CRUDELY, A MACHINE. THE DREAM MACHINE THROUGH THE LENS OF RUSSIAN FORMALISM

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Abstract: This article explains how specific aesthetic decisions work in the game *The Dream Machine*. I analyze it through the lens of Russian Formalism: particular techniques of making a video game are judged through Shklovsky's *Art as a Technique*, and the problem of the game genre is presented through Tynianov's *The Literary Fact*. Theoretically, I aspire to reclaim the original context for these ideas, which is surprisingly relevant to contemporary horror media. Digital games as an artistic form re-introduce the effect of estrangement into the ongoing experiments with their medium; in *The Dream Machine*, this effect is created by replacing a digital simulacrum of computer generated imagery with high resolution scans of real life objects, made of modeling clay, cardboard and found objects. I label this technique "scary matter", and it can be found both in games, animation films and pop music videos, such as Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer*. The medium of a digital game suggests it is timeless and infinitely replayable, which intensifies the effect of estrangement in the case of always-already dead 'scary matter'.

Keywords: estrangement, Uncanny, horror, indie games, animation, scary matter.

Whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine.
Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Introduction. What Is *The Dream Machine*?

The scariest moment I have ever experienced in a virtual world so far happened in an indie point-and-click game. I was locked in a crumbling

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room filled with the most traumatic memories of a nice old lady who used to live next door. There was no exit, only cosmic emptiness behind the door, and the floor was cracked open to reveal nothingness. When I accidentally stepped into the void, everything fell apart: the game froze in a fatal error. For a while, I could not understand whether it was a glitch or an intentionally designed element of the story, but my own perception of the world was already in smithereens. It took several hours with a generally "non-immersive" adventure game to scare me for real, but it felt like a far too real, unmediated experience. In the end, it appeared to be just a glitch, but the game had already made me unlearn the difference between the "normal" and the "weird". This is one of the ways in which estrangement works.

The Dream Machine is not a typical horror game in terms of the established genre. However, its unconventional visual means allow it to produce a satisfyingly frightening effect on the player. This point-and-click adventure game is developed by two Swedish animators Anders Gustafsson and Erik Zaring and consists of six chapters published from 2010 to 2017. Such a long production time is due to the technique of stop motion clay animation that was used to create the game world. Six chapters create a coherent narrative, tied together by the main characters, the place — the mysterious old house where the family had recently moved — and the shared story. The spooky house starts revealing its unsettling secrets as soon as the family moves in, so the main character sets out to save his wife and their unborn child from the evil Dream Machine. To accomplish this, he enters dreams of his neighbors, who are also victims to the machine, and solves dreadful puzzles in their unconsciousness.

Visually, the game experience is exceptionally trippy even by standards of fantastic worlds. Creators of *The Dream Machine* mention transgressive psychedelic experiences of John C. Lilly among sources of their inspiration (Klepek, 2017). Accessing one's subconsciousness in dreams, as it happens in therapy, has been intentionally used as a plot device, and the game is self-reflective about it. The supposed villain Mr. Morton, the creator of the Dream Machine, explicitly cites Freud, and the player character finds Freud's books when rummaging through Mr. Morton's office. The setting and the plot are reminiscent of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), although developers acknowledged that they were even more inspired by another film by Roman Polansky, *The Tennant* (1976) (Khaw, 2011).

However unique, *The Dream Machine* is not completely without precedent in the history of video games. In their interviews, its developers also mention an early Danish noir adventure game *Blackout* (1997) that used animated puppets and stop-motion to tell a story of madness and horror that could be replayed in different ways. In that case, production demanded a miniature model of a city with 30 locations and 60 different characters. The game was accompanied by

a novel by Michael Valeur, also the author of the script, and was praised for its storytelling techniques and artistic merit; it remained a memory and an influence for many game developers in Nordic countries (Walther, 2017).

Clay As A Technique

Clay animation remains an unusual aesthetic choice in video gaming. However, it has been used in many artistic animation films. We may find iconic examples in the acknowledged masterpieces of Soviet animation *The Clay Crow* (1981) and *Last Year's Snow Was Falling* (1983) by Aleksandr Tatarskiy. In the Western world, some influential examples can be found in the music video for the song *Sledgehammer* (1986) by Peter Gabriel, animated by revered masters Nick Park and Brothers Quay, and *Another Kind of Love* (1988), produced by the cult surrealist director and animator Jan Švankmajer. These, and other, early experimental MTV music videos have formed a tradition that inspired many experimental filmmakers and, later, game developers, who would also learn from children's films such as the production of Aardman Animations, where the aforementioned Nick Park worked.

To start from the most obvious reference, *The Dream Machine* has been routinely compared to a widely successful adventure game *The Neverhood* (1996). Another, less known but also critically acclaimed example is a mobile game *Clay Jam!* (Fat Pebble, 2012), addressed to a children's audience but enjoyed by all ages. *Clay Jam!* was an enticing experimentation with affordances of a touch screen that aimed to simulate plasticity of clay. The player would need to create a path for a ball of clay to avoid bigger monsters and incorporate smaller monsters. This unique challenge can be compared to the classical Japanese game *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) that featured a giant adhesive ball, or, in more recent times, *Giant Boulder of Death* (2013), another innovative mobile game published by none other than the animation studio Adult Swim. This visual celebration of claymotion deserved more attention than it got: a complex multi-colored world inhabited by one-of-a-kind magical creatures, all made of clay and whimsically animated. Unfortunately, the game did not succeed commercially and was discontinued.

Such experimental animation techniques have mostly been the domain of smaller, independently produced games. Mainstream video games, aimed at commercial success, most often pursue hyperrealism: they rely on the promise of "immersion" of a player in a digital world that is expected to look like a better version of reality. As Julian Stallabras writes, „...In trying to provide a palpable and unified reality in which the player operates, by linking response, vision and sound, the computer game aspires to a phantasmagoric experience of total

immersion" (Stallabrass, 1996, p. 85). Starting from earliest examples, such as *Myst* (1993) and *Doom* (1993), video games offer "transparent immediacy" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) of interaction to their players. It is expected that, in the utopian future, the game interface will become obsolete as a player's identity will be seamlessly transported into a virtual fantasy world; at the present stage, this ambition is realized through a first person point of view in the game.

Both Neverhood and Clay Jam! can be seen as 'modernist' in the same way as modernists paintings as interpreted by Greenberg: "Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted" (Greenberg, 2018). Instead of digital 'realism', such games as *Neverhood* achieve a different and often uncanny effect of surrealism by inviting us to a deliberately made-up world. While computer-generated imagery aims to create 'believable' 3D simulation ("sculptural", as the art critic Clement Greenberg would say), games that use photography and stop-motion are self-conscious about the matter of their assets. Such games accentuate material qualities of their primary ‚matter' — or, to be precise, its digital representation. This 'matter' becomes the 'scary matter' of indie horror games. Even if it feels somehow more 'real' than photorealistic models, this materiality is always a simulation: the game is played on a screen and not e.g. inside the actual doll house. Stripping down the disguise of the digital would require a disruptive event or a glitch like the one I have described in the introduction, — in fact, such 'glitch-alikes' are used for the sake of estrangement in many other games (Gualeni, 2019).

However, such close encounters with 'scary matter' do not necessarily lead to transgression and horror. Although *Neverhood* and *Clay Jam!* disrupt the medium of a video game, their message is as far from existential horror of *The Dream Machine* as possible. Most likely, creators of these games wanted to mimic child play with clay in a digital form, and the mood of these games is simply childish happiness. We could call it "cheerful art", in Theodor Adorno's words (Adorno, 1997), but without his trademark contempt. Paradoxically, the medium of clay animation can be used to express both horrifying and most joyful experiences.

The last example of the game that is very similar to T*he Dream Machine* is the independent educational game titled *Ever Yours, Vincent*, announced in 2014 by the developer Federica Orlati. This project never received funding, but it was analyzed by Christopher Totten as an example of breaking from the desired hyperrealism of major commercial video games (Totten, 2016) by accentuating "how the game itself is built" (Totten, 2017, p. 60). Judging by the demo reel, the game would follow the same aesthetic style and point-and-click mechanics as *The Dream Machine*. Even one of the game tasks — arranging pictures on the wall — would look the same as in *The Dream Machine*. Besides, *Ever*

Yours, Vincent used real letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother as storytelling devices. Its mood, however, would be total madness and not childish play: the game was planned as exploration of the troubled psyche of Van Gogh.

The Strangest Death In The History Of Literature

Let us look closely at the most sickening episode in Chapter 3 of *The Dream Machine*. We see corpses of the main character's clones, roughly cast in clay, rotting under the deck of a cruise liner that his wife is seeing in her dream. Some of them are not dead yet, and tentacles of the monstrous Dream Machine are sucking life from them. One of the clones asks the player to kill him to end his suffering. The main quest of the hero, however, is killing the Machine. Sparing a dying man who is actually the protagonist himself is only a means to that.

Why are we seeing this? What is the purpose of torturing little clay men (and probably us) with this particular form of visual violence? The answer will come from the horse's mouth, and it will be the most famous dead horse in the classical Russian literature: Leo Tolstoy's Kholstomer (Strider in English translations), analyzed by Victor Shklovski in his manifesto "Art as a Technique" (Шкловский, 2016). Shklovski explains his concept of estrangement with a similarly disturbing scene: he follows Tolstoy, as the latter describes sickness and death of an old gelding in a very detailed and detached manner. The author ends his story with a naturalistic description of what is happening to the body of the horse after death.

> "The herd returned down hill in the evening, and those on the left saw down below something red, round which dogs were busy and above which hawks and crows were flying. One of the dogs, pressing its paws against the carcass and swinging his head, with a crackling sound tore off what it had seized hold of" (Tolstoy, 2003)

According to Shklovsky, things are made strange by de-automatization of a reader's/viewer's/player's perception (Шкловский, 2016). In Shklovsky's interpretation, this dreadful scene is not intended to scare the reader, but to forcefully move him from the conventional point of view to the viewpoint of a dead horse. Shklovsky supports this statement with another observation about the same work: death of the horse's previous master, Serpukhovsky, is described by Tolstoy from the same perspective. To deem the life of this human being completely worthless, compared to his horse, Tolstoy repeats intensifyingly hideous descriptions such as „his rotten plump body" and „the rotten body infested with worms" (Tolstoy, 2003): unlike Kholstomer, Serpukhovsky did no good to anyone before or after his demise.

These are the examples that Shklovsky draws from Tolstoy to show how estrangement works, how things are made strange. However, we should be careful with generalizations of Shklovsky's theories: his examples are singular and specific to particular literary works. An unrivaled writer, Leo Tolstoy used a non-human perspective for various effects, and not always for pure estrangement. To start from, Kholstomer as a whole is a story told by horses, to other horses, also reminiscent of animal fables. Yet another much cited example of Tolstoy is the famous oak from *War and Peace*: as we are following the journey of the main characters, an old tree at the roadside steps out to share its views on life, youth and spring with them: „an aged, angry, and scornful monster among the smiling birches" (Tolstoy, 2012, p. 472). Still, the old oak does not scare us, although it is described as a very ugly, even monstrous, tree: instead, Prince Andrey sees it as an allegory of age, sad rather than horrifying.

Form Versus Construction

To distinguish meaningful estrangement and defamiliarization from seemingly similar, but un-strange and routinely automated techniques at any writers' disposal, Yuri Tynianov proposed to differentiate between expressive, poetic effects of the form and the constructive principle that makes text into a literary fact (Tynianov & Khitrova, 2019). Here I will illustrate this idea with another fragment from Tolstoy that Shklovsky leaves out, and compare it to a similar scene from *The Dream Machine.*

> "A week later only a large skull and two shoulder-blades lay behind the barn; the rest had all been taken away. In summer a peasant, collecting bones, carried away these shoulder-blades and skull and put them to use" (Tolstoy, 2003) .

In this paragraph, Tolstoy tells a story in a way that is very similar to a player' encounters with various in-game objects in a puzzle game scene. The spirit of estrangement still lingers, although to a much lesser degree — studying large bones in a pile of garbage would still make an unsettling experience out of, say, archeological context, — but this description is not gruesome, or aesthetically significant in the context of estrangement. The author does not try to use particularly expressive language, and, as a result, this scene is not as intense, even quite peaceful, in comparison to previous scenes of death and decay.

From the viewpoint of meaningful estrangement, in this scene, mentions of the skull and the shoulder blades are used constructively, not expressively. Tolstoy simply tells their story, and we wonder what use the peasant will make of them in the future without focusing too much on their morbid symbolism. Tynianov wrote: "The uniqueness

of a work of literature lies in its application of the constructive factor to the material, its „formatting“ (essentially „deformation“) of the material” (Tynianov & Khitrova, 2019). To him, a plot is a constructive element in prose, not expressive, as long as contemporary prosaic genres presuppose a plot. In the context of the whole story of Strider (Kholstomer), these pitiful remains of the horse are seen as scary by other horses, who are capable of fearing death, but the same dry bones are still useful to people, and not even scary in this context, when approached by a resourceful peasant. By using these objects, the solves his practical tasks, and the author hints at the fable-like moral of the story once again: the horse has lived a terrible but noble life, doing only good even after his death. Meanwhile, the essence of his owner‘s life was ownership - including owning what was not meant to be owned, such as beautiful things made by others, living horses and even human peasants.

In comparison, the game *The Dream Machine* also includes using hideous objects such as human bones to solve puzzles, not scare the player. These puzzles are a routine part of the game rules: in this context, players cannot emotionally afford being perpetually frightened or repulsed by this scary matter of death. Expressive estrangement is based on surprise, and it eventually wears out as we get used to death in the game world. We start using objects in the game inventory in a constructive manner, and their expressive potential gradually diminishes. After a while we stop feeling uneasy about living in an ugly clay world, turn the blind eye to fake clay gore, and do our point-and-click routine until the finale of the game, in which transgression may go too far even for a somehow desensitized gamer.

Immediacy, Photorealism And Remediation

Now it is the time to compare clay modeling and digital modeling in video games. As we have already discussed above, mainstream video games aim at “photorealism” of their computer imagery, where “digital photorealism defines reality as perfected photography” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). The logical way to achieve this effect would be to use digital photography and then enhance its realism in postproduction. Scanning real-life objects, people and even architecture landmarks has been a routine process in production of many video games, — the horror game *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (2014) can serve as a prime example of this approach (Statham, 2020). Unlike clay animation and other ‘hypermaterial’ techniques, this process, called photogrammetry, is usually aimed at ludic realism, not at transgression of this medium’s boundaries.

Such hyperrealism of video games results in the visual veneer of ‚chrome‘, as Julian Stallabras described it (Stallabrass, 1996,

p. 87), — simulation of a simulation. Shiny surface of 3D models 'sells' in-game spaceships in the same way as buyers are hypnotized by expensive cars. Paradoxically, the use of actual, deliberately imperfect, photography in place of "photorealistic" renderings destroys the magic of simulation: the game world is expected to be impeccable, even better than the real, and eventually, perceived as timeless and immortal.

Developers of *The Dream Machine* intentionally cultivated signs of 'scary matter' such as fingerprints on clay to set themselves aside from the "chrome" of big commercial game titles (Khaw, 2011). They still used the Maya software for animation (Mulrooney, 2012), but they wanted their characters to look and feel as material as possible: „we try to retain the handcrafted feel even though they're digital" (Mulrooney, 2012). As a result, instead of hyperrealism, we should talk about surrealism, to which *The Dream Machine* proudly succeeds. In place of "chrome", we see raw, organic and unruly materiality, intentionally roughened up "to make a stone more stony", as Shklovsky would say, or, in our case, to make clay more clay-ish. It is important to note that impeccable clay worlds are not impossible: in large scale production, clay animation allows for perfect geometry and smooth polish, as in Nick Park's family animation films, but in *The Dream Machine*, and especially in its scariest scenes, the artist's fingerprints are literally everywhere, and it is meant to look like this.

This allows us to assign such surrealist horror games to a particular stage of development of the video game medium — which is, a sort of 'videoludic modernism'. As we already noted, allowing the matter to 'speak for itself" has been a recurrent artistic means in European modernism at large. As Aage Hansen-Löve has demonstrated in his landmark study "Russian Formalism" (2001), the concept of estrangement by Shklovski has its roots in Italian futurism. Deautomatization of perception as a way to arrange an intimate, less mediated encounter with raw matter, including the 'matter' of language, is borrowed from Marinetti and further developed to encompass all forms of art (Ханзен-Лёве, 2017, p. 61). It was widely applied by surrealism, up to the famed Czech animator and horror filmmaker Jan Švankmajer, whose influence also can be found in *The Dream Machine*.

But does this technique allow us to finally encounter "the real Real"? Through the Bolter and Grusin's lens of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), such immediacy is, in fact, the product of an additional order of mediation. Simulated intimacy of contact with earthly matter is the result of meticulous and time-consuming production: building and lighting up environments, the process of photography itself, with its own technicalities such as depth of field, arranging single shots on the timeline in case of stop motion, rendering and processing of video clips and many smaller steps in between. In the end, developers assemble scenes into the game based on its storyboard and/or a written script, program the rules for interaction, test the result for bugs and

perform all other typical procedures of game production regardless of the medium. The original material matter remains only as a very thin illusion, which needs to be intentionally 'damaged', such as, by leaving clumsy fingerprints on it, to make it feel real again.

More generally, it remains in question whether totally unmediated experience is possible, or even endurable by a sane human being. Speaking of video games, it simply cannot be achieved, because the game is already an electronic medium. In the case of artistically meaningful games, their main goal may be to refresh perception of the world, by actively engaging with it, so we can see the world as new, surprising and unfamiliar. Making it strange and scary in the process is just one possible outcome, which was not discussed in Russian formalism specifically. Hansen-Löve highlights the category of ugliness and its defense in these new forms of art by Kandinsky (Ханзен-Лёве, 2017, p. 66), but nothing fearsome or uncanny, at least, in early Soviet modernism, which was predominantly utopian and not really engaged with surrealism. The leaders of the artistic avant-garde of the time were aiming at bringing more life, not death, into art, — unlike the fears and anxieties of pre-WWII surrealists in Western Europe.

The Psychoanalytic Horror Quest

We have discussed formal features of the game so far. In this section, I will connect this very specific formalism of *The Dream Machine* to its message — the inward journey to one's worst subconscious fears, the journey to meet the Other in a psychoanalytical sense. And, as long as we have mentioned Freud, we need to talk about the Uncanny. The Uncanny exists as a psychoanalytic category, but it also has engendered the concept of 'the uncanny valley' in psychology and human-computer interaction. The uncanny valley, based on incomplete realism, is irrelevant in our case: not even in our worst nightmares can these ugly clay people be mistaken for the real ones. However, in the case of surrealist artistic projects, the Uncanny also can be applied as an aesthetic category that operates similarly to the work of estrangement in arts.

Historically, Russian Formalism has many contact points with psychoanalysis. The term 'estrangement' entered the vocabulary of local and, very soon after that, European intellectuals, just two years before the Uncanny (1919). According to Catrin Depretto, one of the reasons why the concept of estrangement was so welcome by French academics is due to its similarity to Freud's Uncanny (‚Unheimlich') (Депретто, 2017). And even more, the very process of analyzing 'art as a technique' can be compared to the process of psychoanalysis, as another Russian poet and literary scholar Andrey Belyi wrote. From this perspective, Shklovsky's estrangement "is a marker of a specific

mode of the critique, rather than a stabilized term" (Горных, 2003, p. 73); a perspective, rather than a particular technique.

The final similarity is that the theory of estrangement and the concept of the Uncanny both grow from classical literature. Originally, Freud illustrated the work of the Uncanny with examples from another classical literary work of horror, "The *Sand-Man*" by E.T.A. Hoffmann (Freud, 2003). In short, the Uncanny can be described as the de-automatized 'Homely'. The ultimate feeling of terror sets off when close, familiar and dear things and persons are unexpectedly revealed as strange, alien and menacing (Freud, 2003). This corresponds to the work of subconsciousness: the things that were real but hidden in our subconsciousness are revealed and perceived as strangely unreal, and often horrifying. Coming back to the classical Sand-Man, — it features the robotic maiden, Olimpia, as the exemplary case of the uncanny resemblance between the living and the artificial. Such uncanny similarity between human and nonhuman that would later become known as 'the uncanny valley', but the roots of surrealist horror can go deeper than turning familiar into strange. To make matters worse, this dreadful Other is in fact a part of us, and we have to face the most 'really real' part of us, and experience the truest horror of existence in the world as we are.

Coming back to *The Dream Machine*, the game's story illustrates the concept of the Uncanny in its initial Freudian sense, at a very literal level of storytelling. To release the subconscious fear of becoming a father, the main character Victor Neff has to revisit his own, and other people's, worst nightmares, to learn what kind of a connection his own child has with a monster, and to cut this connection, if possible. The things that were hidden are revealed, and this is the essence of the game. To achieve this, we familiarize ourselves with mundane objects in the house, which later resurface in nightmarish stories in other people's dreams. Eventually, the main source of terror in the family appears to be the unborn child, bringing up the references to *Rosemary's Baby*. The player may start to wonder whether the child is the real monster of the protagonist's dreams, connected to his mother with a 'tentacle'. This question is resolved with the disturbing climax and the final separation in the last chapter of the game.

Without giving too much about the disturbing ending of the game, it is true that we can productively read *The Dream Machine* through the psychoanalytic lens — moreover, it was created specifically for this purpose. Probably, the only way to make peace with the game's traumatic ending for a player is to interpret it as a lesson in Freudism. Moreover, what makes the game such a valuable aesthetic object is how well formal estrangement and the Freudian Uncanny work together, complementing each other on different levels. Notably, as a final perfect detail, clay figurines of family members and significant people in their lives, as well as the way the player operates them in

a point-and-click game, are reminiscent of role-playing techniques in therapy and family counseling.

Conclusion. What Game Researchers Can Learn From Russian Formalism?

Even though having gained the widest appeal amongst the academic audience, the concept of estrangement was a product of its time and cultural environment. It should be seen as an experimental set of tools to conceptualize specific art forms in the times of (very) late modernism and not as an all-encompassing aesthetic theory (Adorno would be a better example of the latter). In a more general sense, according to Hansen-Löve, the perspective of estrangement becomes a constructive principle that grants fictional worlds (particularly those built at the beginning of the XX century) a special status in relation to empirical reality (Ханзен-Лёве, 2017, p. 106), following the path of artistic modernism in general. It allows new modes of interplay between form, matter and content in works of art, hands down a workable, even if imperfect, analytic apparatus to art critics, and, last but not least, suggests how artists can advance in their craft. As Yan Levchenko writes on Russian formalists, "To be a writer who knows more than other writers (knows how to write, *knows the technology* (my emphasis — A.S.) meant more than any theory to Shklovsky" (Levchenko 2014, 131-132). In the same way, this lesson in Russian Formalism may help independent game developers create better games, as they become more conscious about the expressive and disruptive potential of their medium of choice.

There is one last reason for game researchers and developers to be interested in Russian formalism. Russian formalists were interested in 'art as a technique' from the pragmatic perspective, as they wanted to create better literary works, and they did exactly that, in mainstream media as well. It was their money-bringing craft to write fiction and film scripts, and they successfully applied their theoretical tools in their work. In his act of public repentance in the face of Soviet authorities, "A Monument to the Scientific Mistake" (1930), Shklovsky disowns Russian formalism in the following words: "*The only thing left from the formal method is terminology, which everyone is using now*" (quoted from Левченко, 2014, p. 129), and calls for studying and applying the Marxist method to the fullest instead. Trying to wash himself clean from the accusations of being a formalist — which was a punishable offense in the Stalinist USSR in 1930s — Shklovski later published an educational textbook "How to Write Scripts" (1931) that is still used in education of filmmakers. Before that, he wrote and co-wrote scripts to several dozens of Soviet films, from propaganda clips to the first fiction film "The Prostitute" (1926) produced in Soviet Belarus.

Such unity of theory and practice has yet to become normalized in game research and development.

In this article, I have argued that clay animation as an artistic choice in *The Dream Machin*e was used to estrange the medium of a digital game. There are several horrifying scenes in *The Dream Machine* that involve corpses and skeletons, similar to Tolstoy's Kholstomer analyzed by Victor Shklovsky. But even before that, lifeless clay faces of the game's protagonists are frightening enough, at least, at the beginning, as they play on the horrifying duality of 'homely' and the Uncanny (Freud, 2003). I call this particular artistic effect that is achieved through estrangement of the material 'scary matter'. When the recipient comes into direct contact with the material aspect behind the form, its dark matter, it creates an especially strong and deep impression on them.

Turning clay into pixels is a deceptive trick in virtual worlds. The more effort artists put into achieving "authenticity", the more it depends on hypermediacy, a combination of many media and their reproductions in each other. Clay becomes quasi-realistic 'scary matter', firstly materially and then digitally, through many stages of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). In the interpretation of Stallabras, digital 'chrome' of spaceships and other ludic objects is sold to players as objects of their desire (Stallabrass, 1996). In *The Dream Machine*, we do not see objects of desire, we see the desire itself, and the ugly forms it may take. In this case, the aesthetics of the game are not just "a tool to enhance the impression", as in Shklovsky, but to play with it an adult Freudian game about liberation from one's worst fears.

In the end, this artistic choice can also be analyzed as a political choice. *The Dream Machine* counterposes uncanny "analog" material forms to purely "digital" representations, personalized handmade cadavers to eternal (or eternally repeating) digital simulations of capitalism. The game is not just scary — it is emotionally demanding. We are facing uncomfortable questions about death, family and intimacy (both on the narrative and on the procedural level), while the form of the game challenges our conceptions of the digital medium. The quest for answers appears to be more intense (although less pleasant) than we usually expect from products of the cultural industry in general and video games in particular.

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