



10.2478/abcsj-2025-0016

Living the Dream, Playing the Nightmare:
Remediation as the Critique of the American Dream in
American Arcadia (2023)

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Abstract

The 2023 game *American Arcadia*, set in a dystopian reality show with the same name and a 1970s design, follows the epic escape of the main character Trevor, aided by his ally Angela, a programmer-hacker operating from outside Arcadia. The game, similar to a few other recent titles, challenges the American Dream of unlimited spatial and social mobility. Its novelty, however, is that *American Arcadia* implements a dual-character game mechanic, where Trevor has to proceed in a 2,5D platform-puzzle game, while Angela works as a hacker in a 3D environment, assisting him by undermining the behind-the-scenes infrastructure of Walton Media, the corporation behind the reality show.

The present essay seeks to analyse the game as a critical commentary on the American Dream, and, by extension, on neoliberal ideology. Using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of remediation as a theoretical framework, this study offers to conduct a close reading analysis of the game mechanics, narrative and symbolism. It argues that the game oscillates between hypermediacy and immediacy to expose that the in-game space of *American Arcadia* is not a utopia built on the remediation of the American dream, but rather a dystopia that makes all aspirations to freedom impossible.

Keywords: neoliberalism, freedom, remediation, simulacrum, 1990s, dystopia, utopia, hypermediacy, hyperreal

Introduction

When Out of the Blue released *American Arcadia*¹ in 2023, the reviews did not fail to notice how the game evokes a vintage feel (Bailes; Bell).

Indeed, the visuals, the theme and the narrative equally seem to echo bygone eras. Set in a reality show with a 1970s design entitled *American Arcadia*, the game follows the escape of the main character Trevor, an average everyman, aided by his ally Angela, a programmer-hacker operating from outside Arcadia. While Trevor moves from pure ignorance to slowly realizing his position in the reality show and fights his way out of the seemingly idyllic, artificial dome, he slowly finds out, together with Angela, that not only the showrunners, the Walton family, are implicated in keeping the inhabitants captive against their will for the sake of the show, but the drama-hungry spectators are also to blame. The nostalgic tone set by the Seventies inside-Arcadia aesthetics is complemented by a late Nineties-reminiscent low-poly graphic style and by the game's premise of what may be called the "simulacrum genre" – cultural products commenting on simulacra – which is also reminiscent of the same, pre-millennial decade. Originally published in 1981, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* both responded to and helped shape emerging cultural conceptualisations of the virtual – a concept that had been developing throughout the 70s but gained momentum with the rise of digital media in the 1980s. As Baudrillard suggests, we are surrounded by media-generated images that not only dim "actual reality" but overwrite it, exposing the fact that there is no original behind it: this is the order of the *hyperreal* – "more real than the real" (11). Later, the widespread use of the World Wide Web confirmed Baudrillard's assumption, and popular imagination also claimed simulacra as objects of critical reflection. As critics such as Alice Bell point out, it is *The Truman Show* (1998) that shows the most similarity with *American Arcadia*. Roughly when *The Truman Show* was released, other films such as *The Matrix* (1999) or *eXistenZ* (1999) also tackled issues like primary and secondary realities, and the individual's freedom to act within the restraints of simulacrum worlds shaped by the omnipresence of screens, offering explicit critique of late capitalism and its neoliberalist economics and ideology. In *American Arcadia*, much like in *The Truman Show*, the vision of an idyllic world that is so often presented by late capitalism is inextricably linked to various competing and complementary versions of the American

Dream (Erar), conceived both as a fantasy space and as the ethos of an individual's efforts being proportionate with their achievements.

A logical plot device to match this abundance of simulated pocket universes² – both in the aforementioned late-nineties films and in the 2023 game *American Arcadia* – is that of the escape: the protagonist trying to break the shackles of simulacra in pursuit of reality behind the scenes. Truman in *The Truman Show*, for example, ultimately finds what is depicted as a happy ending by leaving through a door at the margin of his bubble universe, and Neo of *The Matrix*, once he escapes, realises that the “outside” of his simulacrum is in fact “the desert of real.”³ In *American Arcadia*, the escape plot joins a rich tradition within the history of video gaming, too. Present from at least the widespread use of home consoles and PCs – again, emerging in the 1980s – games where the player character needs to escape a room or a facility (escape games) are well-controllable from a game design point of view as they can function in limited spaces and work well with technological constraints. Besides, they are highly enjoyable for players as the gameplay is often concise, there is a meaningful objective, and they have the potential to offer a pleasurable combination of puzzle and skill, while also encouraging looking for clues, hence promoting environmental storytelling. Therefore, escape plots in games are well-suited to a number of videoludic genres ranging from point-and-clicks through first-person stealth games to 2,5D platform-puzzle titles such as *Limbo* (2010), *Inside* (2015), *Black: The Fall* (2014), *Little Nightmares* (2017) or the subject matter of this essay, *American Arcadia*. From this point, it is a small step to combine the escape plot with dystopian world-building, as seen in all the 2,5D titles mentioned above.

Upon first looking at *American Arcadia*, then, it might sound reasonable to dismiss its premise as slightly dated for its clear resonance with earlier escape games and even more so, with late-1990s cultural sensibilities. However, I propose to analyse the game considering the medial shift that took place from the 1990s to the 2020s, and to look at the novel ways of socio-cultural commentary it is capable to offer. Relying on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of remediation as a theoretical framework, this study offers a close reading analysis⁴ of the game mechanics, narrative and symbolism of the game, focusing on how

propaganda is exposed as discourse through an abundance of screens. I contend that a potentially distinctive feature of *American Arcadia* both in the context of hyperreal pocket universes and escape video games is that it stages an oscillation between a desire for immediacy – rooted in the remediation of the American Dream – and the reality of variously shaped and sized, often cascading screens that expose it as a hypermediated dystopia. I map this duality of immediacy and hypermediacy onto the dual-character single-player puzzle game mechanic of *American Arcadia*, and I also argue that the game demonstrates how such duality is inherent to the American Dream itself. While the American Dream is partly about the idealistic fantasy of individual freedom and success, it is also framed by the neoliberal ideas of achieving and measuring these by materialistic markers. The essay concludes by moving forward the shifting definitions of freedom: from an individualistic, neoliberal one to Hannah Arendt's more community-focused understanding of freedom as disruptive social action. I demonstrate how the game highlights the systemic conditions that make the latter impossible.

To this end, I will briefly look at the changes in the cultural and media landscape that shape *American Arcadia*'s approach to pocket universes and simulacrum bubbles, as opposed to the 1990s and early 2000s titles with a similar theme. Next, I will examine the in-game space of *American Arcadia* as a kind of American utopia informed by the ethos of the American Dream of striving for more. This section will look at this utopian façade as a remediation of the American Dream that seeks to offer the illusion of immediacy: the order of the hyperreal. Following this, I analyse instances of hypermediation that are utilized for in-game critique. I argue that these are structured in a cascading fashion, so that all the diegetic layers of in-game realities are exposed as dystopian. Finally, I will scrutinize the idea of individual escape as a way out of *American Arcadia*, while at the same time being strangely aligned with neoliberal aspirations, representing an aspect of the American Dream that has often been criticised and pointing out how the game contrasts various conceptualizations of freedom.

From Hyperreal to Hypermediated

First, I would like to briefly consider the technological and cultural imaginary of the 1990s – the decade that provided the foundation of the technological fantasies that shape the anxieties shown in *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*. In fact, the very same technological context brought to life the theoretical framework of remediation – one that I will be relying on extensively. That is why I will connect Bolter and Grusin's theory to the media landscape of the late 1990s. Then, I shall address how the technological conditions and fantasies shifted by the 2020s, when *American Arcadia* was released. The years directly before and after the millennium were preoccupied with what I would like to call 'the fantasy of the image,' reflecting on the ubiquitous nature of screen-mediated images (see Virginás). In the US, television culture sees the end of the network era and is in a multi-channel transitory period. Ultimately, by the late 2000s, this concluded with what Amanda D. Lotz calls "post-network television" throughout her book *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, which gave more space to viewer agency in controlling the time, space, platform, medium and, of course, content of watching. Screens, especially those of the television, promise to offer a sort of one-sided, parasocial intimacy to the viewer. At the same time, there was a running discourse of truthfulness in TV – the launch of *Big Brother* (1999), after all, coincided with that of the pocket universe films (see Andrejevic).

At the same time, by the mid-nineties, CGI (computer generated image) technology became widespread in science fiction cinema (Pierson). On a similar note, in the realm of video gaming, the decade was witness to the rise of three-dimensionality as a visual illusion – the emergence of the FPS genre with iconic titles like *Doom* (1993) or *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), together with the major advancements in the point-and-click genre epitomised by the release of *Myst* (1993) are various cases in point. All this points towards the magical fantasy of the image becoming reality, which promises that the representation can in fact take the place of the thing itself, that, instead of a simulacrum, we are dealing with the miracle of actual presence through screens.

Also roughly around this time, in 2000, inspired by the “windowed” style of the Y2K digital landscape, Bolter and Grusin developed their influential theory of remediation. For them, remediation is the process of one recent medium interacting with other, previous media, which is described by the interplay of two seemingly contradictory modes: transparent immediacy and opaque hypermediacy. The former, by “ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” (11), seeks to produce a more authentic experience “through linear perspective, erasure, and automacity” (24) while the latter invites “us to take pleasure in the act of mediation” (14) through a visually fragmented, partial and multiple style” (Bolter and Grusin 31).⁵ As Bolter and Grusin suggest at the time of their publication, contemporaneous with both *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, “at the end of the twentieth century, we are in a position to understand hypermediacy as immediacy’s opposite number, an alter ego that has never been suppressed fully or for long periods of time” (34). While, on the one hand, the order of the simulacrum promises to conjure an *immediate* experience in the illusion of presence, the reality of (especially early) World Wide Web is one of visible and fragmented *hypermediacy*.

In the twenty-something years that have passed since the conceptualization of remediation, the Western (mass) media landscape has been significantly altered by a number of factors. Most importantly, it has shifted from centralized, one-way communication to decentralized, fragmented, interactive, and algorithmically personalised platforms, many of them mobile and primarily consumed through social media. I would like to suggest that instead of the yearning for immediacy that was prevalent around the millennium, by the 2020s, it is rather a dynamic oscillation between hypermediacy and immediacy fostered by the abundance of screen-mediated experiences that characterises Western media consumption habits. For example, users constantly alternate between using immersive technologies like VR environments or algorithmically shaped video feeds – that enhance immediacy – and relying on hypermediated interfaces, such as social media timelines and split-screen multitasking. With a desire for immediacy comes the acknowledgement of mediation. The role of emphatic hypermediacy here

is “a playful or subversive attitude, both acknowledging and undercutting the desire for immediacy” (Bolter and Grusin 34).⁶

American Arcadia reflects this shift on the level of gameplay. As the player alternates between controlling Trevor (the in-Arcadia character in a side-scrolling, 2,5D environment in Arcadia) and Angela (the hacker from the outside in a three-dimensional world), the constant switching of perspectives comments on the mediated nature of each layer. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the illusion that Trevor’s world is a perfect utopia hinges on its seeming immediacy. Conversely, Angela, a hacker, works, by definition, in a hypermediated environment, hence, is capable of exercising social critique through her access to screens. *American Arcadia* lets the player control both, making the player realize the oscillation between immersion and disruption, immediacy and hypermediacy.

A Hyperreal Utopia

Before moving on to analyse *American Arcadia* as a seemingly utopian space that is built upon the remediation of the American Dream, it is worth considering what is meant by the American Dream itself, and how it is saturated with, and, at the same time, made impossible by neoliberalism, which seems to find its natural habitat in the digital. Without attempting to offer an exhaustive summary of almost a hundred years’ scholarship in American Dream studies, here I would like to highlight the key themes in the discussion that can frame *American Arcadia* as an outlet of the American Dream. Although the first piece to mention the American Dream is James Truslow Adams’ 1931 *Epic of America* (Adams), the idea itself had started developing long before. As Robert C. Hauhart and Mitja Sardoč suggest in their “Introduction” to *The Routledge Handbook of the American Dream*, the American Dream had been in formation since the arrival of the first settlers, gradually taking on the traits of hopefulness, “a belief in the promise of *freedom*, and a willingness to expose oneself to the winds of chance and face *risk*,” in addition to “a willingness to *shed any connections* to people, places, or

values that may tie one down as a formative element of American character” (5; emphasis mine).

This historically layered conceptualization of the American Dream – emphasizing freedom, risk-taking, and self-reinvention – channels directly into a pursuit of individual happiness that often prioritizes autonomy over social connection. As early as 1970, Philip Slater identified this isolating tendency that is coded in the American Dream. In *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, he argued that the American cultural ideal of independence makes it impossible to create meaningful human connections. If we all chase “a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind” (11), then there will be no reason to communicate with each other, and neither to sustain a shared culture or collective meaning-making. In this way, the American Dream does not simply promote personal liberty – it also carries within it the seeds of social disconnection.

Additionally, the American Dream is also about a set of personality traits and aspirations that are highly materialistic (Hauhart and Sardoč 8) and can be measured by a set of quantifiable outcomes that are generally regarded as the physical realisations of the ethos: home ownership in the suburbs, a car, two children, some savings (see, for instance, Hochschild). In terms of individualism turning into loneliness, on the one hand, and materialism, on the other, the American Dream is clearly aligned with the neoliberal ideology of emphasising individual economic success without collective responsibility. The Dream also relies on aspirations of financial mobility to pay for consumer capitalist desires (see Weinstein). At the same time, as has been often pointed out, such living standards are unattainable to many, suggesting that the promise of equal opportunities is, to a large extent, a fantasy that is overshadowed by the lived experience of people typically in a non-hegemonic position: the racialised, gendered, queer, or migrant other (see, for instance, Skolnick and Alvarado; Mahler).

I suggest that the project of American Arcadia as seen in the game is in fact an allotopia: literally translated as “other space,” it is neither a pure utopia, nor clearly a dystopia. Rather, American Arcadia presents

itself as a utopia, which is exposed as a dystopia upon closer inspection.⁷ In its formulation of the “other space,” it closely relies on the neoliberal ethos of the American Dream, which is now presented as a simulacrum-life that is more colourful and vivid than the game’s diegetic, “external” reality where Angela resides. American Arcadia is shown as the remediation of the American Dream in a utopian fashion and does so by offering an experience of seeming immediacy. This is exemplified by how the game introduces the setting of American Arcadia. Upon first encountering Trevor in Arcadia, “two weeks before that dreadful day” when he learned the truth and had to run for his life, he is seen waking up in his home, with the radio greeting him: “Good morning, Arcadia! Today, we’re enjoying a splendid temperature of 77.1 degrees and a humidity of 53% on this beautiful, sunny Friday morning” – as one of the perks of Arcadia is the weather-control dome that ensures that the weather is always mild and sunny.⁸ As the shades roll up, the player is greeted by a lovely image of vivid suburban greenery, where the garden is conveniently watered by a hovering drone. Connecting to the name of the project and the title of the game, Arcadia, a pastoral, idyllic imagery of nature has been regarded as a prerequisite of the much-cherished American freedom since Henry David Thoreau (*Dziarnka*), which was ultimately channelled into aspirations of the suburban detached house with a garden (*Dougherty*). Although seemingly at odds with technological progress, the yearning for suburban Arcadia is a significant aspect of the American Dream: “[New dwellers] came in search of green grass and trees, away from the hassle, a place where children and pets could run and play unattended; . . . to find an amorphous quantity called ‘greater freedom,’ and to leave behind the alleged anonymity of city living” (*Birmingham* vii).

Even with the strive for Arcadian simplicity and the immediacy of the American Dream, the spaces that Trevor occupies are already part of a proto-digital capitalist system, where even the semblance of immediacy and the allure of pastoral simplicity in Arcadia are saturated with hypermediation and the technological imagery of the American Dream. Before Trevor takes the speed-train to commute to work, the first things we see in his home are two posters: one of a Sunlight Chrome Crush

166M, his dream car, and the other depicting Elijah Walton holding Arcadia in his hands, accompanied by the slogan: “Elijah Walton’s DREAM: ARCADIA.” These two posters clearly connect the imagery of the American Dream – freedom, mobility, ownership – with its material outlets: consumer technology and personal transportation.⁹ Trevor’s exposure to the hypermediation of the American Dream continues at his workplace. As an office clerk with a clearly irrelevant job, he is surrounded by a multiplicity of screens (computers, TV sets, ads). At home, this bombardment goes on while spending his time watching television. One particular advertisement that he is shown encourages viewers to escape everyday struggles: “Have you ever wanted to leave all your worries behind and have the time of your life while exploring the world and making unforgettable memories?.” Arcadia, initially imagined as a refuge or ideal destination within the logic of the American Dream – is now framed as a space from which escape is desirable. Angela, in conversation with Trevor, makes this irony explicit: “[w]e waste our lives looking at screens, but that’s not too different from you guys, is it?.” Here, Angela, who lives “outside” the Arcadian dome, addresses Trevor – and by extension, the player – highlighting how screen-based hypermediation is not confined to either side of the dome.

The game not only criticizes this 1970s version of the American Dream but offers a similarly critical take on the vision of the postwar decades. This is demonstrated by what is called “Old Arcadia,” the initial version of the American Arcadia project. During his escape attempt from the dome, Trevor stumbles upon this abandoned ghost town that was, according to the Walton family myth, designed as a luxurious suburban dwelling that offered “modern housing with the latest technology included: service droids, voice operated devices, and everything a modern American family needs” in a (from the present day) retro-futuristic manner. This promise is established in a diegetic 1960s infomercial of the project, which is complete with preliminary visualisations of Old Arcadia and with said modern American families happily conquering their new, hi-tech suburban homes. Again, this instance of remediation, although it does not hypermediate by the excessive use of multiple screens as frames, draws a stark contrast between the fantasy vision of the infomercial and the next

playable sequence, in which Trevor, still in 2D, walks the grounds of the now abandoned Old Arcadia, with the player having little to do other than moving him. The dingy, derelict suburbia can be regarded as a clear visual commentary on the failure of *this* specific version of the American Dream, and, at the same time, positions it as hauntological, as a vision of the future that has ceased to be conceivable. Although not through digital screens, criticism through hypermediation can be traced in the creative use of billboards – a visual medium that matches the vintage media economy that Old Arcadia models. While Trevor is climbing a water tower, in the background, amidst the abandoned suburban buildings, we can see a billboard advertisement inviting people to apply for Arcadian Housing (Fig. 1). It has been defaced with graffiti, the most superficial layer of text announcing that “Arcadia is a gilded cage and we know it.”



Fig. 1: “Arcadia is a gilded cage and we know it.”

However, the most obvious formulation of the American Dream in Arcadia comes from outside the dome in the in-game public account of

the conception of American Arcadia, admittedly echoing the Walt Disney myth. The founder, Elijah Walton, “was born in a small rural community in Minnesota” and began his career in the film industry during the golden days of Hollywood – a key cultural engine of the American Dream. He then launched a popular science TV show with the iconic sign-off “Soar higher than ever before!” delivered from Walton’s uniquely designed “prototype electric car,” the Waltonmobile. As a sleek, futuristic and prestigious object of possession that is associated with both innovation and spatial mobility, the Waltonmobile can be regarded as a symbolic extension of the American Dream itself. Later, Walton purchased an empty piece of land in the Midwest to realize his grand vision of American Arcadia. This vision ultimately reaches its present state, “the Arcadia we all know and love: an immense retro-futuristic metropolis inside a weather-controlled dome where each and every citizen enjoys a life of luxury and comfort” under the leadership of Elijah Walton’s granddaughter, Vivian Walton, the current showrunner of American Arcadia. In this narrative, American Arcadia becomes the ultimate, high-tech fulfilment of the American Dream – a perfected, artificial space of material abundance and innovation.

The game, however, deliberately depicts this glamorous success story as one that is merely a two-dimensional façade and invites – in fact forces – players to look behind the scenes. The above-mentioned story about the rise of Walton Media is presented while the player controls Angela in a 3D-environment. In this section, Angela must sneak in a badge to Arcadia to help Trevor escape. To do so, she poses as a tourist and must undergo the standard visitor introduction: a dark ride tour of Arcadia’s official history, with the player inhabiting Angela’s perspective. This sequence draws heavily on the aesthetics and logic of early amusement parks, as dark rides were used as immersive narrative attractions in such environments. As William F. Mangles explains, dark rides use “passenger carrying vehicles, which may be boats, cars, or small trains” to guide visitors “through dark tunnels or closed-in passages at a very slow speed” (141). In these rides, Péter Makai adds, “people are railroaded through dioramas in a fixed order to show set pieces that together form the journey narratives that make up the fictional microcosm

of the ride” (166). Such rides are designed to immerse the participants not through speed and danger, but through a well-composed sense of visual presence (see Zika). As such, they have more in common with AR, VR and 3D cinema technologies than with rollercoaster rides that are designed to trigger a sense of vertigo. Here, however, the immersive promise of the ride is immediately destabilized through its remediation in a video game.

While the low-poly graphics do not initially break the immersion as the player takes Angela’s first-person view, the task of hijacking the dark ride definitely does. After completing the ride, Angela, and, by extension, the player, is prompted to literally look behind the scenes. Angela enters the service area to find a spare animatronic of Elijah Walton, which turns out to be a clue for the in-ride CCTV camera manual override. This move deliberately draws attention to the artificiality and scriptedness of the ride’s narrative. Next, the player is required to interact with the animatronic control panel: a hypermediated interface comprised of multiple screens which functions as a practical puzzle but also as a meta-critical device (see Fig. 2). It frames the supposedly immersive ride as a manipulated spectacle and prompts the player to subvert it.

This literal sense of looking behind the scenes using screens has a more figurative aspect as well: it not only reveals the constructed nature of the spectacle, but also its ideological omissions. Probably the most obvious example is the exclusion of the “migrant other,” the fictional Hungarian-born scientist Árpád Kovacs, from the official narrative. A central figure – and the personal hero of both Trevor and Angela – Kovacs was the host of the in-game popular science show *Architects of Tomorrow* and the lead engineer of the American Arcadia project. However, his significance is largely downplayed in this version of the narrative. Even though his animatronic does appear in the ride, the major contribution of his edutainment show is depicted to be Elijah Walton’s trademark catchphrase. Later, Angela’s sardonic remark “What about when Kovacs was kicked to the curb, huh? Don’t you have an animatronic for that?” explicitly draws attention to the marginalization of the migrant engineer. His removal from the official narrative shows how the game critiques the American Dream as a narrative that selectively includes and excludes contributors based on race or nationality. *American Arcadia* thus uses

hypermediation as a technique to frame the American Dream as an exclusive ideal that is maintained through carefully curating its core narrative.



Fig. 2: The screen-mediated dark ride of American Arcadia.

A Hypermediated Dystopia, or, a Cascade Escapade

The previous section examined *American Arcadia* as a seemingly utopian, hyperreal space that presents itself as “more real than the real” by remediating the American Dream into an immediate and immersive semblance of reality. At the same time, it would be both futile and impossible to discuss the dome separately from its critique, which exposes it as a dystopia. This, I suggest, happens through an emphasis on the extreme and visible mediatisation in American Arcadia and, with that, on the cascading nature of hypermediation. The instances of immediacy that I have presented above are always already saturated with hypermediacy, suggesting that any simulacrum of the American Dream is only “a copy without original.” Even though, as has been pointed out, American Arcadia is abundant with screens, it is only after Trevor’s first escape attempt – reminiscent of Neo’s run in *The Matrix* – that screens are depicted as potential means of critiquing Arcadia. At one point, for example, Trevor tries to hide at the Blue Fountain shopping mall. A mall is by definition a simulacrum space, and one that effectively simulates old city centres and nostalgic shopping experiences through the remediation of cityscapes (Bolter and Grusin 174).

A fragmented, excessive and consumption-driven reimagining of communal spaces, the mall can be read as a *mise-en-abyme* of the American Arcadia universe – as the dome itself is a simulacrum of competing versions of the American Dream. Halfway through the mall sequence, Trevor notices Elijah Walton's heir and current showrunner Vivian Walton's televised announcement showing his picture and urging citizens to report him. As if to reflect on this cascading multiplicity of screens (see Fig. 3), Trevor seeks shelter in an arcade within the shopping mall. And even within that, he hides in a 3D immersive Spectrex machine – ultimately entering the fourth level of the simulacrum: Arcadia simulates the American Dream; the mall conjures up the illusion of acquiring authenticity through shopping, a late capitalist fantasy. The arcade is a simulacrum of competition and capitalist values (see Kocurek), while the Spectrex machine delivers the technologically enhanced immediacy that goes unnoticed in the previous layers. Each layer folds into the next, making the hypermediated logic of the dome increasingly self-referential, and increasingly inescapable.



Fig. 3: Multiple frames.

Maybe the most spectacular connection between the trope of unmasking the grim reality of being observed 24/7 and the mediatization of this observation happens when Trevor has to sneak through the top of a

large hall. In this sequence, one wall is entirely covered with screens – some of them showing the above-mentioned announcement with his face on it, staging Trevor’s run as a version of surveillance dystopia.¹⁰ At this moment, he realizes that one of the screens in fact shows him live, crawling through the pipelines, again producing a cascading image of hypermediation through screens-within-screens-within-screens. After asking “is everyone watching me now?,” Trevor tries to leverage the moment and address the people following him online: “Listen to me for one second, American Arcadia audience! This is not right! Your sole source of entertainment can’t be other people’s lives! Their lives belong to them! Our lives belong to . . .”

What Trevor does not realize is that yet another layer of hypermediation frames this moment: his escape is being streamed through a platform resembling Twitch, typically used for live gameplay videos, with a chat window on the right and various users commenting on his trip (Fig. 4). While his grand monologue is conveniently interrupted by an advertisement, the player witnesses this bizarre spectacle that mixes the false parasocial intimacy of television and the luring interactivity of video games (see Schiappa et al.): on the one hand, viewers can root for or against Trevor, show empathy or form attachments to him. On the other hand, the use of the Twitch-like platform gives the impression that he is a character of a video game and that agency might be exercised in controlling him, ultimately commenting on the player’s own position, too. This layered depiction of hypermediation ultimately blurs the boundaries between the various diegetic levels that are displayed in the game, but also between what is regarded as real and what is not. Maybe that is why the player – unlike Trevor – is increasingly hesitant to accept any piece of information delivered through screens. One example is the mysterious disappearance of Gus, Trevor’s colleague at the beginning of the game. While it was strongly suggested that he was eliminated, he later reappears via screens, waving and jovially conversing with Trevor. Another example is the main villain of the game, Vivian Walton, who almost invariably appears through screens and is shown to behave drastically differently in private than on air. In both cases, the game employs its own

mechanics of hypermediation to cultivate a deep mistrust of mediated appearances.

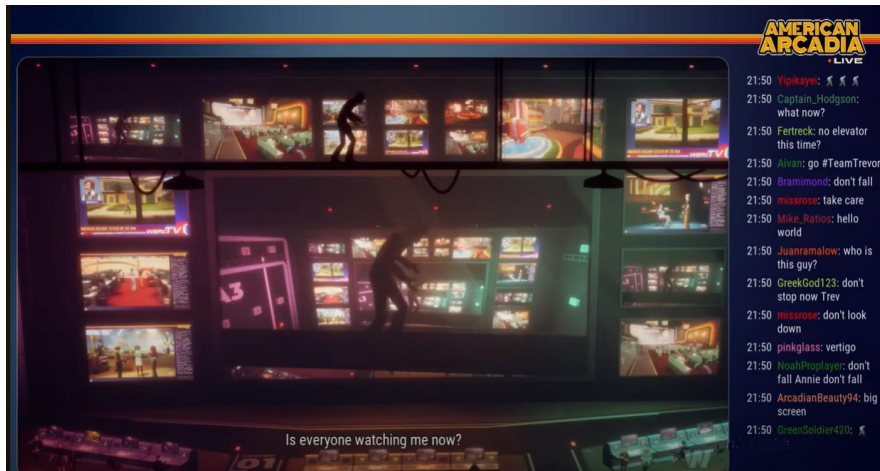


Fig. 4: “Is everyone watching me now?”

Even though the game provides extensive criticism about the in-game pocket universe of American Arcadia, it does not stop at critiquing this innermost diegetic layer for its wild capitalist premises. Expanding the logic of the cascading structures demonstrated above, the primary diegetic level – that of Angela – is also heavily affected by the same stance. The difference is that, in American Arcadia, hypermediacy is used as a clever device in diegetic environmental storytelling, while in Angela’s layer, outside Arcadia, it is transformed into a prominent trait of the game mechanics. The excessive use of multiple screens is not very surprising in the case of Angela, as, being a hacker, she is capable of manipulating CCTV cameras, doors, and generally aids Trevor by hacking various electronic devices.¹¹ She is also known to be able to falsify visual images – the very first thing that the player has to do while controlling Angela is to upload looped visuals to the security cameras to be able to pass them unnoticed. The multiplicity of screens that Angela has to habitually juggle is used as an extra challenge in the game mechanics. For example, as Marcus Javert, the head of the “Arcadian Gestapo,” interrogates her, Angela has to navigate (literally play as) Trevor on one screen, answer questions on the other screen, while hopefully maintaining eye contact with Javert (Fig. 5). While Trevor’s gameplay sequences

mostly rely on puzzles and dexterity, Angela's tasks are typically about working under pressure, often multitasking; here, hypermediacy becomes a mechanic of divided attention, turning cognitive overload into a form of critique.



Fig. 5: Hypermediacy-induced multitasking as game mechanic.

Finally, the last, external layer of remediation is the one that frames the entire gameplay as a documentary, which disrupts both the linearity of the events and the unity of time and space – a prerequisite for a perceived experience of immediacy. As Bill Nichols explains, documentaries make less use of continuity editing, unnoticeable transitions, or the continuity of objects and people – the techniques typical of establishing the smoothness of feature films. Instead, coherence is rather established through the juxtaposition of elements that suggest causal relationships (Nichols 18). This way, for example, contemporary advertisements or training films can be inserted without breaking the logic of the sequence – so one might conclude that the codes of the documentary genre are inherently reliant on hypermediacy. The player experiences something like this in *American Arcadia*, starting from the very first frame, which mimics a VHS tape being started, with the sign “PLAY” in the corner. The ambiguity of the word “play” – as in playing a tape (and watching it) or playing a game (and interacting with it) resonates with the duality of witnessing a Twitch-broadcast of Trevor’s run as gameplay or as a televised media event. In

this context, the player is introduced to various aspects of *American Arcadia*'s world through hypermediated media content from a good sixty years of the show. This remediation is always highlighted by using abrupt cuts, grainy or black-and-white filters, but, at the same time, Trevor's run and Angela's rescue mission are also exposed as remediated: sometimes the footage freezes or slows down halfway through a jump, the interviewer adds a clarifying question, or Angela, from the present day, inserts a sardonic comment on her past actions. With that, even though it becomes apparent that the player is following a counter-narrative narrated by Trevor and Angela as opposed to the mainstream and media-controlled interpretation of the events by the Waltons, their story is also exposed as constructed. Faced with yet another cascade of hypermediated layers, the player is invited to consider that this critique of a digitally staged dystopia may extend beyond the game world – potentially implicating their own media-saturated reality as well.

A Utopian Core? Escaping the Dream and the Dream of Escaping

Life within the American Arcadia dome can be seen as a utopian simulacrum of the American Dream fantasy for tourists – one that is exposed as a surveillance dystopia through the excessive use of secondary screens. This dual quality can also be traced in *American Arcadia*'s ambivalent take on the American Dream, which seems to mirror Western neoliberalism's complicated relationship with the notion of individual freedom. At first glance, *American Arcadia* appears to celebrate the fantasy of the American Dream: the greenery, the suburban bliss, Old Arcadia, or even the Walton brothers' success story, all testify to that. The perfect Arcadian subject, however, is one whose basic characteristic traits are at odds with the ideals of the late capitalist self-made men. Rather than rewarding ambition and risk-taking, American Arcadia favours compliant and easy-to-manage subjects. As the player, together with Trevor and Angela, learns, the showrunner utilizes a "low-frequency sound to generate reverse aversion in the Arcadians," that is, "the Jingle," to physically prevent citizens from leaving the dome. Walton Media,

according to the fiction of the game, uses hard conditioning not only as a final barrier to keep the subjects in the dome, but also to influence their behaviour. Even though the American Dream hinges on the ethos of the self-made man, one who is able to freely shape his future, Arcadia itself prefers citizens who follow the norm, who are obedient, who do not, by any means, seek to “soar higher than ever before” – and that is what they condition them to do. In that respect, Trevor Hill is a perfect Arcadian citizen: he works, he is encouraged to make consumer choices, but these material desires (just like the Sunlight Chrome Crush 166M) are insufficient to make him take risks at a personal level, while he has no interest in making changes at a societal one either.

All this is in line with how freedom is ambiguously conceptualized under neoliberalism. At its core, neoliberalism frames freedom as an economic attribute that characterises the market as ‘free’ precisely because it should operate without external interference. For Milton Friedman, one of the key philosophers of late capitalism, such a free market constitutes the foundation of a free society and of political freedom. This, of course, entails the individual’s responsibility when it comes to their own economic wellbeing: “[t]his is a kind of freedom that we’re all too familiar with today. You are free to look for another job, to retrain, to go back to university or to drive for Uber” (Smith). Such instances of autonomy, now framed as freedom, are not only the “hypernorms” of neoliberalism (Shymko and Frémeaux 213), but also connect back to the idea of escape plots as they are invariably styled as personal solutions – individual escapes against systemic abandonment.¹²

A very different framing of freedom – one that bypasses the neoliberal focus on individualism – can be found in the political philosophy of Arendt (Shymko and Frémeaux). For Arendt, freedom does maintain the disruptive quality of an escape but only in that it bears the capacity to create an unexpected new beginning – what she famously calls natality in *The Human Condition*. Notably, for Arendt, freedom is not exercised in private acts of self-management but emerges through meaningful action within a public space. As Yuliya Shymko and Sandrine Frémeaux explain, Arendt believes that “freedom occurs in social interactions that generate solidarity and foster fruitful political exchanges” (220). This

Arendtian view of freedom exposes the limitations of the individualistic self-made man in the American Dream, who is free to move around as he is unburdened by the attachments of belonging. Instead, Arendt sees creativity and agency as traits that should be put into the service of the collective good.

This is exactly where *American Arcadia* offers a comment on how freedom might be reframed beyond the neoliberal paradigm. In one of the game's most morally ambiguous scenes, Angela uses the very same mind control technology to develop the "Anti-Jingle" and use it on Trevor. This way, although Trevor will no longer be affected by the debilitating effects of the Jingle, his liberation is not self-directed but another instance of hard conditioning – only this time, in service of his escape from the dome. To create the Anti-Jingle, Angela has to gather a number of advertisements, ironically drawing on the very same ideology and the tools of neoliberal consumer society that shaped *American Arcadia*'s version of freedom in the first place. These ads symbolise certain aspects of urban-suburban life, such as finding a partner, grooming your pet, or working out. Throughout the process, these are recombined to overwrite Trevor's fundamental conditioning and mental architecture, giving him an entirely new personality. As seen in Fig. 6, rather than seeking comfort in routine, he now craves disruption; instead of suppressing self-control, he can now strengthen it. He is no longer governed by his fears that are now suppressed, and instead of "a complete distortion of [his] perception of freedom" (Fig. 6), now freedom becomes his sole aspiration. This sequence dramatizes a redefinition of subjectivity that points toward a more Arendtian understanding of freedom. Trevor's transformation suggests that actual freedom in an Arendtian sense requires disrupting taken-for-granted values, even if initiated by another.

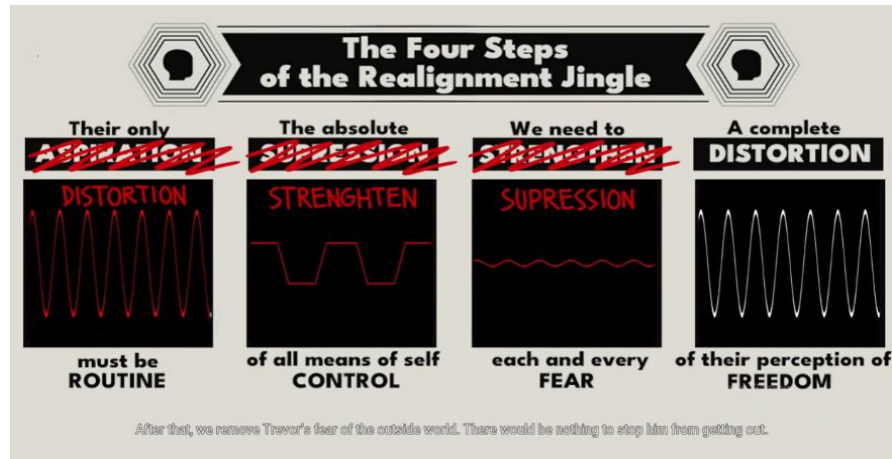


Fig. 6: The four steps of realignment.

The psychedelic platformer sequence that follows not only changes Trevor's conditioning but also opens up a space of imaginative, even political possibility through a combination of extreme immediacy and extreme hypermediacy. Believing that the realignment has failed, Trevor stops by an open-air cinema in Old Arcadia, literally stepping into the screen. First, he finds himself in a stylised, neon-coloured 2D platformer gameworld that evokes the visual style of *Tron* (1982) and the game mechanics of early platformers. The game-within-the-game uses similar mechanics to the rest of the game, yet with a twist reminiscent of early arcade platformers: if Trevor falls from the screen, he will loop back through the top. Even his initials, TCH, that he registered into an arcade machine as he beat the record, are now walkable platform elements in the game, reinforcing the impression that we are playing a game within a game, where the distinct sense of immediacy feels rather trippy and unsettling because of its vivid colours and implausible visuals than in any way capable of conjuring a hyperreal simulacrum. In Arendtian terms, this sequence marks a rupture and a form of disorientation that makes novelty possible, and, hence, can be framed by the term *natality* as the capacity to begin anew.



Fig. 7: Trevor upside-down in a television.

The next stage of Trevor's transformation plunges him into a media-saturated dystopia, which functions as a critique of the neoliberal media spectacle and the mediated illusion of freedom. Here, Trevor walks past omnipresent, judging eyes, manoeuvres piles of man-sized television screens, and ultimately navigates through actual TV sets (see Fig. 7). The extreme sense of hypermediacy here highlights how the self becomes bound by the mediality of control and spectacle, and how the aspiration for freedom is stylized and commodified in late capitalism. The sequence also foreshadows that Nr. 6., the leader of the resistance and Angela's insider informant/employer, is in fact Vivian Walton, seeking to create an even more profitable reality show entitled *Escape from Arcadia*. Vivian's manipulation of both the media environment and the rebellion highlights how dissent is absorbed into the spectacle itself. Here, the entire realignment sequence is narrated by Vivian, who even impersonates a psychedelic version of Angela. When Trevor encounters a giant animatronic of himself, his eyes, that are now television screens, show a hippie version of Angela, proclaiming (in Vivian's voice): "I am Angela Guardiania. Your aspiration must be freedom. Freedom like no other in a Sunlight Chrome Rush 166M. The most perfect work of engineering ever designed. . . . And your favourite car." The dissonance between Vivian's commercialized rhetoric and the absurdity of the sequence evokes

Arendt's distinction between freedom as market choice and freedom as innovative and disruptive social action. For Trevor, this sequence is not just plain reprogramming but rather a test of whether he can wilfully bypass his conditioning – not only by the Jingle, but figuratively, by the internalised norms of consumer culture. In this sense, the sequence not only visualises his realignment but critiques the cultural conditions that make the Arendtian reading of freedom so difficult to enact.

After the realignment sequence, Trevor is not only immune to the Jingle, but his personality is transformed, too. His newfound agency exceeds mere individual escape, and, instead, he exhibits a sense of social responsibility, deciding to help all the other people in Arcadia. All this points towards an Arendtian notion of freedom, but *American Arcadia* complicates this idea by presenting us with the structural limitations of such aspirations. Once Trevor's escape is revealed to be a staged reality show, he is unable to inform Arcadian citizens about the lie they are living in and loses all means of communication to them as he refuses to provide his retroactive consent by pretending that his life was never in danger. In the final scene of the game, Angela and Trevor are shown in their presumably shared living room, now in the outside world, watching the next episode of *Escape from Arcadia*. The game presents a final twist: the pair have used Angela's settlement money to found their own media company, Solano Hills Productions, and they are about to release their own documentary – the one that the player has just completed as a game. This way, Trevor can maintain his integrity while being able to communicate with the audience. While this appears as a small victory, the broader, systemic issues remain untouched: "*American Arcadia* and *Escape from Arcadia* are still on the air. Today, the audience of both shows is . . . soaring higher than ever before." By ironically repurposing Elijah Walton's slogan in the conclusion of the game, *American Arcadia* underlines the idea that the neoliberal spectacle absorbs and refashions even its own critique. The hypermediated documentary form, which promised to expose the truth, has become another tool in the service of the cycle of the spectacle. Trevor's final request – "enough already, turn it off, Ange" – breaks the fourth wall and implicates the player in this cycle,

suggesting that resistance and complicity are only separated by a very thin line.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have identified a thematic similarity between late 1990s “simulacrum films” and the 2023 video game *American Arcadia*. Yet, I suggested that there is a fundamental difference between the two periods in terms of the cultural fantasies, dreads and fascinations that frame their approaches to remediation. The years around the turn of the millennium were fascinated by immediacy and the looming phantom of the simulacrum, while the 2020s are rather characterised by an oscillation between immediacy through media immersion and hypermediacy through the abundance and often cascading nature of screens. I used a mediation-focused close-reading analysis of *American Arcadia* to argue that this ambiguity subverts the seemingly utopian simulacrum of the American Dream and ultimately exposes it as a surveillance capitalist dystopia through hypermediacy. This oscillation taps into the duality inherent in the Dream itself: that, on the one hand, it is based on the idealist aspirations of individual success, but on the other hand, it is very much tied in with and tainted by the ideological and economic context of neoliberalism. Finally, I sought to identify the same duality in the conceptualization of freedom in the Anti-Jingle sequence of the game that ultimately realigns Trevor, changing his personality and making it possible for him to escape Arcadia.

This duality is also reflected in the ending of the game and Trevor’s position within the context of the American Dream, which remains ambiguous. On the one hand, he still advocates for simple, undisturbed life, but on the other hand, his individual escape and then the foundation of their joint company can still be framed as an American Dream success story. His collective rescue plans collapse; structural change remains out of reach. Both conceptualisations of freedom are exposed as illusory: the neoliberal one because it does not offer actual choice and the Arendtian one because social action is hindered by the media and power dynamics of the field. The utopian core, however, may still be retained in Trevor’s

newfound ability to own his story: he is now capable of controlling what is shown, what is shared, and what is withheld.

In this sense, *American Arcadia* exemplifies how, with the increasing complexity of the medium, contemporary games have the capacity to act as both cultural products shaped by market needs and instances of cultural criticism. By drawing attention to its own layered hypermediation – through documentaries, reality shows, meta-narratives, and game-within-a-game sequences – *American Arcadia* exposes the operations of ideology while also partly enacting them. Returning to Truman and Neo: the former exits the simulation for blissful obscurity; the latter re-enters the Matrix to fight the system – both operate against the order of the hyperreal. Trevor of *American Arcadia*, however, inhabits the ambiguity of the in-between – still seeking “freedom,” still yearning to tell his story, yet surrounded by screens. This is what distinguishes him and the game from the simulacrum narratives of the previous generation. If, following Arendt, freedom is disruptive and unpredictable action in service of the common good, *American Arcadia* questions whether such new beginnings are still possible in a late capitalist context that thrives on the very pleasure of oscillating between immediacy and hypermediacy. Trevor’s freedom is not about overcoming the system but about making its operations visible – and in exposing the cost of playing along.

Notes:

¹ To avoid confusion, *American Arcadia* in italics will be used in reference to the game, while “American Arcadia” in regular font will refer to the in-game space or TV show of the same name.

² A pocket universe, according to Isiah Lavender, “whether natural or artificial, exists within the boundaries of another universe - a space within a space governed by its own rules. The larger world envelops this isolated space, this miniature universe” (196).

³ This is how Morpheus refers to the empty space that remains if the simulation that we recognize as our everyday world is turned off. The expression has been used as the title of numerous works that are preoccupied with simulacra and mediated environments, including Slavoj Žižek’s much acclaimed *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.

⁴ While using the fundamental hermeneutical procedure of reading literary texts as a template, close reading analysis in this case is rather understood figuratively, as one of the core methods of game studies with a humanities angle. See for

example the credo of the journal *Well Played*, promising to provide “in-depth close readings of games that parse out the various meanings to be found through the experience of playing a game” (*Well Played*). For thorough examinations of close reading as a game studies method, see Reay 47-52; Mukherjee.

⁵ In a related argument, I have explored the dynamics of hypermediation in the game *Pentiment* (O. Réti, “Labyrinths and Remediation”).

⁶ This shift is very much in line with the emergence of metamodernism: as opposed to postmodernism, which is ultimately interested in taking an ironic disposition over the loss of all authenticity and which is theoretically interested in the waning of the real and the triumph of the image, metamodernism, instead, indulges in the very act of oscillation itself. As Luke Turner’s “Metamodernist Manifesto” famously proclaims, “*metamodernism* shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!”

⁷ For an in-depth inquiry in games as utopias, see Kłosiński.

⁸ The artificially controlled weather may be regarded as a clear reference to *The Truman Show*, where Christof, the director, manipulates the weather to match Truman’s mood. Another such Easter egg in the game would be “The Burbank Act,” making it possible for Walton Media to keep Arcadians in the dome without their consent – referring to the name of the film’s protagonist: Truman Burbank.

⁹ For the symbolism of cars in the American Dream, see Mazurek and Batin; Jones.

¹⁰ Elsewhere I have written about how the same logic plays out in *Black: The Fall*, a game with somewhat similar 2,5D layout and game mechanics (Orosz-Réti, “An Actually Existing...”).

¹¹ With this, as a woman of colour, she is clearly put into a much more agentic position than the white man she intends to help.

¹² Elsewhere I have briefly written about how this dynamic plays out in the video game *Road 96* (see Orosz-Réti, “From Superhuman...”).

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