

CARTE BLANCHE: EXPERIMENTS IN THE ART OF INTERACTIVE
POLITICAL SATIRE AND CONTEMPLATIVE VIRTUAL SPACE

by

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Abstract

This paper documents the process of modifying First Person Shooter video game assets to produce satirical interactive work and expressive-reflective personal space. As virtual space colonizes spheres of diversion, education, and work we come to acknowledge it as a form of literacy, but if we are to accept its utility we must then consider the issue of accessibility – Is this a medium that we as individuals can author? What of the place of Machinima in disseminating this work? In the following pages I intend to explore the potential immediacy of game modification as revealed by work on my thesis project. At issue is the degree to which the practice enables an individual to exploit malleable game space to address social satirical and internal, reflective issues - Virtual space as reflective space.

Keywords: Virtual Space, Game Modification, Half-Life 2, Vignettes, Satire, Editorial, Opinion, Sketch, Machinima.

Project Description

My work, collectively under the title *Carte Blanche*, is a series and succession of interactive vignettes built within the framework of the *Half-Life 2* Source Engine. In practice the project employs the same development tools used to create the *Half-Life 2* episodes, but with a shifted focus from *Half-Life 2* lore and game play to real world satirical and personal/expressive objectives. To be precise, this shift in focus is most evident in terms of intent, as a core element of the practice is to borrow and indeed exploit the assets, interactions, schema, and legacy of what is the inescapable starting platform for this work: *Half-Life 2*. In the course of developing my process, I have experimented with a large scale, narrative piece and smaller, more sketch-like vignettes- intended to be simple enough, ‘watchable’ enough, to transmit their content via short documentary Machinima.

As this project is tied to the framework of the *Half-Life 2* engine, certain aspects of its aesthetic and functionality are understandably derived. In fact, this is desirable insofar as the project attempts to prove *modification* as an essential practice to quick, meaningful, adaptation of virtual space towards

less traditional, generic ‘First Person Shooter’ (FPS) goals. In keeping with its source engine, *Carte Blanche* inhabits a well rendered 3D space in which the main interactive affordances are ‘move,’ ‘look,’ ‘use,’ and a host of ‘shoot.’ While characters, props, and textures are customizable, my experience has shown that the value of creating these new assets *must* be weighed against the ease with which a creator can access the *Half-Life 2* content library (especially as it has been expanded by a community of online users) and exploit the pre-existing familiarity that many gamers have with these assets. In other words, as a modification this project both benefits from and must contend with the signifying power of its source material, a dystopic science fiction First Person shooter.

Despite this game pedigree, *Carte Blanche* is not a game. The basic premise of these modifications is to appropriate game concepts, assets, and interactions as common language/ground from which to tackle current events and the nuances of (my) daily life. The game space is here divorced from a design mentality that argues for the primacy of the game in favor of an attempt to communicate contemporary life – my experiences over the past year; how I have responded to current events. So while a game will attempt to create and nurture its own internal fiction, this project appropriates game

tropes in order to address and convey a personal response to the outside world. This manipulation places my project firmly in the realm of interactive art, while acknowledging the inescapable tension that stems from its embrace of game viscera.

This distinction is further clarified in terms of narrative arc. While a game is usually understood to have an internal continuity and progression, this project can only be said to have the same if one is tempted to see a thread over the entire work period. The project begins with the 2008 presidential election and proceeds along public and private lines, as determined by the author's interest, until spring 2009. Similarly, there is little concern for transition amongst a series of political cartoons; instead we note a body of work reflecting and responding to a period of time. Ideally, *Carte Blanche*, in its entirety, is likewise seen as a sign of the times, but in interactive, virtual form.

While this long-term perspective is essential to a discussion of *Carte Blanche*, I would like to assert the explorative, experimental nature of the individual pieces. In my search for a best practice and an ideal scope for this work I have discovered two formats. The first of these is the smaller scoped

piece –it has the best chance at being topical, capturing an emotional response as it may arise in the context of a certain day and requiring anywhere from a couple days to a couple weeks of work. The second sort of piece is a more gradual affair, formulated and executed over a longer period of time – such a piece is less emotional/personal and more formulated/satirical, requiring more ambitious assets and narrative consideration. In my work on *Carte Blanche*, I have been able to execute a number of the ‘one-shot,’ personal spaces (which typically consist of no more than a single room of virtual space) and one larger, more externally and socially involved piece.

Figure 1: One-Shot Piece – The United States Does Not Torture



Figure 2: Storyboard from satirical, extended piece – Ham Handed: The Audacity of Change



Concept

For this project I have created a series of modifications - a body of work - and a pipeline that allows me to keep pace with changing social issues and personal perspective. At the heart of the project was the desire to approach virtual space with the same ease and freedom as one would a sketchbook. The appeal here is to be able to quickly work through ideas; to discard, refine, and combine work with a constant workflow and finally arrive at something impressive in the aggregate. This concept of the totality of a body of work is essential to the appeal of a sketchbook - it is perhaps most interesting upon rediscovery, where its context allows for it to become a

useful artifact. I consider a collection/reprinting of newspaper cartoons to function in the same manner. My engagement with topical events, such as the election process or bank bailouts, is an attempt to firmly anchor this piece, my thoughts, and work in a recognizable, contextualized time period.

With the exception of my larger, satirical experiment, these pieces are quick and dirty, encouraging a lightness and simplicity of style to pungently address current issues – both public and personal. This streamlining is a practical necessity, as there is an incredible leap in skill-sets and media content needed to actualize a thought in virtual space versus, say, a page in a sketchbook. The choice of modification as a tactic means to address this problem of workload, but it remains a time intensive process, and the challenge persists to most directly approach the issue at hand. Another benefit of this objective/approach is the ability to translate the work into Machinima documentation for YouTube. Since the potential audience for a modification is limited by a specific gamer population, the work would never reach a non-gamer or even a non *Half-Life 2* audience if not for YouTube, and it remains a consistent challenge to convey an interaction mechanic via video clip. In the final analysis, these are all pressures that suggest an efficient style. In terms of a media landscape where clips are

shorter, messages are condensed, and attention is at an ever increasing premium this approach conceivably gives individual pieces their greatest chance of success, as they are for the most part designed to function as one-note experiences – the equivalent of a single panel comic.

So while the process of creating these vignettes has led me towards an increasingly ‘single panel’ aesthetic, to embrace the same abstraction, surrealism, and economical use of background as a single panel comic, some desire has remained to produce high fidelity spaces. Part of the allure of virtual space is in its ability to accurately simulate the real world. In terms of this project, I have tried to push into this aspect of the toolset by having larger pieces progress slowly behind the progress of typical work, often involving outside help. This more intricate sort of project is where I feel I can be ambitious enough to envision a true and notable attempt at social satire; where interactions can actually drive a narrative; where an experience is no longer one-note and possibly fleshed out enough to be more game-like. Whereas the one-note pieces are so reductive as to exploit a certain mechanic, or game trope, the larger piece (*Ham Handed*) is more recognizable as a piece of Half-Life derived interactive narrative.

One limitation of modification as a distribution strategy is that only members of the *Half-Life 2* community are able to experience the work. There is no tradition of political, social, or personal discourse in this space, and while I am engaged with establishing one, I also try to cut Machinima documentation on YouTube to reach a wider audience of game literate (read: young) people who may appreciate a different take on topical events. This decision is a practical one: Individuals progress from community to community as games come and go – my intended audience is much larger than the group currently active in the *Half-Life 2* space.

As this work originates as a modification of *Half-Life 2* and thus extends from the *Half-Life 2* community of user modification, it is quite a departure from the typical mod project. Modification has become synonymous with amateur game development, and so by and large most work is concerned with adding additional weapons, enemies, or rule sets to the Half-Life engine. In contrast to expanding the Half-Life armory, this project seeks to extend the game's lexicon to matters of the outside world. One manifestation of this impulse is in my development of a process for generating an animated character (3d model) from a photo source so as to introduce public figures, or even myself (and relevant sound-bites), into the

game-space. Additionally, while projects such as *Kuma Wars* have attempted to stay topical and regular in terms of their content, in practice they go no deeper than minor adjustments to shooter game play – I have pushed towards regularity not in terms of variation on FPS action but in terms of mediating my personal experience of this past year.

In an attempt at this sort of expressivity, a ‘modding’ relationship with virtual space has been essential. While Second-Life allows customization of avatar and to a large degree environment, it fails to deliver the fidelity, the physics, the triggering, and overall capacity for *experience* delivery that one finds in even the lesser examples of a FPS ‘murder simulator.’ In all fairness, this is in part due to the incredible breadth of knowledge, in the form of various skill-sets, which is needed for a single individual to do an appreciable amount of authoring in a typical FPS engine. As someone who has worked to develop the necessary skills; who has access to tools that streamline various legs of the content creation pipeline, I want to be at the forefront of pushing these spaces to do something other than deliver internal logic and fiction. I am driven to see if I can arrive at some level of transparency with this medium – a level of comfort that would allow me to consider it expressive. Its old hat to transcribe a fantasy or daydream into a

script for cinematic treatment, but what about actually making such things actionable and tangible? This project attempts to project an inner life - the Id in seductive, interactive form.

Given the tremendous learning curve for attempting the aforementioned feats of content in a modern 3D gaming space, it is important to further clarify why a simpler development platform, i.e. Flash, was not chosen.

While Flash can certainly handle interactive cartoons, and is an increasingly robust environment for implementing games, it has never offered immersive space. Flash can certainly represent Obama, but it is unable to approach embodiment on the same scale as *Half-Life 2: A Character* in the source engine will exhibit mutual gaze, refined lip syncing, and an emotive capacity (especially facial) that makes an encounter with the virtual POTUS uncanny – an entirely novel and provocative experience when compared to the sort of caricature one expects in Flash. Aside from this technical reasoning, *Half-Life 2* has an aesthetic feel, a cast, and a setting that offer established meaning and the warmth of association. Despite being over 5 years old as of the writing of this thesis, the second *Half-Life* is endearing enough (and updated, managed enough) to engender countless examples of re-contextualization. This is partly due to *Garry's Mod*, a *Half-Life 2* sandbox

space that allows players to manipulate these game assets as a simple act of play. *Garry's Mod* is responsible for a proliferation of comics, Machinima, and memes that attest to the level at which the *Half-Life 2* Mise-en-scène transmits in online culture - it remains culturally relevant long after its debut. For this reason, the *Half-Life 2* is an example of game-space as point of departure: it accepts and encourages re-imagination while also serving as a reliable anchor. This is inviting for a project that seeks to exploit game tropes and game literacy en route to more experimental content, whereas Flash encourages less relevant and so less useful associations.

Figure 3: President Obama alongside Half-Life 2 character Alyx



When considering the interactive form of this work, I prefer to shift focus away from the physical computer screen, keyboard, and mouse components and recognize the internal affordances of a game space. Many of these engines ship with scripting tools precise enough to make an installation artist envious. Since *Half-Life 2* is a narrative, storied experience there is a robust system in place to trigger events based off of where a user is looking, moving, shooting, or even placing objects - all in addition to more conventional controls such as timers and sequences. There are static, dynamic/animated, and physics based props to interact with and various methods for moving, rotating, or otherwise altering physical space. In my work thus far for *Carte Blanche*, I have found proximity triggers and buttons to be perfectly adequate to trigger action scenes. Part of the allure of this project is the chance to experiment with what mode of interaction works best for a given idea: Should the player teleport? Should they press a button? Should they walk into a designated area? Should the action occur regardless of any input?

Prior Art

A Formative collection of prior art for my work on *Carte Blanche* has been that of Brody Condon – particularly his modifications of the original *Half-Life*. The appeal and early promise of some of his work, namely *Adam Killer*, was in the creation of an incredibly surreal, out of bounds sort of space where the artist could go to enact horrible violence against a dozen or so bots of his friend Adam. I was immediately inspired to make therapeutic or tailored personal spaces to enable this sort of seductive and volatile escapism. Unfortunately, much of Condon’s work moves from this original premise and concerns itself with reduction – an exploration into the formal absurdities and uncanny allowances of game space rather than further attempts to expose the subconscious life of the artist or re-imagine the outside world via appropriated game space. Consequently, I see his original work as an early foray into the real potential of virtual space, as midwife to the subconscious, and it is in the spirit of this example that I propose that *Carte Blanche* act as an indicator of the inner life of its creator.

While Condon’s work inspires the personal aspect of my thesis practice, I look to political cartooning as a medium to emulate when addressing public

events. The pioneering work of Thomas Nast is notable for its reliance on classical, Hellenistic reference, but what really contextualizes his work and informs my opinion on what political cartoons 'do' is the more recent work of Steve Sack. In Sack's work the classical influences and allusions have given way to Hollywood movie metaphors and more recognizable present day pop cultural literacy. What this transition suggests is that political cartoons strive to describe social and political issues in terms of the common language of the day - be it branding, Greek mythology, Disney-version fairytales, or whatever is accessible to the public as a vehicle for editorial content (the spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down). This thesis project proposes that there is a shared gaming literacy, a vocabulary of tropes, the likes that Condon and others showed a brief infatuation with, that is poised to become such a vehicle – equivalent to Nast's Hellenistic ingredient and Sack's Hollywood component. These are deliberate and honest attempts to communicate, just as Abraham Lincoln's speeches consistently invoked not only the content, but the language and rhetoric of the King James Bible – a broad, literary binding tie in that era of American culture. In this tradition, *Carte Blanche* is my exploration into the suitability of game-space tropes, via modifying a game engine, for describing the issues that weigh on the present.

Given these references to political cartooning, I would like to clearly and specifically isolate my reasons for the comparison. The modern political cartoon is a rather debased, and recent, form of political art and social commentary. On the whole, they are dispassionate, vulgarly clever, and kitsch (with notable exceptions), but this was not always the case. In his book *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast*, Morton Keller derives the antecedents to and inspiration for the work of arguably the most famous political artist:

French caricaturists criticized because they defended – the Republic, liberty, secularism. Their social commitment and their Romantic aesthetic went hand in hand. Art and politics were united in social purpose as well as in subject matter. Mere observation was not enough; engagement was all. Courbet’s injunction to make a living art found its echo in one of the few statements attributed to Daumier: “One must be of one’s time.” (Keller 5)

Daumier’s statement encapsulates the spirit of the French origins of this idealized political art – to be passionate and engaged (in other words – personal). The invention of the political cartoon, which must be seen as distinct from its origin as political art, did not arise until 1841, when the founding of the English *Punch* magazine heralded a domestication of the art

form, more in keeping with the aloof sensibilities and restrained sentiments of the Victorian Epoch. The drawings in this periodical were the first to be marketed as “cartoons” – with the connotation of insipidity that the word now carries (Keller 5). What makes Nast’s work seminal is that despite being historically located after the inception of the political cartoon he actually has more in common with the sensibilities of the original French political art. My work is no more attempting to adhere to the conventional notion of a game (to be fun) than Nast was attempting to make mere cartoons, and so whether or not this project shares with or borrows from games is secondary to asserting the principles of active, engaged political art. These principles distinguish Nast’s “cartoons” from an art-form that has become harmless or, in the case of my work on *Carte Blanche*, they distinguish my more recent vignettes from my earliest attempts to respond to the 2008 presidential election – which were generically ‘game-like’ and ultimately little more than diversion.

In some sense, this discussion of prior art has begun, with the introduction of Nast and post-Napoleonic French political art, to address a notion of potency. To understand how influential a man like Nast was in his time, we must consider a political discourse devoid of internet, television, and radio,

where newspaper is the dominant medium and printed pictures are a novelty – meaning, of course, that Nast has incredible power over the public perception of his political target. One such target was Boss Tweed, as Roger Fischer relates in his book *Them Damned Pictures*:

Nast even bestowed on Tweed the middle name of “Marcy,” after the New York Jacksonian William L. Marcy, the purported author of the dictum, “To the victor belong the spoils.” Tweed’s parents had christened their second son William *Magear* Tweed to carry on his mother’s family name, but because of Nast, for generations the Tammany sachem has been identified as William *Marcy* Tweed in virtually every standard dictionary, biographical compendium, and American history textbook...

So empowered was Nast by his particular medium that, aside from hounding this man out of politics, Tweed’s name retained the stain of Nast’s mockery. Fast forward some years to the presidency of Richard Nixon. Despite an earlier point about the ‘insipid’ origins of cartooning, a handful of Nast’s cartoonist descendants have been quite masterful, and never more so than in the skewering of Nixon, but consider the changing spectrum of communications technology/media: A cartoonist in 1973 can no longer monopolize the dissemination of a politician across a media landscape; Walter Cronkite would now have a better chance of achieving such a feat, or even Nixon himself (Fischer xii). This becomes relevant in terms of my

project, which often seeks to address an Obama presidency, and campaign, that has been largely dominated by the political marketing apparatus of the man himself - direct through YouTube, Facebook, or any number of web personality branding innovations. In essence, Obama's marketing team exerts a tight control over the dissemination of his political brand; he has cut out the mediator and inserted himself instead – gone directly to the consumer (obviously goodwill has helped him accomplish this). My contention, as executed in this project, is that a viable critique to such a centralized, empowered marketing strategy will only come from the grass-roots, which means that virtual space is an avenue for empowering users to re-contextualize and twist the Obama image as it suits them (just as it once suited Nast). This is how I rationalize my manipulation and appropriation of the Obama personage in mesh/virtual form (3D model as well as audio), and why I intend release this mesh to the community for the upcoming release of my larger satirical piece *Ham Handed: The audacity of change*.

This media and mediation focused argument contributes to two related conversations: One concerns the utility of virtual space and the other concerns the ethics behind sampling, remix, and manipulation in these spaces. By its very nature, this thesis is concerned with game modification

and whether or not it affords me a special opportunity to employ virtual space in addressing my experience of 2009. This engages with technological issues that are just now cresting: more and more games encourage user generated content, and they are enabling more people to cross a threshold where they are comfortable expressing themselves through these media (most notably, and recently, with the success of *LittleBigPlanet on the PS3*). With this in consideration, it then behooves us to consider what tactics or practices make the most sense here. What my process proves is that a user can quite easily generate a likeness from photographic source and proceed to mix speech, attribute animation, and generally use and abuse someone's likeness/public persona. My assets can concretize what otherwise may be a simple remix of President Obama – I have a virtual actor, in his likeness, that will lip-sync to his speech, and can be manipulated and posed in any sort of context depending on my personal prejudice and agenda. In a sense, this is the next provocation beyond giving a political persona the ironic YouTube video remix treatment.

User's Experience Description

The user experience for this project so varies between vignettes that I am more comfortable discussing it in terms of general layers of proficiency/literacy: From FPS in general to *Half-Life 2* in the specific case. FPS shooters train players to examine environments via a crosshair, and 'reach out towards it' via gunfire and an optional, specifically implemented "+USE" key. Veterans of such spaces are familiar with buttons, levers, and switches that connote the use functionality, and enemies and obstacles that are actionable in terms of weapon input. *Carte Blanche* makes the most extensive use of this +USE key, with attempts at more subtle interactions through body positioning or view direction, and attempts at more vulgar interaction, where appropriate, via weaponry. Aside from a community that will actually engage with and download the mod or see it in installation, most interaction will be limited to simple viewership of Machinima.

More to the point of content, vignettes are expected to question rather than answer. The design and flow of one of these experiences has been a major focus of critique and development. At present, the goal is to create a tension within the description of a problem or an event rather than any sort of simple

judgmental resolution. This sort of tactic can be easily visualized in the work of Gary Larson on *The Far Side*, where Larsen will capture a pregnant moment just before or after the actual dramatic event, which necessitates and rewards viewer interpretation and involvement. Thus, my vignettes are intended to emulate one panel comics, which are forced to decide upon the most appropriate moment for portrayal. As a result, the user/viewer should expect to start ‘in the middle’ surrounded by a mechanism in progress – their interaction should be expected to enable or continue a process rather than initiate from any sort of blank slate (unless such a state is explicitly valuable for the message). Part of the reasoning behind all of these guidelines is to emulate what makes one panel comics so successful – they have the luxury of choosing the moment of highest tension and the assistance of imagination in constructing before or after. To really take advantage of this fact, vignettes are structured under the knowledge that they need not necessarily deliver the pay off, that active participation and viewership will engage a user’s imagination as an added element of the interaction (that will also survive the translation to Machinima).

Vignettes

The first two pieces to see completion sought to address the 2008 Presidential election. At this point in my process, I had yet to establish the ‘quick and dirty’ method, or acknowledge that larger pieces would need scripts, revision, and were better suited as a background process. As a result, both *Obama vs. McCain: a Half-Life 2 Modification You Can Believe In* and *The Interactive Election Map* were both incredibly time consuming and off-message – employing neither of the two tactics I would later advocate. *Obama vs. McCain* features an incredibly detailed recreation of the election debates, but fails to have a specific message – possibly due to my preoccupation with making it ‘game-like’ and mounting pressure to release before November 4. Similarly, the *Interactive Election Map* was a very well-rendered space, but fell short in terms having a legitimate political message. This second piece had utility in that it allowed *Half-Life 2* players to visually predict election results, but little else. While I consider these attempts to be failures, they did impart the necessity of working ‘quick and dirty.’

After these election themed pieces, I took some time to go back to the drawing board. As I began to more freely iterate and refine subsequent pieces, I began to cement the quick, rough approach. In *The Stimulus Bill of 2009*, I was able to use the shooting interaction mechanic to simulate advancing pages through the bill - as a critic of the bill I found this to be a tension release and instigation to actually read the piece of legislation. In *The Tallest Tree in the World*, I constructed the world's tallest redwood and established a relationship whereby any attempt by the player to move closer would result in harm to the tree. The next piece, *The United States Does Not Torture*, brings users into direct confrontation with slides of embarrassingly idealized paintings of president Obama as he arcs from polite acceptance to agony in the course of a torturous slideshow -this piece coincides with recent frustrations over his performance on financial matters. Most Recently, *Mantra* is a surreal space where Obama repeats his political slogan "Change!" into oblivion to the accompaniment of a looping music sample. My intention with this piece was to invoke looping, meditation, and the meaningless of repetition. By having names to speak of, these pieces show a certain amount of refinement, as opposed to the general pool of rough works that I use to capture unfiltered ideas.

Lastly, while engaging in these streamlined shorts I have had a larger project slowly taking shape. The larger work, arguably an entire modification in its own right, is an attempt to fully make use of the narrative, scripted elements of the *Half-Life 2* tool set. Since the scope of the one-shots is such that this level of work is unnecessary, I was afraid of missing out on the possibilities of a large part of the tool set. Additionally, I felt like a large scale piece would have the best possibility for having real satirical focus. With this in mind and *A Modest Proposal* as inspiration, I set out to make a satirical intervention on the notion of government bailouts and stimulus. As of this writing, work on this experiment - entitled *Ham Handed: the Audacity of Change* - is nearly complete.

Evaluation Scenarios

While more of a personal, artistic progression and process than a traditional game or design project, *Carte Blanche* does have components that can be subjected to varying degrees of evaluation. First among these is the larger, satirical piece *Ham Handed*, which has seen multiple script revisions and will see play testing upon completion in early April. Aside from this specific case, the shorter vignettes are created as quick sketches, free to be

quick and dirty, unfettered from even my own critical, and often stultifying, treatment. These undergo a series of passes in which they are revisited and refined. I show them to advisors and in so doing I begin to pull from the rough sketches what I am trying to articulate – only then do iterations begin to come to any sort of refinement, warranting the addition of sound and captioning text, and eventually a Machinima component.

Conclusion

Carte Blanche, nested as it is within modification, remix, and game cultures is my attempt to make virtual space meaningful and immediate – first of all for me. Virtual space, certainly more than any other media, is an organizational endeavor, requiring incredible amounts of content and a incorporating a wide range of disciplines. This project, more than anything, has been an investigation into methods for bucking that trend – for asserting the personal instead of a hierarchical vision. This has been a process-heavy thesis, an exploration first of all. I have learned not only the wide range of skills necessary to competently modify the main aspects of these spaces, but lessons of process – of working iteratively, working with rather than against an engine’s game ancestry, and learning to distinguish ideas in terms of

scope (integrating both the subjective, personal 'one-shot' and the larger, narrative interactive satire). Additional work is simple in this case: My intention is to continue refining and executing on this practice, for which I consider this thesis year to be the incubational, formational period.

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