TRANSLATING VAPORWAVE THEMES INTO MEDIA

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11139807

THE AESTHETICS OF

VAPORWAVE

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catching_vapor

Best of Nostalgia

Busts. Slants. Pink.
Am I Vaporwave yet?

P a t t e r n r e c o g n i t i o n

Photoshop the early days – a collage

It screams 80s

Sunset Drive // Tropical Vacation

TV-Show callbacks

Dreamy Photos

Make it 3D!

Idol Facsimiles

Video Game Boxes

Honorable Mentions

D:// Games/Themes

Importing Themes

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One day Vaporwave came into my life. I don't remember the exact time or circumstances, but there was a before and an after for me. I listened to the music while working in a web design agency which in hindsight fits the whole theme of Vaporwave really well. The music made me feel calm and comfortable. I liked being reminded of my early media memories. But the music also took me further towards media I have never experienced in actuality but were perfectly in line with my memories. It felt like time travel but also weirdly modern and contemporary.

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The Vaporwave scene has produced a distinct and recognizable media aesthetic that gets expressed in music, graphic design, and music videos. Part of the recognizability can be traced to certain tropes that are very prevalent in the genre. Those tropes seem random at first but with time it becomes clear that they deal with more abstract themes. And while it looks like Vaporwave is all about slowed down Pop music, nineties advertisement and Roman busts, those are not the message but the expression. The guiding themes are nostalgia, a sense of loss, and in many cases an examination of consumption culture.

In this essay I want find out what topics Vaporwave deals with, how it translates them into media, and, last but not least, I want to attempt translating some of these themes

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[1] [Ideal], originally uploaded by [Wolfenstein OS X]. (2019, June 22). Vaporwave: A Brief History [REUPLOAD] [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vTeOIw2Rng

into the medium of the Walking Simulator game. The starting point for this examination is a deep dive into the history of the genre in order to learn what the overarching themes are, and how they where iterated upon. Equipped with this knowledge, I want to take a look at the album art as it is the framing device that takes the listener into the music. I will explore how the themes are translated into visual motives, and if there are recognizable patterns. Equipped with this knowledge, it will be possible to translate the ideas into another medium. The medium of choice will be the Walking Simulator Game, or a virtual interactive exhibition if you will. I will show what the narrative symbols in this kind of game are, and explore the themes in several examples.

catching_vapor

Vaporwave is hard to grasp as the genre is quite diverse, but the unifying factor is the feeling of nostalgia it evokes. It developed over its ten year long existence, and brought with it many iterations and changes that where possible due to its easy access (sample based appropriation) and wide range of possible applications. In essence, Vaporwave is a music and art movement that originated around 2010 on the internet. The works often incorporate material from the eighties and nineties, in some cases stretching about ten years back or beyond. The music as well as the graphic outcomes cite the pop culture, technology, and advertisement of these days and try to evoke a memory or dream based response in the listener.

Staples of the genre are eighties and nineties subculture, glitch art, early digital graphic design, roman busts, tropical landscapes, Japanese culture, redistribution, eighties Elevator Music, Funk, New Age and Smooth Jazz. [1] Citing is in many cases an understatement as a lot of the (especially earlier) outcomes of this genre are blatant copies of existing audio and visual content of that time, chopped up and dragged out.

The reason why these particular decades are so prevalent in the genre, has probably to do with the age of the creators and contributors as well as the general emerging trend of eighties / nineties nostalgia, many growing up during that time, and tapping into their childhood memories of consumption culture. This form of reflection results in this peculiar mix of nostalgia and mockery that runs through a lot of Vaporwave works. It even manifests in the name of the genre. Vaporwave is a made-up word that sounds similar to the word ‹vaporware›—a piece of hard- or software that was publicly announced but never released. The ending ‹wave› is a typical music genre ending—like in ‹New Wave› or the predecessor ‹Chillwave›. But there is also a second notion to this neologism. Adam Harper states in his think piece ‹How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed by the Internet› that the name has a second etymology or layer of meaning. He connects Marx's concept ‹waves of vapor› to the planned obsolesce of consumer products: «All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of

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[2] [Esquire]. (2016, August 18). How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed by the Internet [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a47793/what-happened-to-vaporwave/

ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.» [2]

I will come back to the many implications, readings and interpretations of Vaporwave at a later point. For now, I want to focus on the history of the music genre to lay a foundation on which to expand.

B *Best of Nostalgia*

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S H O P

Greatest Hits

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[3] Gooding, S. (2019, September 4). Inside 100% ElectroniCON, the world's first vaporwave festival [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://www.thefader.com/2019/09/04/vaporwave-festival-100-electronicon-scene-report [4] [mxdroom]. Eccogems [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://farsidevirtual.net/2020/01/06/eccogems»

Vaporwave is a phenomenon that has developed exclusively online. This means there were no live performances apart from 2019s first and so far only Vaporwave festival [3]) and the whole distribution was handled online. There were, however, physical artifacts in form of vinyl, mini-discs and cassettes, released only in small runs.

Vaporwave has its roots in the ‹Hypnagogic pop› and ‹Chillwave› which in turn draw from the ‹Plunderphonics› approach, appropriating existing music through means of sampling. As such, it comes as no surprise that the pioneers of Vaporwave were active artists in these scenes.

The album, which is considered the progenitor, and which kick-started the genre as a whole, is Daniel Lopatin's 2010 released ‹Chuck Persons's Eccojams Vol. 1›. Daniel Lopatin was at that time already an accomplished music producer in the experimental electronic music scene. Eccojams was a side project he published under this one time pseudonym ‹Chuck Person›. It featured well known Eighties Pop-songs like Toto's ‹Africa›, ‹Only Over You› by Fleetwood Mac, ‹Morphine› by Michael Jackson, or Chris de Burgh's ‹The Lady in Red›. The songs where slowed down, chopped up and drenched in reverb. In giving them this treatment, they gain an uncanny, haunting quality that was not in the original songs, but works only because the songs are known. As Sam L. Barker wrote in his blog: «Eccojams is not what I'd describe as a crate-diving album. It's not trying to impress you with the obscurity of its samples— it's aiming directly for your musical memories.» [4] The songs were accompanied by several music videos that used

similar techniques, achieving an overall impression that could be called dreamlike memories, just as your memories are fragmented and often only remember «the good bits». If you hear a song in your head for example, you most likely don't hear the whole song—because that is something that requires a lot of practice—but only parts of it which your brain repeats over and over. The same could be said about visual memories: If you remember advertisement from years ago, you are often not able to remember the whole clip—you remember a feeling that you connect to that video or just a fragment of the whole clip. Let me use small anecdote to illustrate this: I remember an advertisement for the champagne brand ‹Deinhard› that was aired around 1994 in German television. In the video, a woman walks down a cobble stone street in a city. She is alone and walks determinedly, the atmosphere being tense and even a little dangerous. At the height of tension, the woman stops in the middle of a courtyard, and shouts: «Wo ist der Deinhard?». After another moment of tension, in which her call echos through the surrounding apartments, a crowd of people joins her down in the courtyard in order to celebrate and clink glasses of champagne. I don't remember any particular details of that clip. When I try to picture the scene I only see snippets, and the movie in my head fills out the blank spaces by «looping» the fragments. I, however, remember very vividly this feeling of tension and absurdity at the woman shouting this—to me as a child—nonsensical phrase. This is how I remember the advertisement. In a way, it is grotesque that I have a fond memory of a piece of

[5]   [sunsetcorp]. (2009, Juli 19). angel [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN0czUMRMU8
[6]   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFunvF0mDw   [7]   [opnamqthrowaway]. (2017, August 15). I am musician
Oneohtrix Point Never, currently importing SysEx files into FM8 - AMA [Comment]. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.
com/r/indieheads/comments/6twk48/i_am_musician_oneohtrix_point_never_currently

consumerism—that a throwaway advertisement makes me feel nostalgic. Upon rewatching the clip I was dumbfounded to see that the it was completely different from my memory: While the scene was playing in a courtyard at night, the actual tension came from the woman walking up to a drum set and playing on it. This goes to show how fragmentary and incomplete especially our childhood memories are.

tisement in the beginning, at the end it is obvious that the promises in this video cannot be trusted and are broken.

The idea of looping memories can be seen in the video ‹nobody here› [6]. Chris de Burgh is repeating «nobody here» over and over while footage of an arcade cabinet game named ‹Laser Grand Prix› is shown. In the video you can see a kind of rainbow space road in the foreground

Retro-Futurism in sunsetcorp's ‹angel›

Stuttering Scene in sunsetcorp's ‹angel›

Rainbow road in sunsetcorp's ‹nobody here›

Precisely these ideas are at the core of Lopatin's Eccojams. Understanding this allows you to see the album as more than a bunch of seemingly incompetent remixes. His critical stance regarding consumption can be seen in his video ‹angel› that accompanied Eccojams [5] The clip shows some loosely connected advertisement snippets of VHS and cassette players that are full to the brim with the future optimism of the eighties as well as some stuttering images of a smiling Japanese model carrying a portable radio in the woods. While the clips look just like some old adver-

while there is a cityscape with skyscrapers at night in the background. All of this gives an ethereal feeling that is at the same time unnerving and soothing, a sentiment shared by fans of this album: «When I listen to your music, I am overwhelmed with a deep, unplaceable sense of nostalgia and loneliness. The tones and melodies of your synth work transcend the eras they emulate. You capture feelings better than any artist I know.» [7]

It is also no coincidence that so many people latched on to the ideas presented in Eccojams. Lopatin stated in an

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Reddit AMA (ask me anything) that «[…] the entire point of Eccojams was that it was a DIY practice that didn't involve any specialized music tech knowledge and for me it was a direct way of dealing with audio in a mutable, philosophical way that had very little to do with music and everything to do with FEELINGS and im happy to see that it actually turned out to be true, that people make the stuff and find connection and meaning through that PRACTICE is all I could ever hope for. It's folk music now.» [8]

Another undercurrent already present in this proto-Vaporwave record is the critical stance towards late stage capitalism and consumerism. This stance could also be described as typical for the millennial generation (loosely defined as young adults born between the eighties and nineties). This generation is often characterized by an ambivalent irony towards the state of the world, on the one hand reveling in consumerism, on the other hand stating «I'm only being ironic.» The attitude in the videos and songs translated into a conversation could sound like this: «Look at all these shallow promises corporations make. It's pretty bad, right?»—«Yeah, but I kinda like it anyway …» In a similar vein, when Daniel Lopatin posted the videos on YouTube he used the channel name ‹sunsetcorp› [9]. I think that name expresses this ambivalence quite nicely.

Another thing that is already present in this release and will continue to haunt the genre as a whole, is the refusal to name the sources he picked from—he neither states the songs' names nor where the images he used originate from.

In October of 2011, James Ferraro released his concept album ‹Far Side Virtual›. The songs on the album where created as a set of ringtones. They resemble cheaply produced corporate music, the kind of music you can hear in a business lobby or on the phone while waiting in an on-hold queue. In comparison to Eccojams the low fidelity is gone, replaced by high definition but low depth midi instrumentation. The album is compressed of original compositions intertwined with speech and music samples. Listening to the album creates evokes a sense of hauntedness. While Eccojams makes you feel weirdly nostalgic, the familiarity Far Side Virtual confronts you with discomfort: You know these kind of sounds, but while the contexts in which you encounter them are commonplace, they are also undesirable. It is music for «non-places», places of transition. When Ferraro was asked about the meaning of the album's title, he explained: «Far Side Virtual mainly designates a space in society, or a mode of behaving. All of these things operating in synchronicity: like ringtones, flat-screens, theater, cuisine, fashion, sushi. I don't want to call it ‹virtual reality›, so I call it Far Side Virtual. If you really want to understand Far Side, first off, listen to Claude Debussy, and secondly, go into a frozen yogurt shop. Afterwards, go into an Apple store and just fool around, hang out in there. Afterwards, go to Starbucks and get a gift card. They have a book there on the history of Starbucks— buy this book and go home. If you do all these things you'll understand what Far Side Virtual is— because people kind of live in it already.» [10] To sum up, ‹Far Side Virtual› introduced a

[11] Sonnenberg, J. (2017, March 20). Identifying Conceptual Marxism in Postmodern Electronic Music [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/context/first-year-writing-seminar/waves-of-vapor

[12] Sonnenberg, 2017   [13] Sonnenberg, 2017   [14] [Esquire]. (2016, August 18). How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed by the Internet [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a47793/what-happened-to-vaporwave

compositional aspect to the genre as well as a more corporate and contemporary perspective.

Only two months later, Ramona Andra Xavier, alias Vektroid, alias Macintosh Plus, released the quintessential Vaporwave record フローラルの専門店 (Floral Shoppe). The album art and especially the track ‹リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー› (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing) are widely regarded synonymous with the Vaporwave style. Musically, it combines Eccojams slowed down timbre with Far Side Virtual's artificial high definition instrumentation. Visually, it is the benchmark of the Vaporwave aesthetic: Roman busts, grids, low resolution cheesy pictures, pink colors, callbacks to product packaging and early photoshop collages. Sam L. Barker expresses Floral Shoppe's impact like this: «Eccojams may have written the blueprint, Birth of a New Day might have perfected it, but Floral Shoppe codified it. It took its forbear's sketches and painted pictures. Gave rough ideas form and substance. Turning the genre's grimy early stylings into something fun, that could be shared, spread, and memed.» [11] But the album is not just a silly piece with seemingly out of context image mash-ups. It is a profound analysis of the commodification through capitalism. Whereas the bust of Helios could represent antique art and concepts of anthropomorphized deities, it loses these fixed meanings and gains new ones through the context wherein it is presented. [12] In contextualizing Helios with the pre-nine-elven New York skyline, the checkerboard and the ‹Compact Disc› logo, Xavier unravels the mechanics behind commodification,

Album Cover for Macintosh Plus's ‹Floral Shoppe›

the same way capitalism decontextualizes familiar concepts, thereby making them unreal. This leaves the treated subject matter in a state where it can't «evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery.» [13] This concept can also be seen at work in the many sunset pictures of various Vaporwave albums. Those sunsets either evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing or they are met with a frowning look of distain, but never are they taken seriously as a representation of reality.

Following the blueprint that was laid out by Floral Shoppe, a somewhat anonymous mass latched on to the genre. Regarding this development, the easy access and distribution of the still rather obscure genre show a lot of similarities with the Punk movement. [14] You need neither musical knowledge nor expensive hard- / software. On top, the genre comes with an already built-in interpretation as it is deliberately anti-capitalist and open-source in the sense that most of the albums are distributed without a mandatory price tag through platforms like bandcamp.com and soundcloud.com.

In 2012, Robin Burnett released multiple albums under the pseudonym ‹INTERNET CLUB› like ‹Vanishing

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[15] [Ideal], originally uploaded by [Wolfenstein OS X]. (2019, June 22). Vaporwave: A Brief History [REUPLOAD] [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yTeOlw2Rng [16] [Ideal], originally uploaded by [Wolfenstein OS X]. (2019, June 22). Vaporwave: A Brief History [REUPLOAD][Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yTeOlw2Rng

Vision› or ‹Modern Business Collection› in which he emulated the aesthetic of Vaporwave, but turned the anti-capitalist notion on its head. [15] Instead of rejecting and mocking advertisement promises, he contextualizes them in a celebratory way. Gone are the chopped up and slowed down songs and videos. What remains, are the loops from imaginary better times.

This, in turn, inspired many imitators and essentially lead to a redistribution of old advertisement, cheaply edited together and of low production quality. The development lacked the subversive approach of its forebears and started to give the genre a bad reputation. It was also the time when the phrase «Vaporwave is dead» was used more and more often members of the scene, a sentiment that wasn't entirely unreasonable considering the death of similar genres. [16]

At this point Vaporwave was confronted with the challenge many new genres face: How to grow past the initial ideas while still staying true to the style.

Artists that took on this challenge were for example ‹Skeleton›, ‹Blank Banshee›, ‹Infinity Frequency› or ‹Eco Virtual›, each adding their own twist on the Vaporwave formula. Skeleton's 2010 album drops the reference to consumption culture and focuses entirely on the feeling of uneasiness that Vaporwave can instill. The songs are slowed down even more to point of being unrecognizable. The droning sounds does not only evoke a sense of unrest but borders on horror—something that is also referenced in the imagery used for the album art and accompanying videos.

Blank Banshee approaches Vaporwave from a remix angle. In his 2012 album ‹Blank Banshee 0› he combines familiar nostalgic sound snippets (like the windows start-up jingle) with Trap beats. The sensation is more modern, but still exhibits the nostalgia and occasional uneasiness of classic Vaporwave.

The Japanese artist Infinity Frequencies comes at Vaporwave from a more conceptual angle: The ‹Computer› album trilogy takes the sense of haunting and technological superficiality, and translates it into a narrative about the death cycle of a computer: ‹Computer Death›, ‹Computer Decay› and ‹Computer Afterlife›. The cycle was released between 2013 and 2014. The music is highly repetitive and sterile, yet worn out and sad.

Eco Virtual with their album series ‹ATMO-SPHERES 第1–4› creates the soundtrack for an imaginary weather forecast channel. The identity of the artist is unknown, which is a deliberate decision on their part. While the aesthetic of the channel leans towards the positive and lighthearted, it is still tapping into the worn out stylistic devices.

The next step in conceptual Vaporwave music came by the artist ‹Hong Kong Express›. Their 2014 album ‹浪漫的夢想› (Romantic Dream) imagines an atmospheric night journey through Hong Kong that followes two protagonists and deals with the themes of romance and loneliness. Deliberately cinematic in style and scope, the artist is able to maintain a distinct Vaporwave-feel, making use of slowed down samples, reverb and lyric snippets while at the same time achieving sonic cohesiveness. They stated in

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[17] https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/09/dream-catalogue-interview [18] [aether09]. Future funk is a good genre for dancing alone in your room Favorite track: Horsey (feat. Sarah Bonito). [Album Review]. Retrieved from https://neoncityrecords.bandcamp.com/album/a-million-miles-away [19] As an example, in this music video to Saint Pepsi's song Cherry Pepsi you see the advertisement snippets used similar in choice as you would expect within the Vaporwave canon, but the context is infectiously positive: [David Dean Burkhart]. (2013, June 13). SAINT PEPSI - Cherry Pepsi [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrR1TGQY20Y [20] In Germany they often kept the instrumentals and melody intact and only rerecorded vocals in German—a good example is Anri's ›Cat's Eye‹

an interview that «There's nothing about consumerism or capitalism in these albums, but I would like to think they are still very much vaporwave in effect, still.» [17] A unique feature of their records is that they come with short prosaic description that introduce the listener to the stories, the different stages being told through the song titles.

Later, Hong Kong Express founded the label ‹Dream Catalogue› and build their discography around acoustic storytelling in the aesthetic of Vaporwave with stories revolving around melancholy and escapism.

The next iteration on the Vaporwave formula was created by the artist Joel Cachero under the pseudonym ‹GOLDEN LIVING ROOM› with his album ‹WELCOME HOME›. The sound is recognizably vaporwavey, with distinct the difference that it was created not by sampling existing material but by recording and processing real instruments.

From that point onwards, Vaporwave experienced a diversification, with the development of several sub-genres that each embraced parts of the Vaporwave aesthetic. This branching off should not be understood a successive process but as parallel developments. Even though old school Vaporwave approaches like simply slowing down Pop songs were becoming somewhat of an old trick, by no means did these kind of releases suddenly stop—in fact, songs in all the mentioned above and later mentioned styles are released up to this day.

The most successful Vaporwave branch-off with regard to popularity is Future Funk. The genre can be defined by its reuse of eighties Pop and Funk songs that are sped up and treated with pounding disco beats, flange- and panning-effects. The lethargy, introspection, and somberness of a typical Vaporwave song can not be found here. Its connection to the genre lies in its fascination with (Japanese) eighties / nineties Pop culture and the sense of nostalgia.

Future Funk is celebratory in nature. Bandcamp user aether09 expresses it well when writing »Future funk is a good genre for dancing alone in your room.» [18] Only the best of those times is in focus, which can also be seen in the song structure: More often than not, only the chorus of a song is used and repeated. [19] The album art often

SAINT PEPSI's ›Hit Vibes

features girls from eighties to nineties Anime movies and TV shows. This is also fitting in so far as a lot (but not all) of the songs featured in these remixes originate from the

マクロスMACROSS 82-99's ‹A Million Miles Away›

genre ‹City Pop› which was popular during the bubble era in Japan. It was highly optimistic, well produced, urban music. The resonance and nostalgia western audiences hold for City Pop in recent years, is slightly peculiar since most of these artists' original music was never published outside of Japan. But since the artists, due to their popularity, were often invited to contribute music for Anime movies and TV-shows, which were in turn aired later in western television [20], many Millennials have child-

[21]   [Ideal], originally uploaded by [Wolfenstein OS X]. (2019, June 22). Vaporwave: A Brief History [REUPLOAD] [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yTeOlw2Rng   [22]   [DARKPYRAMID]. (2014, August 16). An explanation of 'FLORAL SHOPPE 2' [Blog Post]. Retrieved from http://archive.is/To6gW   [23]   [DARKPYRAMID]. (2014, August 16). An explanation of 'FLORAL SHOPPE 2' [Blog Post]. Retrieved from http://archive.is/To6gW

hood memories of songs in the style of City Pop—hence the nostalgia. As the genre is not concerned with deconstructing memories, the typical glitches and digital artifacts are not to be found here. Notable artists in this flavor of Vaporwave are ‹Saint Pepsi›, ‹Yung Bae› and ‹Macross 82-99›.

The energetic opposite of Future Funk is Mall Soft. [21] Music in this style is supposed to sound like field recordings taken at a mall during the eighties and nineties. Musically, it features songs from the Smoothjazz genre that are drenched in reverb and processed to sound like they are playing through the tiny speakers often found in shopping plazas. It is not uncommon to have actual field recordings of people talking, walking, and shopping in the mix. The genre solidified around 2013. It didn't start with this soundscape concept in mind—rather, the idea came from listeners' associations with locations where they would expect Elevator Music. After the christening of this sub-genre, the corresponding visual style was not hard to come up with: Pictures of shopping malls in their glory days, often without people in the frame. Probably the best know album of this branch-off is ‹猫 シ Corp.›'s ‹Palm Mall›. With Mall Soft, the genre returned the idea of a critical approach towards consumerism.

In 2014 Dream Catalogue released an album by ‹DARKPYRAMID› that caused a major backlash in the community. The album was named ‹Floral Shoppe 2› in direct reference to the most famous Vaporwave album. The songs where barely cohesive—a jumbled and dragged out mess. Dream Catalogue was by then already know to publish highly conceptual and narrative works, but this seemingly amateurish piece was considered way out of line. But ‹Floral Shoppe 2› was bad by design, and was made to upset the Vaporwave community. DARKPYRAMID created the album as a social experiment. Originally, the artist found himself wondering what brings people to listen to Vaporwave. Is it the music or is it the aesthetically pleasing presentation? Would people even listen to something if it is not well presented? He composed the album with the goal in mind to create «[…] the most unlistenable and challenging music possible using something resembling vaporwave techniques […].» [22] The artist commented on their experiment with an explanation / apology letter on the Dream Catalogue Forums. With regard to the question, if anything new musically can be created anymore, they concluded that the only thing new about music is the presentation. They would call this development ‹Post-Music›, a musical evolution present in the Vaporwave movement: «What is innovative now is Vaporwave. Because of its presentation, the music becomes more than just a song and instead something larger than that – having a cinematic effect, if you will.» [23]

Dream Catalogue, by now a major player in the innovation of the genre, released another album in 2014 that marked a leap forward. ‹2 8 1 4› was a collaborative project between ‹Hong Kong Express› and ‹t e l e p a t h テレパシー能力者›. The first release under this new banner, the self titled album ‹2814›, was an acoustic journey through a cyberpunk landscape, sombre and intimate.

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[24] [Sunbleach]. (2016, August 13). 2 8 1 4 − 新しい日の誕生 [Blog Post]. Retrieved from http://sunbleach.net/2016/08/13/2814-birth-of-a-new-day [25] Vaporwave still gets press coverage as can be seen in these articles: https://daily.bandcamp.com/scene-report/new-zealand-vaporwave-list?utm_source=footer https://daily.bandcamp.com/the-merch-table/merch-table-tiger-blood-tapes-burner-phone?from=hp https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/yung-bae-bae-5-feature?from=hp [26] Thomas, R. (2014, September 8). Interview: Dream Catalogue's Hong Kong Express on Vaporwave's Past, Present, and Future [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/09/dream-catalogue-interview

While the first record did not gain much traction, the next release ‹新しい日の誕生› (Birth of a new Day) was met with widespread critical acclaim, even to the point of being called the best Vaporwave album of all time, taking Floral Shoppe's place. [24] The album contains original composed music, atmospheric reverb, tape delay, and occasional background announcements not uncommon for subway train stations. It reminds you of Blade Runner but with a more futuristic vibe than the original eighties soundtrack allows for. In compari-
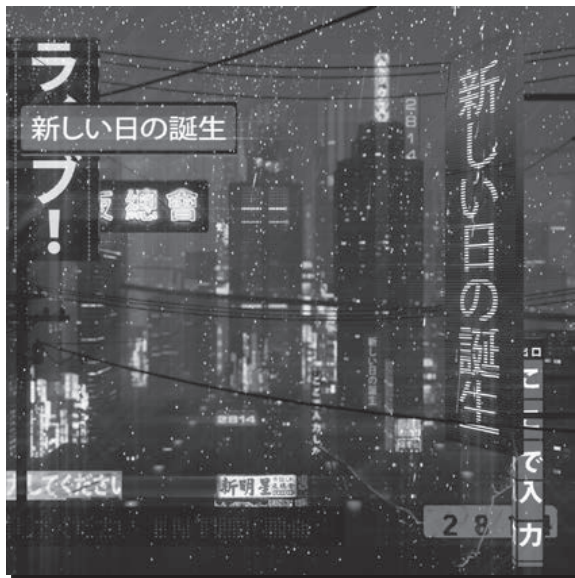
‹新しい日の誕生› by 2 8 1 4

son, the music sounds more dense than the at times isolated Blade Runner Synths do. Over the years, Dream Catalogue would try to distance itself from the tag Vaporwave, preferring the terms ‹Vapour› or ‹Dreampunk›.

Looking at the history of Vaporwave, I find the range of ideas derived from the concepts of 2010's Eccojams simply astounding. The stylistic developments explored here are by far not the end point of the Vaporwave genre. New albums are released to the day, many

in the already established styles. Still, you often come across records that are a world away from the original style. Since the genre has become a form of expression, it seems that everything has already been said—but not by everyone. The genre did not stop developing in the middle of the 2010's, and there are still new ideas and twists on the existing formulas being introduced into the genre. [25] Hong Kong Express succeeds in defining what glues all these different artistic works together when they say «I feel what links everything in the genre together is the sense of creating a dream-like or cinematic quality with their music, projecting a vivid image into the listener's mind. For some, that may be simple nostalgia for a past era. For others it is more heavily conceptual or evocative of a certain mood, and that is when it gets interesting for me.» [26]

C Busts. Slants. Pink. Am I Vaporwave yet?

The Vaporwave visuals are closely connected to the music, not only with regard to the metaphorical content but also to the way of production. At first glance, creating Vaporwave art only requires you to slap an image of a roman bust next to some Google-translator Japanese text; add some purple or turquoise for good measure, and you're good to go. While this satirical characterization is not entirely wrong, there are far more intricacies to the aesthetic than it suggests. Before featuring some possible styles, I would like to introduce some of the tropes and elements and how they fit into the overarching world of Vaporwave.

While Vaporwave can be read as a clever critique of late stage capitalism, another valid reading is that it is just a meme—a form of in-joke that is not to be taken serious. And since Vaporwave art has a rather low entry barrier—just recycling commercial art from a bygone era (there are even web tools that help you mix and mash pictures to recreate this style), many people joined in not always grasping the symbolical depth which some of the pieces hold. Moreover, the attitude in which artists shamelessly appropriate licensed music and advertisements bears a subversive notion. In a way, Vaporwave tries to use the tactics of consumerism against consumerism. Just as the fashion industry appropriates anti-capitalist subcultures like Punk for a sellable aesthetic devoid of the initial ideas behind it, Vaporwave takes the aesthetic of advertisement and appropriates it with a similar attitude.

One of the staples in Vaporwave art is the integration of Japanese Typography. Vaporwave is an internation-

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Busts. Slants. Pink. Am I Vaporwave yet?

al genre. Although many of the early contributors came from North America and Canada, people from all over the world latched on to the style. Why Japanese text then? As a disclaimer: Japanese is not the only typographic system that is used, there is e.g. Arabic, Korean, or Slavic type as well. Still, the use of Japanese is far more common. If it is not used in the album art, it can be found in the song titles. The reason for this can probably be traced back to the general fascination among the Vaporwave scene with Japan. From the perspective of young adults growing up in the western world, Japanese media—with Anime airing in the afternoon or late night programs—often played a significant role in their formative years, and left them with a lingering fascination for this country. Recreating this sense of mystery when making Vaporwave art is probably part of the intrigue, even when they are not actually capable of reading or writing Japanese. The phrases used are rather non-sensical on probably translated by an online translation tool. The Japanese writing also makes the scene less accessible to outsiders, an aspect which shouldn't be underestimated as this scene is also a space to revel in memories (real and fake ones).

Sticking to the topic of typography, there are some tendencies to be noticed. As Vaporwave is all about remembering eighties and nineties consumerism and Pop culture, we can see these mimicked in the usage of type as well. There is a tendency to use italic fonts with a condensed weight. Serif Fonts are used as well as Sans Serif. The same can be said about the Japanese Type: You can find Min-

cho and Gothic. Since typographic experimentation can be found all over the track titles and forum entries with unicase letters and extra wide spacing, I was surprised to not see these tropes expressed on album covers that often. I was also hoping to find some of the expressive layout experiments à la Neville Brody or Swiss Punk but it seems the focus is more on the popular consumerism design aesthetic of that time and on the Vinyl covers of the City Pop genre. A noticeable amount of album art even avoids type all together.

The color schemes used on the covers often revolve around neon: One comes across much pink, turquoise or purple. Considering that these colors are hard to recreate in small number print runs, it goes to show that Vaporwave is first and foremost an online phenomenon. That the analog artifacts can't replicate this vividness, probably adds to the nostalgic charm. It could even be argued that it symbolizes the existing gap between the memorized past and the somewhat dimmer looking present. The reason why these colors are so prevalent can again be traced back to the retro aesthetic. With advancements in color printing and the prevalence of neon lights in the eighties, these hues became characteristic for this era.

When looking at the contexts in which those colors are used, the neon grid comes up again and again. Usually, the pink grid is floating in an otherwise dark empty space, aligned towards the vanishing point on the center of the horizon. From time to time, there is a stylized sun or digital mountain range at the edge of the horizon. The neon grid
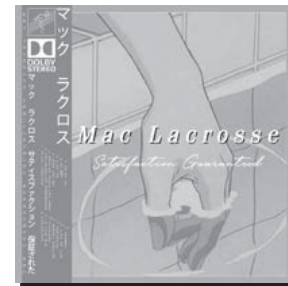
‹Satisfaction Guaranteed› by Mac Lacrosse

‹computer imagina› by b o d y l i n e
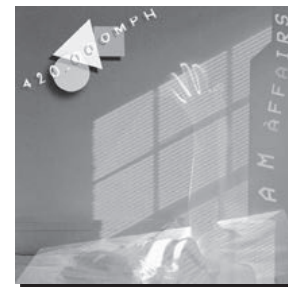
‹420,000MPH› by AM ÀFFAIRS

[27] McKenna, R. (2017, February 16). Vanishing Point: How the Light Grid Defined 1980s Futurism [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://wearethemutants.com/2017/02/16/vanishing-point-how-the-light-grid-defined-1980s-futurism
[28] McKenna, R. (2017, February 16). Vanishing Point: How the Light Grid Defined 1980s Futurism [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://wearethemutants.com/2017/02/16/vanishing-point-how-the-light-grid-defined-1980s-futurism

is a recurring motive in games, movies and graphic design of the eighties. It vaguely represents future visions and the digital space. Despite its near omnipresence in eighties nostalgia, it was not as prevalent in the actual era. Rather, it was—even back then—a retro-future aesthetic that was popular only among a small circle of sci-fi aficionados and well situated computer enthusiasts. [27] As Richard McKenna describes it in his 2017 article ‹Vanishing Point: How the Light Grid Defined 1980s Futurism›: «The grid is a dream dimension that exists outside of time and yet which, for a small moment in the latter half of the 20th century, seemed eminently realizable.» [28]

Since resampling of old media is such a staple in Vaporwave, a look at the kind of images used in Vaporwave art is only appropriate. There is a variety of sampled images used on album covers, ranging from screenshots of movies or TV-series, to scans of old magazine photographs or advertisements, and even some early stock photos (for the cold digital feeling). What is visible in all of them, is the lower resolution or analog artifacts like film grain or video static noise. Those are so essential to transporting the sense of nostalgia that a noticeable amount of images is post-processed digitally to add these statics and glitches. Some examples, which I find particularly interesting for their reflections of personal nostalgia, use images from digital compact cameras from the early 2000s. Despite many millennials lacking first hand experience with film cameras, those digital compact cameras are something that respresents a widespread consumer product of their own youth.

Another aesthetic prevalent trope is the use of early photoshop or MS Paint effects and, to an extend, the early flash art found in online forums at the beginning of the new millennium. Examples of this style are hard drop shadows, border effects that create an illusion of a three-dimensional contour, randomly placed cutout objects, or paint brush doodles. Those tropes can be accumulated into a wild collage, or just be integrated into clean designs. As with many of the tropes present in Vaporwave, the idea is to evoke a sense of nostalgia, but also to mock these outdated ideas of future and consumption. Many covers also frame their key image, sometimes with said drop shadows or contours other times with marble textures. Framing these often disposable advertisement images in such a way, is somewhat reminiscent of Pop Art’s appropriation of comic art or commercial labeling. I think the difference lies in that the framing does to elevate the images—the whole attempt falls deliberately flat.

Next to photos and typography, 3D art is also a staple in Vaporwave designs. The style doesn’t resemble modern 3D aesthetics like the low cell shaded games of the mobile and indie market, the AAA realism, or the »Pixar«-style. It is closer to the early 3D modeling you could find in graphic cards box art. Those, while impressive for their time, where far from being realistic, and rather examples of the uncanny valley—somewhat close to nature but not close enough so that they seem uncomfortably off. These ideas fit right with the ideas of nostalgia and coldness of consumerism.

‹FEELS 感じている› by waterfront dining
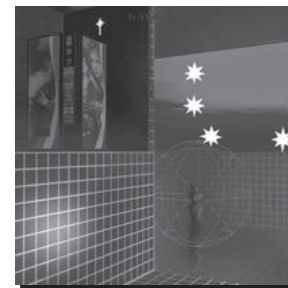
‹Red Twilight› by Gavriel

‹Skeleton› by Skeleton

[29] Sonnenberg, J. (2017, March, 20). Waves of Vapor [Blog Post]. Retrieved from https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/ context/first-year-writing-seminar/waves-of-vapor

Another peculiar aesthetic marker of Vaporwave is the roman busts that are placed at random in digital spaces. While they stand out, they are by far not the most common trope found on album covers. As stated before, the busts can be seen as an example that nothing is holy in the eyes of capitalism: Those former gods are by now mere commodities, at best emitting a sense of sophistication in the places they are shown at, but stripped of the awe they must have inspired once. [29] As is often the case with signifiers, they are imitated without the understanding or finesse behind the original idea. Sometimes they only mean «Vaporwave».

Since the triggering of memories is such an important goal of the genre, there are elements that can be called fan service. They have a similar effect as showing the ‹Millennium Falcon› or playing the Star Wars theme: If you already know them, you feel validated because you recognize them. Those elements can be the ‹Compact Disc› logo, bar codes or the VHS logo, but also antiquated UI elements like the Windows 95 desktop.

Of course there are more tropes in the Vaporwave aesthetic, but the ones listed here give a good idea of what fits this style and why. As with the music, new styles are constantly invented. The art work of ‹Haircuts of Men› for example uses some of those ideas but also combines it with more modern font design in a way that I haven't seen anywhere else.

Photoshop the early days – a collage
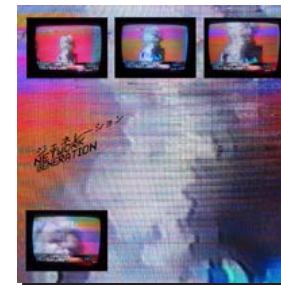
‹Generation› by generation network
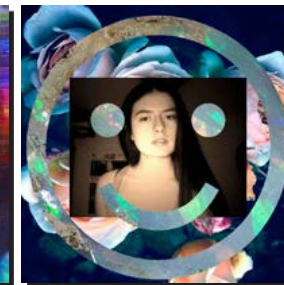
‹[夏日]› by マクロスMACROSS 82-99

‹Staff Only› by Welcome1

‹7年后› by chris†††

‹Subliminal Romance Part II› by WΔll Flowers

‹NEW AIR› by channel select
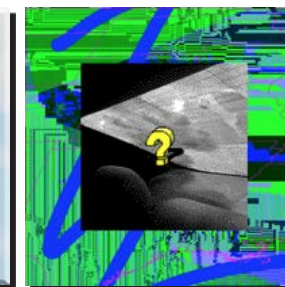
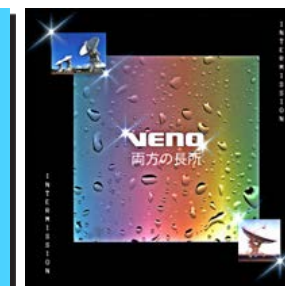‹A Collection of Vaporwave Trap Rap, Sample-Based Funk, […]› by Mega Bunneh

‹B L A C K 大理石 EP› by Combo Reseller

‹cccrpeddreams //////› by windows ㇆ 96
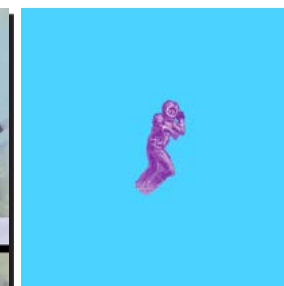
‹In Dedication to Your Crisis,› by hyphyskazerbox

‹Intermission› by VENO

‹MAGAZINE› by HELLCOM

‹Memories› by Pursuing Paradise

‹new wounds› by chris†††

‹R E N D E R E D F R U I T› by DJ i T u n e s

‹Sinto Muito› by eleven eastern

‹Toilet Abstraction Tapes› by Sophiaaaahjkl;8901

‹Generation› by generation network

‹Purgatory› by Cobalt Road

‹Unconditional› by David Love Not War

It screams 80s
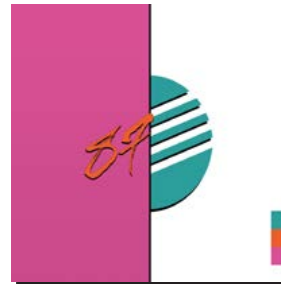
‹ANNIVERSARY VOL.2› by business casual

‹Bluntside!› by Bluntside

‹Childhood› by Childhood

‹cyber city dreams サイバーシティーの夢› by vice*AIRバイ ス*空気自然の愛

‹Subliminal Romance Part II› by WΔll Flowers

‹Distance› by bl00dwave

‹introspection› スカイ ｆａｕｎａ

‹L A S T S U M M E R› by .nebula
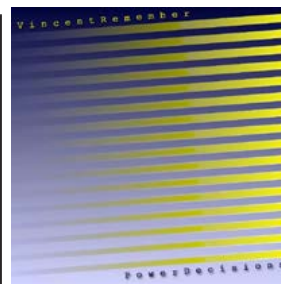
‹P o w e r D e c i s i o n s› by Vincent Remember

‹RIGHTEOUS GROOVE› by AESTHETICS PLEASE

‹Spaceship Earth› by White-woods

Sunset Drive // Tropical Vacation
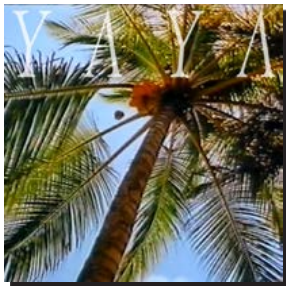
‹BOUNTY› by YAYA instrumentals

‹Daily Night Euphoria EP› by Lindsheaven Virtual Plaza

‹FRIDAY LOUNGE TYPICAL EP› by ANIMAL // MOTHER

‹Friday Night Blues› by DeLorean.88.

‹Hotel Vibes‹ by bl00dwave
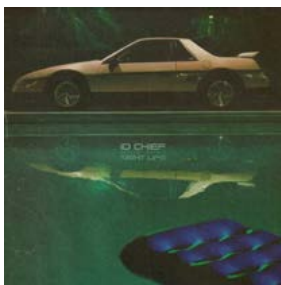
‹night life› by ID Chief

‹Sun, Sea and Surfing› by コンシャスTHOUGHTS

‹Slowed Midnight› by Cape Coral

TV-Show callbacks

‹a better place› by chris†††

‹Argentavis› by Ursula's Cartridges

‹frasierwave› by chris†††

‹fresh› by ACTIVE PRESEN-CE

‹Lovestory› by Desired

‹SCUDERIA› by DELTA金 TOPCO

‹sleepwalking› by delorean.88.

‹未来 THE FUTURE› by bluntside
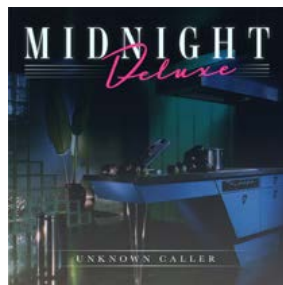
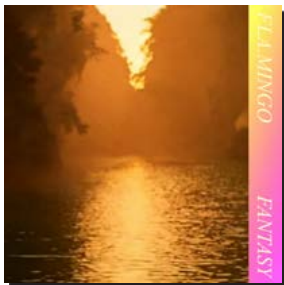‹Midnight Deluxe› by Unknown Caller

Dreamy Photos

‹swby› by swby

‹5000°› by 静脈 v e n o

‹Fantasy› by Fla.mingo

‹Flight Wave› by Innerspeaker

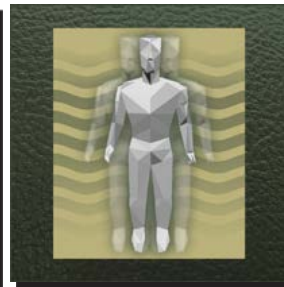‹Great Divide› by Nouveau Cliché

‹HOMEFOLK› by generation network

‹ДЕРЕВЕНСКИЙ FAHK› by Лень

Make it 3D!

‹２４０ｐ› by Ｖｉｒｔｕａｌ－４２０

‹９８´ Ｗ ａ ｖ ｅ ｓ › by SPACE MAGIC スペースマジック

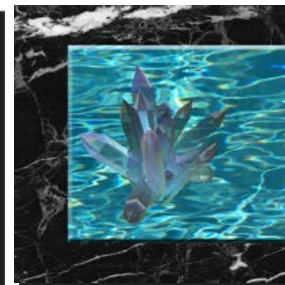‹CAPITAL CUSTOMER› by PZA

‹Gelhash› by TANE IS LOVE

‹History Magic XYZ› by DELTA金TOPCO

‹MALLSOFT ODYSSEY› by Sonnig 991

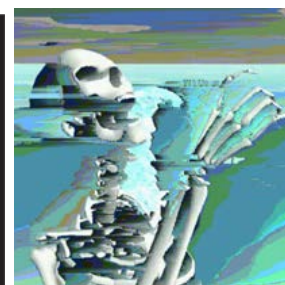‹NEOTOKYOLIVE30XX› by KING QUARTZ

Video Game Boxes

‹Yacht Rock Breaks 2› by Camino 84

‹Escape to New York› by Ursula's Cartridges

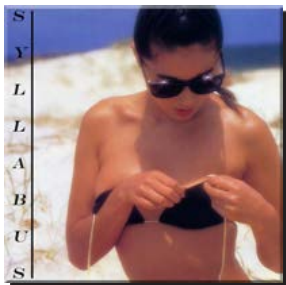‹Arctic Circuitry› by Electric Specter 電妖怪

Idol Facsimiles

‹永遠の愛› by synchro//start

‹CARPE DIAZ› by TANE IS LOVE

‹CLIMATE グローバル› by シルクPANGEA
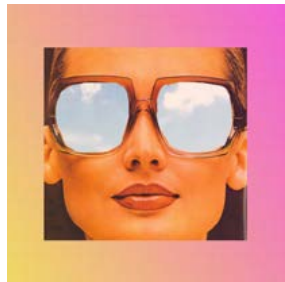

‹July› by SYLLABUS

‹Summer Paradise› by architecture in tokyo

‹Tonight› Color Television

‹Webcast Concert› by Curb Cobain

‹U Melt Me› by Fla.mingo

patternrecognition

When I started to look into the cover art for Vaporwave albums on Bandcamp.com, I was surprised to find many designs that I wasn't expecting. I was ready to see a lot of roman busts, the neon grid, and scenes from hand drawn Anime (in contrast to produced digitally). Being somewhat overwhelmed by the abundance of different styles, I decided to start a catalogue. I focused my efforts on the record label ‹business casual› as I found their releases coming up again and again. They were diverse, but still fit the Vaporwave theme. I added some album covers from other labels for good measure, but in general tried to stick to the business casual catalogue, which is quite big. I catalogued over 150 art works, clustered them into groups of topics that I thought fitting, and named them accordingly. The category names are sometimes a description of the technique, and other times a topic that ties these records together.

PHOTOSHOP THE EARLY DAYS – A COLLAGE

This category was to a certain extend also a wild card when I wasn't able to put the art in any other category. Still, there are some are some common criteria. The works in this category have a certain haphazardness about them. They seem to be thrown together roughly—one can feel the

seams. Also, many photoshop techniques from the nineties and early 2000s are present. Of course, these techniques are still used to date, but now they are far less obvious. These works, in contrast, feature said functions openly. A good example would be the application of the multiply effect to several images or the use of drop shadows. Another marker for this category is the collage approach wherein pictures are added not to stand for themselves but in contrast to each other. Most of the roman busts can be found in this category as they are often placed in juxtaposition to other, far more trivial images.

IT SCREAMS 80S

This category and the following are similar in some elements they use—especially palm trees and the theme of summer vacation—but what distinguishes them, is the feel and context. In this category, you often find pastel colors, typical eighties shapes like waves and triangles, a sunny attitude, and stylistic references to the TV-Show ‹Miami Vice›. The graphic elements are often flat and of a minimalistic vibe. They evoke a nostalgia for the sunshine states of North America—think of the before mentioned TV-show ‹Miami Vice›. Fittingly, the music on these albums tends to be more on the sunny side as well, stylistically featuring songs in the Future Funk sub-genre.

SUNSET DRIVE // TROPICAL VACATION

‹Sunset Drive // Tropical Vacation› stands in close relation to ‹It screams 80s›. Both feature a beach scenery and there are many elements that show up in both categories—namely palms trees, and a pinkish color palette. The distinct feature here is the focus on a the car ride along the beach.

TV-SHOW CALLBACKS

This category cites images of shows—movies, TV-shows, as well as Anime—that Gen Y often grew up watching, thereby relying on the rewarding feeling of recognition mentioned earlier. As stated above, the Vaporwave scene has an element of exclusivity to it (as do many scenes), and ‹TV-Show callbacks› is a good example of this. If you remember these shows and feel nostalgic about them, you are in; if this is not part of your experience, you don't undersand what these random images mean. It is one of the cheaper tricks Vaporwave artists pull off. The evocation of nostalgia is rather blunt, contrary to some of the other styles that give you the same feeling while keeping a certain mystique about the origin of said feeling. There are some variations with regard to tone: Some are more on the humorous side, while others try to elicit longing.

気体キャッチ

Busts. Slants. Pink. Am I Vaporwave yet?

[30] Idols are the East Asian equivalent to Western stars. Their image is highly curated and there are high expectations of their service mentality towards their fans.

DREAMY PHOTOS

The unifying feature of these covers is the focus on a single image. These images create a scene for the viewer to join into. The moods they convey are introspection, maybe even relaxation, and the default nostalgia. In many cases, they also feature typography, but the text is set in service to the scene, never overshadowing the image. The pictures have a vintage feel about them that is achieved by the desaturated colors, dark blacks, and the visible grain.

MAKE IT 3D!

This category is defined by its technique, namely 3D modeling. The renderings are low in quality compared to today's standards– low polygon count and flat, low resolution textures. The reference are games from the nineties and early 2000s as well as graphics card benchmarks. They fulfill three functions as artwork in the context of Vaporwave: 1. Mocking the outdated techniques from twenty to fifteen years ago, which also goes to show how fast technology that was once cutting edge becomes obsolete; 2. Illustrating the coldness of the corporate world; 3. Creating imaginary worlds. The second function is especially visible in the artwork for Ramona Andra Xavier's album ‹Home: Complete Edition›, but seem to have fallen out of fashion soon after.

IDOL FACSIMILES

Albums in this category imitate the style of vinyl cover art during the golden age of Japanese idols[30] in the eighties. While idols during this time were usually portrayed in a casual and non-sexual manner, ‹Idol Facsimilies› remix the style of the album covers with a more lascivious notion. In that way it emphasizes the commodification and objectification of women prevalent in the idol industry to this day. While it is a valid criticism, there is some ambivalence in this style. As is so often the case with Vaporwave, it is critical, reveling, and joking at the same time. Regarding this category, the artistic language does not only unveil objectification of women, but also replicates it to a certain extent as the women in in those pictures remain nameless, and only serve as a theme instead of personalities. Noticeable is the frequent use of frames which can be regarded as a visual metaphor for putting someone on a pedestal.

VIDEO GAME BOXES

What qualifies entries for this category is their relation to video games. These relations can be as straight forward as copying well known designs, or merely making a reference to video game aesthetics. ‹Chuck Persons's Eccojams Vol. 1› is a good example because many of this category's tropes are present. For one, the images are samples taken from the

box art of the game ‹Ecco the dolphin›. Another trope is the reference to console names. The ‹MEGA› is an indirect visual quote of the ‹Sega Mega Drive› Logo—indirect because it is not the actual font or logo—but the reference is clear to anyone who knows the original.

While in this case the design is only alluded to, in later entries the quotation is more literal. One such example are the info stripes on video games regarding the system requirements. Typically, the games you bought in the eighties and nineties came in a carton box with a key visual, the game name, and a stripe on the left or right stating what system the game supported. Album art in the ‹Video Game Boxes› category takes this established signifier, and slaps it onto their art to ride on the recognition wave. What is placed next to this stripe, is entirely arbitrary. As is so often the case with Vaporwave, it is more about the association to nostalgia and a tongue in cheek attitude.

Some of the entries placed in this category show neither system logos nor actual game art but still connect to the idea of video games. This can be by the distinct use of typography, or the graphical style that brings up association with retro games. In that regard they overlap with some ‹make it 3D› designs, but the key difference is that these tap into memories of the technology while those more free form ‹Video Game Boxes› designs callback to the actual gaming experience.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

This list is by no means comprehensive but a mere attempt to gain a grasp on the stylistic variety of the genre. I still want to name some smaller, yet noteworthy, categories. The previously mentioned musical sub-genre Mallsoft creates soundscapes that resemble field recordings taken at a mall during the eighties. In order to emphasize this impression, the cover art often features old pictures of malls.

Another, more serious style shows (dark) futuristic cities in reference to the cyberpunk genre. I found some examples of these neon cities among ‹business casual›'s releases but ‹Dream Catalogue›'s collection can be considered the main hub for this kind of aesthetic. These visuals make a lot of sense in the context of their evokative soundtracks that are often conceptually situated in cyberpunk cities.

D://Games/Themes

While Vaporwave is often accused of being a one-trick pony, this couldn't be further from the truth. One could say Metal is always about aggression, and would be just as wrong. As with many genres, there are unifying themes and feelings that are explored and adapted to the manyfold expressions of the human condition. For Vaporwave, the recurring theme is nostalgia and a sense of loss.

In my exploration of how the themes of Vaporwave are expressed in music and album art, I decided to take Vaporwave seriously. At first, this might seem counterintuitive as the Vaporwave scene is sometimes obnoxiously «millennial» in its stance—especially in its tendency to stay ambiguous, and to gloss over the own earnest positions and feelings behind irony. This stance is also what causes the genre often to not be taken seriously by outsiders when it is presented as one big meme. As many before me I have tried to show, behind a facade of irony hide serious criticisms of consumption culture, explorations of lost times, as well as futile attempts at escapism. Of course, Vaporwave can be funny and plainly nonsensical, but reducing it to this would do the genre a grave injustice.

____Importing Themes

So far, I have examined how the Vaporwave themes translate into the music as well as the album cover art. As Vaporwave is conceptualized as a Gesamtkunstwerk, its

[31] [Dynamic Media Triad]. (2018). BROKEN REALITY Presskit [Press Release]. Retrieved from http://www.brokenrealityvideogame.com/press.html [32] [Adam]. (2018, June 1). Walking Simulator [Wiki Entry]. Retrieved from https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/walking-simulator [33] [Jim Sterling]. (2015, August 17). Walking Simulators (The Jimquisition) [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdHWGMkMorg

consumption in different forms of media is interconnected, with some aficionados going as far as listening to the music on era appropriate devices (i. e. cassettes) in order to get into the right mood. Since video games and the whole early 3D-rendering aesthetic are important references in creating nineties nostalgia, I want to explore how the Vaporwave themes would translate into a video game.
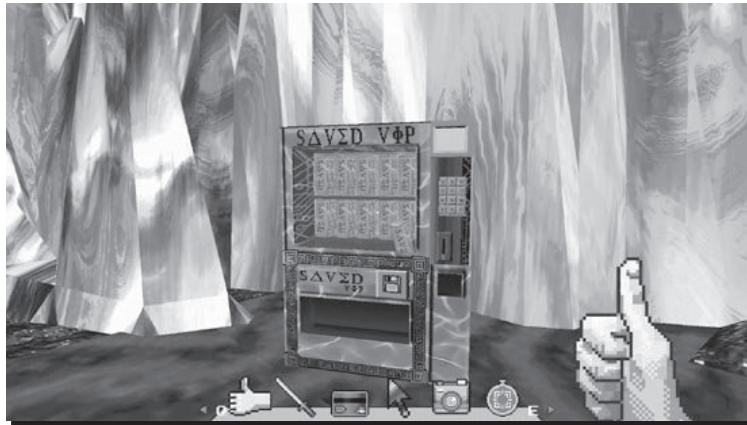
Scene from the Game ‹Broken Reality› (© Dynamic Media Triad)

I'm by no means the first to notice the potential for this marriage. ‹Broken Reality›, a 2018 video game for PC, already experimented with this combination. [31] In the game, the player inhabits a virtual plaza in which everyone is occupied with gathering likes. Your goal is to become the most popular person in this space by accumulating as many likes as possible. You do this by gathering actual likes in the form of currency floating around, buying stuff, and doing favors for other video game characters. As such, the game

combines ideas of mindless consumerism, the visual aesthetic of Vaporwave, and the more recent phenomenon of heightened, social media induced narcissism. The game can be described as a parody on consumerism and self marketing in social media, while simultaneously triggering moments of nostalgia by referring to tropes already established in Vaporwave—it truely wears its Vaporwave influences on its sleeve. Despite ‹Broken Reality› being successful game in its own right, I would like to approach Vaporwave from a more serious angle, namely, the introspective, nostalgic and critical aspects.

My medium of choice is a video game. The game genre most fitting for these themes is the ‹Walking Simulator›. It is—in part mockingly—named this way because the main action is walking around in a 3D space. [32] Games of this genre are often presented in first person, allowing the player to be more immersed inside the game world. They are in general devoid of player violence, focus on exploring, and create an atmosphere for the player to dive into. While exploring the spaces, the story is progressively revealed through pieces of text or spoken audio. The genre is typical for the independent market as the entry barrier for production is manageable for small studios. The two main reasons are the first person perspective, and that the player is usually alone in a world devoid of non-playable characters (NPCs). In consequence, there is neither a need for player character animations, nor an NPC AI that has to be programmed. [33] Noteworthy Walking-Simulators are ‹Dear Esther›, ‹Gone Home›, ‹Firewatch›, ‹What remains

[34]   [Jim Sterling]. (2015, August 17). Walking Simulators (The Jimquisition) [Video File]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/VdHWGMkMorg?t=330   [35]   [Jim Sterling]. (2015, August 17). Walking Simulators (The Jimquisition) [Video File]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/VdHWGMkMorg?t=373

of Edith Finch›, ‹The Stanley Parable› or ‹Dr. Langeskov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist› but also the ‹Blood Ties› DLC from ‹Tomb Raider: Rise of the Tomb Raider› (making it one of the rare AAA entries to the genre).

The lack of interactivity has been admonished by some players. Others appreciate the absence of consideration for game mechanics, as it allows them to more effectively immerse themselves into the scenery and atmosphere. As many of those games put the player in a position where they have to deduct what happened in the place before they arrived, some critics have wondered why they are not playing the initial scenario instead of experiencing the ghosts of that story. [34] While this is a valid point, not every story has to be about an active protagonist with an agenda. A soothing, yet uneventful explorations can be can be just as intriguing as the premise of game.

The walking simulator is especially suited to showcase the before mentioned aspect of introspection. The lack of mechanics facilitate player immersion while the first person perspective allows for an immediate interaction with the world.

The comparably low hurdles for creating a Walking Simulator resemble the accessibility of Vaporwave: It is possible to create a world with existing parts, and mix them together to form something new.
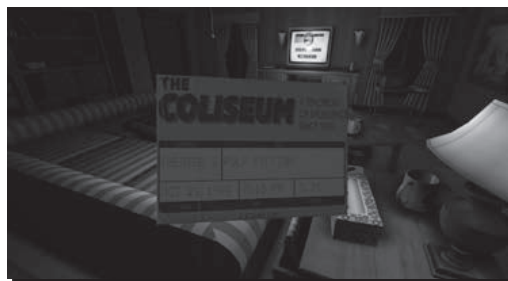
Scene from ‹Gone Home›
(© Fullbright Company)
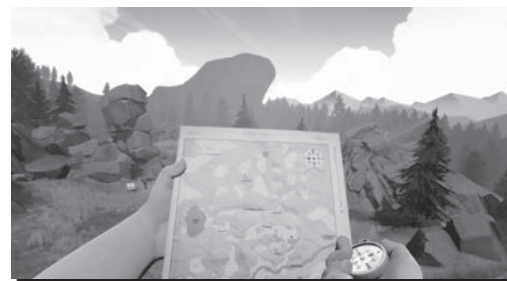
Scene from the Game ‹Firewatch› (© Campo Santo)

Scene from the Game ‹The Stanley Parable› (© Crows Crows Crows)

Another aspect that suits the Vaporwave theme of nostalgia is the before mentioned fact that the player has to piece together someone else's story instead of actually playing it out. Vaporwave places itself on the wrong side of a chasm that it cannot cross—always looking back with a mix of mocking arrogance and yearning. In this vein, Jim Stephanie Sterling had the following to say in their video on the Walking Sim ‹Everybody has gone to the rapture›: «You are wandering around a deserted [place] with evidence of a vastly more exciting and interesting story. A story that you are no part of. I can imagine what the game could be like if we were there in the moment […] And it makes makes me sad.» [35]

buildup

Each aspect is designed to be a self-contained experience. Therefore each is set in its own level. In order for the player to enter these different levels a lobby was needed that houses the respective entrance doors. The place that I found most fitting in the context of Vaporwave is the shopping mall. The mall earned itself the German name ‹Konsumtempel› (temple of consumption)—an allusion to the religious worship of gods in temples. As capitalism and consumerism thrive on consumption, the mall is the place where this happens on a large scale. With malls being almost entirely comprised of franchise stores by global brands, they serve as a focal point of the features of Vaporwave: consumerism, global corporations, nostalgia (with the growing prevalence of dead malls all over the US), and artificiality.

     For the basis of the mall lobby I used a 3D asset. Adjustments werde made as the textures were too pixelated to fit with the other rooms. All the texture maps were swapped and the space was made walkable with colliders. Setting the light in the room was a particular challenge since creating it in real time used up too much processing capacity, thus slowing down the game. Simultaneously, the shadows were not projected correctly on every surface. The lighting adjustments would come up again in the other levels in which consumed many hours of troubleshooting.

     For the overall look, I wanted to use modern tex-

The Lobby

tures with height maps and ambience occlusion to create a believable and visually stunning place. Still, the world should look like it belongs in the eighties and nineties. In order to create this look, the cameras saturation was dialed back, a vignette added, and the view was distorted with a heavy grain filter, thereby creating a visual layer of nostalgia.

     Since neon lights and colors are so prevalent in the Vaporwave aesthetic, I wanted to include them in the game world as well. They are the guiding light throughout the different scenes as they highlight entrance and exit as well as the path. The glowing portals that the player uses to enter different levels are a visual mixture of neon basement club doors and fantasy game stone arcs. I chose them because the resemble the heterogenous, non-accurate mess that our minds create when diving into memories. Vaporwave taps into the collective memory of Millenials—not by pointing

at one specific memory but at the stream of consciousness. This trick is rather effective as it allows people to latch onto individual elements without needing to remember everything presented, ultimately allowing a larger audience to partake in this trip down memory lane.

Some ambience gimmicks of the lobby are the music from the ‹Palm Mall› album playing in the background and the marble statue of Michelangelo's David, harking back to the trope of the roman bust that is almost synonymous with Vaporwave.

CRITIQUING CONSUMERISM

The first scene I developed deals with the theme of critiquing consumerism. It does so with the example of romantic love. One of the points made against consumerism by Vaporwave is that nothing is «holy». Ev-

Title screen for the beach scene.

erything can and will be commodified—even such sacred concepts as romantic love. The medium by which romantic love get's commodified are movies and love songs. Both take the idea of a love confession and make it into a consumable product that you can reuse again and again. The criticism here is that capitalism treats love like any other product that can be mass produced. There are almost no

movies without a (heterosexual) romantic (sub-)plot. The theme is so prevalent that movies without a love story are commended for it. The ubiquity of love confessions leads to a fatigue with consumers. It becomes a box to tick instead of a meaningful and memorable moment in the life of two people.
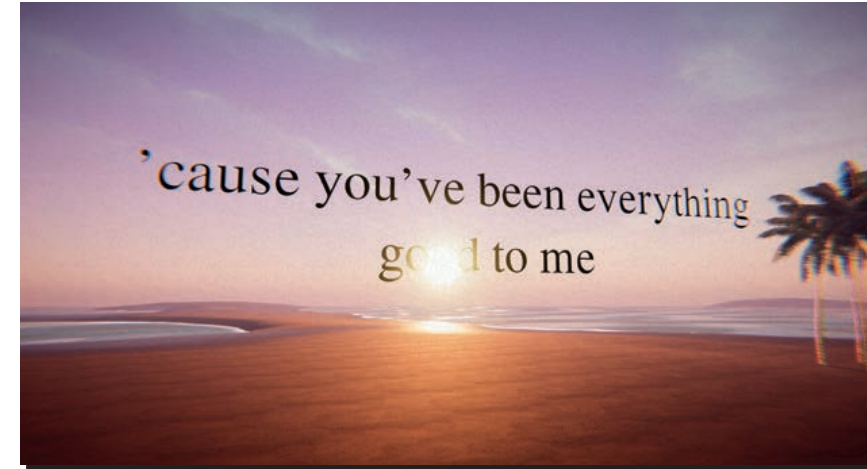
First time the confession is made.

I picked the song ‹Memories› by ‹Pursuing Paradise› as it translated this concept already into music and video. The setting for the game scene is a tropical palm beach during sunset—a setting that is often used to frame romantic scenes, and is frequently referenced in Vaporwave Art. As the player starts walking along the beach, ‹Memories› plays in the background. After a few steps, the text of the song will appear as floating text before the player: The confession that «you've been everything good to me.» Taking a
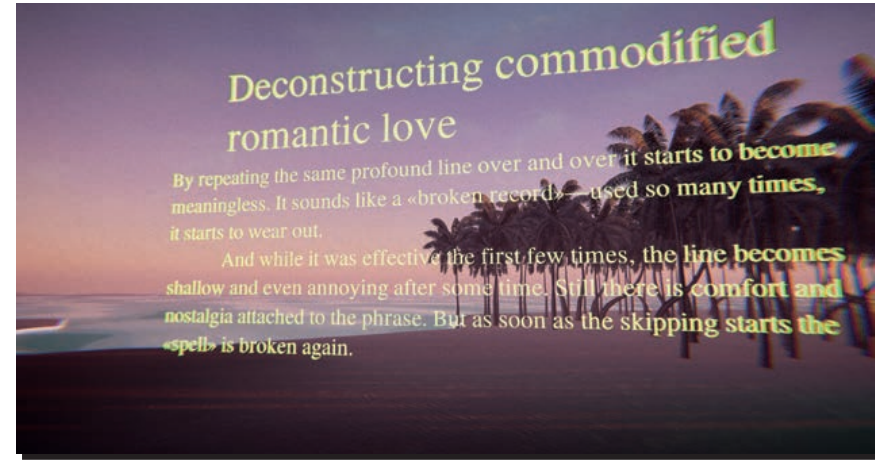
The confession starts the get repeated ⋯

The scene closes with an explanaition.

few more steps, the line will pop up again. The further the player walks, the more frequent the line pops up. It soon starts overlapping and the text becomes less readable. At the

⋯ until it overlaps and is indecipherable.

end of the level, the player is probably annoyed by the text that prevents enjoying the beach scenery. Also the message has changed from a meaningful statement into a mere texture. Before entering the lobby again through the portal the player can read an interpretation of the scene as well as information on the song that was played.

NOSTALGIA

The second theme I wanted to explore was nostalgia, especially in the sense of longing to be part of a moment in the past one has no longer access to. Since memories are always fragmentary, one is nothing more than an onlooker. With regard to the musical inspiration, ‹Cherry Pepsi› by ‹Saint Pepsi› was selected, and paired with the music video

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Entrance to the music hall.

that was created for this song by ‹David Dean Burkhart›. The song is a prime example of the Future Funk sub genre, a style that embraces the positive nostalgia and revels in «better» times. The accompanying video features video clips of Pepsi advertisements and eighties music videos. The atmosphere it transports is energetic and celebratory. Watching this clip highlights the passing of time as it shows a young Micheal Jackson before his many operations, disco scenes, Pepsi versus Coca Cola advertisements (before such practice was regulated), and post-modern advertisement in all its high concept style and absurd glory. While this world does not really exist (and never existed to begin with), in the context of this music it becomes a place of longing.

    For this level, the player is supposed to be pulled into this joyous atmosphere while still maintaining a feeling

of distance to the world shown in the video, using standard assets of a modern concrete building. In order to create a layout with several rooms lit walls were handcrafted which guide the player through the level. The starting point is in a round concrete room with the portal-like neon light entrance the player has just come through and a doorway on the opposite side. The text floating above this entrance gives the scene its title: «Spectating the Spectacle.» As the player passes through the door and the hallway, music fades in. The player will notice the rise in volume and move towards its source, the source being a room that shows the ‹Cherry Pepsi› video. As soon as the player steps into the room in order to watch the video, the music and the video will vanish. The player at this point is probably confused and maybe annoyed. Venturing deeper into the room where the music was coming from, they only find the artist's name and some left over palm trees. When they try to leave the room, the music and video will suddenly spring back to life. This will most likely pique the players
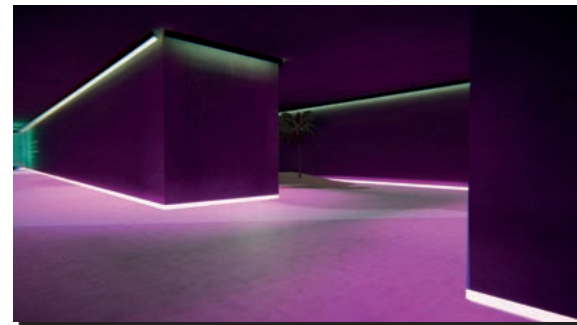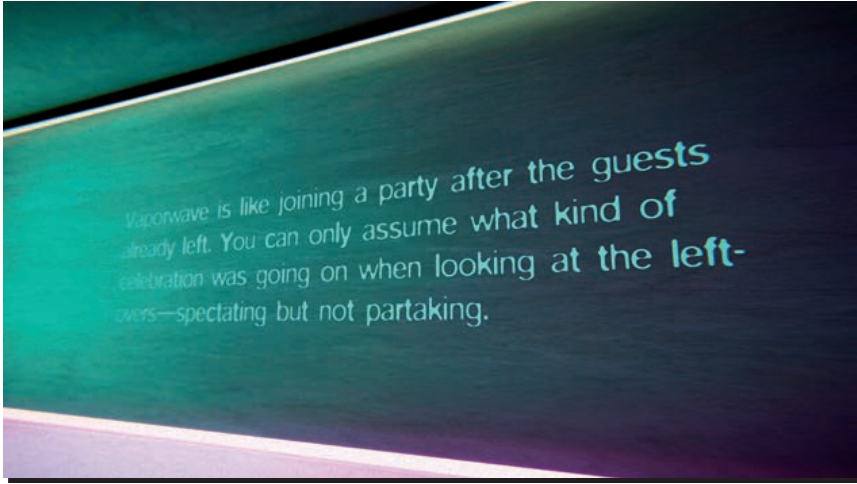

The music draws the player close.
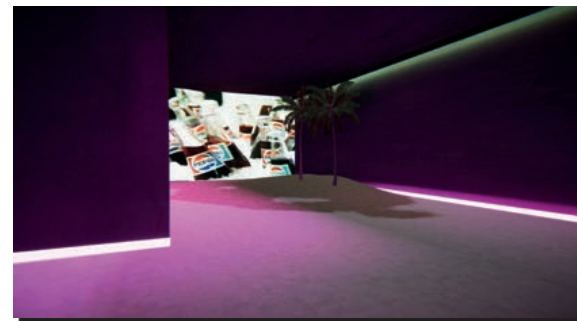
When entering the room the player sees a music video running.
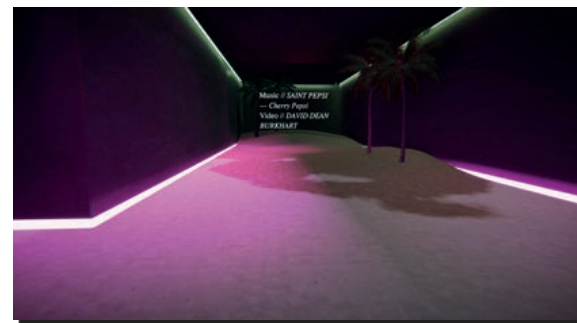
As soon as they step closer the video and music stop.

At the end of hall the player will find an explanation of the scene.

curiosity and they will venture back into the room. After a few attempts, they will likely figure out a spot from which they can watch the video without it vanishing. At this point, the player will have understood that they can only enjoy the scene from an awkward distance. There is a second room where the same thing happens again, with an inscription explaining what they just experienced: They can only watch the spectacle from afar, unable to partake in it.

INTROSPECTION

Many songs in the Vaporwave genre induce a form of introspection. This introspection usually sets in after the initial irritation due to the dragged out loops. The repeating phras-

es allow the mind to wander, and the slowed down melodies invite you to slow down as well. The trick is not a massive innovation, but the effect is remarkable nonetheless.

A good approach for translating the theme of introspection into the game world would be to manipulate time as well. It doesn't have to be an actual slowing down of the whole game; just slowing down the movement tempo could create this effect. The player will start in a small area, moving at regular speed. At the center point the walking speed will get tuned down, forcing the player to spend significantly more time in traversing the rest of the scene. While being slowed down they have more time to pay attention to the scenery or can simply let their mind wander. The scene will start with the original version of Michael Jackson's ‹Off the Wall› and transitions into ‹Saint Pepsi›'s ‹Enjoy Yourself›. The bpm-difference between those two songs is not too harsh, and the lyrics support the idea of taking your time. [36]

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Vaporwave is a fascinating genre that touches upon profound themes. At the very least, Vaporwave serves itself well for one to speculate and write about as it leaves room for many possible interpretations. It is a genre that is accessible and complex at the same time.

Besides, the aesthetic has found its way into other art related fields as well, for example, the 3D designs of Kristen Brinshot: They feature a similar color palette, low poly 3D-designs and a carefree combination of seemingly unrelated elements, as in many album covers of the ‹Make it 3D› category. Another example is the 2015 MTV VMA redesign that was heavily inspired by Seapunk, a short-lived sub-genre of Vaporwave.

Ultimately, despite of lack of discussion around Vaporwave recently, the genre is far from done. There are still new releases to this day, and the fan base is growing steadily. The lack of controversy could also be seen as the genre by now having become a staple of the music and art scene. I think it is worth to further explore the themes of Vaporwave, and I enjoy seeing new ideas brought into the genre.

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Bachelor of Arts Integrated Design

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die Arbeit selbstständig angefertigt habe und keine anderen als die angegebene Quellen und Hilfsmittel genutzt habe. Zitate habe ich als solche kenntlich gemacht.

Köln, 22.03.2021

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