Digging the Digital: Beat Modalities and the Representation of the Beats in Video Games

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1. Introduction

1   Perhaps not typically for every newly sprung-up artistic or literary movement, 70 years of the global legacy of the Beat phenomenon overlap with 70 years of its pop-cultural appropriation.[1] One may in fact wonder whether things could have gone differently at all; the Beat aesthetics emerged in the mid-twentieth-century America against the backdrop of the Golden Age of television and the TV craze seizing hold of most of American people, perhaps best evinced by the rise of TV set ownership among American families from 10 percent in 1950 to roughly 90 percent by 1960 (Paterson). Correspondingly, the discussed decades witnessed the full swing of Hollywood film production, with the immediate period of 1946-1947, the years approximately congruent with the birth of Beat, marking "the apex [of] American national cinema... [and] the largest per capita movie attendance in American history" (Metz 376). In the context of popular music, the ingestion of Beat countercultural and anti-authoritarian modes of existence and artistic praxis was also a matter of time; as noted by Ann Charters, everything including "the clothes style of the beat hipsters carried over to the new rock'n'roll youth... and the Beat Generation, though dead, was resurrected and justified (qtd. in Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* 8). The continuing (mis)presence of the Beats in visual culture and popular music has been thoroughly examined by scholars such as David Sterritt and Simon Warner, respectively.[2] What, however, appears to be a blind spot inviting a critical intervention is the dissemination of Beat modalities and representations of Beat in the area of video games, a sphere which for long has been feeding on various literary phenomena. Delving into Sterritt's discussion of the initial stages of Beat and visual culture as cross-fertilizing domains, one notices a somewhat

variegated relation between the two. Bringing into focus the development of *film noir* and Hitchcock's innovativeness, Sterritt observes that

> [t]he crosswind of social questioning and cultural criticism that ran through Hollywood cinema during the '50s era… prevented Hollywood from congealing into the monolithic establishmentarianism… and provided Beat and Beat-influenced thinkers with provocative film-related material that they could readily identify and approve. Much the same happened with television, where the fluidity of still-emerging production modes offset commercial pressures enough for occasional interruptions of Beat-reflective and even Beat-sympathetic expression. (*Mad to Be Saved* 15)

2　This notwithstanding, the ways of the incipient Beat aesthetics and the dominant environments of post-war visual culture were far from reciprocity:

> Not only Hollywood movies but the entire territory of mainstream visual communication—including television, photography, and picture magazines—fell into monologic habits… absorbing and reproducing the very norms and ideologies that Beats and avant-gardists sought to denigrate, demystify, and detoxify through the rude rebelliousness of their work. (Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* 66)

3　Such duality, as I wish to demonstrate, is discernible in the ways in which video games, indie and triple-A alike, mediate Beat figures, their works and respective idioms. I begin my argument by mapping out various categories of Beat referencing, to further move on with addressing those titles which resort to the denigratory category of "the Beatnik" and to conclude with showcasing *Fallout 4* as the game with arguably most multifaceted and debatable Beat references in video games to date. The unfixed nature of Beat aesthetics in *Fallout 4* can be interestingly contextualized by employing critical notions such as Derridean "hauntology," Zygmunt Bauman's "retrotopia" and Simon Reynold's "retromania," a perspective I adopt in the final parts of the essay.

2. Playing to the Beat: Beat Mechanics and Beat Intertextualities

4　Thinking of direct encounters between the video game business and the Beats, the only moment of intersection between the two came with William S. Burroughs' involvement in voice acting on a 1995 point-and-click adventure horror game *The Dark Eye*, a narrative directly reworking many themes and motifs of Edgar Allan Poe's stories and resting heavily on their dark romantic provenance. In the game the player follows a nameless character visiting a large and uncanny house occupied by two of his cousins and his uncle Edwin, who is lent the cold, flat tone of Burroughs' voice. In the course of action, the ever growing nightmarish and bizarre qualities of reality become the background for the protagonist's entanglement with the mysteries of his uncle's past. Burroughs's voice appearance, additionally supplemented with his readings of Poe's "Annabel Lee" and "The Masque of the Red Death," adds to the overall outlandish and morbid climate of the narrative and yet again attests to the writer's pop-cultural utility in rendering characters who are iconoclasts, social outcasts and subversive types such as the Old Man in Muscha's *Decoder* (1984) and Tom the Priest in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989).[3]

5　With regard to other Beat-referencing game narratives, I suggest that they should be grouped in two categories: projects whose mechanics hope to resonate with a particular Beat modality, and games which, both conspicuously and inconspicuously,

reference Beat-related locations, artists and works. The former type concerns far fewer titles; among them, a once-abandoned and now revived independent project called *Tangiers*, which has been teased as a dark Dada Burroughsian/Ballardian stealth game, "where words are your weapon and shadows are your protection" (Vandell). As stated by the game's lead developer, Alex Harvey, stealth mode is the very point where video games mechanics and Burroughsian literary strategies intersect as the game would allow the player to act "as an agent of disruption, avoiding agents of control" when exploring "the blurred boundaries" between the real and the dreamlike (Sigl).

6 Another Beat icon whose literary idiom and its idiosyncrasies have been subjected to the process of transfiguration into the medium of video narratives is Jack Kerouac. The author of *On the Road* was among inspirations for a 2018 indie narrative-adventure game entitled *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (henceforth referred to as WWTLW) and developed by Dim Bulb Games. Much in the spirit of unrestrained mobility, predilection for life in flux and lust for storytelling characterizing many of Kerouac's protagonists, the core mechanic of the game requires the player (taking the role of "the Traveler") to listen to non-player characters' tales and selecting the ones to share with various drifters while roaming, train hopping or hitchhiking across the US of the 1930s. Although the game is set in the Great Depression era, while Kerouac was born in 1922, it draws heavily on and is an ode to Kerouac's intense love of the land, its diverse people and the American way of life. On an opposite note, it also thematizes frustration and disillusionment with America as a land of freedom and opportunity, the feelings which all of the Beats shared equally. The experience of covering vast parts of the country and the time spent thereby feeds into the gameplay, which rests considerably on one's being en route and without a fixed sense of a goal for a significant time of the game. What further facilitates achieving the Beat modus in WWTLW comes with adopting the form of anthology of vignettes and engaging more than a dozen reputable writers representing various backgrounds and each responsible for the story of a single character. As suggested by the lead developer of the project, Johnnemann Nordhagen, the form enabled the work "to represent a huge amount of America's diversity in the writing staff... and [to give] a number of new or unheard voices a place to tell their stories" within one master narrative (Nordhagen). Not least significantly, the game features a character labelled as "the Beat poet" and named Cassady, an artistic soul and a Bay Area resident who has gone travelling to forget about unreciprocated love and who roams in the Midwest. In the eyes of the game's creator, Matthew Seiji Burns, apart from the obvious link to the real figure, Cassady epitomizes a certain line of great American creative minds (such as the Beats, but also, more contemporarily, the likes of Steve Jobs) who are internally and perennially conflicted between a frantic craving for newness, authenticity, and moments of spiritual catharses (Burns aptly stresses the parallels between the "Beat" and "beatific") and the nourishment of their own egotism boosted by failing to follow their own values and principles (Burns). Such an existential deadlock renders Cassady as a tragic figure, who "want[s] to hear a sadness that resonates with [his] own" and casts his own fate to be that of "an uprooted poet howling unheard into the winds, seething with anger and pain" (WWTLW). On completing Cassady's episode the Traveler receives a sunflower head—a likely allusion to Ginsberg's poem "Sunflower Sutra," which has also been credited as a source of inspiration for the entire game.

7 Of the second category of Beat-referencing games, the 2013 Rockstar Games' big-selling action-adventure hit, *Grand Theft Auto V*, appears to have taken inspiration from

Kerouac's 1962 novel *Big Sur* in designing Raton Canyon, a location situated north of Los Santos, a city modeled on Los Angeles. Raton Canyon was the name Kerouac gave to Bixby Canyon on the Big Sur coast of California, where he went to stay in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's cabin to seek seclusion from fame and clamor. In the game the location offers players some stunning views and a chance for open air activities such as dirt biking or parachute jumping. On another Beat note, a vast creek running through the location is called Cassidy Creek, while an actual creek by that name is to be found near Mirabel, California over 200 miles up the Pacific coast from Bixby Canyon; it is thus tempting to surmise the game developers might have digitally rearranged parts of California to give the discussed location more of a Beat touch, if only with a Beat-reminiscent name. Finally, perhaps in line with the Beat predilection for experimentations with psychedelic drugs, the area is the only place where the player can collect the peyote plant, the consumption of which gives their character hallucinatory visions. Concluding, as noted by John Wills, "Raton Canyon provided gamers with a beautiful place to rest and admire the digital wilderness" (170), just as Kerouac's Raton was supposed to offer seclusion to the troubled narrator of *Big Sur*. Thus, in *GTA V* gamers can interact with a digitized literary space, albeit without any weighty hints at Kerouac's novel other than the above-mentioned toponyms, which operate in a playful, Easter-Egg-like fashion.[4]

8   A far more conspicuous and substantial Beat referencing, whereby the figures associated with the movement are fully integrated into the nexus of the game characters' inspirations and shape the protagonist's sensitivity, is to be encountered in *Life Is Strange*, a 2015 episodic adventure/mystery narrative, whose favorable reception came along with garnering academic criticism. Set in a fictional town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon, in 2013 and revolving around a mysterious vanishing of a local girl, the game features Max Caulfield, a talented and a bit introvert 18-year-old student of photography at Blackwell Academy, a senior high school offering education in Science and Arts. Putting aside the key novelty of the game, which is the playable hero's power to reverse time, *Life Is Strange* invokes a great host of non-mainstream artists and works, with Beat references occupying a prominent place, so as to indicate what informs Max's tastes as well as to fashion her as a young, alternative artist, a bit at odds with the money-driven and narcissistic world around her (and much in line with the name-sharing protagonist of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*). As Max admits to her friends at one point, she "can't help it, [she's] analog, not digital" (*Life Is Strange*), which reads literally since in her work she prefers her Polaroid camera over the hyper-expensive modern gear used by her richer classmates. Accordingly, it also translates to her affinity for unconventional, cult and non-conformist cultural texts of the past; along with her interest for *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The October Country* and photographers such as Man Ray, Henri Cartier-Bresson and David Hamilton, Max is awed by Kerouac, whose picture hangs in her locker room next to Andy Warhol's. She references the Beat writer at least three more times. On the suicidal death of her friend, Kate, the player will see her putting the following quote from *The Dharma Bums* on her late classmate's plate: "Are we fallen angels who didn't want to believe that nothing is nothing" ("Episode 3"). She also revels in a sort of a Beat mood while passing time and walking on the train tracks with the other protagonist, Chloe: "Kerouac knew. It's the romance of travel and movement. The sound of the train whistle at night" ("Episode 2"). Finally, Max's visit to the fictional Zeitgeist Gallery in San Francisco puts her in sheer elation: "I love that Jack Kerouac and the Beats hung out in this same hood. Dig it,

cat" ("Episode 5"). The protagonist's admiration for the Beats overlaps with Mr. Jefferson's (Max's photography teacher) appreciation for them; during one class the latter brings up Allen Ginsberg's 1953 shot of Kerouac smoking on balcony in New York City, asserting: "We've all seen that iconic shot of Kerouac on the balcony—and if you haven't, shame" ("Episode 1"). He also shows high reverence for Robert Frank, who in his eyes and in comparison, "captured the essence of post-war, Beat America" in a truer way than Diane Arbus ("Episode 1"). *Life Is Strange*, thus, may be the first and the only video game up to date which offers a fair treatment of the Beat figures by paying due diligence in addressing, if only briefly, their philosophies, key themes, concerns of their aesthetics and finally their merited prominence in the history of twentieth-century literature and culture. Additionally, the Beat sensitivity embodied by Max Caulfield intersects with other anti-establishment and non-authoritarian values that are dear to her, such as the environmental concerns, her outspoken disdain for violence, materialism and elitism (best epitomized by the attitudes of her peers, Nathan and Victoria) as well as practices oppressive to her or her beloved ones' sense of freedom (such as installing surveillance cameras in Chloe's house by her step-father, David). By that means, Beat sensibilities and Beat artists emerge as enduring and inspirational for contemporary youth and modern-day artists.

3. Playing Off the Beat: Enter 'the Beatnik'

9   A special sub-type of games which allude to the Beats comes with a number of titles which, in a more or less playful and self-aware manner, exploit the stereotype of the Beatnik, a term coined by the *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen in 1958, which was supposed to ridicule the Beat writers and poets and which happened to shape their pop-cultural presence. For the convenience and a sense of moral superiority of scandal-thirsty masses and the conservative powers-to-be of the day, "Beatnik" became an umbrella term focalizing and standardizing any anti-establishment sensationalism generated by the Beats, be it their experiments with drugs, love for bebop and independence of mind or political and artistic radicalism. At one point, Beatniks, along with "Communists" and "eggheads," began to be vilified as the country's worst enemy, as exemplified by President Herbert Hoover's outcry during his 1960 Republican Convention address in Chicago. Additionally, the derogatory term codified and confined the ways of attire and conduct to a set of irrelevant and misguided features such as playing the bongos, growing goatees, or wearing sunglasses and black berets, with little or no relation to real Beat writers and poets.

10   Given all this, the stereotyped images of Beat disseminated in the popular visual culture, as noted by David Sterritt, could be "exaggerations at best and outright wrong at worst" (*The Beats* 93). Belonging to the former category, an *On-the-Road*-inspired CBS adventure crime drama entitled *Route 66* (1960-1964, written by Herbert B. Leonard and Stirling Silliphant) hyperboles on the Beats' alleged affinity for fast driving and brawling (Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* 165-166). Of the latter type, *A Bucket of Blood* (1959, dir. Roger Corman) in an inconspicuous manner sensationalizes and condescendingly sneers at Beat misconducts, not least by protagonizing a beatnik-artist murderer (Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* 143-144). It might therefore come as little surprise that video games have seen a natural continuation of what has occasionally been labelled as

"Beatsploitation" in film; half of eight titles discussed in this essay resort to the figure of the Beatnik.

11   The earliest Beatnik references in video games can be traced back to the mid-1990s. Peripheral to the game's plot, the stereotypical Beatnik appears in *Total Distortion*, a 1995 sci-fi action adventure game saturated with a host of pop-cultural allusions and humor, in which the player follows a music entrepreneur who teleports to extraterrestrial dimensions in order to shoot music videos and next sell them to television producers back on Earth. The pop-cultural blend which the game builds on (perhaps best exemplified by the background music being a raucous collage of mashed up hip hop, rock and electro samples) finds some space for Jed, an interactive "MacBeatnik module" in the form of a book and otherwise characterized as a "bitstream of consciousness poetry & performance generator," which the player may enjoy as a minigame. As one further learns from a brief description, Jed, whose human avatar is a young Caucasian male wearing sunglasses, a goatee and an orange turtleneck sweater, "is a man of many words. He will string his words together into sentences for you. Some call this 'poetry.' Others call it 'stream of consciousness.' You may call it a thing that must be destroyed. Use Jed with caution…. We are not responsible for side effects" (*Total Distortion*). Once the minigame begins, Jed is onstage and letting loose a stream of random words to a regular rhythm provided by finger snapping. The improvised poems end up on the "temporary poem page" and vanish once the book/module is put away.

12   A beatnik bar and spoken word performances are also featured in *Grim Fandango*, a critically acclaimed 1998 adventure game developed by LucasArts, which brought together the pastiche of film noir, dark comedy, art deco and Mexican folklore in a way that elevated it to a status of an interactive design masterpiece to be included into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Architecture and Design (Antonelli). In "Episode 7," Manny Calavera, the main protagonist and a travel agent with the Department of Death guiding deceased souls through the Land of the Dead, visits a beatnik den called "The Blue Casket." Exploiting the stereotypical Beat is put in motion on entering the place; all clients of the shady dive wear black sweaters and berets; they are furthermore suspicious of anybody who is not of their ilk, while some of them may be also heard conspiring against the government, bashing capitalism and calling one another "comrades." On recognizing them as the 'Dead Beats' and trying to start a chat, Manny will learn what follows: "Beat it, Dinner Jacket. We're talking about things you wouldn't understand, like truth and beauty!…. No room for the big fat cat from the uptown party that didn't send out invitations to the working class" (*Grim Fandango*). The game allows the player to take the stage, choose random lines and perform poems that ridicule the spontaneous, personal and spiritual character of Beat diction; an example of a generated poem can go as follows:

> Skee-bee bop, BOP! Skee-bee bop, BOP!
> Dig this real
> A single, calcified tear
> Like, pow!
> Don't pet the cat that way
> …pointlessness…
> Go, go, GO! (*Grim Fandango*)

13   The stereotypical Beatnik has even made its way into a title for the youngest aficionados of gaming. *102 Dalmatians: Puppies to the Rescue*, a 2000 platform game

adaptation of Disney's animation, features yet another character named Manny, a goatee-bearded mole unsurprisingly equipped with sunglasses and tin cans serving as bongos, who aids the two dog protagonists of the video narrative in saving their siblings and parents from the hands of the infamous Cruella de Vil. To the bewilderment of central characters, the encountered ally, also known as Jazzmo, speaks in rhymes and uses a hefty much of Beatnik lingo, yet, notwithstanding this fact and unlike the obnoxious Dead Beats from *Grim Fandango*, he is amiable and responsive to the hero's need for help, which might be simply necessitated by the young target audiences of the game.

14   Although few in number and, as one may assume, with limited impact on current global gaming tastes, the showcased titles reinforce the negative pop-cultural view of the Beats. Whether through recovering the Beatnik attributes, (mis)representing Beat bop spontaneity as ludicrous and artistically fruitless, or rehearsing judgements from President Hoover's playbook, the games, as Sterritt would have it, fall between exaggeration and utter misconstruction of Beat sensibilities. The only angle coming in support of rendering Beat in *Total Distortion* or *Grim Fandango*—an argument I intend to develop in the remaining part of my paper, where I discuss the perplexing case of *Fallout 4*, which magnifies the Beat/Beatnik pop-cultural presence and complicates the apparent one-sidedness of representing the Beats not only in games, but in popular culture in general—is the fact that the discussed games operate in ironic frameworks and seem to be at least partially self-reflective on the ways television, film and music have mishandled Beat. After all, Jed from *Total Distortion* is not simply a Beatnik, but a "MacBeatnik" (let us not forget that the aims of the game revolve around *selling* cultural texts), just as the regulars of the Blue Casket are aware of their being "*Dead Beats*." Thus, the concerns of problematizing the phenomena of Beat and the Beatnik as commodities together with inquiring how much has been left of the value and actual understanding of Beat philosophy cannot be overlooked as they find full realization in *Fallout 4*, arguably the most perplexing instance of referencing and appropriating Beat mythos by the video game industry as yet.

4. The (Dis)harmonies and Subversions of *Fallout 4*

15   A winner of numerous gaming awards and a commercial hit following the success of its previous installments, *Fallout 4* is a 2015 triple A action role-playing game released by Bethesda, which is set in 2280s America devastated by a nuclear catastrophe over 200 years prior. In the game the player takes the role of the Sole Survivor, either a male or a female character who is the only person to have saved their life in the nuclear strike owing to having been preserved in a cryogenic pod and who must find people responsible for the death of their spouse and locate their abducted son, Shaun. The player explores a land named The Commonwealth, which comprises parts of the state of Massachusetts and emerges as a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by wars between several groups of conflicting interests. The variety of factions and quests as well as over three hundred locations correspond to a mosaic of references to culture and history of the US. To name but a few, the key events in the game's story take place at historical sites, such as Bunker Hill, Concord, and Boston. A loosely organized civilian militia called The Commonwealth Minutemen takes one back to the historical formation of Minutemen, a part of the American colonial militia fighting in the American

Revolutionary War. Another movement, The Railroad, an underground liberation group giving freedom to androids called synths, alludes to the activity of the 19th-century Underground Railroad. Of a dozen ventures into literature and pop-culture, *Fallout 4* hints at as wide-ranging artifacts as Edgar Allan Poe H.P. Lovecraft, *Jaws*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Walking Dead.* The central theme which anchors the above-mentioned references and binds all the events comes with a fulfilled nuclear threat that changes America irreversibly, which is a clear reference to the unrest of the Atomic Age of the 1950s. The player becomes immersed in the vibe of the 1950s as early as in the exposition; the game opens by stressing the hero's nuclear family, material well-being and maintaining the standards of middle-class living. The pre-nuclear-strike 2070s are thus the new 1950s as one becomes immersed in the serenity of suburban life homogenous in its design and social composition, yet also concerned with a looming military crisis. The catastrophe that follows is a simulation of what the 1950s world could have been like, had the nuclear arms race escalated to full scale. With the artifacts and design of the past not fully obliterated, the post-war world of 2287 retains much of the aesthetics of the 1950s. In some locations the player may happen to come across jukeboxes, posters, vehicles that are reminiscent of the decade. One example comes with banners advertising Chryslus Cherry Bomb Cars resembling Firebird III engineered by General Motors in 1959. What is more, the advertising slogan "Life is a race.... Win!" reads like a clear allusion to the burgeoning rat race entrapping American society in the mid-twentieth century. The Beats make their way into the game as a part of a wholesale transfer of borrowings from the decade. They are referenced and stereotyped to a significant extent in two sites to be explored by the player. The first one, the Atom Cats Garage, is the home to the Atom Cats, a bit stuck-up but good-natured gang specializing in power armor modifications. Led by Zeke, the Atom Cats identify themselves as dropouts from the Commonwealth society and cast themselves as "beacon[s] of cool in the world of not-cool" (*Fallout 4*). Living in a garage on the outskirts of the Commonwealth and willing to let people in on the condition that they wear a power armor and earn trust by helping with a few tasks, the Atom Cats exercise limited inclusiveness as a group and wish to maintain the status of an alternative community, perhaps as a means to secure what they endear the most, that is authenticity. Their distinctiveness and rebelliousness are further secured by their language, which is heavily indebted to the 1950s slang. From Zeke, the player will hear not to "be a spaz" since there is "a reputation to uphold" and on breaking into his terminal and reading diary entries, they will be threatened to "set [their] peepers elsewhere" unless they want "a knuckle sandwich" (*Fallout* 4). Unsurprisingly, the Atom Cats overuse words such as "a cat," "hip," "daddy-o"; they also "dig a lot" and call everyone else "squares." Given their linguistic habits, as well as their look and outfit, rather than of the Beats, the Atom Cats come as a rendition of the Greaser subculture, yet the Beat twist comes with a discovery that they demonstrate some literary proclivities. As the player learns while exploring their quarters and finding a number of holotapes (a type of laser-readable storage hardware), the Atom Cats regularly hold and compete in poetry nights. The take on the Beats is evidently satirical as the poetry is terribly bad and diffidently performed. Looking through information on Zeke's terminal, the player will further learn that the leader of the gang has the ambition of compiling a book on his life and times, whose tentative title is *The Legend of Zeke*, a likely allusion to Kerouac's *The Duluoz Legend.* Summing up, the Atom Cats episode bears a rather negative set of implications for the Beats; it reinforces the beatnik stereotype

by linking Beat to aloofness, bohemian elitism, and not least, a superficial interest in art. The other trace of the Beats can be found in Sunshine Tidings co-op, a desolate inland settlement which dates back to the pre-war times and which used to be "a beatnik farming co-op of cabins and a trading warehouse" (Hodgson and von Esmarch 265). As we learn, a "local scuttlebutt suggests the place is haunted by its former residents" (265), yet its only tangible inhabitant is a household maintenance robot called Professor Goodfeels. The player finds out that prior to the Great War the unit was "liberated from its slavery," that is stolen from the suburban area of a nearby location by a member of the commune named Jack. A local terminal stores Jack's log entry in which he reports the event to a person named Allen in the following words: "Dear Allen, We finally sprung a slave from the squares for our freedom farm co-op.… The tincan wigged out trying to go back to his slave owners… so Johnny noodled it out and zonked his motivation protocols to 'Just Be.' Now we call him Professor Goodfeels, just digging the world as it be, owing nothing to nobody" (*Fallout 4*). Obviously, Jack and Allen connote, respectively, Kerouac and Ginsberg, but putting aside the allusion, it is interesting to see *Fallout 4* casting these digital Beats as forerunners of the already-mentioned Railroad, the only major faction supporting the doctrine that androids are entitled to freedom. However, with Jack and Allen liberating not humanoid synths but household appliance units one cannot help but think that the Beats are being mocked and satirized once again.

16 Correspondingly to most of the previously discussed games, *Fallout 4* does not refrain from resorting to and utilizing the beatnik stereotype, which comes as early as in the stage of customizing the look of the playable protagonist before starting the game proper. Specifically, on deciding to play as the male character, the player will be able to select a "Beatnik" hairstyle and "daddy o" facial hair. Later in the game, while the loading screen is viewed, among the hints on how to perform better one may find information on a drug called "Daddy-O," one of the rarer consumable items in *Fallout 4*. As the player learns, "[p]opular with beatniks and intellectuals before the Great War, Daddy-O heightens the user's cognitive faculties, making them more alert and more able to process information, but users tend to hyper-focus on the tasks in front of them, making it awkward to interact with them" (*Fallout 4*). The beatnik-commie-egghead triumvirate is spelled out once again, albeit on a clearly ironic note, on visiting a small and deserted town called Andale. The place is home to the Smiths, a family of traditionalists, proud American patriots, and as one soon learns, cannibals. When asked about his political beliefs and elections of the governor, the head of the family named Jack pronounces that "it's every American's civic duty to cast his vote for his favorite Republican candidate. Am I right?" (*Fallout 4*). Not willing to reveal who he voted for, he further declares: "I'll tell you one thing: we didn't vote for any beatnik liberal commies, that's for sure" (*Fallout 4*), a line in which the era of the 1950s conservatism comes across the America of Trumpism.

17 Thus, taking into consideration all the above-mentioned finding on how the creators of *Fallout 4* handle Beat and its tenets, it might be easy to draw an unfavorable image of the game whether basing on the image of Kerouac and Ginsberg as an object of light ridicule or watching Beat as confined to a beatnik token, a convenient signifier of drug abuse, existential nihilism and political radicalism, which continues a long tradition of sensationalizing the conducts of Beat exponents in a variety of popular media. Curiously enough, having said all this, it might be also well claimed that Beat does not

actually fall prey to the sneering and exploitative attitudes of *Fallout 4* developers. The game could be easily castigated as a whole, were it not for a highly ironic framework it is set in. Samuel McCready identifies the work as an example of a counterfactual historical game, which reimagines the Cold War period to challenge frequently rehearsed truths about it. He builds on William Uricchio's wish to see historical computer games "as sites to tease out the possibilities and complications of historical representation and simulation" and to claim that "games by definition subvert the project of consolidation and certainty associated with [historical positivism]... predicated as they are on a reflexive awareness of the construction of history" (qtd. in McCready 20). Through a simulation of alternative past and future, the counterfactual, as asserted by McCready, demonstrates its "capacity to unravel assumptions about the static nature of historical events" and [to] "reveal the tenuousness of... historical trajectory" (26). In *Fallout 4* history occupies the place of an empty signifier, leaving one with "an absence of any cohesive sense of what 'history' is in a future America destroyed by nuclear war" (McCready 16). What the player is left with in their explorations of the game's futurescapes is irony and the uncanniness of encountered remnants of the past world, specters of ideas and items that were incapable of saving the land from destruction nor able to offer a firm sense of order; among many, these ineffective designs, as McCready would have it, include the "unchecked technological progress," "neoliberal democracy and capitalist economies" and "mass consumer culture" (26). Beat references in *Fallout 4*, as I would suggest, aid in excavating a sense of spectrality of the 1950s and the phenomena that belong to the period, including the very notion of the so-called "Beat Generation." If, as postulated in Derrida's theories on hauntology and clarified by Colin Davis, the specter is "a deconstructive figure... [which] mak[es] established certainties vacillate" (David 376) and whose role is, first and foremost, to "open us up to the experience of secrecy as such" (David 377) (while not necessarily pressing us to unshroud it), then the satirical renditions of Beat and the stereotyping of the Beatnik hint at Beat as a spectral presence, a phenomenon that keeps haunting us (just like Jack and Allen do in Sunshine Tidings) yet is impossible to be grasped with fixed categories.[5] If this is the case, then all the satirical undertones of the game are not really targeted at Beat, but at any superficial representation of Beat. In other words, every reiteration of the stereotypical image of a Beatnik in the game becomes a pop-cultural self-reflection, a metacommentary on stereotyping as a misguided predilection and a mechanism channeling our desperate yet ineffective attempts to cast past phenomena as fixed objects of knowledge, a notion which Zygmunt Bauman terms "retrotopia." Pondering on the intersections of nationalisms and the politics of historical memory, the sociologist expounds the collective predilection to mold and seek solace in the past when confronted with the contingencies of the present and the unknowns of the future:

> Most obviously—and therefore most damagingly to our self-confidence, self-esteem and self-pride—we are not the ones who control the present from which the future will germinate and sprout—and for that reason we entertain little, if any, hope of controlling that future.... What a relief, therefore, to return from that mysterious, recondite, unfriendly, alienated and alienating world, densely sprinkled with traps and ambushes, to the familiar, cosy and homely, sometimes wobbly but consolingly unobstructed and passable, world of memory.... [F]uture is in principle pliable—the past is solid, sturdy and fixed once and for all. (61)

18   It is tempting to read the shattered and conflict-ridden world of *Fallout 4* with its procession of items belonging to the past as a lesson on the present-day liquid

modernity, unforeseeable in the social, cultural and geopolitical effects that will take force and thus nostalgically charged. Looked at from such a perspective and taking reverse dynamics, *Fallout 4* problematizes the beatnik stereotype (and its modern inflection, 'the liberal') as a manifestation of nostalgic and phantasmatic craving for past phenomena which are allegedly familiar, manageable and thus vincible. Such an attitude makes Jack Smith of Andale know very well who his enemies are and maintain his hate entrenched by living on the outskirts of society, just like it aids the contemporary American far-right in telling their friends from their liberal-minded foes.

19   Perhaps an idea to be sublated to "retrotopia," "retromania," a notion theorized by Simon Reynolds, comes as another stimulating point of reference for examining Beat traces in video games. Reynolds describes the concept as "an open-ended evocative term for a bunch of phenomena to do with retro, vintage, nostalgia, revivalism... [whose] convergence... in the first decade of the 21st century adds up to a cultural landscape that seems to deserve [such] a term" (Marzec). As he continues, "[retromania] is... [an] ambivalent word... for a condition that could be seen as a malaise, but with something distinctive... with aspects that are exciting and culturally productive" (Marzec). The retromaniacal fashion of recovering bygone objects and feeding on past ideas and cultural phenomena is well thematized in *Fallout 4.* Considering the Beat phenomenon, the already-mentioned holotape, the most widespread storage device in the *Fallout 4* world, connotes both Beat investments in experiments with tape recordings and the current revived love for analog storage media like vinyls or tape cassettes. Respectively, the remnants of co-op freedom farms echo American youth communes from the late 1960s such as Tolstoy Farm near Davenport, Washington or Ginsberg's East Hill Farm near Cherry Lake, New York, which in turn inflect a modern revival of back-to-the-land movements and permanent agriculture philosophy. If looked through the lens of retromania, these references hint at present-day tendency to position past phenomena as objects of fetishism; "Beatness," as *Fallout 4* appears to communicate, is just another current retro in-thing generating market demand, be it Beat-related feature films starring A-listers, luxurious designer item collections by Dior (Cartner-Morley) or Reebok footware (Servantes).

5. Conclusions: The Beats and Visual Culture: Retry?

20   Concluding, if David Sterritt claims that "the latter-day [Beat-related] movies... bespeak a heightened seriousness about Beat... [i]mperfect as they are" ("The Beats and Visual Culture" 277), so can be said about video game narratives such as WTWTLW, *Life Is Strange* and *Fallout 4.* Even when apparently misappropriating Beat philosophies by resorting to "the Beatnik" token, the discussed titles, with the prime focus on *Fallout 4,* turn out as layered works, whose ironic and self-referential frameworks subvert any simplistic and conventional reading of the cultural references they offer by questioning the ways in which popular culture has exploited and monetized particular cultural phenomena, the Beat mythos including. One may therefore gather that, owing to video games and regardless of their yet small-scale attraction to Beat, visual culture has eventually learned some of its lesson in representing the Beats and employing Beat modalities. At the same time, however, one should not overlook the risk of

perpetuating Beat as Beatnik if players approach the games without attuning themselves to their ironic undertones.

21   Typically for all the explored titles, the dissemination of Beat in game narratives comes merely as a single notion in a large roster of various pop-cultural references. Unlike film and television, Beat is still waiting for making a prime theme in the modern medium of video games, a state of affairs likely to be changed in the forthcoming years owing to the constant expansion and the growing prominence of the indie game market, which has already demonstrated a soft spot for the independent and anti-establishment spirit of the Beats.

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NOTES

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2. For an exhaustive account of rendering Beat in the Visual Culture, see the three texts by David Sterritt in the bibliographical section of this essay. For a discussion of criss-crossings of Beat and popular music see Simon Warner, *Texts and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

3. It is interesting to see how Poe marks both the final and early years of Burroughs' life. Recollecting over his teenage years, the writer brings up the famous Baltimorian as a major source of inspiration for his early stories, which felt like "Edgar Allan Poe things, like old men in forgotten places, very flowery and sentimental too, that flavor of high school prose" (Burroughs et al., 17).

4. In my discussion of translating particular Beat idioms into the medium of video games I am limiting the presentation to those writers and poets who have comprised the core of the movement. However, if one were to reach further to post-Beat or wider countercultural influences, investigating *Highway 61 Interactive* might be a worthwhile endeavor. In this Bob Dylan-inspired CD-ROM one re-lives a number of moments from the artist's career (these comprise recordings, videos and photos) through interacting with various objects and places. See Graphix Zone and Sony Entertainment, *Highway 61 Interactive*, 1995.

5. This challenge finds reflection in the field of Beat studies involved in a continuous struggle to define the parameters of "Beat."

ABSTRACTS

Ever since setting their foot on the social and cultural landscapes of the post-World War II realities, the Beats have been both the subject of and subject to pop-cultural representations and appropriations. While figurations of Beat sensibility in film, television, press and popular music have been well recognized and analyzed, an area which remains uninvestigated for Beat influences, perhaps due to its relatively short pop-cultural presence, is the one of video games. Recent years, which have marked the release of titles such as *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) and *Life Is Strange* (Square Enix, 2015), attest to a certain amount of interest invested in Beat mythos by both indie game developers and the biggest game studios in the world, thereby opening a new chapter in representing the Beats in visual media. By, on the one hand, mapping out the categories of Beat references in video game narratives and, on the other, setting them against the backdrop of existing models of (mis)appropriating the Beats in visual culture, I will seek to explore the ways in which video game designers venture into the Beat ethos and I wish to address the implications this bears for the lineage of Beat pop-cultural presence. The final part of the essay takes a closer look at *Fallout 4*, making references to such theoretical concepts as Derridean hauntology, Zygmunt Bauman's retrotopia and Simon Reynolds' retromania, to further demonstrate how complex and ambiguous Beat video-game figurations can be.

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