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## Fear and Loathing in GTA V by Morten Rockford Ravn



Sometimes I make brief escapes from the humdrum of city life and venture into the woods to capture the majesty of nature. I ride around on my bicycle like a madman looking for interesting subjects to capture. The last time I did this, my beloved camera bounced out of my pocket somewhere along the bumpy road; I'd gotten some good shots that day, quite a few actually, and keeping a stoic attitude while backtracking in search of my lost camera became increasingly difficult. Not only was the camera lost, I was lost.

When I'm out by myself taking photographs, I let my instinct guide me without regard for anything else. Usually this leads me on some great adventures, and this time around was no different, except I didn't know it, yet.

What proceeded following the unfortunate incident was a discovery sending me down the rabbit hole of in-game photography. My camera was lost, but my will to take photographs on a daily basis was as strong as ever. In my restlessness I threw myself down on the sofa and turned on the Playstation 4. GTA V was on, cool.



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At the core we have the mind-body problem, the lack of physicality; when you immerse yourself in virtual reality your body is mostly rather stagnant. In contrast my exploits photographing nature are extremely dynamic, I'm on the move, fresh air in my hair, and it feels great. When I'm staring into the screen, I enter into a trance-like state after a while, and a growing despair sets in. This discontentment is what I tried to capture on a metaphoric level. A sort of virtual gonzo journalism emerged where I would influence the environment, if need be, to capture the abstract fear I was exploring.

Hunter S. Thompson based his idea of gonzo journalism on the notion by William Faulkner that "fiction is often the best fact", this idea might seem counter-intuitive, but as any student of Joseph Campbell will know, it's a timeless idea that goes all the way back to ancient mythology. At the core we have the mind-body problem, the lack of physicality; when you immerse yourself in virtual reality your body is mostly rather stagnant. In contrast my exploits photographing nature are extremely dynamic, I'm on the move, fresh air in my hair, and it feels great. When I'm staring into the screen, I enter into a trance-like state after a while, and a growing despair sets in. This discontentment is what I tried to capture on a metaphoric level. A sort of virtual gonzo journalism emerged where I would influence the environment, if need be, to capture the abstract fear I was exploring.

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The loathing comes from the social critique within the game, an often overlooked aspect, despite the fact it's everywhere. Once I started looking more deeply at the GTA universe, as one tends to do with any photographic subject, I started seeing it and my focal point shifted naturally towards this aspect of the world I was exploring.

In this article I will attempt to dissect some of the key photographs from my project and shed light on the process. I will try to arm you with a few ideas, so that you too can explore this new frontier of photography.



## Limits of Control

I'm a strong believer that creativity thrive under limitations, when you limit yourself to a form or subject you tend to sharpen your focus, which allows you to go deep enough to get to the essence. I was inspired by the Dogme 95 movement created by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, whose goal was to "purify filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, post-production modifications and other technical gimmicks".

My personal adaptation, in this case, came from limiting myself to only using the in-game camera phone with the B&W filter in order to highlight the existential despair I was trying to express. By having to pull out the camera phone every time and switch the filter, I had to anticipate events and position myself more carefully, which resulted in situations that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

In the above photo, I was stalking this train yard welder for about 30 minutes before he finally "decided" to strike this mysterious pose.

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## Finding the Perfect Shot

My approach was rather simple to begin with: I would just cruise around and look for anything interesting. As my knowledge of the Los Santos (The city where the game takes place) landscape increased, I found some spots that I would re-visit more often than others.



In GTA, everything is built with a purpose down to the last pixel, yet the algorithm allows for randomness on a previously unseen scale. I went to this spot countless times, more than a hundred in fact, before I found this guy, in this position, right there on the beach; a place full of tourists in various states of leisurely relaxation in the daytime.

This is shot at sunset, and what happens when the sun goes down? Another reality becomes visible. Here's a homeless guy with all his earthly possessions in the foreground, looking at me, looking at him. Unfazed, within his sad reality. Behind him is an abandoned and destroyed ship, and even further out at the shore, we see the ferris wheel, a symbol of joy, as night descends upon our tragic subject.

This sort of metaphoric anatomy was what I was looking to capture. In my opinion this is one of the most successful photographs of the series, as it encapsulates the duality and inherent friction of the project perfectly.

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## Nothing Beats “Natural” Light

Of course, nothing is quite natural within virtual realities, strictly speaking, that being said the lighting in GTA is superb. The light was my guide in these exploits. This shot is a hopeful one, despite the main subject of a homeless colony living under the train tracks. The light represents the hope of transcending one’s current reality, however bleak it might be – even within more depressing places, beauty can be found. however bleak it might be – even within more depressing places, beauty can be found.

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## Using What You Have to Get What You Need

Even with all the complexity and endless opportunities, you're still limited to certain points of view, you simply cannot move as freely as you're used to in the real world. You can't duck, jump, or change the angle a few degrees. You have to get creative.

How did I get the highlight on the girl? By sitting on a motorcycle, using the headlights as spots. That's how. Picking up little tricks like this along the way can be useful to elevate the craft and get results that will have other connoisseurs scratching their heads.

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## **Perspective (This Was Not Shot by a Drone)**

Climbing on top of buildings is a great way to get interesting perspectives. Look at the way the people act down in the street, all confused underneath wires within the maze of big city life. If you look closely, you'll see their behavior is kind of strange: something is going on, but what?

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## Influencing the Environment

As the project evolved, I started finding ways of influencing the behavior of the inhabitants to get shots that would otherwise be impossible. In Los Santos there's a movie studio where they're shooting a sci-fi movie, the actors walk around in costumes, like the astronaut you see above. There's also guards walking around, keeping the peace – by using force.

What I discovered was that the guards would attack anyone causing trouble, even the actors. I would start a fight with the astronaut, run over to the guard, deliberately let myself get hit by the astronaut in front of the guard, at which point the guard would attack the astronaut. The astronaut is still out to get me, and I have to pull out my camera phone, put on the B&W filter before I can get a shot — if I get hit the camera phone automatically goes away.

As you might imagine, I spend a lot of time wreaking havoc in the movie studio before I got this shot, but it was worth it.

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## Making a Scene

Here's another example of me causing chaos to get an interesting shot. Again, there's certain limitations you have to work with, if you cause too much trouble, the cops turn up and makes your job of taking photographs increasingly difficult. When you get hit or shot, the camera goes away, so you have to be smart.

To make this scene I had to create a domino effect, and direct attention away from myself so that I could capture it. I would block two car lanes with a truck, watch the cars stack up, throw a hand grenade into the mix, and then watch all hell break loose – for the purpose of making art, of course.

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## Storytelling

By making a scene, stories emerge. Your job is to capture the stories within the frame, in the best possible way, to express whatever you're trying to express. In movies, as well as in photographs, I believe there's always one shot, one way of composing the frame that's "best", arbitrary as it may sound. It sounds arbitrary, because it is. What you have at your disposal, along with what you're trying to express is what creates the dynamic you operate within.

The story in the above photograph is a classic whodunit? Where the obvious answer is: Me! This is my perspective, abstract as it may be. I only used this photograph because it easily illustrates my point, in actuality, from a compositional standpoint, I'm not a big fan of it, and it even strays a little from my main idea about this project. It does, however, have some redeemable qualities, like the blank stare from the dear officer, while he's being photographed by the perpetrator.

Also, the project evolved, and I ended up with roughly 200 photographs. If I were to exhibit this project (which I might do) I would boil it down drastically to get to the essence and to increase the overall quality. This might be obvious to some, but not all, when you remove 99% of your material you're left with the essence, and your project becomes much more potent. When you shoot a movie you might have 1.000 hours of footage, but you need to boil it down to 2 hours. Same goes for photographic projects.

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## Glitch in the Matrix

Once you got the basics down you can move into more advanced territory, in this project I wanted to appeal to many different audiences, on different levels, without dumbing it down to the lowest common denominator. It needed to work on the most basic aesthetic level, composition, light, subject etc. And more importantly, it needed to work on the metaphoric level, as it was in essence a conceptual project.

Finally, I also wanted to give something new to people already intimately familiar with the universe of GTA. If you have ever played the game, I'm sure you've never seen anyone move like the guy in the above photograph, GTA characters don't move like that. Unless you find glitches, which is a combination of luck and hard work. Finding glitches opens up a whole other dimension when it comes to in-game photography, and the possibilities are endless.

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## Go with the Flow

The last and most important lesson is to stay fluid. Not once did I plan or preconceive a photograph, everything arose as a result of instinct, and evolved on the spot. The subconscious is much vaster than the conscious mind. By letting go, and going with the flow you learn to trust your intuition and get much more interesting results in process.

In a time where everything is being quantified, intuition becomes golden in creating contrapuntal work that stands in stark contrast to the more sterile work created by forcing one's will unto the work.

This is perhaps the most abstract lesson, it takes hard work and time to shift your perspective in accordance with this idea, but you will be rewarded for your patience and once again creating your work will feel like the adventures you had as a child building go-carts, exploring new places and the likes.

## Conclusion

In-game photography is a new frontier for photographers. When the first GTA came out in 1997, it was a pixelated 2D game; now it's so complex it's almost possible to take photographs indistinguishable from physical reality. My photographs were taken on the Playstation 4 version by the way, on PC the graphics are even more realistic with the right hardware.

Bottom line is that these virtual realities will only become closer and closer to physical reality, which makes them extremely attractive as subjects to dive into without the restraints we're used to in the real world. A new dimension is opening up, and we have a shot at getting in on the ground floor.