

From the Invisible to Glitch: Rethinking the Possibilities of Aesthetics, Bodies, and Connection in Virtual Parties

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual environments, such as games, perceptually immerse users with their spatial and interactive nature. They are not solely simulations or fiction, but instead are active sites of ideological and affective production, which influence the perception of power, identity, and social constructs (Moyzhes 2020). The ideological capabilities of virtual worlds have been critically discussed in relation to aesthetics (Murray 2017). As famously referred, aesthetics is the regime of perception (Renciere 2004), which defines what can be experienced. It not only shapes the worlds we inhabit, but also the bodies we become, social relations, and our future imaginaries. This necessitates the investigation of the underlying and dominant aesthetics of simulated worlds. Along similar lines, virtuality redefines our corporeal capacities and individual identities.

How bodies are represented, encountered, and perceived in virtual spaces has also been critically considered in relation to discussions around affective and experiential capabilities of virtual worlds (Tavinor 2022). Particularly, real-time interactive virtual environments like multiplayer games or metaverse platforms are everyday experimental sites for such investigations, as they allow audiences to actively take part in and interact with simulated worlds (Hesselbein and Bory 2025), as well as share and socialise with others (Ducheneaut 2007). Investigating game environments as authentic social milieus also allows studying aesthetics and embodiment in relation to intersubjectivity and connection.

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Virtual parties got popularised after the pandemic, and now are evolving and offering a variety of ways to engage, dance and play in real-time and from various locations, helping to build or collapse social ties, or shape new social norms and rituals, imaginations, and creative expression (Krisel 2022). Hayles (2000) argues that virtuality risks treating the body as subordinate to information, which creates a rigidity in the way experiences occur, but also that it can be a space for new digital subjectivities to emerge. Considering how different virtual aesthetics can influence different social possibilities, we are motivated to examine two differing virtual party realms to uncover what kind of possibilities each world allows players to inhabit and become. We start from the question “Why do some virtual parties feel like simulations of the present while others feel like a space for speculation?” This is not to create a dichotomic understanding of the virtual party realms, but to offer a starting point to critically analyse the potential shrinking or expanding aesthetic codes and possibilities that impact how we exist within virtual realms, more specifically in virtual parties.

METHODOLOGY

We selected two virtual party environments: 1) Party environment in GTA V RP is an unofficial mod of (Rockstar 2013), played in roleplaying mode, launched in 2015 and 2) Party environment in NeuroXcape, which is a series of virtual events hosted in Club Coeee, created by Neurodungeon, a collective focused on speculative and interdimensional art that leverages game space as a means for ideological experimentation. For this study, we adopted both primary and secondary research. For the primary, we employ the method of anthropological interviews (Bonetti and Natali 2024), which makes it possible to engage directly with members of the target community while limiting the various cultural biases and enabling them to describe their feelings and their relationship with different virtual spaces. For the secondary, we employ critical analysis as a method to uncover power dynamics that are embedded through aesthetics.

The research will be conducted both through interviews and through direct observation of the gaming sessions. Since the interviewing process is in progress, here we are discussing the preliminary analysis of the critical literature analysis. The findings of the interview will be woven into this discussion by allowing these initial categories to evolve and expand.

SPECULATION AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

In GTA V RP, the world construction is mainly representational. Simulating the present, it simulates various recreational and social moments, including parties and celebrations. In most cases, these events serve to reinforce the character’s storytelling or the overall narrative, and they replicate a standardised idea of festivity typical of Western imaginaries (Wright 2002).

On the contrary, NeuroXcape emphasises the idea of using virtual game space as a form of speculation towards a fantasy where expression becomes a form of resistance to the late-capitalistic rage. NeuroXcape’s emphasis on speculative worldbuilding that foregrounds the queer, neurodivergent, marginalised viewpoints, and also fantasy-driven, other-than-human aesthetics, presents this intention. NeuroXcape draws from McKenzie Wark’s conceptualising of rave less as escapism and more as a collective aesthetic (Wark 2023), which draws parallels with the critique of the discussions that treat games as inherently escapist (Calleja 2010). The social and collective imaginary

building desires of NeuroXcape could be seen as taking a critical distance to construct a 'world as it could be', versus GTA V RP's intention to create a 'world as it is'.

TOWARDS AN EMBODIED EXPRESSION

GTA V RP presents a player body that is gendered, standardised and objectified. This is not only because avatar personalisation is limited to binary gender body presentation, but also because the social interactions are disembodied. Party moments depicted in the game often feature the presence of strippers and gangsters moving through events that closely replicate the typical American 'pool party,' which has become a symbol of masculinity, luxury, and power.

In an alternative virtual party realm such as NeuroXcape, gender doesn't exist in its societal binary form; rather is an endless possibility. Avatars' presentation is a diverse range beyond gender binaries, where posthuman and transspecies corporealities blend and create an environment for different subjectivities to arise (Hayles 2000). It creates a significant embodied social encounter by extending the virtual to the physical through LARP practices.

GLITCH AESTHETICS AS A CRITICAL STRATEGY

The standardised idea of festivity could also be seen in the visual language, where the pursuit of realism in representing the spaces and interaction is to disregard the entire irrational and playful dimension that should lead human beings to reconnect with their primordial nature (Sicart 2014). GTA continues to simulate neoliberal society with its luxury-coded, perfectionist, high-gloss visual aesthetics; hence, the simulation of moments associated with entertainment is focused on consumption and the display of wealth, reproducing dynamics that are strongly tied to binary structures and leaving little space for anything considered 'other.'

In NeuroXcape, the aesthetic is maximalist, deconstructed, cluttered, and also glitchy, as it is proclaimed by the creators. It embodies the glitch aesthetics as a strategy to critique (Russel 2020), especially to reveal hidden power structures and hidden computational processes, which challenge the myth of transparency (Kane 2019). NeuroXcape glitch aesthetic emphasises the materiality of hidden labour structures and powers, where they claim "foreground the workers involved in the process".

CONCLUSION

This study aims to critically explore the aesthetic codes and possibilities of two virtual party realms held, to uncover what kind of possibilities each world allows players to inhabit and become. The critique towards GTA V RP can be considered not solely as oppositional, but as opening up possibilities for creating points of departure for creating collective and empowering aesthetics where subjectivities can irradiate. How could the potentials of virtual aesthetics and embodiment be drawn from a virtual party realm influence overarching virtual making viewpoints? As this work is in its early stages and still ongoing, we have presented our research as a foundation, which will be further developed and expanded with the primary research findings.

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