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## Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies

# *Facing Fanon: Examining Neocolonial Aspects in Grand Theft Auto V through the Prism of the Machinima Film Finding Fanon II*

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In this article, I examine the Machinima film *Finding Fanon II*, by London-based artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, for what it can tell us about the relationship between video gaming and the postcolonial. Evoking Frantz Fanon, one of the most piercing voices of the decolonisation movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), one of the most technologically advanced and, at the same time, scandalous video game series of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Finding Fanon II* amounts to a scathing critique of both the game series' depiction of race and academic scholarship that has been defending the series on the grounds of its use of humour and irony. Shot in the in-game video editor of *GTA V*, *Finding Fanon II* lets this critique emerge from inside the game and as an effect of the artists' engagement with it. By suspending the game's mechanisms and programmed forms of interaction, the artwork brings their racialised logic to the fore, pointing towards the ways in which *GTA V* commodifies black men for the consumption of white players. This commodification has the effect of normalising and naturalising the precarious position of black people in Western society. What the artwork adds to this argument through its facilitation of a Fanonian perspective is a reminder that it is not only the gaming experience of *white* players that is framed in this way. Players with ethnic minority backgrounds might also accept the white gaze of the game as a given. Acts of self-commodification along the lines of a white Western rationality must thus be seen as a plausible new form of cultural imperialism promoted by the *GTA* series.

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## Introduction

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), a psychiatrist, philosopher, intellectual and political activist from Martinique, is one of the most charismatic figures in postcolonial thought. His books *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which analyse the scarring heritage of French colonialism, are canonical reading for all interested in the history and psychology of colonialism and decolonisation.<sup>1</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), in particular, published shortly before Fanon's death, became a call to arms (metaphorically as well as literally speaking) for the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It inspired the founding of the Black Nationalist Party in the US and the black consciousness movement in South Africa, ignited the passions of the Irish Republican Army and was part of the ideological foundation driving the Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Bhabha, 2004: xxviii ff.).

What can the urgent and angry voice of Frantz Fanon contribute to the understanding of our post- and/or neocolonial situation in general and the neocolonial effects of the medium of video games in particular?<sup>2</sup> The Machinima film *Finding Fanon II* (2015), by Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, two contemporary artists based in London, can be seen as an answer to this question and, in this article, I will seek to unfold an answer.

*Finding Fanon II* is part of a series of shorter (10 to 15 minutes) film works that first and foremost should be read as the artists' negotiations with the ways their personal histories are entangled with the colonial past and the mediated present. The series comprises three main pieces: *Finding Fanon I* (2015a), *II* (2015b) and *III* (2017), as well as a three-part spin-off, *Finding Fanon Gaiden* [Japanese for 'side story'; S.K.]: *Alt, Control, Delete* (all 2016). Both the second part of the main series,

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<sup>1</sup> The influential *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995), for example, contains – and thus canonises – two key passages from Fanon's works, 'National Culture'.

<sup>2</sup> In line with Ashcroft et al. (1995), I use the term 'postcolonial' to 'stand for both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of everyday and sometimes hidden responses to it throughout the world' (1995: 3). For the cases in which these responses to colonisation revive and reactualise the imperialistic, suppressive and exploitative relations of the colonial rule, I use the term neocolonialism.

*Finding Fanon II*, and the spin-off series, *Alt*, *Control*, *Delete*, are produced in the in-game video editor of *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*, Rockstar, 2013/2015)<sup>3</sup> – by the time of writing (Sept. 2017) still the latest installment of the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series. It is the appropriation of *GTA V* in *Finding Fanon II* that will interest me in the following; it is here that the critique contained in the artists' appropriation of the game comes most clearly to the fore.

Produced by the British company Rockstar, *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–) is one of the most successful video game series of all times. At the time of writing, four of its eight releases are in the thirty-five best selling games of all time, the total sales figure lies above 150 million copies for all games in the series together (wikipedia.org, n.d.). The lion's share of this figure falls to *GTA V*, the series' latest installment, with 80 million sold copies, which makes it the fourth most sold game worldwide. Beyond and besides the sales figures, the series' games have won a significant number of industry awards (see, for example, Leonard [2006a]).

A number of factors account for the series' success: firstly, the 'open world' or 'sandbox' (e.g. Harris, 2007) principle, along the lines of which all of the *GTA* games are construed, makes it possible for the player to either follow the game's plot, moving the protagonist to specific spots in the game world (in earlier versions by answering telephone calls); or to explore this world freely, discovering the various side stories and gameplay opportunities scattered across the virtual environments. Over the two decades of the series' evolution, these environments have reached unprecedented levels of complexity (Redmond, 2006: loc. 1980).<sup>4</sup> *GTA V*, the most advanced of those game worlds yet, is set in 'San Andreas', a fictive US state that emulates California, with 'Los Santos', the state's capital, based on Los Angeles.

In addition to the combination of two well-established video games genres (driving and shooting), the opportunity to play the 'bad guy', performing acts of transgression and felony in secure virtuality is another major aspect of the game's

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<sup>3</sup> The story mode was launched in 2013, the online mode was added in 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Since I have used the e-book (Kindle) version of Nate Garrelts's (2006) compendium *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto*, the articles from this book are referenced using location (loc.) instead of page numbers.

success. In the late 1990s, when the first installment in the series was published, this option was a relative novelty: at the time time, video games were still regarded as a subcategory of children's toys (Kerr, 2006: loc. 474). As I argue below this aspect turns problematic when the 'badness' of the game is racialised.

Finally, the ironic and exaggerated displays and enactments of violence, which came into their own in *GTA III* (2001 for PlayStation 2; 2002 for PC and Xbox) – the game that marked the series' move towards 3-D graphics – sought to appeal to mature gamers (comp. Kerr, 2006: loc. 484) and, in turn, *interpellated gamers as mature*. With Sony going to great lengths to market its PlayStation console to older consumers with dark and yet tongue-in-cheek advertising spots that branded the console and its games as creating uncanny 'third spaces',<sup>5</sup> *GTA III* (to which Sony PlayStation obtained the exclusive rights) became paradigmatic for mature gaming in such spaces. As Dennis Redmond points out in his assessment of the game: '[a]ll of the vehicles, ads, and corporate icons featured in the game are parodies or fabrications' (Redmond, 2006: loc. 1990). Given the density of the satirical and ironic elements in the game (as well as its follow-ups), being a *mature* gamer meant first and foremost *being in on the jokes and the irony*. In terms of the game's violence, this meant enjoying with self-confidence and insider savviness what caused moral panic in the uninitiated (cf. de Vane & Squire, 2008).

The heated public debates about the series' depiction and enactment of violence, which arose first in response to *GTA III* (see Frasca, 2003) and came into full swing with *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) (see Chess, 2005), served not only to censor (parts of) the games in several parts of the world, but also, inversely, to strengthen the bond and feeling of togetherness between players and producers, as they effectively created an out-group against which the game's admirers could define themselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the *PlayStation 2* advert: 'Welcome to the Third Space' (TBWA/London, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> As Kerr (2006: loc. 547) points out in regard to the infamous 'Hot Coffee' mini sex game that the Rockstar programmers hid inside *GTA: San Andreas*, 'What is interesting [...] is that the game developers hid such a scene in the game in the first place knowing that it would probably not be found by game ratings boards but suspecting perhaps that game players would unlock it'.

Worried parents, politicians, cultural commentators and lawmakers simply did not understand the game, because they did not play it and complained from afar.<sup>7</sup>

As these debates carried over into academic discourse, a significant number of the assessments produced by academics sided with the players and producers (e.g. Dymek & Lennefors, 2005; Higgin, 2006; Miller, 2008; Murray, 2005). Although it was through these academic debates that the game's depiction of violence eventually became linked to questions of race and gender (e.g. Dietrich, 2013; Kafai et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2009) – questions that became especially pertinent with the release of *GTA: San Andreas* and the game's African American protagonist CJ – the satire in the depictions proved to protect the series from resounding critique from an informed perspective. Only a few game scholars, such as David Leonard (e.g. 2006a, 2006b), Dennis Redmond (2006) and Paul Barrett (2006), were willing to point to the limited range and limiting effects of the ironic and parodic play with the racist realities of US culture.

Against this historical backdrop, Achiampong and Blandy's act of appropriation of *GTA V* in *Finding Fanon II* is highly evocative, particularly since *GTA V* has largely kept to the recipe of *GTA: San Andreas*'s success. While there are now three playable characters in *GTA V* and two of them are white, it is Franklin, the African American character, whom players are invited to identify with most easily. He is a young rookie criminal and the player is to facilitate his way out of the ghetto and into the higher echelons of organised crime. By evoking the figure and *oeuvre* of Frantz Fanon in the context of this plot, I argue that *Finding Fanon II* constructs a view *from inside the game onto it* that is unabashedly, yet also *instructively*, critical. In the following, then, I want to use *Finding Fanon II* as an 'evocative object' (Turkle, 2011) – a heuristic tool with which to assess the *GTA* game series and existing literature on it for what they say about race relations and the postcolonial state of gaming. Such use is in

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<sup>7</sup> This attitude is verified, for example, in Gareth Schott and Jasper van Vught's (2013) 'Replacing Preconceived Accounts of Digital Games with Experience of Play: When Parents Went Native in *GTA IV*'. Furthermore, as Kerr (2006: loc. 585) observes: 'Unfortunately, it would appear that most commentators only experience games as scenes which they watch and this leads to games being analyzed and assessed in terms of films and videos rather than in their own terms, as games'.

line with academic approaches to Machinima works: by virtue of their inherent intertextuality (e.g. Frolunde, 2012), these works can create views onto the games whose architectures they appropriate that are productive exactly because of the alienating effects they produce. As Daniel Martin Feige writes of *SOD* (Heemskerk & Paesmans, 1999), a modification of the classic first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3D* (Id, 1992): ‘*Sod* [sic] alienates and thematizes the ordinary logic of playing FPS [i.e. first-person shooters; S.K.] and lets the player discover aspects of his [sic] ordinary playing of these games’ (Feige, 2012: 103). Such discoveries, I argue, are also what *Finding Fanon* makes possible.

In a first step, I will provide a more detailed overview of the *Finding Fanon* series and explicate the function of the figure of Frantz Fanon and Fanon’s *oeuvre* in relation to Achiampong and Blandy’s film. In a second step, I outline the implications of the film and its construction of a Fanonian perspective for *Grand Theft Auto V* the academic discourses prompted by earlier games in the series. Occasionally, I support my hermeneutic approach with information gathered through conversations with the artists.<sup>8</sup> I argue that by suspending the game’s mechanisms and programmed forms of interaction the artwork brings their racialised logic to the fore, pointing towards the ways in which *GTA V* commodifies black men for the consumption of white players. As other critics of the game have pointed out (first and foremost: Leonard, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2016), this commodification has the effect of normalising and naturalising the precarious position of black people in Western society. What the artwork adds to this argument through its facilitation of a Fanonian perspective is a reminder that it is not only the gaming experience of *white* players that is framed in this way. Rather, players with ethnic minority backgrounds might also accept the white gaze of the game as a given. Acts of self-commodification along the lines of a white Western rationality must thus be seen as a new form of cultural imperialism promoted by the *GTA* series.

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<sup>8</sup> I loosely follow the ‘depth hermeneutic’ approach of Alfred Lorenzer (e.g. 1986; see also Krüger [2017]). Lorenzer suggests a focus on forms of interaction at the micro level. The task of depth hermeneutics is to grasp the psychic and social meaning of such forms of interaction as two sides of the same coin.

## **The *Finding Fanon* Series by Larry Achiampong and David Blandy**

In their *Finding Fanon* series, London-based artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy stage an ongoing confrontation with the way that colonialism has impacted on their personal and familial histories sounding out the possibilities and conditions of their friendship in the face of a colonial history that sets them apart – their families having experienced these histories from opposite sides. Achiampong is second-generation Ghanaian; his parents came to Britain in the late 1970s. In attempting to follow them, his uncle was held in various immigration detention centres. Achiampong remembers visiting him there as a child together with his mother, thinking that his uncle was in prison. Blandy's grandfather was a key figure in developing the pineapple industry in Kenya in the 1960s. This was a large agricultural programme funded by the UK government designed to retain Kenya as a British colony. Nevertheless, their opposing histories draw them together and the *Finding Fanon* series aims to facilitate this rapprochement, as the beginning of Part I (2015) explains: 'This is the story of two men, marked by images from childhood; the violent scenes that upset them and whose meaning they would grasp only years later happened in the streets and schoolyards of London in the 80s, sometime before the outbreak of the war [sic]' (Achiampong & Blandy, *Finding Fanon I*, 2015: 00:22).

*Finding Fanon I* is filmed with a digital camera, the two artists playing themselves as the film's protagonists. Set in an old shipyard, inside a mouldered houseboat, with references to ships and the sea gesturing towards Europe's colonial ambitions. The imagined future war referenced in the narration provides the *Finding Fanon* series its fantastic (or not so fantastic) departure from reality and places the two men's negotiations in a post-apocalyptic setting, devoid of other humans. The web of civilisation and its historical ties are not so much stripped away, but lie in ruins; rendered as relics of a past that is not entirely passé but has to be reread and reassessed. The two men are shown sitting quietly in the houseboat, playing an old Ghanaian board game, lying side by side on a rug, looking at maps, and conversing. Towards the end of the film they leave the boat and in its final scenes clamber over rocks to reach the beach and look out over the sea.

Technology plays a central role in these scenes. Historical advances in technology are shown to have made colonialism possible: ships as means of transportation; maps with their suggestive logics of the reachability and first-come-first serve availability of land and lenses as (precarious) means of scientific objectivity, surveillance and control (Arnold, 2005). These technologies, the film suggests, brought people from different continents in contact with one another and facilitated Western domination. At the same time, the post-apocalyptic setting suggests that this history of technological advances also played a role in the downfall and eradication of this civilisation. With the two men now reassessing these technologies together, the film suggests that they might now be used to build a new world. Maybe technology, once it is cleansed of the misguided, Western ideals of humanism (the dialectics of which helped unleash its highly destructive, dehumanising potentials), can now facilitate a new understanding and coexistence between people from different racial backgrounds.

Where *Finding Fanon I*, ends with the protagonists reaching the seashore and, seemingly, coming to the edge of the world; *Finding Fanon II* begins with them falling out of the sky and into the virtual game world of *GTA V* (see **Figures 1 and 2**) – in this way transposing the series into the Machinima genre. This fall into the virtual can be read as what the German philosopher Odo Marquardt (1981) called *Vermöglichung* – ‘possibilisation’, an inversion of *Verwirklichung* (realisation/materialisation) that turns the act of realising and substantiating onto its head. The two artists – now in digitised form – are made to fall from their physical existences into the virtual possibilities of the *GTA V* game world, where their negotiation with their colonial pasts is to continue. In a parallel to the shipyard setting of the first part, the *GTA* game world has also been cleansed of all signs of other people in order to continue the post-apocalyptic, otherworldly theme of the series. Perhaps here, in the virtual, they can find each other - a mutual ground upon which to work towards Fanon’s wish to go ‘forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men’ (Fanon, 2001: 254).



**Figure 1:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 00:07.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 00:09.

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<sup>9</sup> All images in the article are used with the artists' permission.

In the first third of *Finding Fanon II*, at least, such a possibility seems to be in reach, with the two avatars' silhouettes in front of an orange-red glowing sun over the San Andreas seashore (*Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 03:10) creating a moment of calm and harmony. 'These sunsets are the most beautiful they'd ever seen,' states the narrator's voice, and, indeed, at this moment in the film, Fanon's utopia of a decolonised state of existence – a prospering, liberated Martinique bathing in the late afternoon sun – and the hope that Fanon might truly be 'waiting here, inside the polygons, behind the texture maps' (ibid.: 01:33) appears to have (virtually) come true (see **Figure 3**).

### ***The two Fanons***

However, as becomes clear in what follows these scenes, this unhampered optimism only tells half the story and is undercut by the darker, more brooding characteristics of Frantz Fanon. David Macey (2010), Fanon's biographer, points to a 'fairly conventional dichotomy between a Fanon who was *l'homme du refus* ['the man who said "no"'] and a Fanon who asserted his loyalty to a new world' (Macey, 2010: 33). While Fanon's readers usually sided with *one* of these, Macey rightly holds that the



**Figure 3:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 03:10.

two must be thought of as belonging together. In 1959 a minor traffic accident in Martinique's Fort-de-France between a black dock worker and a white incomer from Morocco escalated into race riots, in which local youths clashed with anti-riot police, Fanon offers a *public* and a *private* response. In a Tunisian newspaper affiliated with the Liberation Front, Fanon 'interpreted the flare-up as a "first manifestation of the Martinician spirit" that might, "in the long term", lead to an independence movement' (Macey, 2010: 38). In private, however, he:

Was scathing in his dismissal of the likely outcome, telling an acquaintance from Guyane that: they're not going to do anything about it. They'll probably vote for some symbolic motion and then begin all over again to croak from misery [...] It will be a question of a manifestation [demonstration] and nothing more, somewhat like an erotic dream (Macey, 2010: 38).

The two Fanons emerging from these contradictory responses must be conceived as belonging together in their contradiction. One needs to hold his revolutionary loyalties and enthusiasm in check with the other's negativity, and the other needs the revolutionary stance in order not to be overwhelmed by his negativity. Strikingly, this is a lesson about Fanon that one can learn from *Finding Fanon II*. It sets out to find the revolutionary Fanon, the one who wants to 'turn over a new leaf' and 'set afoot a new man' (Fanon, 2001: 255). What I want to argue that the film ultimately brings to the fore, however, is the other Fanon, who, under the burning gaze of a white racism, asks: 'Where do I fit in? Or, if you like, where should I stick myself?' (2008: 93). Like the contradictory figure of Fanon etched out above, the overall movement of the film performed by its avatar protagonists, can seek a way 'forward' in and through the new virtual terrain, only to come up against inner and outer obstacles – after all, with San Andreas being conceived as an island, the avatars constantly come up against borders and limits, no matter what way 'forward' they take.

*Finding Fanon II* is thus stopped short and arrested in its search for a truly decolonised state in the texture maps of the virtual. Ultimately, this is articulated

– albeit in encrypted form – at the beginning of *Finding Fanon III* (Achiampong & Blandy, 2017: 00:49), with the female narrator starting out by stating: '[t]he world is burning. Old certainties are dead. I could no longer feel Fanon's ghost.' However, this has already come to the fore in *Finding Fanon II* through the avatars' roaming of the game world. Reuniting after their fall in an old, dilapidated shipyard, we see them tracing the contours of this world together: running up a hill in the San Andreas countryside in the rain; hurrying along a dirt road through the wind park on the Los Santos outskirts; and walking along railroad tracks by night, through an empty car tunnel, across the freight port (see **Figures 4–7**).

All their urgent, searching movements are punctuated by scenes of standing still, of facing each other and of looking out into the open sea; and what the narrator refers to as 'edges of the traversable world' (Achiampong & Blandy, 2015, 03:40), i.e. the limits that, in the context of the game, are the ends of the virtual, programmed platform. On a psychosocial plane, they are the limits of the thinkable, conscionable, imaginable and acceptable. Thus, as picturesque and impressive as the *GTA* game world proves in the film, what ultimately comes to the fore as is that there is no peace for the two men to be found here: their incessant walking, running and gazing out into the open articulating disquiet, restlessness and an uneasy search for Fanon – i.e.



**Figure 4:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 02:20.



**Figure 5:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 02:51.



**Figure 6:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 03:55.



**Figure 7:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 05:23.

for the '*possibilisation*' of his vision of radical decolonisation – which cannot find its realisation and release here. After all, such a release would amount to a disavowal of the traumas of ethnocentrism and racial violence that remain fundamental aspects, not only of *GTA V*, but of the social, material, political and economic realities to which the game refers and the foundations upon which it rests. Disoriented and stuck, their movements aimless, the protagonists of *Finding Fanon II* bring to the stage the core of Fanon's legacy: the way towards a utopian destination that just cannot find a realistic point of departure.

'[L]et us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her,' writes Fanon at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*. 'Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would almost be an obscene caricature' (Fanon, 2001: 254). Yet, as Fanon knew, and as *Finding Fanon* shows, this 'something other' is extremely hard to come by if its foundations are shot through and through by a colonial past. 'The Master's

Tools will never dismantle the Master's House,' Audre Lorde (1983) famously wrote.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, what one can see the avatars resisting through their paralytic disorientation is GTA turning them into the 'obscene caricature' that Fanon warned about in his writings (2001: 254).

### **From Gaze to Gameplay – *GTA* in *Finding Fanon's* negotiation of the (post)colonial**

In this section I step back from the narrative of the *Finding Fanon* series to explore the colonial foundations and implications of *GTA V* through the Fanonian lens of Achiampong and Blandy's film. What is it that *Finding Fanon II* foregrounds in *GTA V*'s game world that 'repeatedly pays tribute' to Europe, or the West; and which constantly threatens to turn formerly colonised subjects into 'caricatures' (Fanon, 2001: 254, see above)? Where in the game does the film find what Fanon refers to as 'all this whiteness [that] burns me to a cinder' (2008: 94)? How does it capture this 'whiteness'? And how does the film's appropriation of *GTA V* relate to the debates about the game series?

With regard to this last question, it might be conducive to my argument to clarify a general point at the outset. Specifically, the gap between those *playing GTA* and those *criticising* the series – highlighted by many of those defending the game (see Kerr, 2006; Schott & van Vught, 2013) – is not given in *Finding Fanon*. As Machinima, *Finding Fanon II* makes it clear from the outset that its critique of the game emerges from an intimate familiarity with it. Achiampong and Blandy know how to play *GTA V* and their film displays elements of 'high-performance play' – a characteristic that Henry Lowood (2006) deems one of the defining features of the Machinima genre. Players familiar with the game will recognize that it took them significant effort and coordination to stage the fall from the sky in the opening scene. This was confirmed to me by Achiampong and Blandy, who recalled that filming the scene required them to meet in online mode outside Los Santos airport, sneak onto the premises, steal a plane, get it airborne (which requires the player and their avatar to have taken

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Emil Lundedal Hammar for pointing me to this quotation.

flying lessons) and then jump out at maximum height over the city. Through this grasp of the game, the artists can critique it from the inside and on the basis of its programmed mechanisms.

### ***The racialisation of game mechanisms***

Ultimately, it is these mechanisms that the artwork critiques, and the way in which this critique unfolds brings us back to Frantz Fanon. The evocation of a Fanon torn between revolutionary fervour and defeatism; action and inaction, through the artists' avatars' restless roaming of the *GTA V* game world can be seen to unfold an alienating, *uncanny* effect in relation to *GTA V*.

Sigmund Freud (1919) defined the uncanny as that which derives its disorienting effects from a feeling of an excessive, inexplicable 'familiarity'. This unease, I argue, can be experienced in *Finding Fanon's* display of exactly those places in *GTA V* that are only too familiar to the game's players. When Achiampong and Blandy's avatars roam the game world, this evokes the violent situations that would occur in those locations during normal gameplay. They are an absent presence, or, in Freud's (1919) example of the uncanny, they are 'like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again' (Freud, 1919: 223). By emptying the *GTA* game world of all social life and by making the two avatars walk through the all-too-familiar, but now deserted, environments, the mechanisms and forms of interaction that *GTA V* creators programmed into the playable characters are tacitly evoked, without being triggered.

Two of these mechanisms are worth dwelling on here (my descriptions here focus on PlayStation4 controls, but the mechanisms can be repeated on the PC version of the game). Firstly, in the proximity of a car, pressing the triangle button sets in motion a sequence of clearly defined actions. If it is a parked car, the protagonist either smashes the car's passenger window or, if one plays Franklin and if the car is expensive and fancy, Franklin will use his carjacking skills, unlocking the door elegantly and discreetly with a hook. Strikingly, of the game's three main playable characters (in offline mode), only Franklin has such 'street skills' and, by virtue of this exclusivity, these skills are offered by the game as quasi-natural racial proclivities.

Secondly, it is not advisable to bump into or provoke a member of one of the racialised minorities represented in the game that populate the poorer areas of Los Santos. The chances are, it will get the avatar killed, with armed men appearing from everywhere around, attacking without further warning. Again, the algorithmic inevitability of such a pattern results in a supposedly natural state of affairs in which racialized minorities are shown to be inevitably and naturally inclined to raw, unmitigated violence.<sup>11</sup>

Rendering all people and cars out of *Finding Fanon II* the two artists and their avatars seek to avoid all direct confrontations with the racialized programming in the game and its socio-political implications. Yet, like the repressed unconscious of psychoanalysis, *GTA V*'s programmed patterns might be covered over and held in suspense, but they have by no means been left for good. For those viewers of *Finding Fanon II* who know *GTA V*, the racialised violence built into the game will be only a few steps away, separated from the visible and playable only by a few frames, or covered by the thinnest layer of digital manipulation.<sup>12</sup>

### ***'Black Skin, White Tasks' – the commodification of black culture for white players***

It is thus in the gameplay mechanisms of *GTA V* that *Finding Fanon* finds 'all this whiteness [that] burns me to a cinder' (Fanon 2008: 94). As misplaced as the term 'whiteness' might appear at first in the context of the construction of racialised, *black* game mechanisms, it points us in the direction of the neocolonial dimension at the centre of *Finding Fanon's* critique. The blackness in *Grand Theft Auto V* that the artists' avatars shy away from is one created for the consumption of gamers that

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<sup>11</sup> For this point, see also Paul Barrett, who writes about *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*: 'Driving along the wrong street at the wrong time of day is reason enough for why CJ is suddenly shot at. Similarly, there is no explanation for the state of CJ's own neighborhood, a pseudo-shantytown literally under a bridge. Nor is any explanation given as to why CJ's friends are all unemployed, parentless gangbangers. Instead, the game begins with these things as a given—they are natural to the environment in which the game is set' (2006: 100).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, at 06:55 mins into the film, the viewer can see a person on the beach in the background who then quickly disappears. Approaching David Blandy with this find, he confesses that he still cringes every time he watches this scene and witnesses its imperfection.

are conceived as predominantly Western, white, male and middle class. Paradoxically, then, the blackness offered in *GTA* is one that is *white*. As David Leonard (2006a) observes in relation to *GTA: San Andreas*, the invitation to play an African American gangbanger not only added extra fuel to the game's critics and their calls to protect 'America's youth (read: white middle class) from these indecent and immoral games' (Leonard, 2006a: loc. 949), but also gave an extra boost to game sales and players' enjoyment. Leonard quotes an enthusiastic review of *GTA: San Andreas* on Amazon.com, saying that: 'Like all the other "Grand Theft Auto" games, this is going to be great. Only this time is [sic] the ultimate game .... Playing a gangsta this time is going to be tight' (Leonard, 2006a: loc. 1064).

When the narrator in *Finding Fanon II* states that white people now 'want to wear our masks, mimic our movements' (4:07), this is perfectly in line with the tradition of critical thinking about the commodification and consumption of blackness – a tradition of 'eating the other' (hooks, 1992) exemplified by the Amazon review quoted by Leonard. While Fanon describes how colonialism keeps people apart by constructing blackness and whiteness as exclusionary categories – '[t]he white man is locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness' (Fanon, 2008 [1952]: xiii–xiv) – the Achiampong and Blandy's film gestures towards the fact that such categories are very much alive in contemporary game culture and are also upheld by the game's players, through their embrace of the 'black' experience that the game provides. Interviews that Kiri Miller (2008) conducted with players of *GTA: San Andreas* reinforce this point. One player states: 'I feel that [the rap music in *San Andreas*] is the most appropriate music to play while performing antisocial behaviour' another states that '[I]t's nice to do drive-bys [i.e. drive-by shootings; S.K.] while listening to Dr Dre sing "Nuthin' but a G Thang"' (Miller, 2008). Here, in the gameplay experience of the interviewed players, antisocial behaviour, shootings and black culture are matched, enjoyed and consumed in a way that endears primarily white players to their black avatars. 'I wouldn't usually listen to rap, and only do in-game because CJ would,' confesses another player from Miller's interviews. For white players, the possibility of playing the 'bad – black – guy' and performing what Leonard (2004) calls 'high-tech blackface' thus comes with various invitations to

empathise with, and develop loyalty to, their black avatar. However, to expect that such identification would automatically help create an understanding of the fate of black people in Western society or alleviate their plight is overly optimistic at the least. As Leonard states those embracing the black experience of the game also accept 'the virtual inscriptions of the ghetto' – although often unwittingly – and are thus taken to reactualise established power structures through the celebration and enactment of their 'ghettocentric imagination' (Leonard, 2006a: loc. 1208).

### ***Black self-commodification***

By refraining from setting the game's racialised mechanisms in motion, Achiampong and Blandy stage an avoidance and refusal of this 'ghettocentric imagination; a refusal that makes this it possible to reflect this imagination. My reading here contrasts with Souvik Mukherjee's optimistic assessment of the potential of video games. For him, 'it is the actualisation by the player that results in a deeper understanding and experience of the postcolonial' (Mukherjee, 2016: 15). As *SOD* revealed aspects of *Wolfenstein's* gameplay, *Finding Fanon II* reveals the racial logics at work in *GTA V*. In this respect, what *Finding Fanon II* does is to expand on the existing critique of the game by introducing the perspective of a player at and from the margins. That this is still no small task can be gathered from the existing scholarship on *GTA* to which the present article has referred. As instructive as this literature is, more often than not it tacitly presupposes a white middle-class player as the subject of its inquiries replicating *GTA's* marketing strategies (on these, see Kerr, 2006).

*Finding Fanon II* puts to use the *GTA V* in-game avatar generator to address this issue. Offering the opportunity to match a player's real-life likeness with the creation of an avatar, this generator facilitates the fantasy of inserting a player directly into the game and thus collapsing (if only in play) fiction and reality. This metalepsis (The 'paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told')<sup>13</sup> is now a standard feature in the online mode of *GTA V*, with Lamar,

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<sup>13</sup> (The Living Handbook of Narratology: un-hamburg.de, 2013). On the use of metalepsis in the *GTA* series, see Bailey (2006).

Franklin's drug dealing African American friend, picking up new players from the airport and initiating them into the 'thug experience'. In *Finding Fanon* it serves a critical function, which comes to the fore through comparison. Viewers of parts I and II of *Finding Fanon* witness the transformation of the artists' likenesses into avatars and can thus compare the changes brought about in each of them. In the artists' own experience, this transformation was tied to significant losses, especially for Achiampong. In our conversation, he told me that he was not able to find templates in the *GTA V* game engine to adequately reproduce his hair and skin tone. Through this dearth of available options and a subtle 'aggressivisation' of expressions, gestures and mannerisms, his transformation into a 'pimp' and 'gangster' appears more striking than in Blandy's case.

In comparison, then, the insertion of the two players into the game makes perceivable the implicit Western expectations as to who should be *playing* the game and who should '*be played*'. In this respect, Achiampong's avatar in particular becomes approximated to a (stereo)typical in-game character. At the same time, however, due to the comparison that *Finding Fanon* facilitates, viewers can safely identify this player-avatar with Achiampong's real-life person. This suggests a double inversion of the white gaze built into *GTA V*. Collapsing player and played, gamer and 'gamed', *Finding Fanon* creates a situation in which a player from an ethnic minority group is inserted into the context of a game that otherwise excludes him/her by commodifying, objectifying and turning him/her into a tourist attraction (c.f. Nakamura, 1995). By the same token, the artwork creates an imaginary situation in which the game's racialised stock figures are made to look onto the game itself and, by extension, onto the cultural-political situation that keeps ties them to virtual as well as actual stereotypes.

Beyond the racialised game mechanisms, then, what the two protagonists in *Finding Fanon* seek to escape from by restlessly roaming the *GTA* game world is not only the commodification of black people and their lifeworlds on the part of *white* players, but acts of *self-objectification* and *self-commodification* that the game suggests for *black, or ethnic minority players*. Teaching black players how to be black

in a way that makes sense within the frame of a white, neocolonial rationality, *GTA V* risks becoming one of the tools of a renewed cultural imperialism: what scholars have called 'media imperialism' (Boyd-Barrett, 1977) or 'electronic colonialism' (McPhail, 1981). By planting a 'white habitus' (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006: 231), i.e. a 'racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010: 104) into players from the margins, the game effectively keeps these players at the margins and, in so doing, keeps in place structures that date back to colonial times. *Finding Fanon II* protests against these ideological tendencies, but it does so tacitly and through a strategy of avoidance. Without the opportunity to create a valid expression of their own inside the game, the avatars are condemned to roam the game world like ghosts. If it were not for *Finding Fanon I* and *III* framing part *II* in addition to the non-diegetic elements (first and foremost: the narrator) giving it context, Achiampong's avatar in particular would be condemned to a 'subaltern' (Spivak, 1999) existence, i.e. 'a voice from below that can never articulate itself' (Mukherjee, 2016: 2).

### ***'Facing Fanon' – the academic debate on GTA from a Fanonian perspective***

It is in the face of the global proliferation of 'white habitus' (furthered in part by phenomena such as *GTA V*) that the invocation of Fanon in *Finding Fanon II* unfolds its subversive force. In an attempt to counter the default position of black people as subaltern in products of the culture industry, the film invokes Fanon by virtue of the very elements of the game that cast their neocolonial spell over players from the margins. The Fanon thus invoked, however, is no longer the intellectual leader of a movement towards a utopian world order, but the angrily resisting naysayer. By holding the game's violence in suspense and making its uncanny presence perceivable, the film manages to turn it against the game itself. The raw, uncontained energy oozing from the pimp and gangster-like looks that *GTA* attributes to the avatars is made to evoke the violence that Fanon calls upon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001). In the introduction to this book, Fanon writes:

'The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world [...] will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities. To blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject' (Fanon, 2001: 5–6).

This angry desire echoes and reverberates in *Finding Fanon II*. Each time the artists' avatars turn to look at each other, there is a distinct feel of confrontation (see **Figures 8** and **9**). 'Facing the game world and facing each other, it is as though the characters are turning Fanon's unforgiving gaze and his anger at the stagnation of the decolonisation process towards *GTA V* and the social realities that it helps perpetuate.

However, this Fanonian anger, which *GTA V* is forced to own, does not exhaust itself in its critique of the game. Rather, it also points beyond it and towards the ways in which the game series has repeatedly been defended and apologised for by academics, who time and again have emphasised the ambiguity in its use of humour and irony. For example, Mikolaj Dymek and Thomas Lennefors suggest with reference



**Figure 8:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 01:37.



**Figure 9:** Achiampong and Blandy, *Finding Fanon II*, 2015, 06:09.

to *GTA III* that '[b]y bringing forth the stereotypes that are the player's, the player is granted opportunity to reflect upon them' (2005: 11). Tanner Higgin, in turn, sees the *GTA* series as offering variations of 'performative spaces wherein the player stages a fantasy that satirizes and demythologizes the outside world', claiming further that 'the player undergoes a becoming [...] which re-sensitizes her to the violent structures of the world in order to better understand and navigate them' (2006: loc. 1362). David Annandale, meanwhile, reads *GTA: San Andreas* as a 'subversive carnival' and CJ as the 'carnival king', claiming that 'the denunciations from on high' that *GTA: San Andreas* in particular received, 'grant the game the very powers the hegemonic forces fear' (2006, loc. 1919). The list could be continued. What is important here, though, is *Finding Fanon's* stance towards this vision of the liberational effects of irony. By evoking, yet ultimately refraining from *enacting* the game's racialised forms of interaction, the artwork implies that, no matter how carnivalesque the attempt at their subversion, they will remain toxic and should simply be avoided.

There is no doubt that irony, parody and satire have the power to unfold a subversive force – the power to make us aware of the dubious political underpinnings of our actions and the contexts we move in. However, in the case of *GTA*, for this force to be harnessed in a liberating way, irony would need an opening towards something different – a utopian spark and a line of flight towards a changed vision

of reality. In line with Redmond's (2006) critique of *GTA: San Andreas*, I do not see such an opening in *GTA V* and the reading of *Finding Fanon II* offered here suggests that Achiampong and Blandy cannot locate one either. Roaming the game world in search of Fanon's vision of a truly decolonised state, the avatars come up against the same old stereotypes, offered for the consumption of white (or 'whitened') players whose engagement ultimately reproduces power structures that reach back to colonial times. When Slavoj Žižek (1989) suggests that ideology can no longer be found in what people *say* and *think* but rather needs to be looked for in what people actually *do*, this offers an instructive way to assess the function of irony in *GTA V*. By virtue of its ironic depictions of race, players might indeed be granted insight into the dynamics and structures that keep the existing order in place and can thus feel empowered and enlightened by the knowledge received by playing the game. Yet, in the overwhelming majority of cases, this feeling of empowerment will exhaust itself in the savvy consumption of the ironic product itself. We play the game, are in on the joke, are critical of its social representations and then ... we play some more. In this way, irony ultimately allows us to consume and enjoy more of what, intellectually, we should be able to leave behind. Moreover, if the seemingly unending chain of incidents of racial violence in the US is anything to go by, the power relations between minority groups and the white mainstream have de facto not changed. Against our better judgement, we keep on shooting and being shot at, in both the virtual and the real world.

### **Conclusion – *The Limits of the Traversable World***

Evoking *GTA*'s fraught forms of interaction and holding them in suspense re-enacts the core truth of the works of Frantz Fanon, namely the interchanging between two contradictory movements: a Fanon who 'said "no"' and a Fanon 'who asserted his loyalty to a new world' (Macey, 2010: 33). This movement is by no means unproductive in its contradictoriness. In the case of *Finding Fanon II*, it turns the dammed-up, violent energies of colonialism, which *GTA V* holds in store, against the game itself. In this way, the film lets its viewers experience the neocolonial impact of the game, namely the reproduction, normalisation and naturalisation of the place of black people in Western society. Making this point from inside the game, *Finding*

*Fanon* makes it clear that its critique is not a re-enactment of the moral panics that followed the releases of games in the *GTA* series, but an informed assessment from two of *GTA V*'s players. Furthermore, by letting viewers witness the transformation of its protagonists into avatars, *Finding Fanon* offers a correction of the implicit preoccupation of scholarship on *GTA* with white middle-class players (i.e. the players that Rockstar targets). In view of the identifications with the role of the black gangster that *GTA* makes possible, *Finding Fanon* suggests that players from minority groups are also at risk in taking on the game's white frame of reference. Such acceptance further suggests a process of self-commodification in which black players again take on those roles and patterns of identification that are made available to them. In this way, I have argued, the game could effectively work as a new tool driving cultural imperialism. By evoking the anger of the late Frantz Fanon, *Finding Fanon* rejects these roles. When Fanon says vis-à-vis the everyday racism he experienced in France that 'laughter had become out of the question' (2008: 91), this drawing of a line is exactly what the film wants to achieve. The irony that repeatedly saved the *GTA* series from its colonial, racial implications withers away under the unforgiving scrutiny of Fanon's anticolonial project.

Ultimately, however, Achiampong and Blandy also resist Fanon's call to 'destroy the colonial world' and demolish 'the colonist's sector' (Fanon, 2001: 6). The two avatars never turn the violence that is stowed in the game onto one another or their surroundings. While Homi K. Bhabha rightly states that he finds Fanon's positive stance towards violence 'deeply troubling' (2004: xviii), what saves *Finding Fanon II* from the same troubling connotations is the connection between the two artists, even if it is still an unsure one. The desire to banish 'the colonist's sector' (Fanon, 2001: 6), fed by the game and turned onto it, is never discharged in it, never bundled into an act of violence – however virtual that act might be in the game's context. Rather, in the knowledge of the lived, everyday reality of the neocolonial, this violence is sublimated and directed towards the other in the form of a question. 'Do you really think Fanon is here?', the voice from the off quotes from the two men's conversation. Unable to settle in the virtual game world of *GTA V* and unable to find harmony with each other, the surprising answer is 'yes'. Only, it is not the Fanon they had hoped to find.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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