Let us begin with contrasting virtual landscapes. First: a slow tracking shot, moving in toward a virtual reproduction of Los Angeles’ Griffith Observatory. It is the first shot of American avant-garde filmmaker Phil Solomon’s 2007 video Last Days in a Lonely Place, the middle entry in his trilogy of videos In Memoriam, Mark LaPore. Created, like the first video in the series—2005’s Rehearsals for Retirement—from footage captured from Rockstar North’s 2004 game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Last Days in a Lonely Place finds Solomon mixing visual effects achievable within the game with his own video post-processing to transform the game’s fictional metropolis of Los Santos into a moody, black-and-white noir-scape.

Next, some footage I myself captured from the PC version of Rockstar’s Grand Theft Auto V, released earlier this year. Returning to Los Santos a decade after Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Grand Theft Auto V contains several familiar landmarks from its predecessor, here sporting all the cosmetic benefits of 11 years of developments in consumer-grade graphics technologies.
Returning to Solomon’s work, this time *Rehearsals for Retirement*: A crossroad in the *San Andreas* desert, near dusk—butted up against a similar crossroad, in *Grand Theft Auto V*:

![Image](image1)

Here we see Solomon steering a plane toward a desert landing strip in *San Andreas*, versus me attempting to match his descent, in a corresponding landing strip in *Grand Theft Auto V*:

![Image](image2)

As we examine Solomon’s footage from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, and my own footage captured from *Grand Theft Auto V*, I would like to call attention to the different sort of visual engagement required of viewers when approaching each respective game. The graphical quality of *San Andreas*, as mediated through Solomon, is noticeably rougher than that of *Grand Theft Auto V*—something that should come as no surprise, given the technological developments that occurred between their releases. As spectators, there is a way in which *San Andreas* asks more of us—its lack of verisimilitude demands more leeway of visual interpretation, its reduced visual fidelity requires more work when it comes to the simple act of recognizing images as objects.
Within both popular and academic literature on videogames, this extra work is frequently cast in terms of players’ “imagination.” Within the common teleological narratives of videogame graphics technology, various degrees of graphical abstraction are an involuntary product of technological limitation, which will eventually be cast off as consumer hardware reaches the ability to produce Hollywood-level CGI in real-time. Until that time, however, players’ imagination has acted as a necessary corrective to abstraction—a corrective that has been required less and less with each passing year. Don Dagrow, developer of the pioneering simulation/strategy game *Utopia*, released in 1981 for Mattel’s Intellivision console, expresses this strain of thought clearly in interview:

“The obligation in the early days of games was heavily on the user for willing suspension of disbelief. That probably shows up in *Utopia*. We really did ask users to use their imagination. And because that whole idea of computer graphics telling a story was so fresh, they were ready to do it. Users would come with us, very willingly, in that setting.”

There is something unsatisfying about this position—something, I want to suggest, that it does not get quite right. Here, I do not simply mean the teleological narrative, in which player imagination, necessary in the early stages of gaming graphics technology, will eventually fade from usefulness altogether as games become a manifestation of André Bazin’s total cinema—“a recreation of the world in its own image,” a completely transparent medium, indistinguishable from our sensory experience of physical reality.² No, beyond this, I think there is also something unsatisfying about the evocation of “the imagination” in this context, at all. To suppose that players “imagine” a better-looking world when they play games of a certain era is to presuppose an intervening layer, a sort of buffer that prevents players from having to encounter the raw abstraction of videogame

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graphics. But we do encounter this abstraction. We negotiate it constantly, and consciously. Or, at least, we can.

As indicated by their collective title, Solomon’s *In Memoriam, Mark LaPore* trilogy of videos—*Rehearsals for Retirement, Last Days in a Lonely Place*, and *Still Raining, Still Dreaming* (2008–2009), represent a deeply personal project, a work of mourning that memorializes Solomon’s friend and fellow filmmaker Mark LaPore. Any complete reckoning of these videos’ imagery and place within Solomon’s oeuvre must necessarily account for the various ways in which they pay homage to LaPore, and act as an expression of Solomon’s grief. Indeed, other critics and analysts have done an admirable job of accounting for such dimensions. Today, however, I want to undertake a different, more focused task, examining how Solomon’s videos foreground and transform the precarity of a certain era of videogame imagery—a tactic, I argue, has a deep connection to the videos’ overall aesthetic and emotional palettes.

In particular, I feel that Solomon’s videos present surprisingly deep investigations into the question of *what videogames ask of us*—not as *players* (for, let us remember that interactivity is stripped from the world of *Grand Theft Auto* when we encounter it through the intervention of Solomon’s videos), but rather as *viewers*. How do we negotiate the precarious abstractions of images created with limited graphical horsepower? How are commonplace notions of players’ “imagining” of game worlds disrupted by the bracketing of interaction?

Normally, the process of granting games’ assets their mimetic aspirations would arrive simultaneously with the process of enacting a game’s fiction, via play. Within the standard narratives of player imagination, coming to peace with a game’s paucity of verisimilitude is positioned as part of a tradeoff, a worthy entrance fee for the experience of being granted active participation within a fictional scenario. But Solomon alters the terms of this tradeoff. When viewing Solomon’s videos,
we are not in the driver’s seat. Interactivity is yanked away, and the act of agreeing to see game assets as the things they purport to be becomes roughened.

Solomon revels in this roughening, making no effort to make the mimetic project easy. Drawn to the soft visual poetry of graphical imperfections, he casts a lingering, loving gaze on rough edges—edges such as the grass that punctures the floor of a hearse as it drives through a field, swimming uninterruptedly through the coffin it transports in Rehearsals for Retirement. His purpose, however, never seems to be simply to mock the inadequacies of these models. Rather, in pushing the boundaries of mimesis and abstraction, he creates more work for us to grant these models their representational aims, as a way of testing whether we are up to the task.

In removing interactivity from Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Solomon shakes its world loose—but he stops short of breaking it. We can contrast this to other video artists working with appropriated game imagery. A work such as JODI’s 2006 browser-based machinima piece max payne CHEATS ONLY has as its goal the straightforward breaking of the world of Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne (Remedy Entertainment, 2003), laying bare the various tricks and cheats used to prop it up, leaving behind only a universe of nonsensical, broken graphical facts. A work such as Rehearsals for Retirement, by contrast, engages perhaps in some mild de-worlding. But its ultimate goal is not to destroy mimesis, but to call attention to it—to dwell upon the perceptual labor that can sometimes be involved in seeing something as something.

To allow something to be seen as something as it is not … to grant a representation’s mimetic aspirations. As we circle around this act, there are theoretical reference points that could aid us in mapping it out: Coleridge’s willing suspension of disbelief, Wollheim’s seeing-in and seeing-as, or even Walton’s recasting of representation as make-believe. I am drawn, however, to a different reference point—one much stranger, but, I think, ultimately fitting: sein lassen
Sein lassen is a term from Heidegger’s writings, usually rendered into English as “to let be.” In typical English usage, “letting be” takes on a passive sense—by “letting something be,” we acquiesce, we allow, we do not interfere with a given state of affairs. But, as John Haugeland points out, diving into the richness of sein lassen, we can also push the verb “to let be” in a more active direction. Sometimes, rather than a mere lack of interference, “letting be” can be an act of enabling or effecting—for instance, Haugeland offers, when “ballplayers say, ‘Let this sidewalk be the goal line.’”

It is this latter, more active sense of “letting be” that best captures the spirit of sein lassen, which Heidegger uses when referring to Dasein’s ability to have entities show up within a given mode of being. We “let a hammer be equipment” when we discover it in its readiness-to-hand, as having a place within our socio-historical network of projects and concerns. We let entities of scientific discovery be when we bring them into the clearing of human understanding. To say that Dasein “lets entities be” is absolutely not to say that Dasein does not interfere with them—rather, it refers to Dasein’s ability to grant a given mode of being to an entity.

“Letting be” is not a formulation of Heidegger’s that has made it into much scholarship on matters of aesthetics and mimesis. This is understandable. While it was liberally deployed in Being and Time and his other writings from the 1920s, the lifespan of the term did not extend into Heidegger’s writings of the 1930s, such as “Origin of the Work of Art,” in which he more thoroughly addressed matters of art and the function of images. It is little wonder, then, that it is missing from the vocabularies of many of those who have even profitably applied Heidegger’s thought to matters of pictorial representation and art’s world-disclosing possibilities.

I do believe, though, that the term has unique utility within the aesthetic realm. To say that we “let [a visual representation] be [what it depicts]” holds some advantages over competing

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formulations, such as we “see [it] as.” One of these advantages comes from the fact that “to let,” in English, can mean “to grant permission.” This bring to the fore the essentially collaborative nature of mimesis. A depiction asks our permission to be something, and we comply by letting it be.

And, importantly, our compliance is not always grounded in an essential deservingness of the depiction. Sometimes, we grant permission for something to be something out of a sense of generosity. Sometimes, we do so even when it creates difficulties for us. There is a labor involved in recognition—especially when one is discussing videogame graphics of a certain era. We reach out, in sympathy, to videogames’ unmet graphical aspirations, and perform no small amount of work on our end to grant them the mimetic status they yearn for.

Solomon’s In Memoriam, Mark LaPore series is rather unique in its respect for the videogame assets the populate it, its participation in this generous work of letting-be. For many other artists who appropriate imagery from videogames, part of the draw is precisely how disposable and crude said imagery is, how worthy of derision, delivered with ironic detachment. Corey Arcangel, for instance, discussing his multi-channel video installation Various Self Playing Bowling Games (2011), makes it clear that ugliness lies at the heart of his aesthetic attachment to the games he re-purposes.4

This fascination with videogames’ startlingly abject attempts at depicting of persons and objects is a current that runs through many works by video artists and experimental filmmakers, detectable not only Arcangel and JODI’s output, but also works such as Peggy Ahwesh’s She Puppet (2001), Seth Price’s Industrial Synth (2000–2001), and Bobby Abate’s One Mile Per Minute (2002). Videogames, in these works, are simultaneously shunned and celebrated as some of the most gloriously ugly kitsch late capitalist culture has dreamed up.

Solomon’s work with Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas in the In Memoriam: Mark Lapore series, however, strikes me as a more thoughtful attempt to wring genuine surrealist beauty from the

models on offer, however much they may fail on a mimetic level. “What intrigued me the most,” Solomon writes about his early experiences with San Andreas, “was the strange poignancy I felt in the game’s polygonal aspirations, its desires to be of the real world that fell short in very interesting ways.” Although containing some surface similarities to Arcangel’s statement, Solomon’s position is wrapped up in a different tenor. Arcangel celebrates degradation, whereas Solomon holds out at least the possibility of redemption. Solomon’s images extend a genuine respect for their Pinocchio-like subjects—not only Carl Johnson, who wants to be a real boy, but also the slowly-spinning pinwheels of needle textures in Last Days in a Lonely Place that want to be trees, the sheets of translucent white in Rehearsals for Retirement that want to be fog, the mishmash of colored planes, reappearing across several videos, that wants to be a bouquet of flowers. There is something off about all of these models, yes, but there is also something haunting, especially when blown up on a 30-foot screen.

According to Jean Epstein, under the power of cinema’s magnification, “the most alluring falsehoods lose their force while the truth bursts forth on first sight, strikes the spectator with the unexpectedness of the evident, and arouses an aesthetic emotion, a sense of infallible wonderment and pleasure.” The effect of the In Memoriam videos, though, is subtler than this, more ambiguous. Do these false trees, fog, and flowers “lose their force” when we see them blown up on the screen? Perhaps. But, simultaneously, they gain force, because we are better able to see their melancholy yearning.

Given the particular positioning of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas in the history of videogame graphics technology, Rehearsals for Retirement and Last Days in a Lonely Place especially benefit from this

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6. I am inspired here by comments made by Solomon at a screening at the University of Chicago Film Studies Center on October 10, 2008.
Pinocchio effect. Arriving a console cycle later than Arcangel’s beloved *Brunswick Circuit Pro Bowling* (on the original PlayStation), *San Andreas* sits in a liminal space between the inadvertently abstract and the breathtakingly verisimilar, between the resoundingly hideous and the conventionally beautiful. The inclusion of fine details, such as the way in which, in the railway tunnel shot of *Rehearsals for Retirement*, individual raindrops can be seen hitting C.J.’s shoulders, allows this world to inspire a certain amount of awe. But the frequent *wrongness* of these details—for instance, how the splashes left by those raindrops fail to properly conform to the contours of C.J.’s shoulders, and instead hover in mid-air beyond the boundaries of his body—admits an uneasiness back into the picture. I do not want to say “uncanniness,” as I do not believe that the images generated by *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* are quite “right” enough for their “wrongness” to unsettle us in any profound way. But there is an *uneasiness* to these models, a feeling of unfulfillment—perhaps a self-consciousness about the evident fact that they do not, strictly speaking, “deserve” to be what they ask to let be.

Solomon obviously does not believe this is a bouquet, that this is a tree, that this is a passing fog. He is not “fooled” in this regard, and neither are we—as players, or as viewers. Our encounter with these images is never a matter of *illusion*, but rather a question of *dignity*. Out of a sense of these images’ dignity, we let these models be what they aspire to be. We let these dancing polygons be a bouquet, be a tree, be a passing fog.

I mentioned earlier the importance of rejecting the game industry’s teleological myth, aligned so perfectly with Bazin’s myth of total cinema, that at a certain point “imagination” will no longer be necessary in players’ engagement with games, because a perfect reproduction of reality will be within the realm of possibility on consumer hardware. And indeed, it is important. But it is also simultaneously important to reflect on the ways in which certain aesthetic effects are always historically positioned.
Post-Memoriam, Solomon has returned to videogame capture as one of the tools within his filmmaking repertoire, for instance working with footage captured from The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) in his 2013 video Psalm IV: “Valley of the Shadow.” There is no denying that Psalm IV carries with it the same mournful tone as its Grand Theft Auto-based predecessors, with techniques such as booming, borrowed voice over narration and a blue-black color palette reappearing.

But there is, at least to my eye, something missing in Psalm IV’s endeavor—something that points to the historical specificity of the San Andreas-based works. Rehearsals for Retirement and Last Days in a Lonely Place benefit from the particular historical position the graphics of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas hold, between the appallingly ugly and the hyper-verisimilar. There is more room for Solomon to insert—and, indeed, to assert—his poetic sensibility when he casts his loving gaze upon models so obviously imperfect. By the time we get to Psalm IV, however, the intrusion of conventionally pretty game imagery disrupts Solomon’s poetic workspace. The constraints that Solomon works under do not feel as stiff, and so his navigation of them does not feel as impressively agile.

There is always labor in letting-be. But all acts of letting-be are not equally generous … and the onward march of game technology, it seems, is robbing us of some of the careful sympathy of earlier eras. The fragile precarity of these assets was waned, and, much like children growing up, they are less in need of our constant support.

And as always, there is a melancholy to such developments.