

The Highlights - Terra Incognita (A Video Game Folly)



Still from *The Simpsons*, Season 20, Episode 18: 'Father Knows Worst.'

SYNTHETIC WORLDS

A cartoon is the ultimate work of abstract art. The practicalities of frame animation require extreme visual simplification. Despite the sacrifice of realism, it's amazing how easy it is to slip into this parallel universe. With a compelling narrative hook, one's mind surrenders to the logic of the drawn world.

In *The Simpsons*, the society of Springfield is populated with familiar archetypes - the lazy cop, the schoolyard bully, the ruthless capitalist polluter, and the Hispanic television presenter in a bumblebee costume. A character arc lasts only as long as an episode; it has no long-term growth. In the next episode the world is reset. Everything within the symbolic order is rigidly fixed, for Springfield is a zone of platonic order.

Without the need to build sets or cast extras, the city of Springfield can also become astonishingly large and complex. It is not constrained by a television show budget for special effects, and in this sense is like a dream - anything that can be imagined can be brought into existence. A fish with three eyeballs doesn't seem out of place. Mirroring the chaotic flux of the unconscious, there is surreal juxtaposition of references in Springfield - Jerry Lewis, Orson Welles, James McNeill Whistler, Philip Glass, and the Venus de Milo. If *Seinfeld* is a show about nothing, *The Simpsons* is a show about everything.



Left: Peter Blake, *The Meeting, or Have a Nice Day, Mr. Hockney*, 1981-3; Right: Gustave Courbet, *The Meeting, or Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*, 1854.

CUTTING & PASTING

Peter Blake is the quintessential British pop artist, and the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album sleeve is his most celebrated work. On the cover, over seventy cutouts of notable figures range from Aldous Huxley to Karlheinz Stockhausen and Lenny Bruce. The studio production techniques of pop music had reached their height with the Beatles in their late career - the three-and-a-half-minute structure could be a repository for an infinity of reference. Blake's cover manifested this heterogeneity as the Fab Four were placed in his pantheon of historical figures.

In *The Meeting*, Blake paints an imagined encounter between the artists Howard Hodgkin, David Hockney, and himself.

"The image is an homage to *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*...The squatting girl's pose is taken partly from a skating magazine and partly from classical sculpture...Monumentality and banality, a timeless present and the transient afternoon are set in serene contrast."

-Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?*

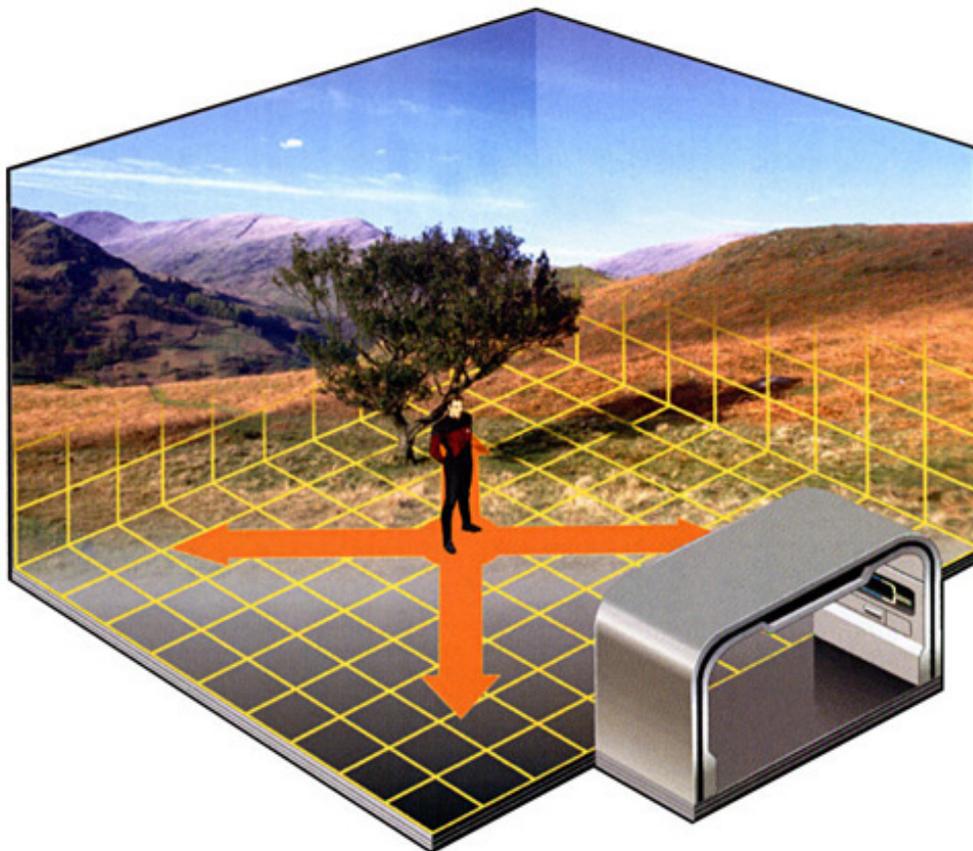
Like the Beatles standing among the heroes of the ages, Blake puts himself (and his art) in a continuum that stretches back to antiquity. Culture too is collapsed into a high/low mishmash. The agenda, presumably, is to create a concoction of references that lead to a kind of post-modern euphoria - an ephemeral transcendence.



An image from Max Ernst's 1934 collage
Une Semaine de Bonté.

With Surrealism, juxtaposition had a different purpose. If Pop formed a bridge between high and low art through appropriation of commonplace objects, Surrealism made the point that objects were no more than extensions of the subjective self to begin with. To the Surrealists, juxtapositions could open a window into ourselves.

"My excited gaze was provoked by the pages of a printed catalogue. The advertisements illustrated objects relating to anthropological, microscopical, psychological, mineralogical, and paleontological research. Here I discovered the elements of a figuration so remote that its very absurdity provoked in me a sudden intensification of my faculties of sight..." All that was necessary, he realized, was subtly to modify and rearrange these images. "These changes, no more than docile reproductions of what was visible within me, recorded a faithful and fixed image of my hallucination. They transformed the banal pages of advertisement into dramas that revealed my most secret desires." -Max Ernst



A holodeck, as seen on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

A VIEW WITH A ROOM

In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the holodeck is an artificial reality room on the Starship

Enterprise that can holographically project any environment or character. Sounds and smells are simulated by speakers and fragranced fluid atomizers. The floor of the room is a treadmill that moves in every direction so that the participant never reaches the wall.

In the original *Star Trek* series outer space was the final frontier, but in *The Next Generation* the search is also directed back at ourselves. Exploration doesn't just orient forwards to the future, because the holodeck allows it to move sideways to alternate versions of the present, as well as backwards to the ancestral past. Before 9/11, philosophers had proposed the idea that we had entered a post-historical epoch. *The Next Generation* embodies this terminal velocity of the temporal. *Star Trek* could now be set in the London of Arthur Conan Doyle, or in the nineteenth-century American West. It is also a domain for the fantasies of crew members - a dream machine. But, like our irrational desires, it is never entirely under our control. In some episodes, crew members find themselves trapped in the holodeck room, or artificial characters become self aware and escape from the room.

STRUCTURE

Let us imagine a game that has no objective. It would exist online for anyone to play, but this game would not allow interaction with other players.

Like the old-fashioned adventure game, it would be an insular experience. The game would consist of characters you could talk to in various rooms. New rooms would be added on a weekly basis so that this online world would continue to grow. Without the chance to talk to 'real' people and with no definable quest, the player is left to wander without purpose.



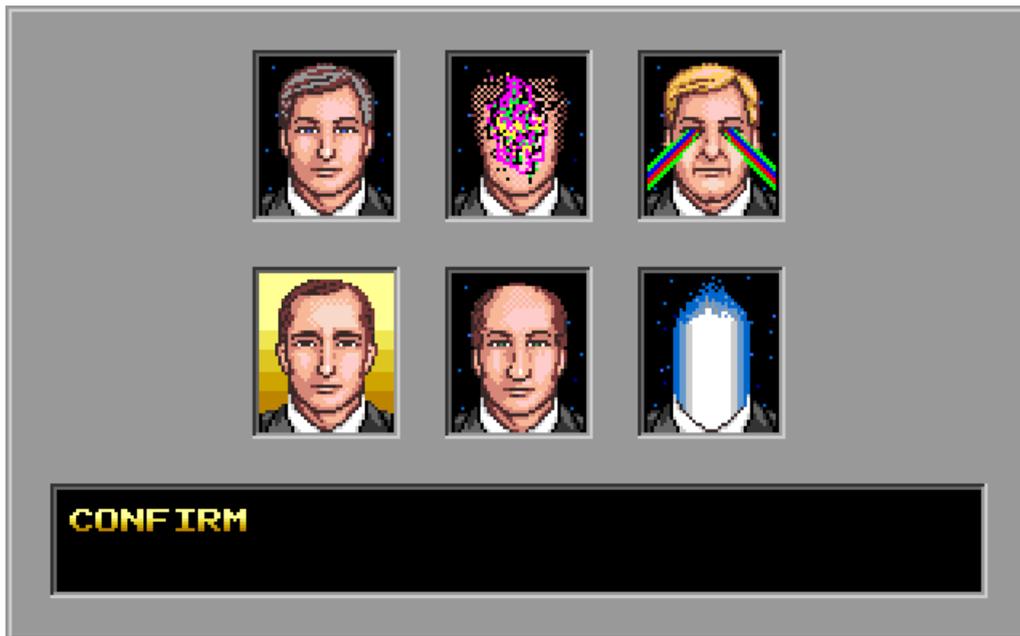
The title screen of *Terra Incognita* recalls Max Bill's geometric typeface from 1949. It is suitably revised with a chromed skin.

CONTENT

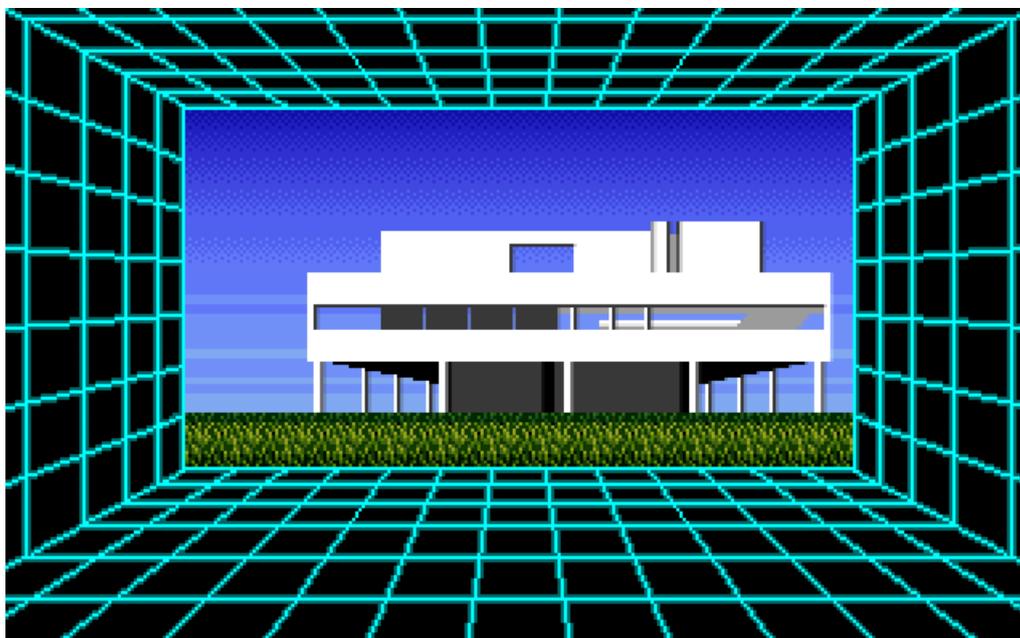
The content of the game is completely arbitrary: it will include fragments from vintage video game culture as well as banalities from every-day life, exemplars of ideals, half-forgotten memories, and futuristic projections, both the sublime and the ridiculous. Everything will be rendered in the 16-bit vernacular of the video game to quicken loading times, and unify the disparate elements.



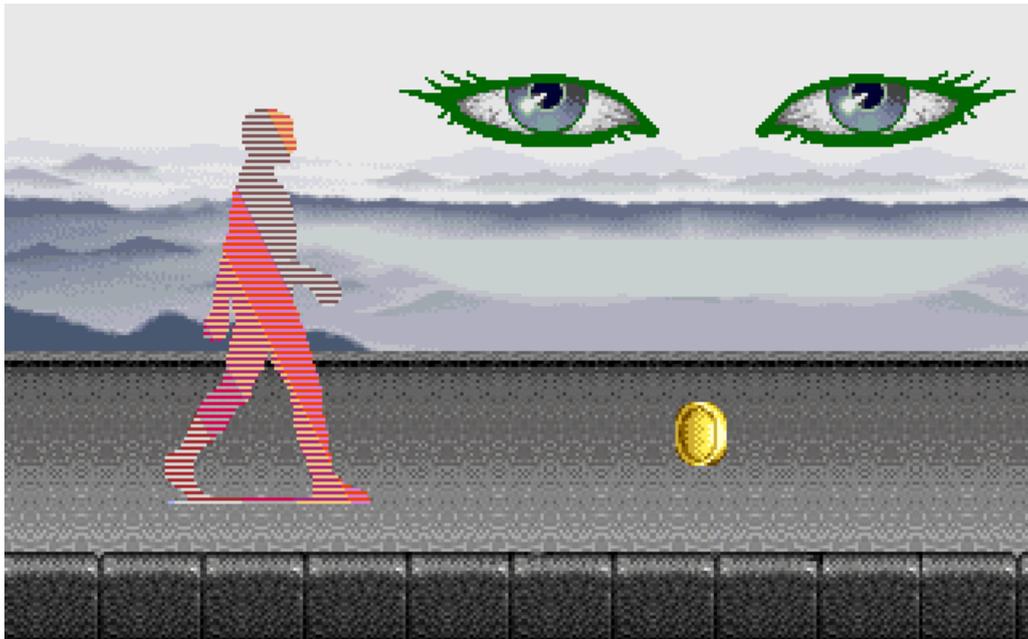
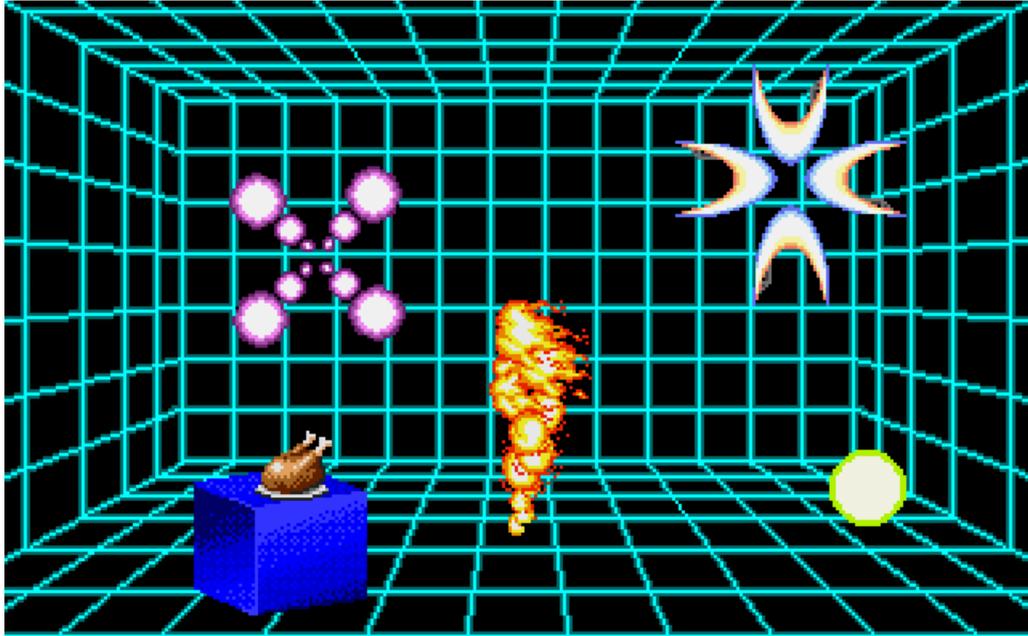
A map of the game is appropriated from the Surrealist Map of 1929.



The adventure game's protocol for selecting a character is subverted. As in life, your external appearance is pre-determined. This screen merely offers a choice of personality.



The introductory sequence is an electronic ante-chamber. Random scenes, sprites and events flicker in and out of being.

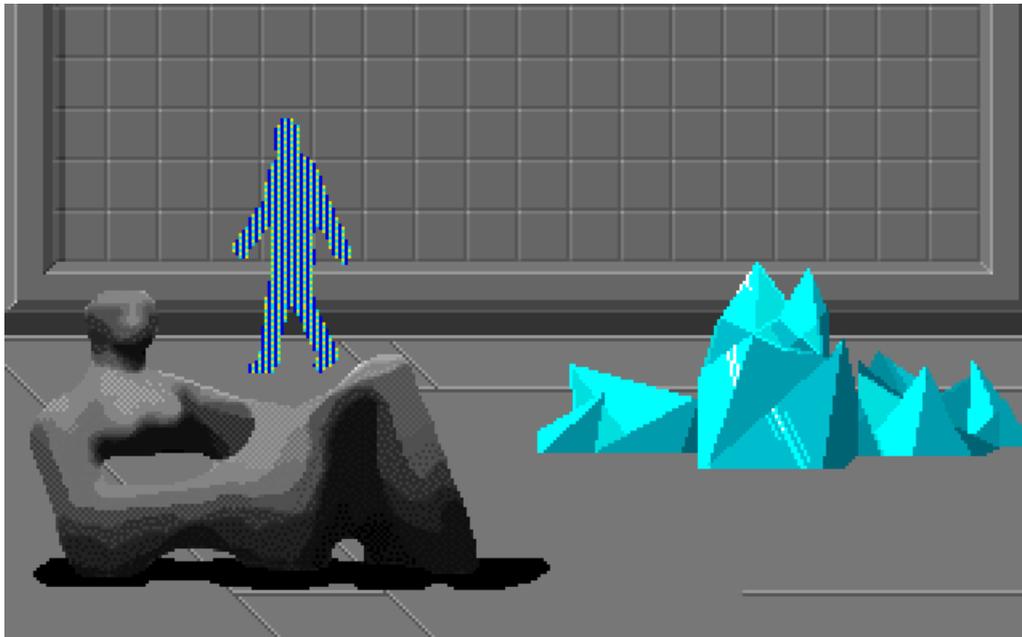


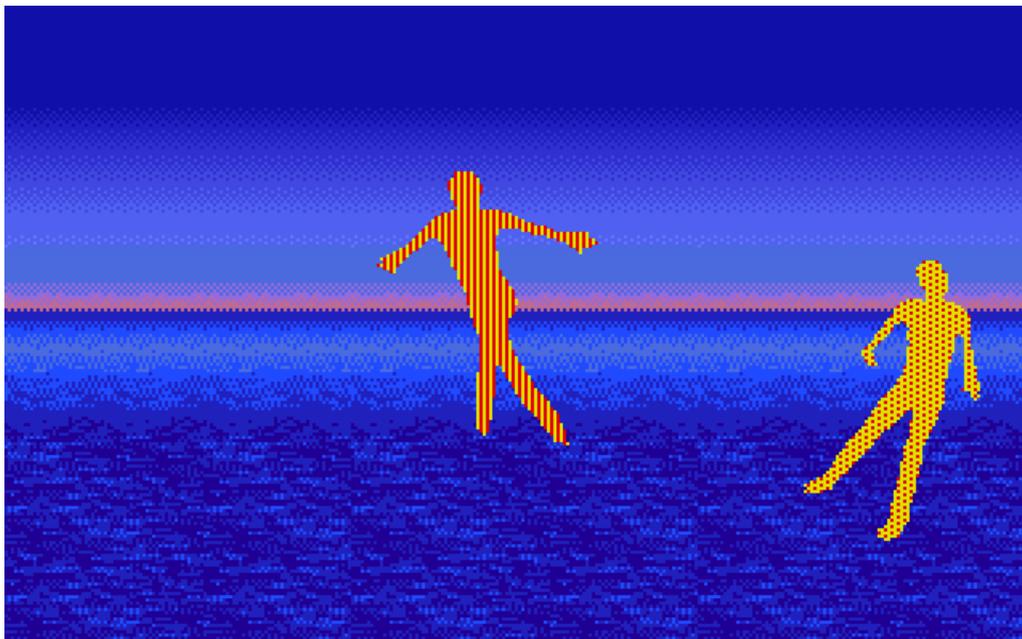
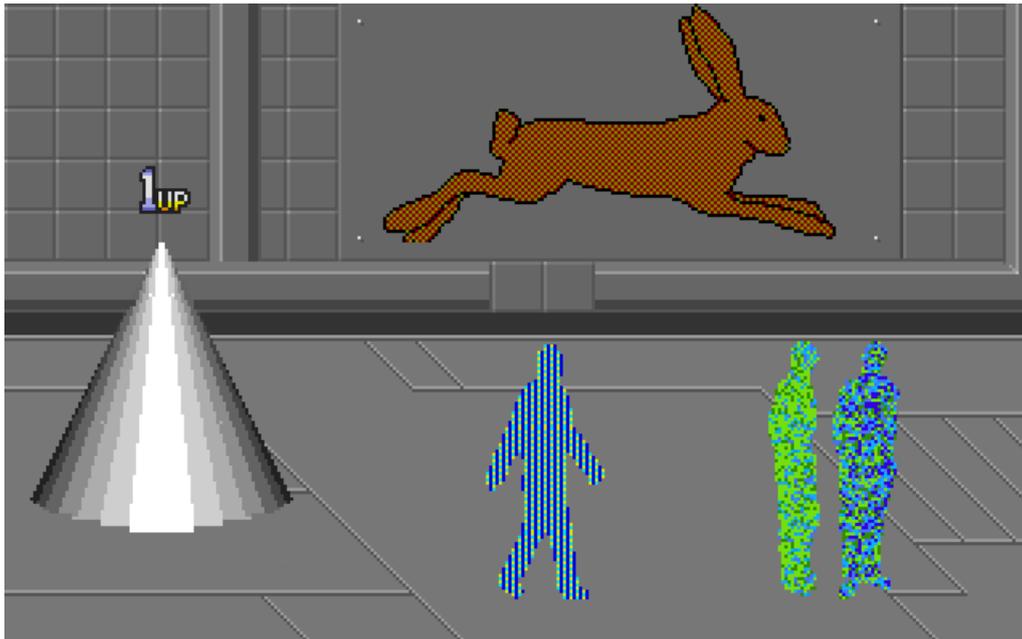


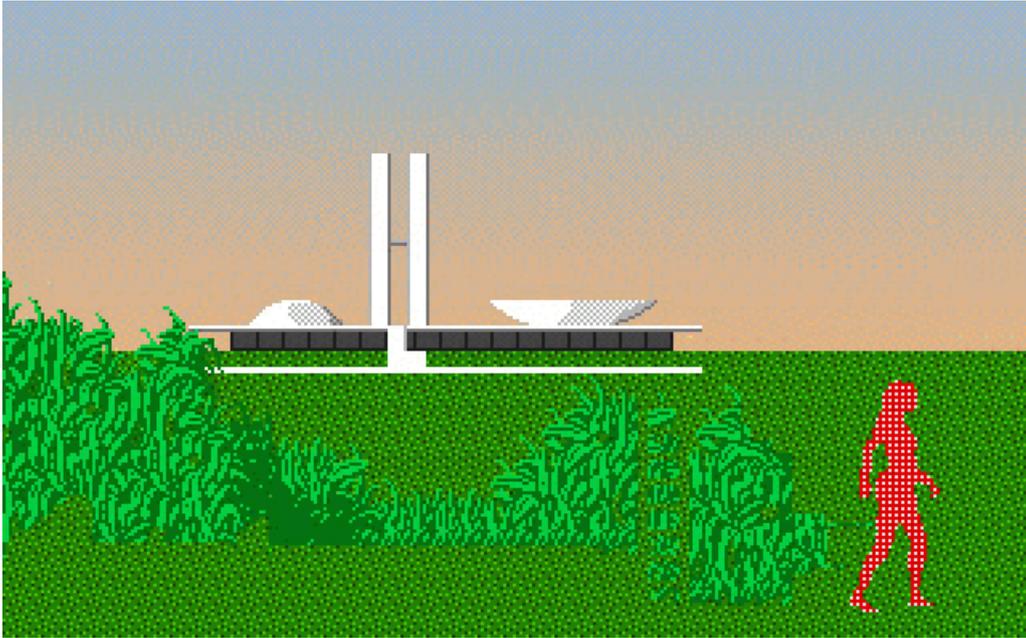
YEOMAN: GOOD MORROW.

AVE, A COMELY SPRING MORN.

I HAVE NO TIME FOR IDLE DISCOURSE.
FAREWELL UNTO THEE GOOD SIR, MAY
GOD KEEP THEE WELL.







Screen shots from the game illustrate the mutable form of the protagonist. As a proxy for the player, the hero / heroine is an intentionally ambiguous figure.