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A Thesis

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By

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Abstract

My artwork is about the impact of the digital revolution on every aspect of life, such as relationships, war, and self image. I explore this in the creation of sculptures that represent abstracted globes or video game worlds, digital animations concerning the virtual and simulated, and prints as allegories for embodied post-human experience. The visual themes of my work are bitmapped patterns, early computer graphics, and twenty-sided dice.

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"Videos, interactive screens, multi-media, the Internet, Virtual Reality; interactivity threatens us on all sides. What was once Separated is everywhere merged. Distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between the stage and the auditorium, between the protagonists of the action, between the subject and the object, between the real and its double."

-Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, P.75

My show, "esc," is named after the esc key on the computer keyboard. The esc key is used to exit a program, but it is also a reference to the escapism screens are often used for. I have avidly escaped into the worlds of video games ever since I was a young child, and as an adult I continued to play games and use screens as a form of escape. I read a lot of science fiction novels, and have long imagined humanity would be able to experience fully virtual worlds such as Neil Stephenson's Metaverse from *Snow Crash* or William Gibson's Matrix in *Neuromancer.* One-day humans could become cyborgs, or even disembodied entities that have a completely virtual existence. One of my favorite movies, *Ghost in the Shell*, explores both themes. This is the future I have always imagined.

As a child of the '80's, I grew up with images that promised such a future, and currently we live in a world that has started to see many of these once fantastical ideas becoming reality.

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Humanity has entered the 21st century in a symbiosis with the computer. Cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence (AI), once a dream of sci-fi novels and movies, are now a reality. The smart phone, practically a new appendage, can be used to "google" whatever information I want. Google, a form of AI, has a very specific task to search for information on the Internet, and it is very good at doing that. We will soon have self-driving cars and robots that diagnose disease better than doctors. Wars are fought like video games: a drone pilot in Las Vegas, Nevada can fire a hellfire missile at a target in Afghanistan. The list goes on and on with technology literally evolving on a daily basis that changes the very definition of what it means to be human.

My childhood fantasies have come partially true. The word cyborg conjures half man, half machine, super warriors such as the Darth Vader, RoboCop, and Batou from *Ghost in the Shell,* but all of us with smart phones could technically be called cyborgs. Our virtual worlds have become increasingly realistic, and virtual reality is just around the corner with numerous companies working on devices. *Second Life* has provided a version of a Metaverse for sometime now, and Facebook's recent purchase of Oculus Rift indicates they may be working on a more fully realized version. But what has also increasingly become apparent is that the virtual world is not disconnected from the real world, and the desire to escape the "real" world for the virtual may cause us to destroy ourselves. Overpopulation, climate change, nuclear weapons, or even the technology singularity (super Artificial intelligence) may be very real threats to humanity. Advancements in information technology allows us to dream of both utopian and dystopian futures, but how this technology will change humanity will be more nuanced and unpredictable than our current narratives could predict. We are at a point where we can just start to see what a sea change the digital revolution will be.

The virtual world of the Internet has connected humans in a historically unprecedented way, making us now posthuman. I would identify my way of thought as being posthuman, but posthuman is a term that does not yet have a solid definition. N. Katherine Hayles hopeful

definition is this: " …emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism, distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodied replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature."[1] My thoughts on this subject are also influenced by Rosi Braidotti's book *The Posthuman.* I believe everything is constantly evolving and that everything is connected; that our current symbiotic relationship with intelligent machines is a natural progression, but also a radical shift, in what it means to be human.

My artwork is an exploration of what it means to be human during the information age, and I am specifically interested in how our experiences are mediated by computers. In my work I investigate the impact of the digital revolution on every aspect of life. Digital technology has allowed us to see the world in new ways such as the satellite images of Google Earth, smart phone apps that quantify aspects of our life and social interactions, or the simulated worlds of video games. My work has mainly revolved around the creation of sculptures that represent abstracted globes or virtual worlds, digital animations concerning the virtual and simulated, and prints as allegories for embodied posthuman existence.

Sculpture: Twenty-sided Dice - Virtual Worlds

My sculptures are based on the twenty-sided dice that are used in role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and in Strategy games such as *Magic the Gathering*. The dice in these games are rolled to determine the outcome of events, or to signify the player's life total (how many times they can and have taken damage). The name for this twenty-sided shape

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[1] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 288.

composed of congruent triangles is an icosahedron. Computer-simulated 3D environments are built out of polygons and texture maps; the triangle is the most basic polygon, and bitmapped images are used to create texture maps. My icosahedrons are created using triangles and bitmaps, and thus they reference both digital and analog game spaces. By increasing the scale of these dice I am creating an environment where the spectator becomes another playing piece in such a board game or virtual world.

In both board games and video games, you are deferring reality for an imagined world governed by rules and systems. The Game worlds, or simulated worlds, that these dice originally represented for me are versions of Utopia. Humanity wants to be both free and repressed. In America we often talk about freedom, and we hold it up as this ultimate value, but in reality we don't want to be free. We want there to be rules, and we want others to also "play" by these rules. An example of this would be the current debate on same sex marriage. Conservatives insist that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, whereas liberals feel a free society should allow all to marry. Marriage itself represents a legally binding agreement between two people, and is itself a thing that acts as a rule that limits freedom. Obviously societies need rules to function, but this is the dualism of what it means to be a human - freedom / rules. Baudrillard writes on the subject, "In the anthropological depths of the species, the demand for rules is as fundamental as the demand to be free of them."[2] Civil unrest comes when a group of people feel that the systems and rules of a society are unfair to them, and rightly so.

In McKenzie Wark's book *Gamer Theory,* he posits that all of reality is now game-space. Wark compares the world to a game board by saying, "Now global positioning satellites grid the whole earth and put all of space and time in play."[3] The modern world, which is increasingly

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[2] Jean Baudrillard, *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 51.
[3] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

databased and systematized, often feels much like a game. There are apps for smartphones

that track and database any number of activities that a person does. I have an app that records

how long I ride my bicycle, what my fastest speed is, how many calories I burn, what route I

take, and a number of other aspects of my ride. This biking app turns my daily commute into yet

another game, with a level to learn and conquer where I can rack up points or get a high score. I

feel my experiences of real lived events are often mediated by the constant flow of information I

receive, and that the simulated is becoming more real while the real is becoming more

simulated. There is a parallel between the experience of video games and the now quantifiable

and databased aspects of real lived experience.

Fig. 1. *Black Mirror,* critique installation, 2013

The first icosahedron I built is called *Black Mirror* (fig. 1), and it represents the reflective surface of screens (when turned on or off). Onto and behind it I projected a spinning computer generated three-dimensional model icosahedron that had a scrolling rainbow background. My use of the rainbow represents the additive colors of RGB used in screens, the Apple Computer spinning wheel of death, Internet art that it is pervasive in, and pollution because of the rainbow that appears on oil slicks. Wark calls the virtual worlds of video games "the cave," referencing Plato's cave where one only sees shadows of reality. But what if a gamer were to venture out of the cave? Wark, paraphrasing Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, writes, "The whole of life appears as a vast accumulation of commodities and spectacles, of things wrapped in images and images sold as things."[4] In other words, the real world would appear no different from the game world. The media we consume shapes our perception of a commodity, person, or event, and because our experiences are so mediated it is impossible to see objective reality. The placement of the projection made the shadow of the physical object an important part of the piece, where the screen is now the shadow that shapes our reality. This object and its double represented both the real and the virtual combined together to create what Baudrillard would call "integral reality." Guy Debord writes about a similar theory, "The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a Weltanschauung which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."[5] It is the inability to escape the virtual when experiencing the material.

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[4] Wark, *Gamer Theory,* 4.
[5] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 12, 13.*

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/ Abstract Globes

      The icosahedron sculptures also act as visual metaphors for globes, worlds made flat and connected by information. The rapid pace that news travels on the Internet, and specifically social networking sites, is almost instantaneous. The world is flat again, but unlike Columbus's day, it is due to an overabundance of information as opposed to a lack of information. At the time of the creation of this work, I was reading N. Katherine Hayles's book *How we became Posthuman,* and I was particularly interested in a section where she talks about a switch in the understanding of the world from presence / absence to pattern / randomness.[6] Hayles thinks that pattern/ randomness may be informing ideas of language, narrative, and subjectivity in the information age and uses the example of virtual reality to illustrate this. A virtual reality machine can create an immersive environment for a person's senses in which a person can interact with a virtual world using feedback loops from the interface of body and machine. In this way the user of such a machine feels as if they are inside the virtual world and that self within this world is defined by feedback loops rather than skin. In such an experience there is not really presence/ absence dialectic because the "puppet" (Hayes's word for the virtual representation of self) is both present and absent and the user is and is not inside the virtual world. Hayles feels instead that pattern/ randomness is the dialectic that happens within such an interaction, which in many ways is a similar experience to simply interacting with a computer. The first icosahedron inspired by this theory, called *Pattern / Randomness* (fig. 2), is white with a black bitmapped pattern screen printed onto every surface. The use of black and white correlates to the 1's and 0's of a bitmap's binary code, and this symbolizes a connected world that is understood via this theory.

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[6] Hayles, 25.

I named my next icosahedron *Panopticon* (fig. 3) after Michel Foucault's theory based on

Jeremy Bentham's designs for a prison, but I was inspired to do this because of Nicholas

Mirzoeff's further interpretation of this idea. A panopticon is a prison where the prisoners can

Fig. 2. *Pattern / Randomness, 2014*   Fig. 3. *Panopticon, 2014*
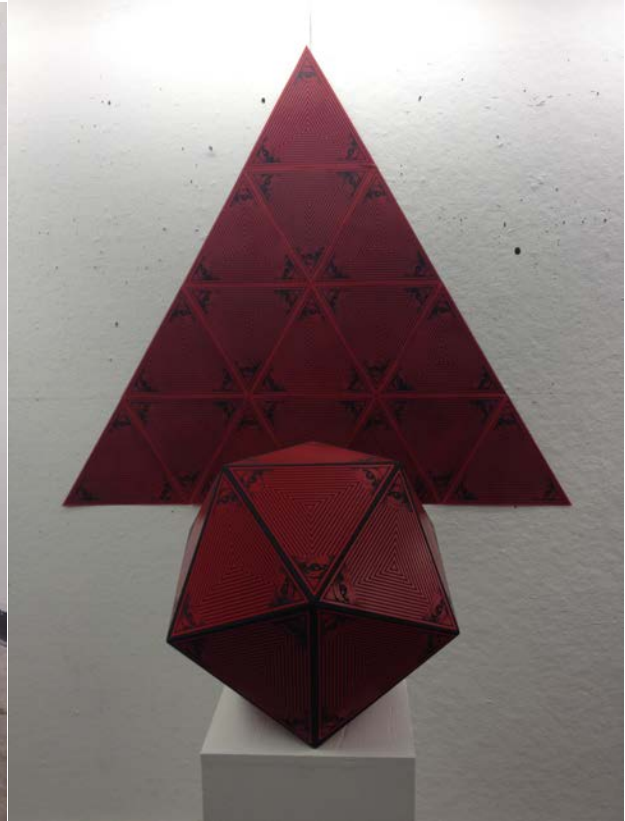
always be watched from a central tower, the idea being that they would behave correctly

because of the awareness that a guard may be watching. Foucault expands upon this in his

book *Discipline and Punish* by including other institutions and generalizing that this is how

power works within society. People do what they are supposed to do because they may be

caught doing something wrong by an authority and then they will be punished. Mirzoeff expands

upon this further in his book *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* by

writing about closed circuit television (CCTV). Mirzoeff writes, "Like the panopticon, CCTV is

based on all seeing technology, but the difference between the two is that while CCTV really does see (almost) everything, it prevents nothing."[7] Our cities, schools, banks, and other institutions are now all constantly surveilled by CCTV, but these devices simply record the criminal act and do not stop the criminal.

Now that we have entered the Information age, the concept of the Panopticon takes on new significance, especially after the revelations of Edward Snowden concerning the NSA. The NSA's whole supposed goal is to stop a terrorist act before it happens, but obviously there are many concerns about privacy. A recent Pew study showed that a 1/3 of Americans are now hiding what they do online.[8] Americans are also more cautious about what they search for as well as not using tools to hide their activity out of fears of seeming suspicious. For a long time we knew that what we did on our computers at work was being watched, but now we know that what we do in the privacy of our own homes is also under surveillance.

My icosahedron *Panopticon* represents a dystopian view of the future of the Internet where it is completely controlled by corporations and governments. A world where your Internet history will be used to blackmail you, and you may be persecuted for your well-documented beliefs. It is painted red and has the Eye of Providence, or the all-seeing eye of God, appropriated from the dollar bill, on each corner of each triangle. This artwork's intent is to communicate a globe that is now under constant surveillance by both satellites and the monitoring of Internet traffic by the NSA. Obviously I support the NSA's attempts to thwart terrorists, but who gets defined as a terrorist? Is anyone who participated in the Occupy movement considered a terrorist? At this state in late capitalism, it is not even a conspiracy theory to claim that the government is controlled largely by corporate money, and that seems apparent when no bankers were punished after the subprime mortgage crisis. The Internet can

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[7] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 159, 160.
[8] Lee Rainie, and Mary Madden. "Americans' Privacy Strategies Post-Snowden." Pew Research Centers Internet American Life Project RSS. March 16, 2015. Accessed March 18, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/03/16/Americans-Privacy-Strategies-Post-Snowden/

be used for revolution as well as control, and there have been many examples of both. This is a very complicated subject where this is no black and white answer. Revolution comes in the form of a people changing an unjust government, but it also takes the form of terrorists who wish to make others conform to their ideologies. Obviously the NSA is intent on stopping terrorist attacks, but in the process they have collected data on innocent civilians, members of Congress, as well as friendly foreign leaders. Corporations are constantly lobbying congress to pass legislation that would allow them to control the flow of information on the Internet for monetary gain. Perhaps worrying about such things seems paranoid, but it is my belief that Information should be free, and privacy should be a basic human right.

Fig. 4. *Hyperreality, 2014*
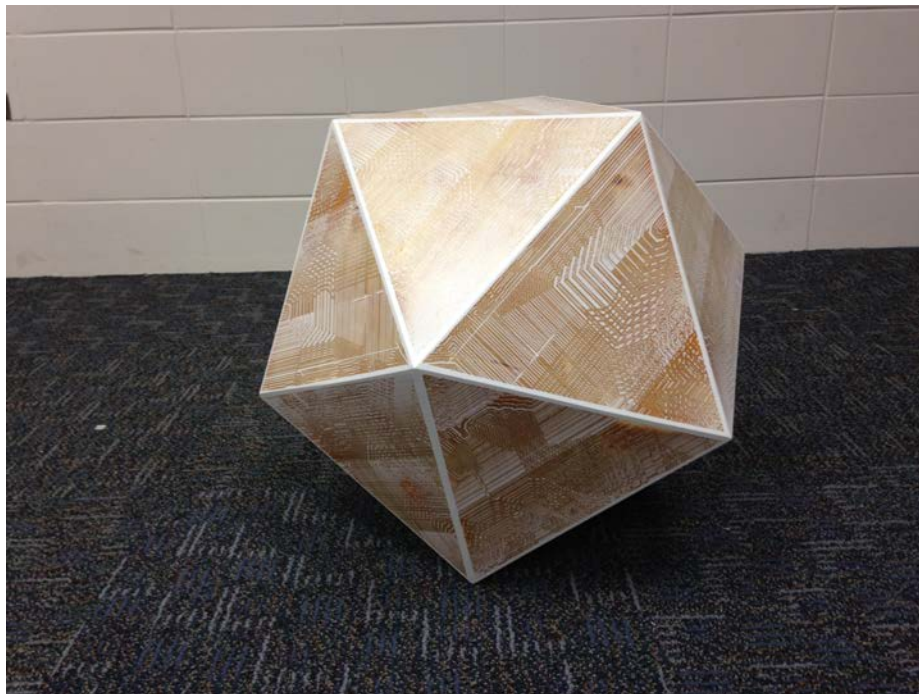
For my icosahedron *Hyperreality* (fig. 4), I left the material, birch plywood, visible. The idea for this work is to represent the transformation of the natural world into that of the model. The bitmapped patterns I screen-printed onto the surface reference both terrain and circuit boards. One of the next steps in the evolution of the intelligent machine is that they will become

a large part of our environments. An example of this is going to be the smart car that will make

transportation easier and safer. Other examples are the various connected devices that are

starting to populate our homes. Often the model does not actually fit human needs, and in those

cases we are forced to live in environments that make us unhappy and are dangerous to our

health. Many of the spaces we now inhabit are really built for automobiles, and often in the

suburbs that is the only way to get anywhere safely. Hopefully future environments will be built

more with people in mind, as well as with concerns for incorporating nature into our

environments. We are at a point in history where we can choose to further alienate ourselves

from our environments and the natural world, or we can choose to create environments that are

welcoming to people and keep our need for nature in mind.

Digital Animations: Simulated Experience

My large-scale dice place the viewer in a position of inhabiting a world that is quickly

becoming simulacrum, and I explore the subjective experience of inhabiting such a world in my

animations. I have taken my original idea of combining sculpture and animation and created a

more refined version using projection mapping, also called spatial augmented reality, to more

seamlessly combine the two. *Integral Reality* (fig. 5) is named after a concept Baudrillard writes

about in *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*. My interpretation of his meaning for this

term is that we are faced with a harsh objective reality once we accept the death of God, and

this is something that we cannot deal with. Even when the world is freed from illusion it does not

simply become objectively real in a metaphysical sense. Integral Reality has to do with virtual

Reality, or the reality that is created by the projection of the simulacrum onto the real.

Simulacrum is the confusion of the sign for the signified, and integral reality is the world that

results from this confusion. Baudrillard writes, "What becomes of the world when freed from

truth and appearances? It becomes the real universe, the universe of integral reality."[9] By using

the word "truth," Baudrillard is referring to the fact that the truth of the universe is unknowable,

and obviously appearances are often deceiving. Integral Reality is a term that is being used to

describe the experience of using products such as Google Glass, or other virtual reality devices,

which allow the user to experience the real world with virtual data superimposed over their view.
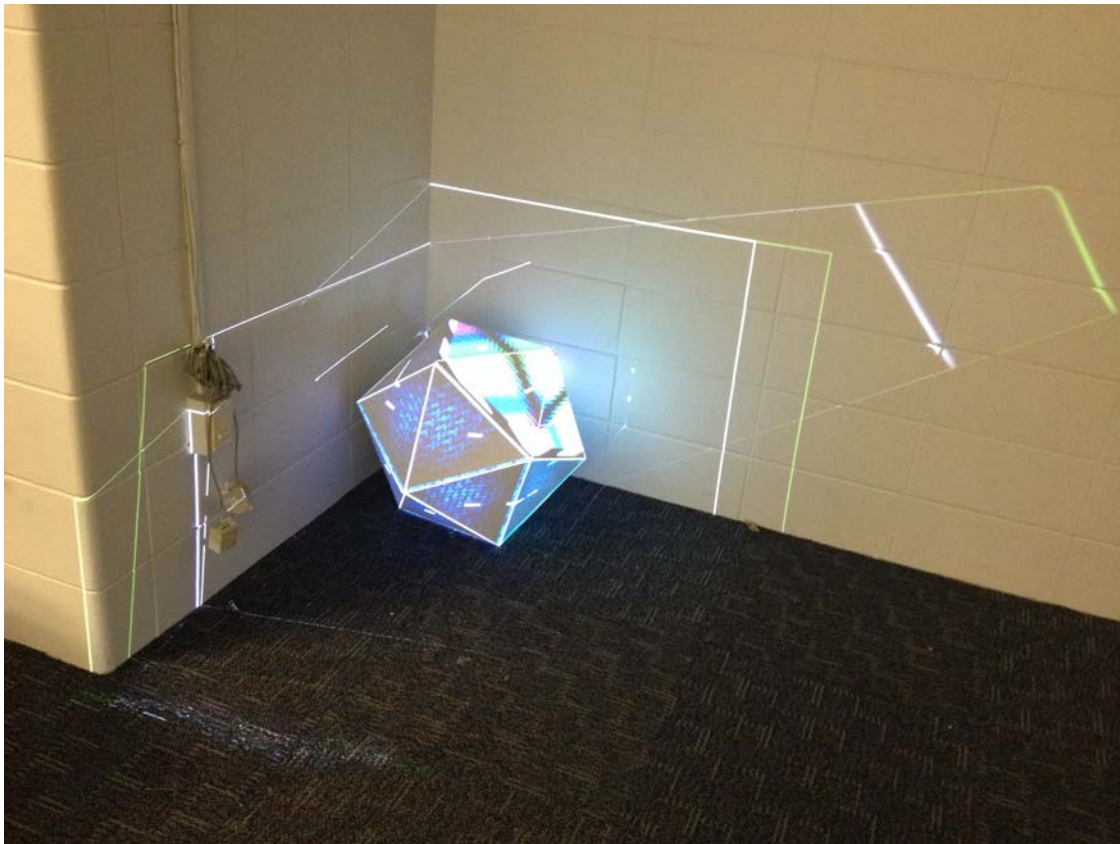
Fig. 5. *Integral reality, as a* work in progress, 2015

For *Integral reality,* I created a white Icosahedron and projected animated gif patterns

onto it. These gifs are inspired by the artist Nicholas Sassoon's *patterns,*[10] which are often

named after natural phenomena such as rainfall, waterfall, ripples, waves, and tides. Liquid is

the substance that the natural patterns of the universe most visibly manifest themselves in, and

[9]Baudrillard, *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact, 25.*
[10] Nicolas Sassoon, "P A T T E R N S." P A T T E R N S. Accessed March 30, 2015. http://nicolassassoon.com/PATTERNS.html.

that is why many of his titles are ones that we associate with water. Patterns are more generally

a part of all aspects of physical existence, and my patterns are an allegory for the informational

waves that are the invisible undercurrent of contemporary life. We think of life now as codes and

patterns that repeat. An example is DNA, which is a code that creates a repeating pattern of

organisms. N. Katherine Hayles states, "even though information provides the basis for much of

contemporary U.S. society, it has been constructed never to be present in itself."[11] The only way

we ever see information is as an abstraction or an index, but not as a tangible material thing. My

patterns represent such an abstraction, a way to visualize the digital information that is

transforming the way we live. I use visible pixels in my patterns as a way to signify the virtual,

and the projection of these patterns creates an object that is both physical and virtual.

The loop plays an important role in much of my animation work. *Integral Reality* is

composed of looping patterns that form a larger looping video. Looping gifs are used to

communicate on the Internet and have become an important part of how we express ourselves

as a culture. Often these loops are small parts of popular movies, and loops were how movies

started. Manovich writes, "… all nineteenth-century pro-cinematic devices, up through Edison's

Kinetoscope, were based on short loops."[12] Video games use the loop to simulate life, effects,

and natural forces. The loop is also how a basic computer program functions. Manovich writes,

"… The loop gave birth not only to cinema but also to computer programming. Programming

involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as "if/then" and

repeat/while"; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures."[13]

Long Distance Relationship (fig. 6) is an artwork about how media has a way of

replacing our experience of the real person, and how our memories are simulations of events.

This translation of my girlfriend's image into what appears to be a video game is to symbolize

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[11] Hayles, 25.
[12] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 315.
[13] Manovich, 317.

how mediated our experiences of others have become. I have an iphone photo (fig. 7) of my

girlfriend sitting in front of a window as sunrays framed her face on Christmas morning of 2013. I

have a recording from a day spent at a park with wind chimes by a body of water. I also have

memories of those days. From these documents and memories I have created an animation in a

16-bit video game style, which simulates these experience in a neverending loop.

We have transformed ourselves into images. This is true of celebrities who we will likely

Fig. 6. *Long Distance Relationship*, 2015   Fig. 7. iphone photo of my girlfriend

never meet, but it is also true of those we may know intimately. An obvious example is

Facebook where interactions take place within a virtual environment, and all socializing is

mediated via a graphic user interface (GUI). Technology has a way of compressing space so

that there is almost no distance that cannot be instantly communicated across, but at the same

time it creates a different kind of distance. People often choose to interact with and view screens as opposed to really interacting with people, and who we pretend to be online is not necessarily who we are. Guy Debord writes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[14] Facebook and Instagram, email and instant messages, emojis, and all the other virtual ways we interact have a way of filling in gaps and distances (both physical and metaphysical) in our understanding of someone. The image of that person exists within a network of images that we associate as being somehow linked or aligned with the image of that person, but also all images that those people are not. A simple example would be what products and media they consume. It is easier to flatten a complex human into a stereotype of a person.

With this artwork I have transformed my girlfriend into an idealized video game woman, which is a mirror of how romance works in real life. A person's body essentially drugs them into love, and the only way that love is lasting is to view your partner as somehow special. Dopamine, norepinephrine, and oxytocin are the chemicals in the brain that cause love, but these neurotransmitters will only take you so far. For romantic love, one must build and maintain a fantasy narrative. If someone is in love, they feel that there is no one else, and that is ridiculous. There is no shortage of possible sexual opportunities with the numerous dating websites and apps available. People are devastated when their love is unrequited, but the larger objective picture is that there are many partners that would make them happy. For romantic love to work, one must choose to believe a fantasy. A video game is also deferring reality for the fantasy, and video games often manipulate similar neural networks to achieve addiction in the player. Video games and romance defer the real and choose fantasy, and fantasy is the only place an idealized partner can truly inhabit.

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[14] Debord, 12.

I am also thinking about memory. The animation exists as a loop, in the same way that a

memory exists as a loop that you play in your mind over and over. *Long Distance Relationship*

is what Lev Manovich would call a spatial montage. A spatial montage is when multiple images

appear together on screen and have a relationship that the artist is using to communicate an

idea. For example: Emojis float down the screen as a reference to Apple's program Messages,

but they exist in the same virtual space as all the other images, and they change the meaning of

those images when they appear. Lev Manovich writes:

> In spacial montage, nothing need be forgotten, nothing is erased. Just as we use
> computers to accumulate endless texts, messages, notes, and data, and just as
> a person going through life accumulates more and more memories, with the past
> slowly acquiring more weight than the future, spacial montage can accumulate
> events and images as it progresses through its narrative. In contrast to the
> cinema's screen, which primarily functions as a record of perception, here the
> computer screen functions as a record of memory.[15]

Every image that enters the virtual landscape of the screen modifies the meaning of the other

images, much like the accessing of memories, and the accumulation of new memories modifies

a person's perception of past moments. Our memories are malleable and ever-changing things.

We change a memory each time we access it, and with each access the memory becomes

further removed from the actual reality of that event, moment, or time.

My animation *Virtual Explosions / Simulated Terror* (fig. 8) is about the barrage of both

advertisements and horrific stories of terrorist attacks and military violence that are a part of our

everyday media experience. For this project I used graphics from a number of dated video

games, but once again my reason for this is not nostalgia but to communicate the simulated and

the virtual. The video starts with the materialization of a scrolling modern city street with various

shops and advertisements in both English and Japanese. It is a fantasy city that looks both

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[15] Manovich, p. 325.

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vaguely dated as well as futuristic. A Coke machine is an obvious reference to globalization.

These graphics are taken from *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* arcade game, which is based on a

Manga and Anime series that is a good example of globalization due to its popularity and

success outside of Japan. The music I chose and modified for this video is from another

internationally popular Japanese video game, *Pokemon Blue/Red*. The song is called "Lavender

Town," and the meme associated with it is that it caused children to commit suicide due to mind-

Fig. 8. *Virtual Explosions / Simulated Terror*, 2014

controlling frequencies put in by the programs. This never happened, but I use it in the video as

a reference to the idea of mind control and subliminal messages. We live in a consumer culture

where you cannot escape the ubiquitousness of advertisements. Mirzoeff writes, "To think about

an advertisement, even critically, is to bring oneself to the edge of buying."[16] People who

pretend that they are not controlled to an extent by consumer culture are lying to themselves.

The news often functions in a similar way by selling you a certain perspective on an event. We

are all being manipulated to think a certain way by the media we consume.

In *Virtual Explosions / Simulated Terror*, explosions and blood start to appear on the city

street, but they cause no damage to the environment. Media images of violence, explosions,

blood, death, and war eventually have no impact. As the explosions scroll by, the viewer

becomes numb to them, or even bored. This is the very background of everyday life in a

connected society - the awareness of such tragedy and also the lack of an ability to really care.

Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" Series explores a similar subject. Warhol, as he did with all

his images, prints the "Death and Disaster" series images many times. Thomas Crow writes

about these prints, "As for the repetition, might we just as well understand it to mean the grim

predictability, day after day, of more events with an identical outcome, the leveling sameness

with which real, not symbolic, death erupts in our experience?"[17] Crow argues that we do not

consume these images in the same way that we do products, and he goes on to say, "They

have in common with the celebrity portraits and product labels discussed above a fascination

with moments where the brutal fact of death and suffering cancels the possibility of passive and

complacent consumption."[18] This does seem to be one of the main fears that corporations and

governments have: The disruption of consumerism by disturbing images. 9/11 is the obvious

example, but it is also a very extreme one.

On a daily basis we consume these images just like any other, and they do not disrupt

consumption. For example: Images from a slaughterhouse, or those from the Iraq war, do not

stop the consumption of meat or the consumption of oil. This is not to suggest, however, that

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[16] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 76.
[17] Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 60 - 61.
[18] Crow, 61.

images do not have power, and in fact much of the true power in the world is simply that of image. In America we live in constant fear of another terrorist attack, but the images of explosions and violence are often from somewhere like the Middle East. We see the daily suffering, much of which we have caused, and hope it never comes to our soil. At the same time we continue to live the way we always have. For all the images that are disturbing and disruptive, there are those that are comforting and offer us entertainment, and we are always being advertised to regardless. We do not question our lives as we commute to and from work, and we do not question them in front of the TV or the computer screen before we fall asleep. Crow is arguing that Andy Warhol's best works are those in which "mass-produced image as bearer of desires was exposed in its inadequacy by the reality of suffering and death."[19] I would say that images of suffering and death only demonstrate how indestructible the mass-produced images of desire are by their inability to disrupt consumption.

/ Virtual Self

My animation *Athena Quotes Baudrillard: Ruins of the Real* (fig. 9) depicts a statue of the Goddess Athena speaking quotes from Baudrillard's *Simulation and simulacra*. The Athena statue is an image from the recreated Parthenon in Nashville, TN, which is an example of simulacra. The image of the Parthenon is of the ruins of the original in Greece, which was destroyed by an explosion in 1687. The Ottoman were storing ammunition inside the Parthenon when it was struck by a Venetian bombardment, which substantially destroyed the structure. This may have been the second version of the Parthenon, further removing any semblance of the real from that of the simulacra. It is believed that a previous Parthenon, a porto-parthenon, stood and was raised thirty-three years before even this Parthenon was built, so this structure

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[19]Crow, 51

would have been a copy itself. Baudrillard regarded simulacra as a negative thing, and though I

do not necessarily agree, I do understand the point he was making. A thing, usually an image,

often becomes denatured the further it is removed from the original until there is nothing natural

about it, and Braudrillard argues this with his four stages of simulacra, the last being based on

nothing real and pure simulacra. The Parthenon in Nashville, with its statue of Athena, is nothing

Fig. 9. *Athena Quotes Baudrillard: Ruins of the Real,* 2015

but simulacra of the original. All meaning has been taken from it, and its only function is to be

sign for what was. It is a ghost, an image, a Disneyland version of a site that once had meaning

for a now dead culture. We have no true connection to that meaning, no way to understand its

original meaning. It is but a shadow of a shadow of a thing that is forever lost, but built in such a

way that it conjures a hyperreal experience. Baudrillard has a point, and simulacra often cause a

variety of physical as well as psychological sicknesses in people. Examples are the

photoshopped images of models as ideals of beauty, or processed food products that have an

excessive amount of calories and little nutrition. Baudrillard's fear was that people will one day

destroy the natural world and replace it with simulacra, and simulacra have no true meaning but

become our empty truth.

A form of simulacra called an avatar often mediates user interactions online, and in this

animation I am also playing with the idea of an avatar. In Hinduism an avatar is a physical

manifestation of a deity, and in computing it is a graphical representation of a user. The Avatar

of Athena represents both of these ideas as she questions the truth of images, and in particular

what is behind an image. Athena is the Goddess of wisdom, among other things, within Greek

mythology, and so she is particularly suited to question the truth of images since the questioning

of what is true is how one gains true knowledge. In the animation Athena quotes Baudrillard:

> This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra,
> the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the
> destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear - that deep down God
> never existed, even God himself was never anything but his own simulacra - from
> this came their urge to destroy the images. If they could have believed that these
> images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have
> been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But
> their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal
> anything at all.[20]

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[20] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994): 4.

In other words, the iconoclasts feared that using images, as signs for God would make it easier for people to make the logical conclusion that God did not exist at all. If people began to question these images, then they may question God, and then realize that God was nothing but the images, which in turn leads to the images representing nothing.

People are obsessed with the images of other people as well as with the image they project. Our obsession with celebrity is one example, but so are selfies on social media. People often create idealized versions of themselves on Facebook where they curate every photo and never post anything negative. Another example of this would be avatars that people create that are not even based on who they are in the real world, such as World of War Craft characters or Second Life Avatars, or even just taking on another persona in a chatroom or on a message board. This takes its most extreme version when one takes such avatars and manifests them in the real. An example would be the documentary movie *Talhotblond,* in which a love triangle takes place completely online and ends in murder. The murderer goes by the screen name marinesniper, and he killed his rival by sniping him. The murderer was not a marine sniper, but he had created an elaborate backstory for this persona that he eventually became in real life.

This animation attempts to explore the blurring of who we are via all these fractured versions of ourselves. For the animation I used Motion capture data of someone speaking the Baudrillard quotes, so the Athena in the video is a sort of puppet controlled by this data. The puppet Athena also has the eyes of the actress from the motion capture video by the end of the animation, as the real and the virtual identity of the two become more closely linked. The world of Athena starts to crumble and burn by the end of the video. We, as a society, increasingly wrap meaning up in these virtual identities and images of ourselves, and with this animation I am attempting to question what we might find behind these images. We might find, perhaps, nothing at all.

Prints: Metaphors for Embodied Posthuman Experience

My prints explore the idea of embodied posthuman experience, even though the idea of posthuman is often associated with a utopian view of disembodiment. Disembodiment represents a freedom from the limitations of bodily existence, as well as supposed freedom from mortality (and perhaps even morality). People have historically been oppressed because of their bodies, women being the most obvious example. Gamer worlds, or virtual worlds, offer the player both the freedom from their bodies as well as from their identities in the real world. I believe this is why the idea of the disembodied posthuman has grabbed the imaginations of so many, but the reality is not so simple. Any type of escapism the virtual allows is only momentary, and the reality is that there is no true escape. Online gaming is often plagued by racist and sexist comments. The anonymous nature of many virtual interactions may bring out the worst in people rather than providing an equal space for interacting.

Gamergate is a good example of how the virtual is never removed from the "real." Gamergate was the organized misogynistic attack on women in the gaming industry sparked by an accusation that Zoe Quinn had received high reviews of her game *Depression Quest* by sleeping with reviewers. Anita Sarkeesian also became a target because of her feminist critiques of Video games in her YouTube video series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games," as did Brianna Wu, another female game developer, by challenging the members of Gamergate on Twitter. The harassment went as far as death, rape, and mass shooting threats. Online bullying has become a serious problem for not just children but also adults. It seems ridiculous that a culture war over video games would get to the point were someone would threaten a mass shooting, but this is an example of Internet echo chambers that lead to extreme thinking. The

problems inherent in society are not solved by the removal of the body via virtual interaction, and often this very removal causes a lack of empathy for others and their viewpoints.

There is also no separating one's body from one's mind, and neglect of a person's real body for a life lived in virtual worlds does not lead to happiness or freedom. Baudrillard writing about game states, "… in gaming no one is free, everyone is both the master and the slave of the game."[21] This becomes literally true in extreme cases of addiction. Cecilia D'Anastasio writes about this in an essay called, "Inside the Tragic, Obsessive World of Video Game Addicts." In this essay there are examples of people who have such serious video game addiction problems that it ruins their lives. D'Anastasio lists several extreme examples; Seungseob Lee, a boiler repairman in South Korea, played StarCraft for more than 50 consecutive hours at an Internet café before suffering a fatal heart attack. In China, a man named Xu Yan died after playing an online game persistently for two weeks. And in America, a woman named Rebecca Christie was sentenced to 25 years in prison after she allowed her daughter to starve to death while Christie was preoccupied with *World of Warcraft.*"[22] These are extreme examples, but even the more benign examples like sitting in front of a screen all day and never exercising have very negative consequences for both physical and mental health.

Any true human utopia (if such a thing were possible) will not be divorced from embodied existence. The idea that a person's consciousness could be uploaded to a computer is another utopian idea linked to the posthuman. This idea raises all kinds of metaphysical questions about the nature of consciousness, free will, identity, and what it ultimately means to be human. Is a human still a human if their consciousness is uploaded to a computer, or are they a machine emulating a human? I think the latter is more likely. Posthuman means the end of humanity in such a scenario, and the successive dominant organism is the intelligent machine. Embodied

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[21] Baudrillard, *The intelligence of evil or the lucidity pact,* 55.
[22] D'Anastasio, Cecilia. "How Video Game Addiction Can Destroy Your Life | VICE | United States." VICE. Accessed March 18, 2015. http://www.vice.com/read/video-game-addiction-is-destroying-american-lives-456

posthuman thought has to do with the symbiotic existence of humanity and intelligent machines. Humans have evolved over millions of years into what we currently are, and there is no separating the brain from the body. We should understand as completely as possible what we are rather than trying to transform what that is, and then supplement that with intelligent machines. N. Katherine Hayles writes, "Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines." [23] The posthuman is the symbiotic relationship of humans and intelligent machines, and is the next evolution in what it means to be human.

David Joselit writes in "Notes on Surface: toward a genelogy of flatness" about using wax as an allegory for skin, and also about a process that reveals what was invisible as an allegory for memory and the mind. Joselit writes about how Jasper Johns uses wax: "… Johns adequation of skin and painterly surface thematize an imprisoned body welling up from just below the paper's surface like a distorted reflection on a pool of water. In their formal structure these works also produce an allegory of the mind, or memory."[24] Joselit is writing about subjectivity and identify within the context of race mainly, whereas my work attempts to speak about the fractured and virtual identity of the posthuman. Joselit goes on to quote Johns from one of his sketchbooks, "Devise technique to imitate 'magic picture pad' - image printed in invisible size on paper becomes visible when scribbled over with pencil…"[25] For my prints (fig. 10, 11) I am using almost this exact process for very similar ends. I print an invisible image resist, and by rubbing ink into the paper the image appears as the ink sinks into the paper around the resist. This is an allegory for memory (a form of simulation), but also an allegory to

[23] Hayles, 287.
[24] David Joselit, "Notes on Surface: toward a genelogy of flatness," *Art History* vol. 23 (March, 2000): 26.
[25] Joselit, 26.

how the digital is invisibly changing fundamentally what it means to be human. I then wax the

paper to reference the body, and this embeds the digital within the body of the wax.
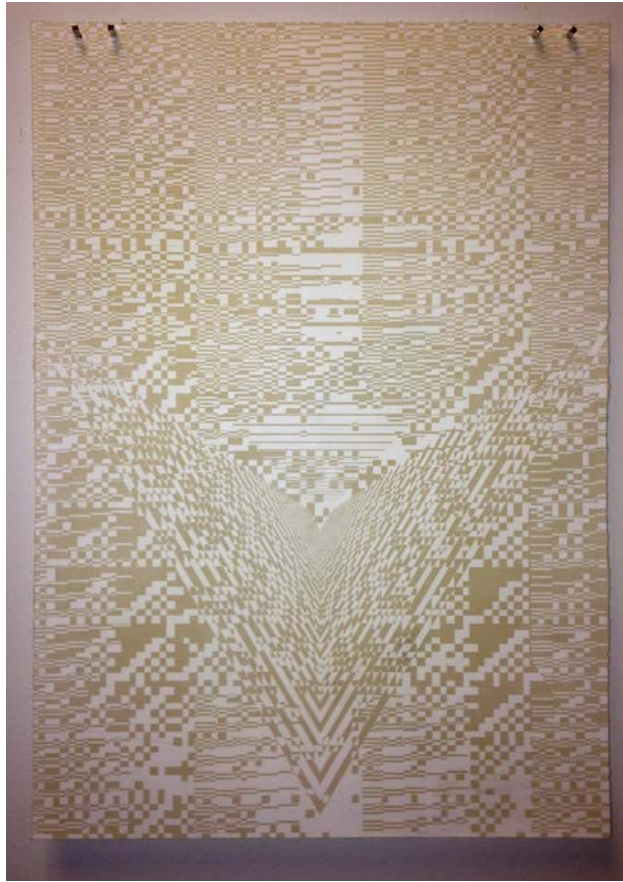

Fig. 10, *Bitmaps Series: Untitled* (triangles), 2014

Fig. 11, *Bitmaps Series: Untitled* (VR), 2014

My works on paper are often long and vertical as a reference to the scroll (fig. 12), which

is the form the modern webpage, takes. This is an observation that Lev Manovich makes in his

book *The Language of New media*, "The conceptual development of the page in computer

media can also be read in a different way - not as a further development of a codex form, but as

a return to earlier forms such as the papyrus roll of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome."[26] The

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[26] Manovich, 75.

scroll usurps the book as the dominant disseminator of text and image. Rather than flip through

pages, we now scroll through information.

Though many of my works on paper are abstract, I also use images from video games.

Fallout (fig. 12, 13) is a print where I appropriated a variety of explosion graphics and combined

Fig. 12, *Bitmaps Series: Untitled* (Sun), 2014

them to create the mushroom shape of a nuclear explosion. The video game *Fallout 3* opens

with the quote, "War. War never changes." This, however, is only true in the most basic way -

which is to say that the underlying reasons stay the same. The game narrator goes on to say,

"… In the 21st century, war was still waged over the resources that could be acquired. Only this

time, the spoils of war were also its weapons: Petroleum and Uranium."[27] The spoils of war have

also been the technology created to help in the eradication of the enemy. In my print the

Fig. 12 &13, *Fallout*, variable edition print,

[27] Todd Howard, Bethesda Game Studios, Fallout 3 (Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks, 2008), intro.

radiating pattern surrounding the mushroom cloud represents information and technology that becomes a part of society. War does change drastically as our weapons become more advanced, but also because our abilities to communicate and simulate become more advanced. WWI was an excellent example of this with its tens of thousands of casualties per day due to Machine guns and artillery, but this was also when radio technology was invented. In WWII the nuclear bomb was created and used, but so was the first programmable, electronic, digital computer called Colossus.[28] WWII brought humanity's ability to both wage and simulate war to a whole new level.

Another print on paper is titled *Death by Upskirt* (fig. 14), which is an appropriated image

Fig. 14, *Death by Upskirt*, 2014

[28] Friedrich A. Kittler, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, and Michael Wutz, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Press, 1999), 257.

from a PC98 game called *Atlantia*. This image features two giant eye monsters staring at the

dead protagonist whose panties are revealed. This is a comment on the voyeuristic nature of the

Internet, as well as the reality that you can be photographed and recorded at anytime while in

public. An upskirt photo is when a photograph is taken from under a woman's skirt so that you

can see her underwear and crotch area, usually without her knowledge or consent. These

images are posted online to fetish sites where a community of men collect and share them. The

bodies of women are being objectified in both the video game and these photos. Bradotti writes,

"… objectification is indeed a humiliating and demeaning experience for humans in that it denies

their full humanity and can thus be truly called inhuman at a basic social level."[29] There are also

many videos online that feature death, and there are websites dedicated to sharing these

images as well. This piece is about the loss of privacy due to the digital revolution, and how

dehumanizing that can often be.

Conclusion

I am old enough that I remember life before the Internet, but I am also young enough

that I grew up with the digital revolution. Marshall McLuhan is known for his statement, "the

medium is the message."[30] By this he meant that the medium was embedded in the message,

and it was not just the content that was important. McLuhan was urging us to look at the subtle

ways in which the medium was changing how people lived their lives, and not just the obvious

ones. Every old medium is on the Internet, with new ones being invented daily, all broadcasting

endless messages. There are the intended effects of media, but there are often unintended or

unexpected effects. McLuhan thought of media as being an extension of man, something that

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[29] Rosi Bradotti, *The Posthuman* (Madlen, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 106.
[30] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

augmented us, and the Internet does that exponentially and is used in many unforeseen ways. I feel that we, as culture, do not even realize how differently we perceive the world due to the Internet, and I explore this in my work.

In this paper I talk about utopian and dystopian aspects of the digital revolution, but I feel that I often dwell more on the dystopian aspects. I think this is mainly that I view the world through a science fiction/ gamer lens. Utopia, as the movie *The Matrix* pointed out, would be boring, unless that utopia is threatened in someway and must be protected. If utopia is threatened, then the world becomes dystopian, and dystopian futures are so much more entertaining due to a conflict that must be resolved. Most of the games I have played involve me saving the world, but I have also been the protagonist that realizes freedom from an oppressive government. Real life, of course, isn't like this, but I find that we like to frame it within these kinds of narratives. Both scientists and religious leaders keep predicting the end of the world, both blaming the other's ideology. We have a serious political divide in The United States, and it only seems to be getting worse. Ideologies are simulations of how the world works, much like memory is a simulation of an event. Often people get trapped within the confines of these ideologies, and they cannot see reality objectively. All information is filtered through the ideology, and it is made to conform to the simulation instead of being allowed to challenge the person's worldview. The main thing I enjoy about a good science fiction story, either utopian or dystopian, is that it causes me to see existence in a different way. Art also has the ability to do this. Boris Groys defines art in this way, "Art's function is to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked."[31] My artwork challenges the truth of narrative, and allows others to see aspects of reality they may have overlooked.

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[31] Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 69.

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Vita

     Craig Branum, and his twin brother Brad, were born in Baltimore, Maryland. When Craig was four, his father retired from being an English teacher and moved the family to a farm in Tennessee. His father had a prolific garden, a variety of farm animals and pets, as well as a substantial amount of property for Craig and Brad to explore. Craig's mother taught him how to draw at a young age, and he has been making art in one-way or another ever since. He lived in several different parts of the country after high school, but he eventually received a BFA from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2010. Craig then moved to New Orleans to work with a friend at a print shop and experience the city. Craig was accepted to the University of New Orleans in 2012, and he has been working toward his MFA ever since. Craig thinks he will move to New York City this summer.