the project was as a cyclist's revenge project, in which a cyclist would be invincible and he or she could blow up as many cars as possible. This was expanded to include cars and streets populated by politicians on opposite sides of wars past and present (the cold war, the Gulf wars). The digital ready-made of *GTA* in this case was merely a banal (if mildly offensive) object to be exploited in order to create a radically different viewpoint than the original. *GTA* is thematically ideal as a ready-made digital object due to its generally vacuous qualities and its utterly nihilistic world-view.

GTA was less than ideal to mod from a technical point of view due to the 'closed-source' original game which made it very challenging to change the contents. Once the source code was cracked (which took months) it was then relatively straightforward to replace the contents, if a bit frustrating due to unstable 'modding' tools. We pulled out all of the skins of the gangsters in the original *GTA* game and replaced their faces and features with those of politicians. It is worth noting that we kept the original *GTA* AI gang structure, and merely replaced the skins of the gangsters. This allowed us to have the Bush gang (Bush, Blair, Harper) fight against the Osama gang (Osama, Saddam and Kim Jong-Il). Other gangs in *GTA* have varying loyalties: determining which gangs were allies, neutral, or enemies allowed us to program our gang structure accordingly. We also pulled out all of the voice-files of the original gang characters and replaced them with the speeches of politicians downloaded from the internet. Some of these speeches were unaltered, others were spliced in a manner similar to those used in 80s and 90s industrial culture by bands such as *Ministry* and *Severed Heads*.



Fig. 5. *Grand Theft Bicycle*, sound clip of Dick Cheney unaltered, 2008, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson. Sound link: http://www.grandtheftbicycle.com/Gibson-04-Grand_Theft_Bicycle.mov



Fig. 6. *Grand Theft Bicycle*, sound clip of Steven Harper edited, 2008, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson. Sound link: http://www.grandtheftbicycle.com/Gibson-05-Grand_Theft_Bicycle.mov

We also pulled out all of the original signs and billboards in *GTA* and replaced those with ‘modded’ versions. The original billboards in *GTA* mostly consisted of somewhat juvenile variations on popular American brands. Our ‘modded’ signs therefore created somewhat absurd combinations of location and message, as shown in Fig. 7 below, in which a fundamentalist church sign is juxtaposed with a Wal-Mart billboard along a boulevard which houses a casino (not on screen).



Fig. 7. Screen grab from *Grand Theft Bicycle*, 2008, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson, Photo © 2010, Jim Olson, Used with Permission.

In addition to exploiting the Dadaist form of the ready-made and the absurdist appropriation common to Dadaist collages, *GTB* is deliberately politically provocative in the Dadaist sense. There is no particular message intended, the user can side with invaders or insurgents, or just go on a full-on bloodbath aimed at all politicians. The project deliberately allows multiple political perspectives and doesn't attempt to lecture about the nature of violence in video games. Despite this, the use of political figures has caused a bit of a stir in certain locales. As Randy Adams outlines in the Stride Gallery exhibition text: "As an associate professor at the University of Victoria, Gibson was 'hauled in' to face the university's lawyers. They feared his use of Stephen Harper as a character might put funding at risk. Gibson refused to remove the figure of Harper from the game, and has yet to face any consequences." [16] When *GTB* was shown at the original home of Dada in Zurich – Cabaret Voltaire – in 2010, the Swiss parliament were simultaneously debating on whether to ban or censor certain violent video games. The Zurich daily free paper "20 Minuten" brought *GTB* to the attention of some parliamentarians, and the reaction was predictable outrage, particularly given that the Swiss Finance Minister at the time, Hans-Rudolf Merz, was included in the game as a moderate ally of Bush, Blair and Harper.



Eine Szene aus dem Killerspiel: Der Maschinenpistolen-Schütze im Vordergrund ist Hans-Rudolf Merz.

Fig. 8 - Screen grab from *Grand Theft Bicycle* used in *20 Minuten*, 14 April 2010, 3, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson, Screen image ©2010, Steve Gibson, Justin Love, Jim Olson, Used with Permission.

In response to the above information, the leader of the far-right Swiss People's Party (SVP) Mauro Tuena stated: "This nonsense has nothing to do with Dada," [17] revealing the good parliamentarian's utter lack of knowledge about the history of Dada more than anything else. As the Director of Cabaret Voltaire Philipp Meier said to us personally in response: "this project has everything to do with Dada." [18] The provocation in this context was perfectly in synch with Dadaist goal of creating a public stir in order to reveal the ignorance of the bourgeois press and reactionary elements in society.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that *GTB* does indeed have one stated agenda: to increase aerobic fitness in traditional game players (who undoubtedly lead somewhat sedentary lives). In this regard there is an 'ethical' element to *GTB*, despite the obvious nihilism of the violence evident in the game. In this regard it differs from the total nihilism of Duchamp's *Fountain*, even as it retains some of the anti-art qualities of Dadaism.

Conclusion

The game art mod can be seen as an example of a digital ready-made, and therefore logically tied to Dadaism in at least this respect. This is particularly true when the ‘modded’ game (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto*, *Quake*) represents ubiquitous commercial culture. In this sense certain game art projects sit in the uneasy realm between art and anti-art: the natural ‘trashiness’ of some game culture makes this inevitable to a degree, but many artists choose to exploit and emphasize the anti-art qualities of games in order to provoke and infuriate in the Dadaist sense of these terms. Similarly many game art projects are deliberately politically incendiary. That is certainly true of *Virtual Jihadi* and *Grand Theft Bicycle*. The public reactions to these projects are evidence enough of this. Dadaism most visibly provides an model for considering the game art mod as an (anti-)art form. The natural affinities between the two provides insight for the game artist when considering a conceptual approach to ‘modding’ and for the theorist when considering historical links between game art and earlier related forms.

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Author Biography

Steve Gibson is a media artist. His works have been presented in such venues as Ars Electronica, Banff Centre for the Arts and European Media Arts Festival. His project *Grand Theft Bicycle* will appear at Albuquerque Museum of Art & History at ISEA 2012 from September 20, 2012 to January 6, 2013.

Web: <http://www.telebody.ws/>