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The Wanderer and a Digital Sublime

By

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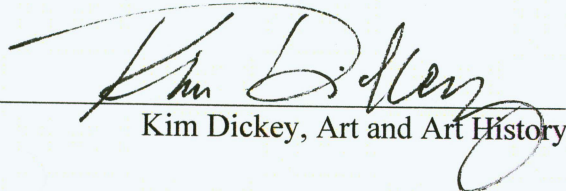
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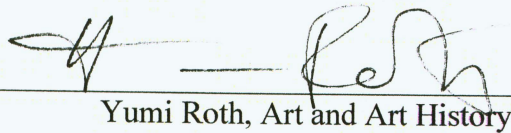
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Abstract

O'Brien, Nicholas (M.F.A., Art and Art History)
"The Wanderer and a Digital Sublime"
Thesis directed by Professor Mark Amerika

The Wanderer is a multi-work installation primarily composed of a video game designed by Nicholas O'Brien and presented at the CU Art Museum from November 9th until November 29th. The work has been created specifically for the MFA Thesis show, and is overseen by professors Mark Amerika, Frances Charteris, Kim Dickey, and Yumi Roth.

The purpose of the work is to create equivalences between Romanticism and contemporary digital art practices. O'Brien creates analogies between the work of Caspar David Friedrich and contemporary models of landscape representation to discuss how Romanticism can continue to hold relevance in today's art world. *The Wanderer* employs cutting edge technology including game design and Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) 3D printing tools in order to bring the tropes and visual iconography of Romanticism into a contemporary conversation. In doing so, the work asks viewers to reflect not only on art history, but also on the demands that contemporary technology enforces upon users.

By critically reflecting on video games, network technology, affective space, ruins, landscape studies, and other artists' reflections on the role of nature within contemporary art, O'Brien weaves a work of art that challenges expectations and invites audiences to self-reflect on their place within digital culture.

The Wanderer and a Digital Sublime

Over the course of several years of research and experimentation, I've come to question whether or not the sublime can exist within digital environments. The long-standing debate regarding authenticity, presence, real vs virtual, and the problematics of the hyperreal all position the digital as a location that stands in opposition to the sublime. Although these arguments are compelling, the challenges that the digital poses to contemporary notions of the sublime create an area of cultural exploration that greatly appeals to my artistic practice. This line of inquiry has forced me to examine not only the tools of my work and the technology of how I distribute my projects, but has also forced me to critically reflect on the conceptual material of my practice.

When initially starting my research into the sublime, I wasn't quite sure what I was specifically attempting to address. As a result of trying to wade through the multiple definitions of the sublime, I knew I would need at least a working definition to either work off of or completely deviate from. Edmund Burke provided me with the starting point I needed in his fascinatingly vague yet poignant summary:

.... [when faced with the unknown] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.¹

Although I was uncertain how I might be able to harness the irresistible force of the sublime, the terror it engenders, and the profound demands it enforces on the mind, I know that Burke's statement would act not only as an insightful starting place, but also as a constant reminder of the need for poetics when approaching my subject material.

Regardless of this uncertainty, what I did know was that my work had become deeply

¹ Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

concerned with landscape. I was repeatedly finding that my video, performance, and net-based work were all returning to landscape as a site for experimentation and inspiration. In acknowledging this tendency, I came to Colorado. In some ways, this step served as a radical departure from my urban life up to that point, but in retrospect I can see how necessary it has been in developing my research and practice.

I don't understand landscape really; its appeal, its attraction, its fascinating sprawling qualities, its danger, its awe, its remoteness, its network, its allegorical properties, its metaphorical potential, its permanence, its mutability, its there-ness, its pervasiveness, its paradox. It is the space from which we came, the space for which we long, the space for which we hope to return, and the space we wish to ultimately control and dominate.

I know it is there; in the real world, in the space beyond the last road, or in the space just around the bend; in a backyard, or behind a fence, or off a highway, or seen from a plane. Landscape looms in front of me while I wait for the bus, while I am walking home, while I travel across the country, while I sit and have morning coffee. It appears suddenly, but also always seems to be at hand.

I know it is changing; with fires and storms, with tectonics and deforestation, as a result of a flood or a drought, due to development or blight, because of weather or because of man.

I know that landscapes have qualities that I understand only through the abstract lens of language. I know that it has qualities that I understand only through the abstract lens of my vision. I know that it has qualities that I understand only through the abstract lens of philosophy. I know that the only way I can understand it is through an abstract lens; or better yet, I know that I will never understand it through a lens that does not have a layer of abstraction.

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While delving into the sublime and attempting to understand landscape's impact, another form of abstraction informs and runs through multiple layers of my practice. Linguistic, rhetorical, and textual abstraction has remained a consistent consideration while undergoing my recent research. Many

aspects of my practice, be it performative, curatorial, coding, or 3D animation are heavily influenced by the role that language plays in the formulation of critical inquiry and exchange. As Ferdinand de Saussure argues in his germinal thesis regarding on semiotics, language is a system of interrelated signs, and words are abstractly defined by what they are not.² Comparison, contrast, and difference create the foundation of linguistic meaning, and this process contributes to the ways in which language itself operates on a deeply abstract system of signs and signifiers. This premise of a nodal and networked system of understanding and meaning greatly appeals to my interest in digital technology since both systems function on user adaptability, modification, and engagement.

In this way, language and rhetoric can be seen to be the foundational creative technology from which all other creative technologies are built. Marshall McLuhan and his theory of media formalism as articulated in his renowned *The Medium is the Message* has inspired this thinking.³ He argues, that any given medium is a modification of its predecessor, and that when reduced to a remote point of origin, one will inevitably arrive at text and speech as starting foundations.

To that end, when we look at the various technological lenses used to understand landscape - agriculture, mathematics, cartography, earth science, navigation, one-point perspective painting, telescopes, photography, animation, radar, and television – we can start to (forgive the pun) map some tendencies within Western culture. An interesting note here is that as each of the above mentioned technologies advance our understanding and knowledge of landscape, so too have these technologies propelled a need for continued abstraction. The long-standing irony here, one that land artists don't seem to acknowledge, is that although these tools create more clarity for our understanding, they also simultaneously create more layers of abstraction for that understanding. By using tools that bring us closer to accurately simulate landscape we unwittingly distance ourselves from the material of nature.

When compounded (or confronted), these layers turn into what I have come to personally

² De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Writings in General Linguistics*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

³ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Boston: MIT Press, 1994

identify with the sublime. There are an innumerable amount of definitions of the sublime, which result in an almost insurmountable confusion about this material. That confusion – a personal and cultural conundrum – is responsible for my own desire to tackle the sublime for my thesis work. The various definitions of the sublime aren't necessary always in conflict, but the personal preference of the language used between one theorist and another often results in stupefying artists like myself in creating concise definitions to work within. As previously stated Burke served as an important benchmark in my research, and his articulation of the sublime stands as one of the pillars of reasoning on the subject. However, my personal understanding of a contemporary sublime allows a theoretical flexibility for my work to confront this material from a variety of perspectives and analysis.

Within my thesis work, entitled *The Wanderer*, these perspectives take on four different symbolic paths: ruins, glitch, domestication of landscape, and the abyss. Each of these pathways addresses abstract qualities of the sublime through particular theoretical frameworks and specific historical references. Language, then, serves as an essential conduit for the player of *The Wanderer* to reflect and engage with each of these themes. The greater construct of the game, however, situates an audience member as not merely a passive reader, but as an active participant in these forms of the contemporary sublime.

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I have come to use a lens of digital abstraction to understand landscape for multiple reasons, but primarily because the digital enhances and emboldens the virtual qualities of landscape that I wish my work to address. This lens has suited me particularly well, since my understanding of the limitations and the scope of the digital have been ingrained in me for a long time. My familiarity with those limitations serve as apropos schema to explore the historical and theoretical limitations of landscape representation. Due to the inherently abstract quality of the digital – a quality based on simulation, virtuality, and re-representation – this lens is the most appropriate to employ for my exploration of a contemporary understanding of landscape and the sublime. It is a particularly well-suited toolset

because it binds art, computers, and landscape through their mutual need and reliance on abstraction.

Abstraction, according to Robert Smithson, “brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself.”⁴ To create abstract imagery, or to use abstract qualities of any media, allows a maker and audience to take metaphorical short cuts to the material concerns of landscapes. Most processes of digital landscape rendering are based on an array of abstractions: UV texturing, artificial lighting, simulated physics and weather patterns, and procedurally generated animations are all examples of abstract techniques used in high-resolution 3D rendering software. All of these techniques are employed to bridge the gap that Smithson describes. The small list above are methods of recreating the material of landscape on our close-at-hand digital displays. They, like many other forms of technology (both digital and analog), shorten the distance between simulation and reality, and in so doing complicate our relationship to the real in unexpected ways.

In *The Wanderer*, the above mentioned tools are of particular interest to my overall practice not just because they are the dominant systems for producing abstractions via digital simulation. I am also drawn to the use of these tools because of the ways they present a technological group of software and skills that I consider to be the defining technology and media of the beginning of the 21st century. Video games are currently going through a renaissance phase where independent developers, artists, and academics are all gaining access to high-functioning tools as a result of comparatively minimal cost. Like photography, cinema, and personal digital computing, the growing population of individuals gaining access to these tools has fostered dynamic communities of amateur game makers. In recent years, critical conversations regarding game making, art games, and the ways in which culture is being shaped by the proliferation of game making has drastically increased. As a result, entire academic programs and curriculum have been built around the growing interest in these easily accessible technologies.

⁴ Smithson, Robert. “Frederick law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape.” *Documents on Contemporary Art: The Sublime*. Ed. Simon Morely. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.

I tend to avoid making work that can be considered overtly novel, or else purely an exercise in techno-fetishism. However, game development is particularly well suited for my work. Many trajectories of media development link video games to cinema, video, and animation – all mediums that I have worked with in the past. However, my main desire to employ game development stems from the equivalences that I wish to emphasize between Romanticism and contemporary digital art. When considering the work of Caspar David Friedrich, I've particularly found that the figures in his landscapes – specifically *Wanderer Above Sea and Fog*⁵ – can be considered Romantic analogs to contemporary avatars found in game media. The wanderer in the painting can be understood to be a vessel for the audience to project in/onto (although noted by Helmut Börsch-Supan to be an homage to Friedrich's close friend and patron, Herr von Brincken).⁶

The wanderer character is a Romantic figure that plays heavily not only in my work, but also in video games and digital art in general. An entire genre called “Open World” or “Sandbox” games is entirely dedicated to building environments that the player is meant to explore and wander.⁷ These games encourage players to be active participants and observers within the framework of a game, occasionally giving players tools to procedurally interact with the environment – a method of programming based upon reactive and dynamic algorithms that are non-static and/or non-repeatable. In these types of games, players are invited to bend the rules of the simulation in order to complicate player/game relationships in order to create worlds of self-reflection and self-awareness.

Open World games contain Romantic elements in that they position the player as a cyber-flaneur. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, the *flaneur* is the gentleman stroller who wanders the urban landscape, searching within the yet-to-fall ruin of the Parisian arcades, observing his surroundings with a heightened self-awareness.⁸ This “permanent tourist” explores the

⁵ See Appendix Figure 1

⁶ Börsch-Supan, Helmut. *Caspar David Friedrich*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1990.

⁷ Notable examples are Rockstar Games' *Red Dead: Redemption*, Bethesda Studio's *Elder Scrolls* series, or Lionhead Studio's *Fable* series. See Appendix Figure 2, 3, 4 for visual examples.

⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press,

nooks and crannies of their environment with an ever-questioning eye, gazing deeply into the history and culture that exists underneath the surface of the material world. In Benjamin's words:

*To go out strolling, these days, while puffing one's tobacco, ... while dreaming of evening pleasures, seems to us a century behind the times. We are not the sort to refuse all knowledge of the customs of another age; but, in our strolling, let us not forget our rights and our obligations as citizens. The times are necessitous; they demand all our attention all day long.*⁹

Although considered a central figure of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin's musings on the role of the walker-dreamer within a greater cultural milieu has deep roots in Romanticism. The flaneur is not merely an individual that nostalgically reflects on yesteryear – of the “evening pleasures” of a more simpler time. Instead, as Benjamin stipulates, the flaneur positions what once would be aimlessness into a more specific conscientious direction. It would be naive of the flaneur to be unaware of how their privileged tobacco smoking does not fit within the contentious present. In this way, the flaneur acts a kind of casual social/civic guardian of cultural space.

The cyber-flaneur is then the digital equivalent of Benjamin's stroller. Through deep-surfing the web, trolling forums, seeding and seeking peer-to-peer networks, the cyber-flaneur is a digital wanderer whose meandering creates ripples in the social and visual fabric of culture online. This purposeful act is akin to what Kevin Bewersdorf defines as the INFOMonk in his *Spirit Surfer's Manifesto*.¹⁰ The INFOMonk is an individual that surfs for content – jewels of significant and authentic value – and re-hosts this media into other forums for admiration, elevation, and critical examination. The similarities in practice and language between Bewersdorf's INFOMonk and Benjamin's flaneur is uncanny in that each argue that wandering and self-reflexive examination are a cultural/social responsibility. This

Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bewersdorf, Kevin. *Spirit Surfers Manifesto*. Re-hosted online by the author from <http://maximumsorrow.net>. <<http://doubleunderscore.net/cu/spiritsurfing.html>>

deliberate performative exploration of the exterior life of the living world allows the individual a metaphysical space for interior examination and reflection.

In this way, the cyber-flaneur acts as an integral part of a larger social mechanism that facilitates critical inquiry and psychological re-evaluation. In *The Wanderer* the player is placed in the role of a cyber-flaneur; wandering a digital landscape to explore and reflect on the ways in which we visualize nature and are culturally effected by that simulation. Wandering within the game positions the player as central explorer in the equivalences that I am drawing between Romanticism and contemporary digital art. In this way, the design of the game enacts the role that Benjamin self-identifies and calls for in his fellow citizens.

Being a wanderer creates a performative gesture of self-exploration. Digitally browsing and meandering enables a process of discernment; it requires one to question what is of value and what is of importance. By allowing oneself to be open to a multitude of experiences, a wanderer can pick and choose what resonates with their cultural and historical sensibilities and what is peripheral. Perpetual and rigorous questioning of assumptions and pre-determined cultural associations are undone by the act of wandering. This process is part of the demands that occupy Benjamin's flaneur in the necessitous times of Modern life. The responsibility of cultural self-awareness that cyber-flaneurs undergo has become antithetical to the dominating entertainment culture that pervades networked environments. In turn, that awareness and self-reflection become a pressing concern and demand on the wanderer in cyberspace due to the dwindling desire of netizens to take on these roles. *The Wanderer* reflects on the "customs of another age," to not merely reference art history, but to play with Romanticism in order to create a dynamic, ongoing conversation initiated by Friedrich, his contemporaries, and those that came before.

This being said, *The Wanderer* struggles against the constant, attention-demanding environment that Benjamin asserts. In the game, players are encouraged to not only be observant, but also to explore the landscape without too much haste. The journey of the player is to take in the digital representation

of the landscape that would normally be atypical while playing contemporary blockbuster video games. The hyper-active First-Person Shooters that dominate the commercial video game market now act as the distractions that prevent the cyber-flaneur from more fully engaging screen-space. Benjamin's call for city-wanderers to not dismiss the cultural significance of the present resonates with the sensibilities that are offered in my game in that we might have become too accustomed to non-self-reflexive interactions within digital environments.

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Video games are, as defined by Ian Bogost, “a medium that lets us play a role within the constraints of a model world.”¹¹ And although he categorizes this as a primary trait of what distinguishes videogames from other media, I'd argue that Friedrich's paintings provide a similar function. Friedrich's oeuvre provides many striking examples of the kind of role-playing that Bogost describes, and I view his work as an important art historical benchmark where the constraints of the model world of Renaissance/traditional painting are beginning to fray. The difference, however, that Bogost distinguishes between painters like Friedrich and videogames is that the latter requires computational frameworks to execute role-playing. This substantiation of the differing properties does not necessarily create a barrier between them. Within Bogost's book, How to do Things with Videogames, cross-discipline comparison between the conceptual and material concerns that exist in Romanticism and videogames manifest in long-standing concerns that Bogost has with Humanism and Digital Humanities.

The study of the relationship that contemporary digital art has with the Humanities tradition is a pursuit shared by many besides Bogost. A now somewhat defunct collective of academics and artists collaboratively blogging on *Grand Text Auto* have been discussing this issue thoroughly since 2003.¹² Through their research, this group has published extensively on issues revolving around

¹¹ Bogost, Ian. How to do Things with Videogames. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

¹² <http://grandtextauto.org/>

digital/interactive literature, liberal arts education, and the history of digital media. Artists like Mary Flanagan (who contributed to *Grand Text Auto*) and Claudia Hart both create work that explores how the Romantic tradition of the Humanities can provide significant contributions to contemporary digital practices.¹³ Specific interests in games and interactive fiction often take place in Digital Humanities conversations as a result of the shared narrative interests that both mediums explore. To this end, video games provide Digital Humanities a dynamic platform of criticality as a result of their ability to encompass and embody multiple creative mediums and interdisciplinary fields of study.

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Bogost defines five properties that separate commercial or “traditional” video games and “artgame” titles: procedural rhetoric, introspection, abstraction, subjective representation, and strong authorship.¹⁴ Of these, *abstraction* seems of paramount importance and speaks to my own concerns with landscape representation. Bogost writes, “No matter the level of abstraction... works don't equate higher abstraction with lower production value. Where image, sound, and texts are present, it's carefully selected and incorporated into the system that forms the rest of the game.”¹⁵ Abstraction for Bogost is not merely a visual quality, but instead should be evaluated through the ways in which the multiple parts of a game are designed to illustrate concepts in non-literal and non-didactic ways. This type of abstraction is not unique to video games, but this medium can employ this quality particularly well as a result of the multiple layers of abstraction that occur within the screen-space of a video game environment. In this way, abstraction not only complements landscape, but it also serves to bolster the thematic structures and systems implemented in video games. This coupling of landscape and games is precisely a determining reason for my interest in developing a work that highlighted the need for abstraction within a contemporary digital art practice.

¹³ As a professor at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Hart teaches a 3D modeling class entitled *Atmospheric Animation: Contemporary Romanticism and the Techno Sublime*.

¹⁴ Bogost, Ian. *How to do Things with Videogames*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The abstract is a quality of the digital that often goes unnoticed, or else is greatly taken for granted, due to a willingness that digital users have to allow simulation to act as appropriate substitution for the physicality of material objects. Heightening that abstraction then situates the player as an active participant in the creation of an abstract environment. In doing so, *The Wanderer* asks the player to reflect on these layers of abstraction that they 1) seem so willing to participate in/with, and 2) might otherwise not consider of conceptual significance conveyed by a piece of digital art.

The Wanderer employs glitch aesthetics to open up the digital to an intensified debate around the abstract. The glitch has become a digital aesthetic addressing the ways in which information and communication technologies can be incredibly inconsistent, broken, noisy, prone to loss, and easily corruptible. Although not inherently bound to digital tools, the glitch most often manifests in contemporary visual culture as “dead pixels” on a LCD Screen or a result of improper codec translation in video and/or audio information.¹⁶

Not only do glitches expose an abstract visual layer, they also operate as a conceptual platform to investigate the ways in which incompleteness or brokenness can be included within the rhetoric of contemporary art. The glitch can be observed as an emotional or experiential state of contemporary art that no longer functions as cultural problem solving. Within my own practice, I invite openness and constant questioning as part of my personal social obligation as a cyber-flaneur. My work does not aim to create solutions or answer questions to cultural problems, but instead it aims to pose more questions to that which has become the cultural norm. Glitch aesthetics operate as a fitting mode for that questioning to manifest.

Within this particular work, the glitch throws the player into a state of reflexive inquiry about the digital materiality of simulated landscape. Since digital media is often considered to operate as the epitome of contemporary visual representation, glitches within *The Wanderer* question what assumptions and exceptions players bring to the supposed visual perfection of digital simulation. Our

¹⁶ A more full articulation of what the glitch encompasses can be found in Rosa Menkman's *Glitch Studies Manifesto*.

expectations have become so clouded by a generation of digital representation meant to mask the fact that we live in constant state of visual simulation. In other words, when looking at a simulation of a landscape within screen-space, we don't say "That is a digital representation of a mountain." Instead we would merely say, "That is a mountain."

The glitch then serves to remind viewers and players the digital objects they are observing are not merely taking the place of pre-existing physical objects, but that these digital objects are in and of themselves material manifestations of the digitization. Mark B. N. Hansen discusses what unfolds as a result of that process of translation from analog to digital:

Following its digitization, the image can no longer be understood as a fixed or objective viewpoint on "reality" - whether it be theorized as frame, window, or mirror – since it is now defined precisely through its almost complete flexibility and addressibility, its numerical basis, and its constitutive "virtuality."¹⁷

As a result, the materiality of the digital image must be taken into consideration when working with these tools. Later, Hansen warns that this process of digitization can dangerously act as a viable replacement of the former physical object it represents. The potential danger here is that the substitution not only acts as a representation, but also becomes its own object that supersedes what it is representing. As a result, Hansen suggests that an abundance of this kind of substitution can problematize an individual's ability to navigate, understand, and negotiate physical and/or haptic reality. Thus, the glitch exposes the flexibility and virtuality of an on-screen object, and creates a visual short-circuit for audiences to self-reflexively understand the digital as having its own material (and not taking on the material of its analog counterpart).

In other words, the material of a digital rendering of an object textured in oak is not made of wood, but instead is made of data. In this way, the material of that rendering is not physical, but is digital; the material of the digital wood is data. The danger that Hansen points to is that we are

¹⁷ Hansen, Mark B. H., New Philosophy for New Media. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

becoming increasingly willing to assume that the material of digital objects is identical to their physical counterpart.

The need to delineate these lines of materiality between screen objects and physical objects is reinforced by the installation component of *The Wanderer*. Within the current installation, processes of “reverse-translation” occur with objects that were originally designed to exist primarily in-game. The map of the game has been physically fabricated using a Computer Numerical Controlled (CNC) printer. This object, made out of several cross-section cuts of MDF that have been laminated together, acts as a physical mediator of the digital object – thus a “reverse-translation.”¹⁸ Traditionally, digital objects are meant to simulate something physical, or at least represent an object that has already had a physical existence (this is particularly the case in most blockbuster video games). However, with my installation the contrary is true. The physical object is meant to simulate the digital space of the game. As a result, multiple negotiations regarding authenticity of the digital object occur. Because the digital object acts as the initial representation of the space, new concerns of the materiality of the digital must occur.

While Hansen not only describes the affective turn that occurs in the digitization process, he also – quite by accident – illustrates a point that I have repeatedly found when formulating comparisons between landscape representation and digital art. The “unfixed” quality of the digital image that Hansen suggests situates digitization as being one of the only mediums with the capacity for addressing the unfixed qualities of landscape. Contrary to the ways in which we look at landscape from a human lifetime scale, the physical and geological material of landscape is in permanent flux. From the ever-fluctuating tectonic plates underfoot, to the nearly invisible mutations of fungi-bacteria that overtime will consume entire forests, landscape is far from being permanent. Previous forms of landscape representation have framed nature as an object of timelessness, acting as a visual reminder of the fleetingness of humanity's struggle. However, the assumption of a perennial landscape has been thrown into question within contemporary representations precisely due to the use of digital tools in

¹⁸ See Appendix Figure 5 for installation documentation.

documenting and digitizing the natural. The glitch then not only serves as a way of addressing the materiality of the digital image, but also as a reminder of the ways in which landscape must be viewed as dynamic and mutable spaces.

Scenery in *The Wanderer* undergoes a series of jarring, glitchy animations when players move deeper into one section of the mountains. At first these animations throw viewers off and can be seen to be genuine mistakes in the game design, but as the player further explores the landscape this aesthetic eventually become the norm. Within this particular path in the game's environment, these animations are accompanied by text that discusses preconceived expectations and traditions of landscape representation. The abstract – as manifested through the glitch aesthetic – generates a kind of self-reflexivity in the player that brings questions of digital materiality and the limits of landscape representation to the fore. Couching these concerns together in one path helps not only to illustrate the equivalences that I am drawing between Romanticism and contemporary digital art, but also addresses the growing need to evaluate the ways in which the digital is creating a new paradigm of material understanding of space.

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This specific pairing of content (Romantic Landscape) and medium (video games) is not simply made for the sake of highlighting the complicated relationship found between simulation and reality. More importantly this work is meant to show how that complexity is not a concern that suddenly appeared as a result of digital technology. This problematic that digital technology poses in understanding landscape has a long history – one that equals the history of landscape representation itself. Many scholars have attributed this to concerns of the *virtual* in terms of the body's relationship with the mind. Although this concern extends beyond the scope of my artistic work – delving deeply into post-Kantian theory/philosophy is not a primary concern with my practice – I will cite Brian Massumi as a particularly inspiring voice regarding these concerns.

Massumi, a follower of Deleuzian rhetoric and theory, provides multiple outlets for considering

the ways in which the natural, the cultural, and the digital overlap and intersect in varying problematic, and abstract, ways. In his Parables for the Virtual, Massumi offers a telling definition of the abstract that will assist in relating previous concerns to the virtual:

*... abstract means: never present in motion, only ever in passing. This is an abstractness pertaining to the transitional immediacy of a real relation – that of a body to its own interdeterminacy (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now).*¹⁹

The abstract is characterized not by that which is fixed, and as a result can only truly be approached as something that is constantly in movement. This statement provides not only a formal understanding of the abstract, but also lays a foundation for understanding the representation of bodies and their relationship to the virtual (discussed below). The perpetual passing of the real that results from quickly moving through vectors of space speaks to a quality of speed that inherently exists in digital technology. Common criticism and evaluation of digital technologies are situated in analyzing the radically shorted distance between objects and subject. However, the shortening of time as a result of this speed is what makes the digital an aptly capable engine for the creation of abstract content that differentiates it from previous technology. In this way, the quickness of tools like the Internet, and in what Bogost calls *proceduralist games*,²⁰ accentuates the transitional motion that Massumi suggests.

The importance of the above quotation, however, rests in how we understand the abstract as being a primary component of the virtual. When discussing the foundation of his own research, Massumi later states:

*A word for the “real but abstract” incorporeality of the body is the virtual... For the virtual to fully achieve itself, it must recede from being apace with its becoming.*²¹

More simply put, the virtual is composed from “the ultimate paradox of the dynamic unity of

¹⁹ Massumi, Brian. Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

²⁰ Bogost, Ian. How to do Things with Videogames. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

²¹ Massumi, Brian. Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

movement and sensation.”²² The problem then becomes how does one, a body or figure, approach that paradox when the movement/motion/speed of abstraction results in an ever-increasing distance of objects/subjects from itself. A solution to this problem seems to be the primary function of digital technology to harness virtuality through a process whereby intermediary objects/subjects take the place of the body and sensation. In digital environments this often takes the form of some kind of avatar and user interface. These temporary containers have traditionally acted as mediators, but as they have proliferated they have become substitutions for the immediacy that bodily sensation desires. This mediation, again, is not unique to digital technology, but given the propensity of these tools to be of a particularly fast pace and heightened meditation, their capacity to overthrow a non-abstract reality tends to be unbearably strong. Thus, a need to be enwrapped in these tools is developed as a result of a reliance on their ability to temporarily bridge the gap between the abstract and the real. This faculty is what makes digital technology a well-suited medium to discuss the sublime.

For my own work, I want to consider how to maintain abstract qualities of digital technology while simultaneously slowing the speed in which that media is often digested. I feel as though employing digital technology for the purpose of capturing the virtuality of landscape is the most appropriate method for attempting to mitigate the pressures that constant motion and perpetual transitory phases pose to digital culture and art. My work then serves as an (even further) abstracted layer operating on top of – or really alongside – virtual space as a way of exacerbating the problematics of allowing the digital to overtake the real in how our bodies experience realness.

One way that I have maintained these abstract and rapid qualities of contemporary technology has been through the production of five digital prints that exists in the installation. These light-jet prints have been hung in custom CNC printed frames also made out of MDF and represent the five different paths and themes that exist within the game. Although the source material of these objects exists in digital data and computer renderings, the fabrication of these framed prints directly addresses the

²² Ibid.

virtual experience our bodies have in relation to physical objects.²³ CNC printers are designed for rapid-prototyping of industrial design and other mass-produced objects. Thus employing this technology speaks to the abstract speed of digital environments and mitigates this through the fabrication of physical representations of objects that initially only existed on-screen.

Landscape, then, serves as an apropos location of research and practice to address these concerns. Culture is already so firmly grounded in/to landscape, but more recently particular cultural identifications of landscape have become pointedly challenging to simulate in virtual space. These qualities have been defined in social geography as the difference between space and place.²⁴ Although spatial simulation has become increasingly capable of rendering landscape and architecture, “platial” simulation still leaves much to be desired. The timeliness of these concerns is then based in the fact that landscape is undergoing a second round of containment; first spatial and now virtual. Within this undertaking, a process of similar translation is occurring with our relationship to the sublime.

Spatial containment has occurred through various technological means: agriculture, interstate highways systems, and cartography. Digital technology certainly heightens virtual containment; however this process also occurs as a result of architecture and ruin. Within *The Wanderer* a dedicated path is devoted to the ruin ending with a specific reference to Friedrich's *The Abbey in the Oakwood*.²⁵ This pathway references many metaphorical considerations that are contained within ruins as well as asks the player to reflect on their own mortality, agency, and personal cultural history. The ruin serves as a location to investigate how contained space undergoes virtualization. Looking beyond the mere translation of architectural sites into digital contexts²⁶, the virtuality of a space occurs at the moment when this location shifts into a state of ruin.

²³ See Appendix Figure 6 for installation documentation.

²⁴ Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

²⁵ See Appendix Figure 7.

²⁶ A project of my own that does this more directly deals with a demolished historic neighborhood in Omaha called *A Temporary Memorial Project for Jobbers' Canyon built with ConAgra Products*.

This process shifts a location from being merely a space into a place. The difference between these two types of locations is that a space just requires physical area, whereas place requires context. This context can take the form history, identity, or political conflict amongst other cultural identifications that make a space contain more than merely its appearances. The qualities that identify place are what give that location its virtuality. For if the virtual is “real but abstract,” cultural history is perhaps the most virtual quality that permeates space.

Ruins serve as a directed and specifically spatial container for the virtual properties of place. The physical manifestation of history is contained within a ruin. Ruins are often associated with architectural objects that have fallen into disrepair or partial demolition. However, ruins do not have to require a specific patina to mark its passage in time, and also do not require the object to have any specific element of physical collapse. Instead, the ruin should be viewed as a location in which the virtual or platial properties are evidenced through a shifted paradigm within the cultural context in which it exists.

As we observe the collapse of many totalitarian political systems throughout the 20th century, we can see that the ruin can be a sudden and terrifying event. Thus the shifted paradigm came rapidly as opposed to over several centuries of so-called “progress.” The terror of such a sudden transformation haunted the Romantics, especially those that lived through, or paid witness to, sudden transformation as a result of war. Friedrich himself is cited as one of the first painters of the region to make anti-war works as an act of protest against the Napoleonic campaigns.²⁷ Benjamin's Romantic tendencies are often reactions against the violence of the global wars for which he had intimate (and ultimately ill-fated) knowledge. Benjamin goes so far as to suggest in The Arcades Project that the ruin of the early 20th century can be labeled as “modernity:”

All at once, [the arcades] were the hollow mould from which the image of 'modernity' was cast. Here, the century mirrored with satisfaction its more recent past.

²⁷ Koerner, Joseph Leo. Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape. London: Reaktion Books, 2009.

*Here was the retirement home for infant prodigies.*²⁸

Benjamin laments that previously the great arcades of Paris were once illuminated with a promise of intellectual and cultural triumph. The glow that had faded from these architectural sites had not only darkened the shadows of these consumerist tombs, but had also dimmed the hopes for an illuminated escape from the Modern oppression that these ruins inflicted upon citizens. The ruin of the Arcades for Benjamin is not that they are becoming glorified dust collectors, but that the virtual properties of this place have become more difficult to obtain and identify. The glimmer of these sites is gone, and with it the cultural history they contain becomes a strain to see.

The ruin then becomes a site primed for reclamation; a location that already contains virtual properties waiting to be rekindled into contemporary discourse. Because of the fragmentation of a ruin – whether physical or virtual – these locations become challenging sites for artists and cultural workers to engage and investigate. Georg Simmel suggests that one method would be to acknowledge that ruins, although objects of the present, contain a life of their own:

*The ruin creates the present from a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such*²⁹

Ruins for Simmel are not locations of merely observing and paying homage to, but are locations that carry that past into the present and must be engaged as sites that require a negotiation between then and now. This process “leads to a unity of external image and internal effect.”³⁰ In this way, artistic treatment of the ruin must require an internal dialog that the artist must undertake with the site that they are hoping to address. That conversation is manifested in an external discourse that I address with players within *The Wanderer*. In exposing the internal dialog I had when creating the landscape of the game, I'm making a gesture towards the audience that points toward the unity Simmel stipulates as an

²⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1999.

²⁹ Simmel, Georg. “The Ruin.” *Documents on Contemporary Art: Ruin*. Ed. Brian Dillon. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ongoing process.

Within the landscape of *The Wanderer*, signposts act as specific locations where the player reads these self-reflexive moments. As the player journey's along the path out toward the sea, a signpost occurs right before the ending of this path; the post reads:

I wish I could tell you what it took to make this for you... it probably doesn't seem much to some, but to me it means a lot. To have you here, now, floating along, looking into the nooks and crannies of this proverbial purgatory makes me very happy. Sometimes I worry that you might not care, but at other moments, knowing that you'll come across this, and take the time to read what I wanted to say makes it all worthwhile.

By addressing the player directly and appealing to their willingness to wander within the game, I'm not only breaking the 4th wall of the video game, but I am also specifically exposing my own personal self-reflexivity. In doing so, the external representation of the games acts as a conduit for generating a conversation between my audience and myself. This dialog brings to the fore my personal misgivings about how to represent the sublime with digital imagery. This gesture not only reveals my personal voice, but also invites the player to reflect on his or her own wanderings.

This negotiation is particularly a challenge when the ruin becomes a decentralized location, and/or does not necessarily require any physical space. Again, the traditional idea of the ruin requires space to physically manifest an architectural site of disrepair. However, this tradition is undergoing an upheaval as a result of the proliferation of digital and networked technology. Ruins – as platial/virtual locations - can manifest themselves over several physical locations and as a result might not require any specific geography. This disruption of the traditional physicality of ruins is one of the primary themes within *The Wander*.

While wandering around the landscape within the game, the player navigates the topography of the space. However, my interest in this work is not in having the player simply float through forests or mountain paths. The specific placeness of this environment become more and more significant as the

wanderer goes further into the landscape. The particular visual, literary, and cultural references that exist within the landscape of the game give the terrain its virtual properties and make the digital space become a virtual place. The players must discover within themselves what negotiations they undergo when thinking about landscape, space, and the virtual properties of places that they personally identify with. The ruin acts not only as a conduit of reflection on the past, but they also operate as visual outposts for digesting the pervasive visual iconography of ancient ruin. In this way, the familiarity of ancient broken columns is paired with contemporary “obsolete” technology in order to create a type of ruin that doesn't require a specific space but also doesn't require a specific time.

This juxtaposition illustrates how the contemporary ruins are a reflection of a new architectural paradigm that speaks to the relationship that buildings have to bodies. Previously the dimensions of domestic/interior spaces directly corresponded to the framework of the body. However, in more contemporary architectural practice the centrality of the bodily image has become splintered and unfixed. Anthony Vidler argues that the classical humanist figure has taken a radical departure:

... this body no longer serves to centre, to fix or to stabilize. Rather, its limits, interior or exterior, seem infinitely ambiguous and extensive; its forms, literal or metaphorical, are no longer confined to the recognizably human but embrace all biological existence from the embryonic to the monstrous; its power lies no longer in the model of unity but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken.³¹

The contemporary human figure, which architecture has relied upon since a Classical epoch, no longer can be contained within the limits of a specific space/physicality. As a result, the body itself has become a virtual object; a constantly shifting organism fluctuating between variable historical, cultural, political, and personal identifications. The unstable body activates landscape and space into locations of place. Thus digital technology serves as an apropos technological apparatus for the negotiation

³¹ Vidler, Anthony. “Architecture Dismembered.” *Documents on Contemporary Art: Ruins*. Ed. Brian Dillon. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

between body subject and cultural place since it inherently contains virtual, flexible, and dynamic properties that distinguish it from previous tools.

In the decentralized ruin of networked culture, and the fractured nature of the contemporary body, we find that the methods of exploring glitch aesthetics all the more fundamental in addressing how both landscape and body can no longer be viewed as fixed locations. *The Wanderer* wrestles with these concerns through employing the Romantic tradition of poetic fragmentation. Although the space of the game initially appears stable, grounded, and “full,” the player quickly discovers a layer of intentional incompleteness that not only plagues the ghost-wanderer of the game, but also the player’s traditional expectations of digital representations.

The sublime then emerges in this renegotiation of expectations, platial awareness, and self-reflexive understanding of what continues to resonate from the past within sites of ruin. Traditional Romantics would attempt to encapsulate this sublimation in the form of static paintings, and as a result of the technological limitations of that medium they would suffer great heartbreak. Now, however, these limitations no longer hold the artist hostage, and the dynamic qualities of interactivity and play assist artists like myself in more fully representing the sublime.

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This dynamism creates great potential for contemporary artists, but it is important to reinforce the fallacy that occurs in our supposed technological progress. The continued stacking of these abstract layers via the development of higher resolution technology is not only what continues to drive the humanities to represent the sublime, but it also results in a further marginality of the sublime. As a result, the sublime becomes all the more difficult to grasp.

Some central questions then need to be considered (or reconsidered) given the rate at which technology continues to develop new tools for representation and abstraction: Are our notions of the sublime the same as when they were established by Burke and Kant? In other words, can we create new paradigms and standards for evaluating the sublime given our current technological state? Can we

address the problematic of the past's definition of the sublime in order to address the problematic of the present definition? The nuance of these questions resides in both an acknowledgement and abandonment of history's dictation of the present. This is a risky gesture. In fact, it is particularly dangerous given the potential ramifications that might arise from both maintaining the current status quo of the question of the sublime, as well as the forsaking of that tradition for a completely new framework. However, this is a risk I am willing to take, as I find that the role of the contemporary artist is to be able to delve into these areas of murky philosophical, cultural, and historical content. It appears that a compromise – or better, an agreement – between the need to reevaluate previous notions of the sublime and a more contemporary evaluation of these concerns must occur. In *The Wanderer* these agreements unfold not only between Romanticism and myself, but also between my work and a diverse audience of game-players, art appreciators, and those interested in wandering into the unknown.

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Appendix

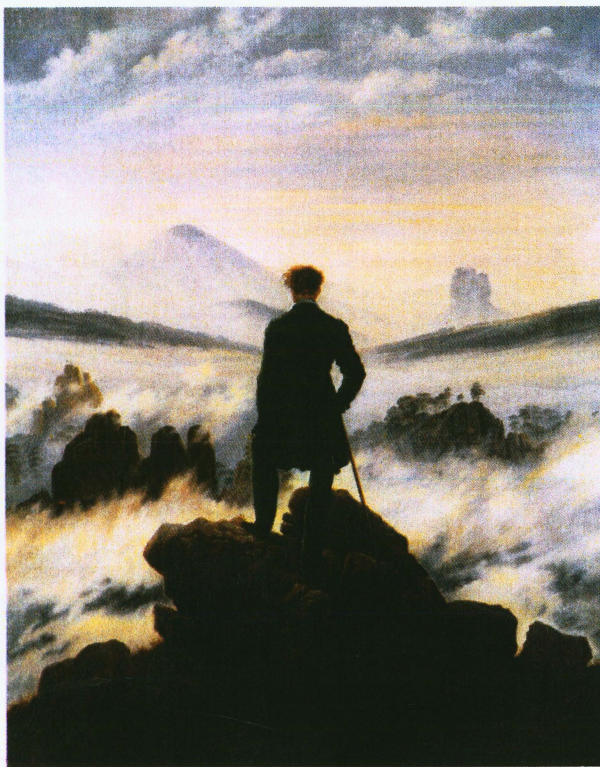


fig 1. Casper David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above Sea and Fog*, 1818.



fig 2. Bethesda Studio, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, 2012.



fig 3. Rockstar Games, *Red Dead: Redemption*, 2010.



fig 4. Lionhead Studios, *Fable 3*, 2010.

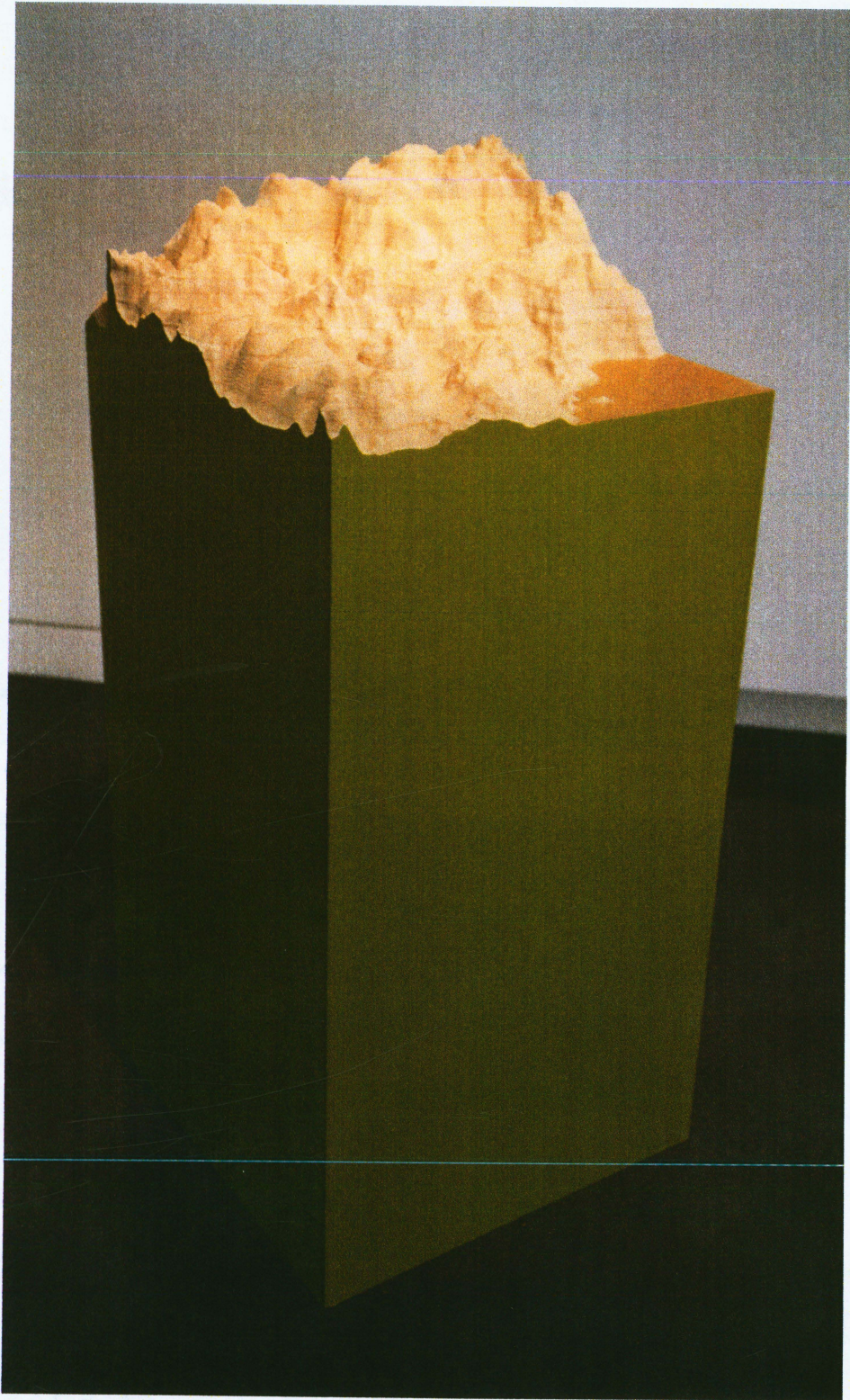


fig 5. Installation Documentation of CNC Printed Sculpture



fig 6. *The Wanderer* Installation view, CU Art Museum



fig 7. Casper David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oakwood*, 1809-10.

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