



Rehearsals for Retirement

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP SOLOMON

SUE ZEMKA

Philip Solomon is an internationally acclaimed experimental filmmaker. He has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship, and his work has been featured at the Museum of Modern Art (three one-man shows) and twice in the Whitney Biennial. Recently he has ventured into the medium of digital gaming, called “machinima” in most circles, although it is arguable that Solomon’s films do not have much in common with that genre beyond the use of the same raw material. Certainly the multi-layered, textured soundtracks of Solomon’s films and his striking use of chiaroscuro and color manipulation (including complete desaturation) go beyond what most artists in this genre imagine. Working with the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, Solomon has to date produced three films, the first of which, *Untitled (for David Gatten)* (2005), was a collaboration with the late Mark LaPore. The other films are *Rehearsals for Retirement* (2007) and *Last Days In A Lonely Place* (2007). *Rehearsals for Retirement* won a first prize at the 2008 Black Maria Film and Video Festival and was named in *The Village Voice* as one of the top-ten experimental films of that year.¹ Solomon is planning to make a fourth film, titled *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*, using the recently released *Grand Theft Auto IV*. His film is expected to premiere in the fall of 2008.²

Digital gaming is an insistently fast and violent media, its speed wedded to its violence. As such, Solomon’s recent films challenge viewers with intertwined and unexpected shifts of expectation: from destruction to mourning, action to loss, and acceleration to contemplative stillness. On a winter night in 2008, I met with Phil Solomon to talk about his films, video games, time, timing, and other things besides.

Sue Zemka: These three films have been a surprise to those who know your past work, much of which has been painstakingly produced on an optical printer (a machine which re-photographs films one frame at a time), and often involved the use of chemically distressed and heavily textured surfaces. Then suddenly you take up digital media, of all things a video game. Where did the motivation come from—what moved you to forego your past resistance to non-celuloid film media?

Phil Solomon: Originally, I was motivated to venture into video gaming when I was teaching a class on Postmodernism at the University of Colorado. I began to notice that a shift

had occurred in the sense of space in the movies I was watching and that cinematic ontology was being affected by digital aesthetics. Films like *The Matrix* clearly seemed to be informed by ideas of virtual space. So I went out and bought myself a Playstation 2, ostensibly to find out what was going on. The young man at Best Buy recommended the “Grand Theft Auto” series for its detailed graphics and “free roaming” capacity. I found myself more intrigued with the experience of interactivity, even from a crude controller, than I had imagined. What intrigued me the most was the strange poignancy I felt in the game’s polygonal aspirations, its desires to be of the real world that fell short in very interesting ways.

When my friend and fellow filmmaker Mark LaPore came to visit in the summer of 2005, I had only been playing for a few months. Initially, this game, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* appealed to our sense of humor because of its wacky mash-up of the sublime and the ridiculous. We weren’t interested in actually playing the game; we would use built-in codes (called “cheats” by gamers) in order to bypass the narrative and its cumbersome missions with their hierarchical levels. We mostly just wanted to drive around and look at the landscape. We sat up playing it one night, without any real plan to make a piece together. Mark would go online and look up cheat codes and read them to me without telling me their consequences. “Cheats” are built into the game; they are codes that allow you to do things that “real gamers” disparage. They are often extraneous to the narrative of the game; for example, there’s a cheat that will allow you to make a car fly. There is another one for “all pedestrians riot.” The game gets hysterical and chaotic if you start piling on these cheats which push the game in directions it wasn’t meant to go. But this allowed us to create a rather surreal *mise-en-scène* and dreamy, haunted landscapes.

After some time, Mark actually started directing me as if I were a performer and cameraman. This is where *Untitled* really started. It wasn’t my intention to do “machinima” or be slick; it was something Mark and I started doing together for our own amusement. Still, as the night wore on, it got more and more serious, and Mark became intent that we could make something with this, and that we should finish it that evening. We started to conceive the film as a private work for our friend and colleague David Gatten. All three of us had recently battled serious illnesses. As it turned out, this night was to be my last visit with Mark, the last time I saw him before his unexpected death three weeks later. Now, the film that we had completed seemed to be both his gift to me and an oddly prophetic memorial. *Untitled* premiered at David Gatten’s show in the New York Film Festival that fall. What had originally been intended as a get-well card for all three of us now had terribly reverberant overtones.

So now I was inspired to revisit *GTA: San Andreas*, searching for clues and poetic signposts; in effect, I was looking for Mark. Like *Untitled*, the films that followed (*Rehearsals for Retirement* and *Last Days In A Lonely Place*) are supremely slow. These are elegies. I am playing against type of most video game design, which is laden with violent missions and monetary goals, and has a linear momentum. What interested me was pushing stillness, along the lines of the great Japanese filmmaker, Yasujiro Ozu. Ozu always used the same

lens, which approximated human perspective and usually shot from the tatami position (the low angle mat position). So his films have a very different dynamic than other filmmakers, in that there is a tempered elegance to them, a kind of formal reticence with composition and time. Using video, I felt liberated to explore time in a similar spirit. In contrast, when I work in film, I attend to every frame. Using optical printers, I have seen every frame and worked on every frame of my films, and there are 1440 frames per minute of screen time. But for me, video is closer to analog tape in that it is a more of a recording than a photographically emblazoned image. In video, time is much more like “riverun,” in Joyce’s sense.

My work has been slowing down over the last few years. When I was younger, I was very excited by dynamic montage, because that was the traditional province of experimental film. But now so-called “MTV style” cutting is everywhere, and I find it terribly brutal. Look at most commercials or “The Bourne Series”; they are so unremittingly aggressive with their use of montage for a “chop chop, off with their heads” effect. I am more interested in duration and in what might be called a softer sense of time. I am also interested in an abundant sense of atmosphere and space. When you are in the land of a John Ford film, you can feel the very air. Oddly enough, I seem to be able to access this through these airless digital games. There is a simulacrum of weather and atmosphere, and literally so, because a group of designers attended to breezes, drops of rain, and storm clouds, to a level of astonishing detail that goes above and beyond the narrative needs of the game.

Sue: How did you achieve this elegiac tone and dream-like landscape with a medium that is so fast and violent, so immersed in an action-filled present? Was it mostly a matter of tuning in to the level of detail in the simulation that goes unnoticed when one is “playing the game,” in a traditional sense?

Phil: Well, the game is and isn’t elegiac. Certainly most people get wrapped up in the immersive experience and intrigue of going on missions, which mostly means stealing cars and killing people. It’s urban warfare. But the underlying premise of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is that the user’s avatar, C. J., is trying to piece together the facts of his mother’s death. Standing alone in the rain, in his undershirt and jeans, staring at the revolving bouquet of flowers, C. J. became for Mark and I a Robert Johnson-type character. He is a black man in a deserted world; in our film, he is indeed at the crossroads.

So maybe it’s knowing that C. J. is a character in mourning that allowed me to regard him in a different light after Mark’s death. In *Rehearsal for Retirement*, I decidedly made C. J. look more ambiguous, something of a void man, a holder of negative space—the unknowable. Then, in *Last Days in a Lonely Place*, after I put a coat on him, which accentuated his lanky frame, he really began to look like Mark to me, in uncanny ways. Ironically, although the ostensible subject matter is loss and grief, creatively speaking, the games provided me with a spark of life, because Mark got me shooting again, after my illness—with the caveat that shooting in this context literally means driving, and I am actually driving a simulated



Last Days In A Lonely Place

car. And this became the means of composing the shots and choreographing the camera movement. Perhaps I should be nominated for Best Driver in an Animated Short Subject.

In *Untitled*, the action is very simple, hardly the mindset of a traditional video game. It was Mark's idea to construct *Untitled* around four cuts. One: C. J. looks away while we regard a revolving bouquet of flowers suspended in the air. Two: C. J. "runs like hell" "through a world gone wrong," a push/pull breathless dash through a forest of no return. Three: the bouquet devolves into the ostensible plains of its virtual composition. Four: C. J. watches the flowers in the storm while rattlesnakes hiss and frightened dogs bark and a train whistles in the wind. In the last section, I left C. J. alone. When faced with nothing to do, both C. J. and the game get bored and restless. For example, C. J. crosses and uncrosses his arms, and the game sends birds and planes to fill the sky. In other words, by refusing to play the game, things happen. Once again, like Ozu, you have to wait. What seems at first counter-intuitive becomes a new way of playing, a way of directing the game's original intent towards creatively fertile territory.

The game has an intelligence. It accounts for things that I don't think anyone ever anticipated. For example, when I drove a car over an ocean, with the help of a "cheat code," the game accounted for car headlights on the surface of the water. Who would have guessed that? What I am intrigued by is the uncanny level of detail and the verisimilitude with no ostensible narrative purpose that to me can only suggest a degree of love and, dare I say, a virtual tenderness.

Sue: So, the code has primary attributes, but it has secondary attributes as well, and the latter makes the game smarter than you imagine, but also makes accidents possible— aesthetic serendipity. And here you are, a classically trained filmmaker, with a specifically cinematic expertise and knowledge which, at first glance, seem out of place in the world of digital gaming. How does *Grand Theft Auto* show Phil Solomon the old-school experimental filmmaker?

Phil: Each of the three films has a different style. *Untitled* is spare and reticent, restrictive in its emotional range: this is more Mark's style. The cuts are very matter-of-fact, very blunt. "Rehearsals" and "Last Days" are in my style—baroque, romantic, and flamboyant. The transitions are softer, using achingly slow dissolves. Visually, the films contain many images and allusions that resonate personally with my memories of Mark. Some of these are allusions to other films. For example, the very title *Last Days In A Lonely Place* is a mash-up of Gus Van Sant's *Last Days* (about Kurt Cobain) and Nick Ray's *In a Lonely Place*, which is about a man whose inability to control his anger leads to despair. Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* is also invoked in *Last Days In A Lonely Place* as we approach the famous Griffith Observatory, complete with an apocalyptic lecture coming from the soundtrack. Sal Mineo asks James Dean, "Do you think the end of the world will come at night time?" In *Rehearsals for Retirement* there are intimations of 9/11. Mark LaPore died on 9/11/2005.



Untitled for David Gatten

I realize that some of these references will be recognized by only a limited circle of viewers. However, I believe the effect of the films is not contingent on knowing the references. If the "feeling is in the form," as Susanne Langer has it, then the work could be resonant for anyone. That is why I try to work with allegorical figures and images, which viewers will hopefully register at the level of feeling, whether or not they consciously recognize them. In *Last Days*, I weave allusions to personal mortality together with an overriding sense of a cosmic apocalypse. The end of the world; the end of my world. Though we seem to be moving through the aftermath of some terrible event, destruction is not in the foreground of the frame, and in most cases, the viewer doesn't directly see it. Instead, we are in the shadow of destruction, and literally in its light.

Sue Zemka

University of Colorado at Boulder

NOTES

¹ See <<http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0801,halter,78745,20.html>> and <<http://www.blackmariafilmfestival.org/films.php?qs1=2008&qs2=jcho>>.

² See Philip Solomon's website: <<http://www.philsolomon.com/>>.