

# ***The Unreal: Imaginaries of Techno-colonialism***

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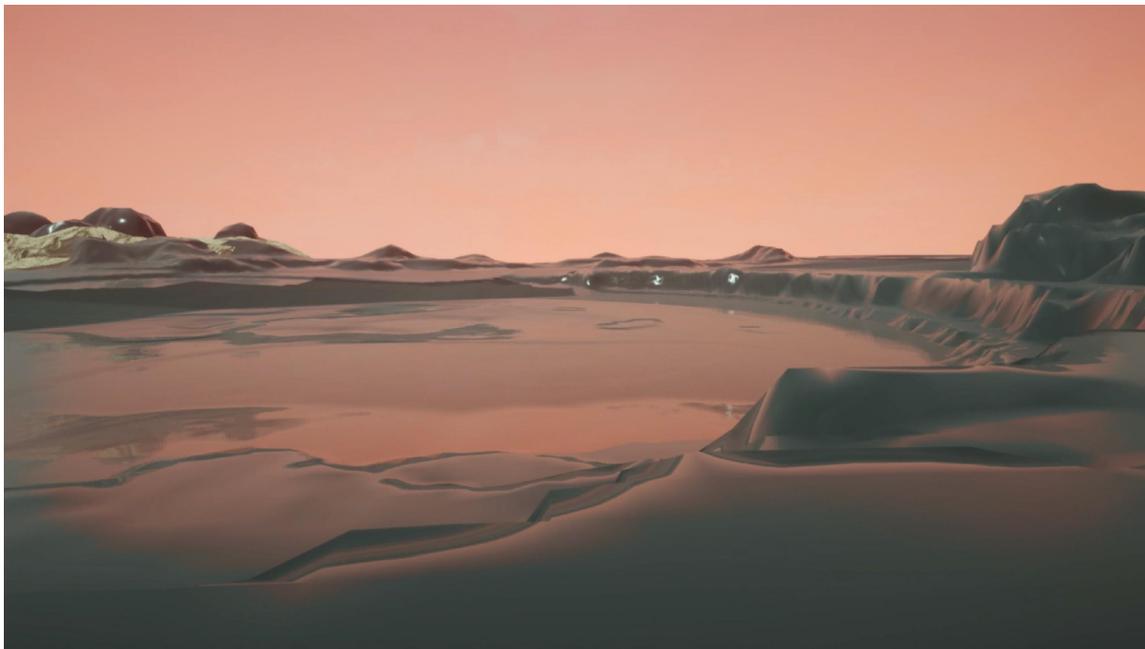


Fig. 1. Still from *The Unreal* (2019).

Keeping your body far from this landscape,

hold your mind in spatial awareness.

Let your consciousness float in this dimension and notice the infinitude of space.

Bring awareness to the scale, the expanded surface.

Just bring attention to it.

(Opening voice-over from *The Unreal*)

*The Unreal* is a machinima film (videogame recorded in real-time) set in a utopian mine landscape. The viewer is led in a first-person point-of-view across a glossy surface between icebergs and sand dunes (see fig. 1). Ambient music accompanied by a soft voice-over creates a relaxing atmosphere and seduces you into meditation while simultaneously highlighting technology's mineral origins. Our project aims to raise questions related to the contradictions of media. In a practice-based approach we have used videogame software to create an artificial world and to play with the appropriation of visual and narrative codes of techno-colonialism.

### **1. The Concepts Behind**

This practice-based study looks at the links between the materiality of the digital and techno-colonialism through the perspective of critical studies that deal with concepts such as immateriality and digital waste (Parikka; Fuller and Goffey; Gabrys; Hogan), extractivism (Crowford and Joler) and the capitalist world-ecology (Moore). Our intention here is to briefly introduce the complexities of colonialism through two different layers: the colonization of the earth and the colonization of the imaginaries and narratives created around technology.

In the film, which was launched in 2019 on Internetmoongallery.com, the viewer is guided through various resources. Thus, *The Unreal* is a virtual promised land encircled by an infinite shoreline and a transcendental pink sunset. We may draw lines to settler colonialism in what resembles an expedition towards the sublime. In this sense, *The Unreal* has been created as a representation of the techno-romantic discourses that permeates everything related to technological and media development today. We may even go as far as to say that the technology industry has colonized our minds.

Deep time resources, as the raw materials of the earth, are fundamental to the development of computer technology. With this acknowledgement, one could argue that

media-technological culture is based on the development of mining techniques and the emergence of geology as a discipline in the 18th and 19th centuries (Parikka vii-viii). However, the discourses of *immaterialization* and *detrterritorialization* of the digital reside through natural metaphors associated with the infinite: the cloud, the sky, the sea, and the space. These metaphors are part of the rhetoric of Silicon Valley's digital emancipation and cultural hegemony, and especially of its ideological propaganda inspired by their physical presence to the Pacific. A certain "oceanic" and "peaceful" sentiment has been stimulated by the technologies of the exponential and the virtually "unlimited powers" of artificial intelligence that are as endless as the horizon (Sadin 208). In *The Unreal*, the voice-over reveals how technology industries appropriate the natural world through aesthetics. On average the consumer is distracted from the actual implications behind services such as 'the Cloud' which are data warehouses in disguise, storing our not so private data, taking up more and more land with the increase of data mining on an industrial level.

Under slogans of innovation and infinity the digital market strategies have consciously ignored the physical, material and residual condition of technology. The philosopher Eric Sadin links Silicon Valley's historical roots of the "creative spirit" with digital liberalism. For Sadin, "the spirit of Silicon Valley breeds a [new?] Colonization—a silicolonization" (31). This colonization does not respond to aggressive dynamics of domination but is endowed with the universal value of progress that infiltrate our imaginaries. This type of rhetoric serves us the inevitable triumph of large tech-corporations and their ideology, coined as the "Californian Ideology." Individual freedom seemed no longer achievable through rebellion "but by abiding by their natural laws of technological progress and free market" (Barbrook and Cameron).

For media theorist Marshall McLuhan, the “translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information” may transform “the entire globe, and of the human family, [into] a single consciousness” (73). This vision represented the basis of techno-liberalism when Apple's slogan proclaimed individual freedom through its marketing campaigns. In addition, the idea of 'freedom' and 'technological optimism' was expanded with the publication of *Wired* magazine and emphasized by the so-called *visionary* founders of start-ups and the large corporations that control cyberspace today: Facebook, Amazon, and Google.

As a result, Silicon Valley, with their “patron saint” and their “prophets,” have created a disembodied cyberspace, where spirituality—influenced by the Californian New Age ideology—is united with techno-liberal politics (Sadin 106). Thus, through the dogma and the imaginaries of techno-romanticism, it is possible to ignore the materiality of technology and the manufacturing and production of the Silicon spirit. For this reason, it is urgent to highlight the words of the cultural critic T. J. Demos: “If environmental matter has historically been treated as an external thing to be used, exploited, commercialized, fetishized and colonized by humans, then what we need is a new conceptualization of our relationship with material objects and forms of life non-human” (14).

## **2. The Construction and Narration of *The Unreal***

The film was developed through two different approaches: first, through the construction of the mine, and second, through the narratives that guide the viewer through that space. First, we reflect on the material through Unreal Engine, which is the game development software we used to create the visuals. The software contains a selection of default game assets, some of which are made to match a variety of objects, such as a chair or a gun. We mainly recycled materials from this selection of assets, such as the glossy surface of our mine, which copies the

metal cover of the standard gun in Unreal Engine. In fact, when choosing a first-person point-of-view in the project settings, the software's default character is a man with a gun, as if the intention with game design was to create war scenarios. We wanted to play with conventions of game design that fetishize war through default gun-carriers and glossy materials by dressing our landscape in the same suit and thus associate the viewer with another form of violence—namely, the mineral extraction executed upon natural landscapes (see fig. 2 and 3).

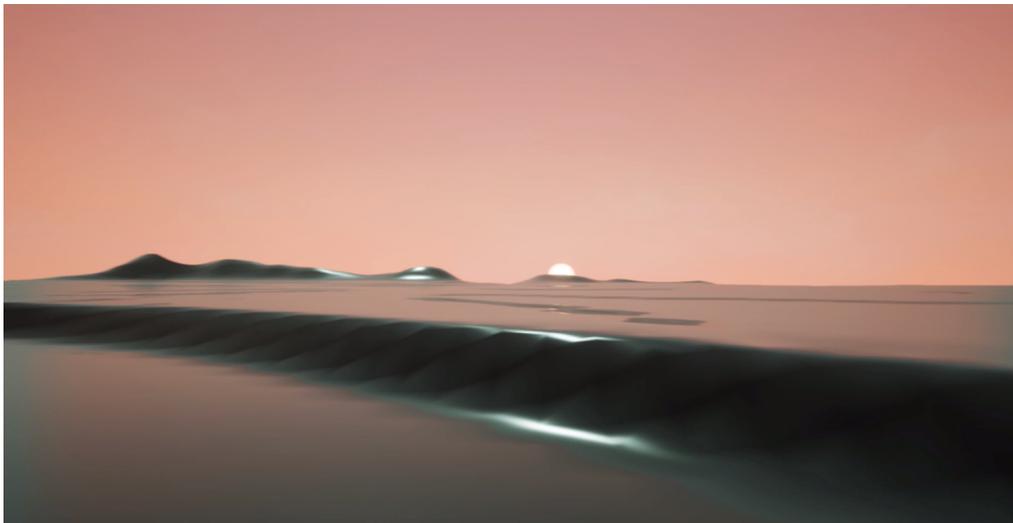


Fig. 2. Still from *The Unreal* (2019).

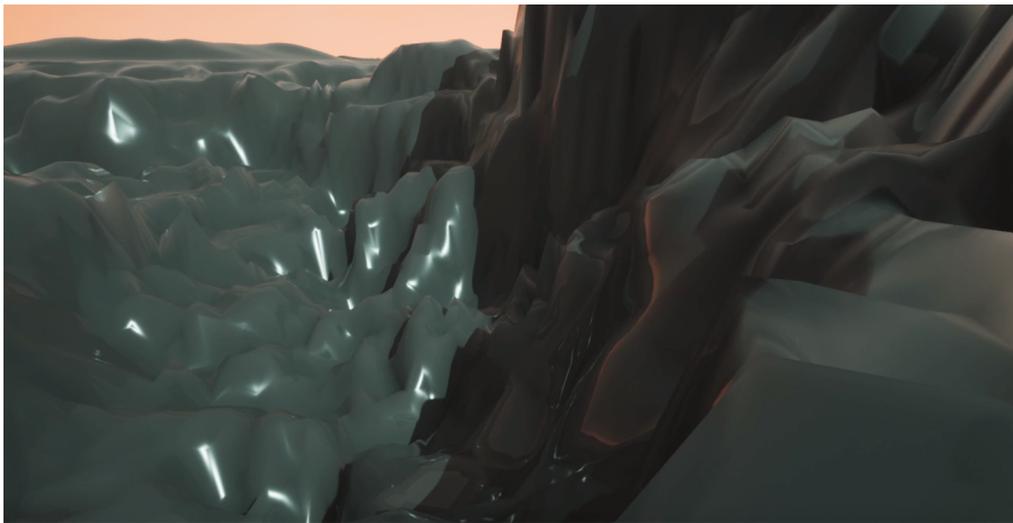


Fig. 3. Still from *The Unreal* (2019).

In other words, *The Unreal* offers a comment back onto itself as a medium embedded within a tradition of war games by recycling visual codes associated with the violence inherent in the software. The world created for our film does not host any apparent weapons, and the glossy surface instead triggers the desire of the aesthetically pleasing. Here, we may draw the line to the artist Harun Farocki's video-installation series *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–10), which reveals the paradoxical role of videogames used for training soldiers before combat and upon their return as exposure therapy for war-veterans suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. While Farocki highlights the danger of videogame's distancing-effect that enables killing with a click, he also problematizes how immersive media can blur the distinction between fiction and reality. When does the fiction become dangerous, and how can we reveal the reality behind the fiction?

The fiction of our landscape has been exaggerated through the illusory surface and the mixed minerals of ice, sand, and magma in an impossible rendering of any physical constellation on earth. As an aestheticized landscape this imaginary represents the dream of extractivism, and in the film they remain static as if these minerals could be photographically stored and continuously absorbed. While the viewer is given the impression of the limitless, the actual body of the mine reveals its limitations as the edges are visible. Limitations of the software command a confined space with borders and 'blocking volume boxes' to stop the player from falling off the edge (see fig. 5), while the possibility, for us as the creators, to expand the landscape remains. Through the contradictory landscape and the impression of a walkable experience, we have emphasized this gap between real and fictional spaces, by magnifying the desirable and deliberately masking material origins of the technology used. We

have, however, left clues of errors to this masking, such as the squared images covering the figures of supposed sand dunes (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Still from *The Unreal* (2019).

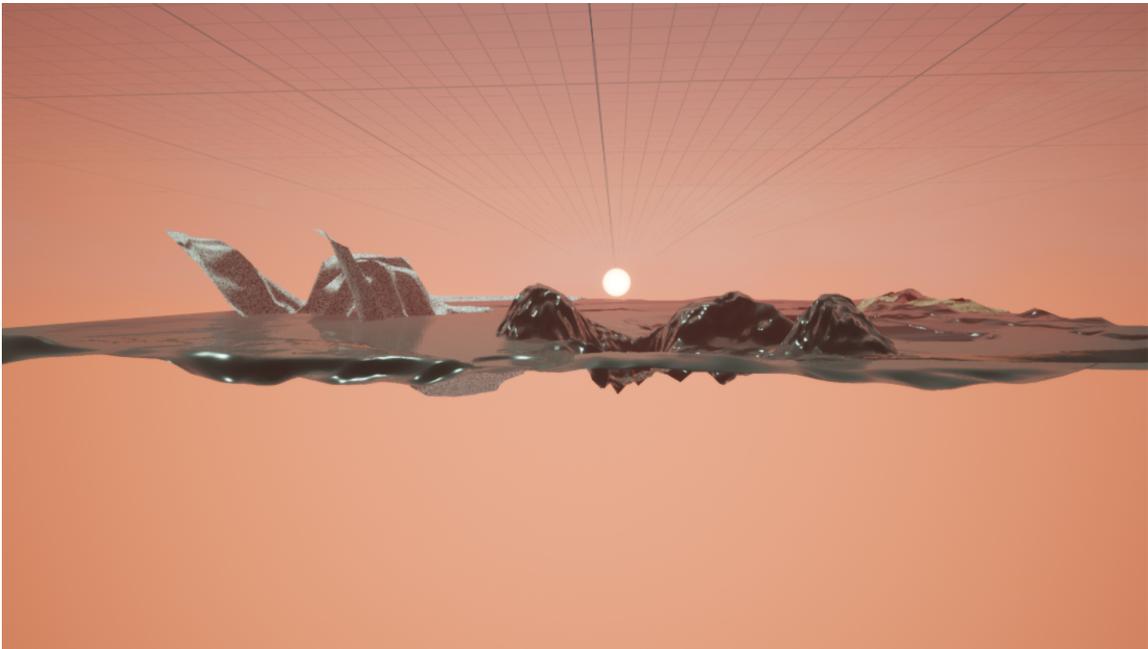


Fig. 5. Still from *The Unreal* (2019).

The second approach of *The Unreal* is inspired by guided meditation videos and videogames as ‘walking simulators’ or ‘relaxing simulators,’ which aim to get the viewer/player to relax through meditative entertainment or to unfold a concept through environmental design. Examples such as *Proteus* (2013) by Ed Key and David Kanaga or *The Night Journey* (2007-2018) by Bill Viola focus respectively on changes in nature along with the exploration of a space in first-person and an “individual’s journey towards enlightenment.” In these cases, likewise to *The Unreal*, the gradual discovery happens mainly through observation with little room for interaction. Our strategy, using the meditative experience to guide the viewer through the paradoxes of techno-colonialism, can be understood as a speculative journey. This intention has been used by the artist Fabien Léaustic in *The Skin of Ruins* (2014-2020) to simulate a continuously changing environment imitating phytoplankton and concerns how the player can alter the ecosystem.

With *The Unreal*, rather than offering practical involvement such as in a videogame, we have created a film that asks you to think twice about what you are witnessing through the emphasis on the experiential. We may argue that our methodology of creating a computer-generated landscape and a paradoxical narrative has served the purpose of over-romanticizing the audiovisual imaginaries that we are critiquing.

### **Summary**

Creating a virtual landscape with a game software has implied critically sourcing images for materials and textures and deciding on limitations of the surface. It has also involved the question of language and representation whereas the environmental atmosphere marks the experience, enhanced by the first-person point-of-view and the lack of a human body. In the denial of a human reference nor any other living presence, our landscape is situated within the

context of the post-Anthropocene of not only speculative futures but also the ongoing colonialism of both nature and minds executed by the techno-liberal rise to power.

*The Unreal* is a utopia in disguise, containing errors that put into question how to fully engage and what's left to conquer. If anything, the place is the purpose, but it remains static and silenced, similar to the colonized landscapes it depicts that have been operating under the radar of waste-logics *out of sight, out of mind*. In mediating a site, *The Unreal* has set out to appeal to capitalist strategies of desire that may seduce or reveal its layers to those awake.

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