Tabor Robak

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WHEN YOU SIT DOWN TO A MEAL, YOU EAT A STORY...

QUAND TU T'ASSIEDS À TABLE, C'EST POUR MANGER UNE HISTOIRE...

My piece "Screen Peeking" depicts four different kinds of food, imagined through four different lifestyle narratives. I'm playing with genre and brand-based marketing, juxtaposing four different closed systems.

The format for the piece is based on single-screen, multiplayer video games, where each gamer is assigned one quadrant of a screen. The images are computer-rendered, using software called Cinema 4D and Unity. I created virtual environments, then filmed them with a virtual camera.

I have an ambivalent relation to each quadrant. Each represents a fantasy which entices me personally. I was craving each of these images, and the design process was also a process of study and consumption. On the other hand, I realize that each mental space is limited, and can only hold my attention for so long. I've managed to outgrow and step back from each of these narratives.

This quadrant is filled with an Old-World, bountiful feast, like the Giant's table in Mickey and the Beanstalk. This is a screenshot from Unity, with the textured wireframe turned on. Lighting a CG scene is like lighting for photography or film, in that you're using artificial methods to simulate natural illumination. But it's also different, since the "lamps" are invisible: you don't have to keep them outside the frame. Here you can see the circumference of each invisible light source. The spheres remind me of overlapping beach balls, filling up the space of the room. My aim is to make each surface as lush as possible, but I also like to create a rhythm of bright spots and shadow. Certain objects, like the turkey, seem to glow from within.
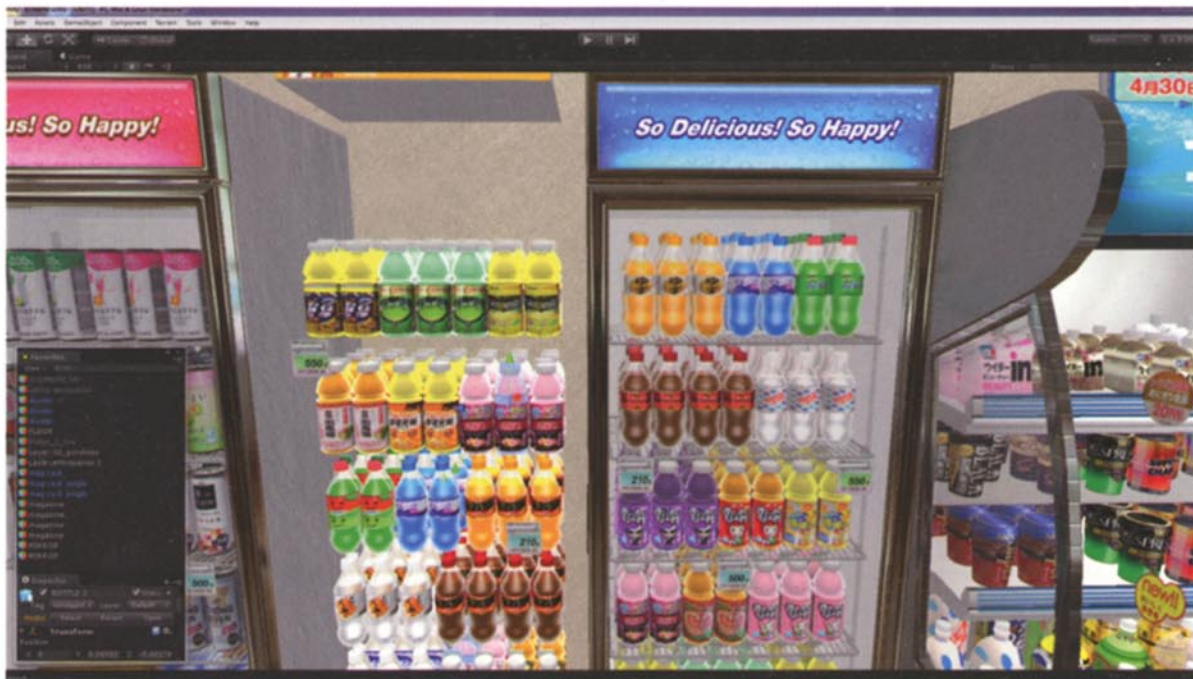
This quadrant shows a Japanese convenience store, or "Konbini." Like many Americans of my generation, I have been absorbing Japanese pop culture all of my life, so that it feels like home to me. But I also realize that it's not "mine," especially since I've never been to Japan.

This particular konbini is clearly a constructed fantasy: I had to decide what did and didn't belong. For example, I included an ATM, but none of the necessities that you find at actual konbini (scissors, soap, air fresheners, etc.). I wanted to emphasize the snacks. In Japan, they tend to have higher-quality, more eclectic packaged foods than in America: you'll find everything from energy jellies that you suck out of metallic bags; to oversized candy bars filled with air bubbles; to alcoholic coffee drinks. Almost every product has its own maniacal animal mascot. There are a lot of Japanese snack-food enthusiasts online, so I was able to draw on Google Image Search and Flickr in my

research. The result is loving but deliberately inaccurate: I remixed features from many different brands and retail chains, to assemble my ideal, imaginary konbini, which is probably more indulgent than any existing store.

Sometimes when you're modelling a scene in Unity, it's necessary to "turn off" certain objects. Here, I've removed the fridge, but not the bottled drinks. So you can see that the drinks aren't actually resting on the refrigerator shelves: they're in suspension. There's no weight or gravity in a virtual space; that's just an illusion.

The objects in the konbini were an organizational nightmare. I went on a modelling spree; then I had to go back and group them so that I could work with larger units. Here, we're looking at "Project" and "Inspector" views in Unity. You can see that each object combines a shape and a texture, which wraps around the frame. There's a lot of data attached to each individual object.
All CG rendering comes down to math.

Most of the scene is turned off, except for the price tags, the hanging signs, and the spills on the ground. I liked thinking about those elements. The spills add griminess, but they're also there to break up the floor texture, which is just a repeating pattern. That's a trick I learned from video-game design: if you make a surface dirtier, it's more convincing. The price tags add another level of detail, without becoming quite clear to the viewer--like a dab of paint suggesting far-off flowers in a landscape painting.
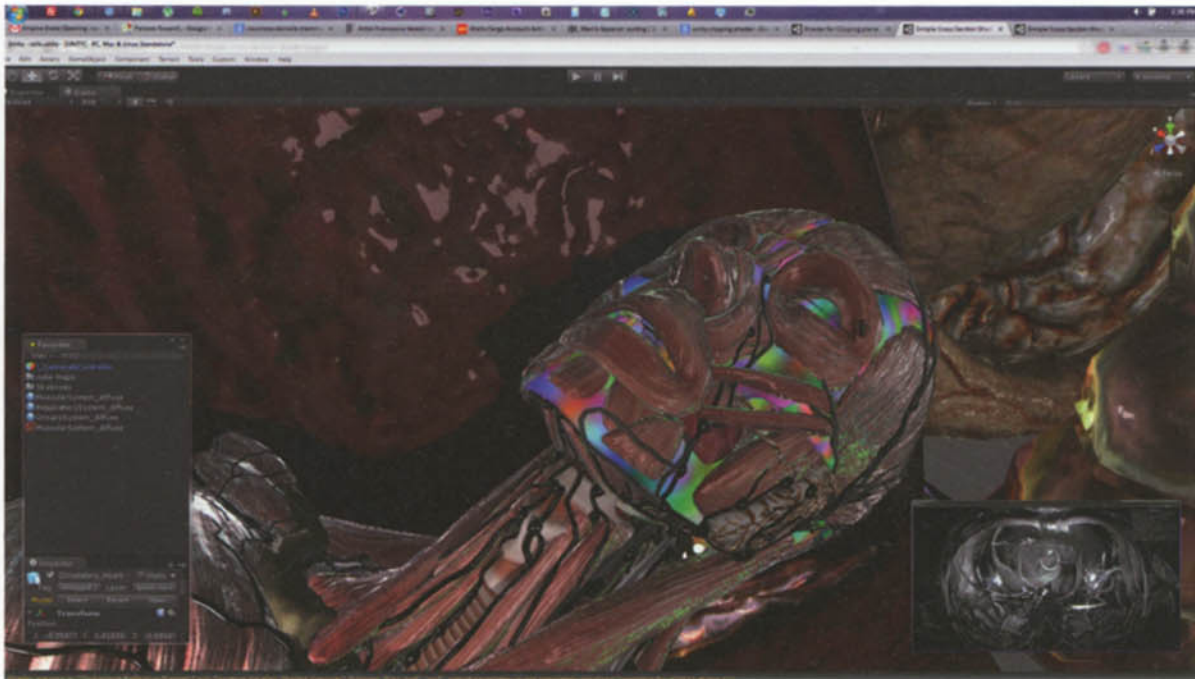
This quadrant looks like an educational video you'd watch in high school biology. I downloaded a virtual model of a human body, zoomed in really far, and looked for an interesting area to tunnel through with my camera. I did a lot of deleting and refining, to bring out certain tissues and structures. Then I filled out the space with my own invented forms, which could be cells or more complex organisms. Next to the other quadrants, it might make you think of food. Which is appropriate, since human bodies are basically meat.
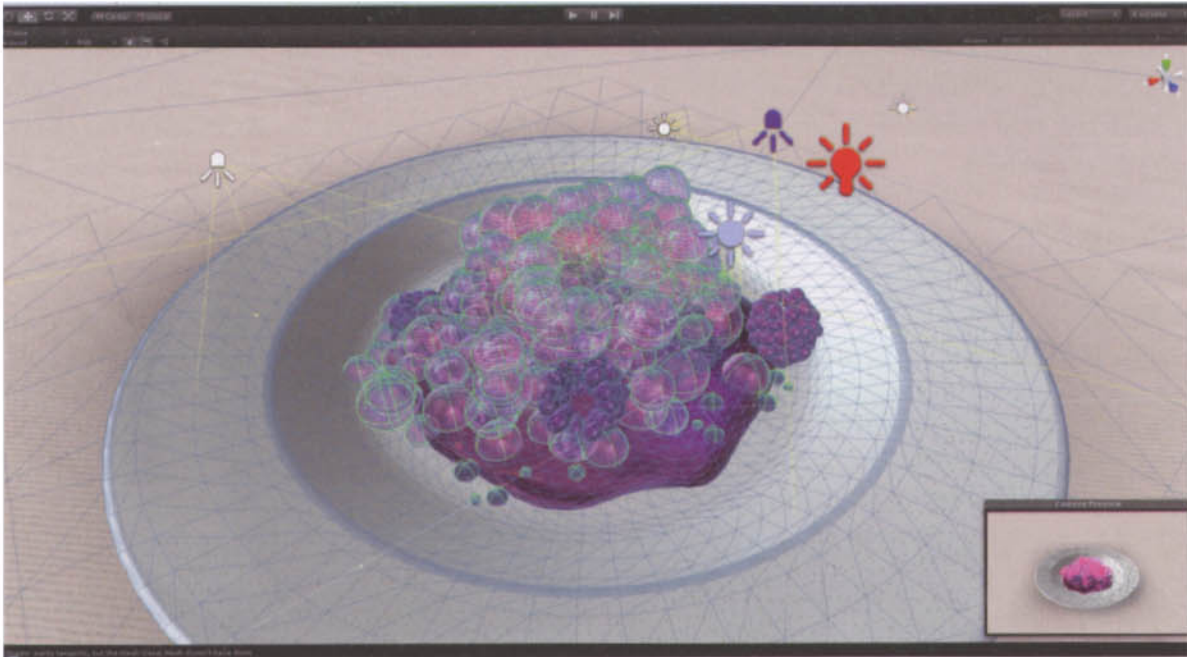
The imagery is inspired partly by videos made with scanning electron microscopes. I like that black-and-white is intrinsic to that medium, in the same way that VHS looks grainy, or digital videos look pixellated. I worked with a shallow depth-of-field, so that the objects seem to emerge out of a cloud. You're not supposed to be able to recognize anything. We're so deep in the substrate that everything has become abstract. If you zoom in far enough, scale becomes irrelevant: we could be in deep space, or underwater.

I hope that this quadrant captures the "feeling" of science, the fetishistic awe it inspires. We're somewhere else, and science took us here. Or maybe science is a foreign country, like Japan.

This quadrant is based on experimental fine dining, or molecular gastronomy. Since the foods are invented, it leaves a lot of room for interpretation. The viewer has to imagine the mouthfeel, the flavor, the temperature.

These meals are mid-way between the science quadrant and the konbini: organic, but also precisely composed. Again, I had to create the illusion of gravity, of fluids spilling and oozing. In Unity, you could turn this plate upside down, and everything would stay put. It's surprisingly hard to get a glass of water to look like a glass of water. It's clear on top of clear, and you need the two kinds of clearness to read as different materials. I enjoy such challenges, maybe in the same way that a world-class chef enjoys perfecting his sous-vide technique. This quadrant reflects on the piece as a whole, since the foods here are so obviously aestheticized.

A connoisseur wants to contemplate his food, to consume a concept. And that's true for everyone. When you sit down to a meal, you eat a story.