«What a Piece of Work is an Avatar». Conversation with Sam Crane on *Grand Theft Hamlet*

Interview by Sergio Lo Gatto

This article documents a conversation with the British actor and director Sam Crane, co-author alongside Pinny Grylls of the documentary *Grand Theft Hamlet* (UK, 2024, 91'). The work stems from a radical experiment conducted during the lockdowns imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic: the transposition of several scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into the virtual space of the video game *Grand Theft Auto Online*. Starting from a sense of frustration regarding the restrictive liveness displayed by video-call platforms like *Zoom*–perceived as confined little boxes devoid of true vitality–Crane and his collaborators explored multiplayer servers as spaces where unpredictability and digital co-presence become central dramaturgical elements. The result is the account of an operation that, on one hand, calls into question some of the foundational elements of acting technique and the dialogue between performers within the context of staging; on the other, it provokes reflections on the sense of belonging, engagement, and empathy within a relationship not based on physical co-presence.

If analyzing *Grand Theft Hamlet* requires, first and foremost, a theoretical reconsideration of the concept of "liveness", indispensable tools can be found in the contributions of Stefano Brilli and Laura Gemini (2022; 2023; 2025), in which this term takes shape according to so-called "gradients." These gradients define the impact on the spectator, the artist, and the semantic dimension of the spectacular object, demonstrating how «the sense of presence is re-articulated according to socio-technical contexts» (Gemini and Brilli, 2025, p. 15).

In the now paradigmatic formulations of Philip Auslander, «digital liveness» refers instead to «[...] a specific relation between self and other, a particular way of "being involved with something"» (Auslander, 2012, p. 10). From this perspective, the live experience does not derive solely from technology, but from our conscious act of perceiving virtual entities as alive in response to the solicitations they bring us.

As emphasized in the conversation, in the video game *GTA Online*, "liveness" seems to manifest as a composite experience that includes simultaneity, interaction with the per-

formers, and the performers' awareness of participating in a unique event. Within the already rich literary review on the concept of "liveness", a distinction becomes clear that is fundamental to the examination of this case study: the one introduced by Steve Dixon (2007) and also taken up by Gemini (2016), which separates «nowness»–a condition requiring simple temporal synchrony and not necessarily the sharing of a common space–and actual digital co-presence: «If nowness involves the definition of a "present", simultaneity requires the recognition of a "now"» (Gemini and Brilli, 2025, p. 25).

The latter is realized when actors and spectators share a phenomenologically shared spatial window within which mutual physical influence is possible. In the environment of a video game where multiple players are admitted simultaneously through the sharing of a common server, such influence is guaranteed by the possibility of different subjectivities entering into immediate connection to collectively give shape to the unfolding of a "story." As emerges from the experience recounted by Sam Crane, in some ways the procedure does not deviate significantly from what would happen in the creative process leading to the staging of a performance, when various actors–searching for the subtle interpretative nuances of their characters–engage, for example, in shaping an improvised scene, the final outcomes and individual dramaturgical knots of which remain partly undefined.

A large number of people play and interact with other players on the Internet on various platforms and devices. At the same time, «[i]n order for players to feel that they are part of the online community, they should be considered as valuable members of the team and should feel that the community fulfils their needs» (Pietersen, Coetzee et al., 2018, p. 125).

In the case of *Grand Theft Hamlet*, this proposal of "affiliation" to a community received–in some ways spontaneously and perhaps not entirely consciously–a response through the intuition of circulating the announcement of the "performance event" scheduled in the GTA "venue" within virtual video gamer communities, opening up the possibility for actual spectators to connect to the interconnected environment of the game session. If «[t]he four key components of a sense of belonging are: membership, influence [...], integration/fulfillment of needs […], and sharing of emotional connections» (Ibid.), in this case, one has the impression that the operation "teaches" players a peculiar trait of relationship based on theatre's tradition: the fundamental distinction between actors and audience. The practice of accessing an online video game with one's avatar without actively participating in the

challenges it itself proposes represents, in fact, an anomaly, observed by some case studies also in association with a sense of defeat regarding the indispensable agonistic dimension of the game (Pietersen, Coetzee et al., 2018). In the case of *Grand Theft Hamlet*, in a sense–and the conversation bears witness to this–the intervention of a group of virtual observers influences the final rendering of the performance, but even more so, it produces an effect on those who, by connecting, find themselves no longer as participants but exclusively as spectators of an event that is detached from the context to which the player community itself is accustomed. This is an effect that should be studied through subsequent analysises, where the "spectatorship contract" that the theatrical dimension asks the spectator to sign becomes a reacting and detonating element within a universe whose relational systems are based on a logic of interactivity that gives meaning to the experience itself.

A central point around which the conversation with Sam Crane revolves is the complex concept of the avatar, for which–especially in contexts where an almost total transition from physical body to virtual body becomes possible–it seems no longer sufficient to refer to the popular theoretical formulas of post-humanism. In more specific studies, however, reference is made instead to a "*technè*" inherent in and embodied by the avatar as an entity now in control of its own phenomenology, and to a «sense of virtualness» which «is constituted precisely by the meta-awareness of this gap between the actual and the virtual […]. [T]he purpose of the *technè* of avatar embodiment is not to erase the gap between the actual and the virtual, but to create it» (Manning, 2009, p. 311).

In other words, the avatar emerges as a digital body capable of inheriting only some of the dualities and multiplicities typical of "conventional" performative objects.

In the preparatory work for *Hamlet* in the *GTA Online* environment, the rehearsal phase–itself conducted through *Zoom* conversations and therefore not in co-presence–focused on selecting the virtual locations best suited to serve as the backdrop for the scenes selected for the performance, but above all on the rendering of the prosody and meter of Shakespearean poetic verse, keeping in mind the impossibility of having a physical body capable of supporting inflections and emphases governed by analytical directorial thought.

Paul Manning, citing the so-called «Zich's Contradiction,» explains that avatars can be perceived alternately as living people or lifeless dolls. The cited essay dwells particularly on the role played by the voice, which grants the avatar the use of a trace of what is, in fact, the

only eminently human quality available to a totally virtual body–albeit mediated by a process of formalization and digitalization through pre-recording. The tension between the animate and inanimate object finds a key role precisely in the voice, an element that somehow leaks from the physical world, revealing the real identity of a sort of company of puppeteers. If the gap between the human voice and the artificial body is too jarring, the illusion breaks and the avatar is reduced to a mere mechanical puppet. For Crane, this limitation transforms the actor into a digital puppeteer who basically perform a decomposition and recomposition of human behaviors in a manner as consistent as possible with the context hosting the performance. The impossibility of enacting variable facial mimicry forces the use of code constraints, such as the *emotes* selectable from a menu, as creative stimuli, transforming them almost into a Brechtian *Gestus* (Brecht, 2001).

One option is that, in this way, acting technique proposes an opportunity for overcoming the live/non-live dichotomy in favor of "gradients of liveness," where the "live" becomes a construction of the observer mediated by technology. The avatar thus becomes a symbolic object representing the general nature of the character through stylized gestures rather than through a realistic emotional expression governed and conducted moment by moment.

One of the most significant aspects of the *Hamlet* performance in *GTA Online* is the recovery of relational dynamics characteristic of Elizabethan theatre. Regarding the proposal of a clear separation between those who act and those who spectate, in the conversation Crane ultimately compares the game environment to the Globe Theatre (Sixteenth-Seventeen century), highlighting several fundamental points of contact. Just as at the Globe actors and spectators shared the same natural light, in *GTA* everyone inhabits the same visual environment and the same "digital light," thus renouncing the sharp separation between stage and stalls typical of modern and some contemporary theatre. What was, according to contemporary accounts, the Elizabethan audience's practice of spectating–extremely active, chaotic, and participatory–seems to be reflected in *GTA* through direct interaction with other players who can intervene in real-time, if only by giving voice to their own avatar.

While in the conversation–analyzing the role of «griefers»–this unexpected intervention is accepted as a generative stimulus to consider the formation of a chaotic order in the system of stage delivery and representation, this condition of fundamental displacement also connects to the content of the tragedy that the artists chose to bring into the virtual world.

Even considering the advent of a global emergency as the genesis of this operation, one can perhaps look at this artistic attempt by associating it with a curative and therapeutic dimension. Proposing the term «prosthetic memory,» Alison Landsberg argues that certain video games–particularly those produced ad hoc for a traumatized user base–can be seen «as a mechanism for redressing hidden historical atrocities and traumatic memories, shape the experience and subjectivity of game players through the mediation of agency and creation of "prosthetic memory," a new form of public cultural memory made possible by modernity and mass cultural technologies» (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2).

Violence, guaranteed within a virtual environment like that of *GTA* by the fundamental opportunity to behave as one wishes and to break every possible rule of social living, should not be interpreted here exclusively as a disruptive element or an aggressive game mechanic, but rather as a powerful activator of liveness that guarantees the authenticity of the actors' performative experience and that of the bystanders' participation. According to the theoretical perspectives of Paul Sanden (2013), also cited by Gemini and Brilli, this phenomenon could be placed within the category of the «liveness of spontaneity,» where the value of the event lies precisely in its unpredictable nature and the ability of the human (or mediatized) performance to react to chaos. In a context where mediatization is integrated into social production, the sudden violence of a «griefer» or an unexpected explosion tears the user away from the static nature of pre-recorded content to project them into a «window of simultaneity.» As Varela (1999) observes, this window «is the result of a cognitive process that correlates the perception of the environment and the consequences of action» (Varela, 1999 in Gemini and Brilli, 2025), transforming here the risk of failure into tangible proof that what is happening is "now" and "here," albeit in a digital space.

It should be added that the sensory impact of these violent acts is largely conveyed by sound, which Alfonso Amendola defines as «pure action.» The sound of a firefight or a speeding vehicle is here not a simple aesthetic ornament, but an indicator of technological spaces that «crosses and envelops» the player, dynamically signaling the presence of other agents on the same server, which can now be considered a para-theatrical context (Amendola, 2012 in Guerra, 2024, p. 25). From an ontological perspective, the violent destruction of the character in Hamlet and/or the avatar in *GTA* recalls Matthew Isaac Cohen's theories on the «magical destruction» of the performative object. Puppets and digital simulacra are, by

their very nature, entities designed to be destroyed and reconstructed, allowing the subject to process destructive impulses or traumas without the annihilation of the virtual figure entailing the end of the real person (Cohen, 2007, p. 3). The avatar's ability to suffer violence and return to life does not diminish the gravity of the act, but creates that Landsberg's «prosthetic memory», perhaps capable of allowing players (especially if confined to their own homes) to touch "first-hand" the fragility of the individual in the face of authoritarian power or a hostile environment.

Finally, violence reinforces Auslander's «digital liveness,» as it forces us into a conscious act dedicated to making us consider virtual entities as «alive» precisely by virtue of the claims and impacts they make upon us (Auslander, 2012). Even if the interaction is violent, it establishes a physical and spatial reciprocity between avatars, validating virtual co-presence as a real and not merely simulated experience. In this framework, violence stops being gratuitous to become what Peters defines as a «care structure» (here perhaps implemented involuntarily): «[A] supra-individual framework that makes the event meaningful because it is imbued with an intentionality and a risk that only live communication can sustain» (Peters 2001 in Gemini and Brilli, 2025).

Ultimately, the conversation with Sam Crane highlights how the meta-documentary approach chosen for Grand Theft Hamlet serves not only to document the performance but to expose the creative process as a Hamletian "mousetrap" set to analyze how the mediation of technology can affect the human condition for entertainment workers locked down without the possibility of expressing themselves, and simultaneously for a virtual community of players who happen to find themselves deprived of the fundamental possibility of making a difference in a collective quest.

An operation that stages *Hamlet*, defined by many scholars as the archetype of the modern human being, in the world designed by *GTA* seems capable of transforming the limits of the software into a new, unexpected form of stage truth, where the virtual stage is configured as an environment of welcome for a community of actors, spectators, and people.

Sam Crane observes that *GTA* is characterized by a deep duality: on one hand, a detailed visual beauty; on the other, extreme violence and a constant drive toward committing every type of aggression. This contrast reflects Hamlet's monologue, «What a piece of work is a man,» in which the main character celebrates human nobility while looking at the world as a «foul and

pestilent congregation of vapours» (Shakespeare, 2016). In this sense, *Grand Theft Hamlet* conceives the *GTA* universe not only as an opportunity for gamification but as a complex ecosystem suited to host a reflection on the contradictory nature of the human being, divided between wonder and brutality, between agency and passivity, between community and solitude.

Conversation with Sam Crane

Sergio Lo Gatto: I'm particularly interested in the concepts of body, avatar, and the ontology of performance. In *Grand Theft Hamlet*, the performance experience is entirely mediated by the avatar, which functions as a digital body. Considering the creative and conceptual development of the project, from a performance theory perspective, how does your team define the concept of "presence" within this specific digital and embodied context?

Sam Crane: My background is as a performer in theatre, that's where I did most of my work, and it's how I primarily defined myself. I worked on other things as well (film, television, videogames), but mostly in theatre. As it was for everyone, I found that the pandemic and the lockdown were very traumatic, and scary, for lots of reasons. I think that for people working in live performance, there was a very particular kind of effect, because obviously the whole ontology of live performance demands co-presence: it's about going into a darkened room together, sharing stories, and collaborating. And I think people working in theatre tend to be very creative, so immediately they were thinking: "Okay, how do we do this? How do we do live performance without having physical corporeal co-presence?". There were lots of people trying things, like with *Zoom* which was really taking off–and what we're using now and there's a kind of liveness to that. But obviously there's not a physical co-presence, and there's something highly restrictive about the form of *Zoom*; we feel quite confined in these little boxes. I saw one thing on *Zoom*, *End Meeting for All*, by British theatre company Forced Entertainment, that lent into those restrictions and was a very funny and interesting, but apart from that mostly I found that whole way of trying to do live performance on *Zoom* really frustrating, as it didn't have that feeling of liveness, which is of course really difficult to define.

So also, in the pandemic–I don't know what it was like in Italy–but for us, in the, you know, heavy lockdowns, you're allowed to go out, like, once a day or something for exercise. So I used to go out, I've got children, they were, like, 11 and 9 at the time, and we'd go out

for a walk and chat. And it's interesting, also, that thing of physically walking and talking and having ideas, you kind of… It's a freeing thing, I think, and… And I was talking to my son about what he was doing. At the time, you know, because obviously he's at home, off school, and obviously he plays video games, and watches *YouTube* videos a lot, and he was telling me about a YouTuber he was watching. A guy called *Dream*, who was doing stuff in *Minecraft*. And from what he was describing, it sounded to me like he's doing live performance inside *Minecraft*. Obviously, that's not how he articulated it, but he was in this multiplayer server with some friends, and they were doing a kind of semi-fictionalized ongoing story narrative. Inside Minecraft.

Sergio Lo Gatto: Like a role play in some way.

Sam Crane: Yeah, but I hadn't really played online video games before, I didn't really understand the culture. So, when I heard about that, I was like, oh wow, that sounds really interesting, and I just started looking into it, watching some live streams, watching lots of *YouTube* videos, I went down a rabbit hole of discovering the whole culture of role-playing inside video games.

And I started playing video games myself, and hanging out with friends sometimes, and, my friend Mark Oosterven, as you see in the film, because he was already, you know, a big, big gamer in a way that I wasn't, so I was kind of saying: "Oh, look, do you want to jump on? We played *Red Dead Redemption* online, we played *GTA* online a lot, and it was just really… It was really fun, and it just also felt, like, very live in a way that *Zoom* doesn't, because… Unexpected things can happen as well, because you're obviously in a server with other people, so someone comes around the corner and suddenly blows you up or something, which can be annoying, but it's also really exciting and quite dramatic. So I got this sense early on that, okay, there's real drama here, like, in a real, theatrical sense.

Sergio Lo Gatto: Another interesting point is the absence of a proper audience in *Zoom* calls. Essentially, you cannot have a separate audience; you can only gather a group of people for collaboration, meetings, and so forth. This environment eliminates the traditional separation between those acting and those watching. Given that certain forms of contemporary theatre

actively investigate the boundaries between performer and spectator, maintaining a subtle balance between these two roles is crucial. How did your team address this specific dynamic?

Sam Crane: Well, I think that also applies, really, to Shakespeare in its original form. They were doing those plays at the Globe, and there were people turned up and went in and out, and they would sort of shout at the actors and throw things at them, and there's a real kind of involvement. In a theater like the Globe, which is outdoor, and everyone's in shared light, there is obviously a delineation between the stage and the auditorium, but maybe less so than in a contemporary theater setting. It's all natural light, and people would walk in and out, and throw things, and the actors talk directly to the audience,

Sergio Lo Gatto: Would you say, then, that the interactive nature of Elizabethan theatre–specifically the relationship between actors and the audience–was the primary reason, or at least a key factor, in your decision to adapt *Hamlet* (or one of Shakespeare's plays)?

Sam Crane: I think there are several reasons why Hamlet popped up. There's certain quite obvious thematic things. In the game, you know, things about power, and violence, and stealing, and also… Masquerade, cover, pretending to be things you're not, and which are all in the game, and also in *Hamlet*, there's this thing that Hamlet talks about, that I think I talk a bit about in the film as well, that, you know, in the «What a piece of work is a man» speech, he kind of expresses this duality in how he views the world, in terms of: isn't it beautiful? And humans, aren't they extraordinary? Aren't they wonderful? But they're also kind of horrific, and ugly and disgusting and violent. And that was my experience of playing *GTA* as well. It's stunningly beautiful, and outrageously detailed, and when you see other avatars, in there, you're like: "My God, *wow*", this is just stunning, or a beautiful sunset. And then there's also obviously extreme violence and aggression, and so it's like that kind of duality.

Sergio Lo Gatto: In my view, the central tension lies in the contrast between these two worlds: *Grand Theft Auto* is predicated on random and often gratuitous violence, whereas Hamlet is structured around cathartic, motivated violence. Furthermore, *GTA* provides a non-narrative environment built on player freedom, which stands in stark contrast to the

formal rigidity of Shakespearean tragedy, where roles are highly defined and interconnected. As a result, this virtual freedom in the game almost invariably culminates in violent acts, such as stealing a car simply to run over a passerby.

Considering the strong metatheatrical element in *Hamlet* (and other Shakespearean plays), when the text is re-contextualized as a video game–specifically, when Hamlet becomes *Grand Theft Hamlet*–does this adaptation allow for a discussion of the actor/player and character/avatar concepts through the lens of the puppeteer/puppet dichotomy?

Sam Crane: With acting, I think there's often an idea, or almost like a fetishization, of being emotionally connected, and being in the moment, and sort of becoming the character.

There's an element of that, but I think in any performance, there's also an element of technicality, especially in theatre, when you're repeating performances. It's inevitable, and there has to be, you're following a text. You're following a kind of physicality that you've rehearsed. Within that, there is obviously a certain amount of freedom and possibility for spontaneity and a real kind of emotional connection with your character, and there's a whole of interesting things about how much, as an actor, you are becoming the character, or how much the character's becoming you, or how much separation there is. What I'm saying is there's always an element of technicality. It is probably similar to puppeteering, there's a very high level of technicality. There's specific, really interesting things about the limitations of how you move in this game. There's certain things you can obviously walk around: you can run, you can jump, you can beat someone up, and so on. In terms of being more emotionally expressive, there is a quite extensive catalogue of *emotes* available in the game.

There's lots of different *emotes* you can do, but the tricky thing in the game is how you perform the *emotes*, how you execute them, because you have to select one in a menu. You basically go into the menu, select it, and then you activate it by pressing both thumbsticks together, and that activates the *emote*. So, performing the *emote* is quite easy and intuitive, but changing between *emotes* is really complicated and tricky, and you have to go into a menu. We found in performance that it was practically very difficult to change *emotes* quickly, so we realized that an *emote* couldn't truly be used as a realistic expression of emotion that changes from moment to moment.

So, because of those restrictions, really interestingly, we thought that maybe we'd find an *emote* that somehow had symbolic resonance for us, maybe for the whole play for that character, or certainly for an extended period of time, for a whole scene. But then it becomes more like a kind of Brechtian *Gestus*, a repeated gesture that is not about realistic expression of "moment-to-moment" emotion; it's more symbolic of the general character. So, the process did not necessitate any technical intervention into the game's structure; you simply utilized the emotes already offered by the game itself. We were playing on PlayStations. We used the game as it is. We purposefully didn't make any changes to the game: obviously, another way of doing this, is to play on PC, and go into the whole modding community, and shape the game to be able to do more of what you want to do, but actually we wanted it to be as accessible as possible. Once you go down to that modding route, there's still a big community there, but a very particular kind. We wanted it to be for more of the average game player, so anyone who played on PlayStation, which is a wider pool of people, could then come and play.

And also we wanted to embrace those restrictions. Rather than think that we could do anything, and so engineer the game to do anything, we chose to use the game as it is, utilizing those constraints or obstructions as creative spurs.

Sergio Lo Gatto: In my view, this strategic choice is one of the most compelling aspects of your work: the audience can palpably sense the constraints–the feeling that the actors/avatars are forced to operate within the borders imposed by the programmers. This tension is also evident in the verbal delivery. Since the avatar's limited movements could not fully emphasize the nuances of expressivity, tone, pace, and rhythm, the result is a subtle distancing effect, which led me to consider the concept of puppeteering. Furthermore, given the strong physicality and proximity inherent in many Shakespearean plays, these constraints compelled you to creatively reinterpret the dynamics of intimacy and conflict central to *Hamlet* (such as the encounter with Ophelia or the slaying of Polonius). Eventually, the metatheatrical element is dramatically intensified by the unscheduled intervention of the hostile players, or "griefers", who deliberately disrupt the scene. Since this interruption is entirely unprogrammed, unannounced, and unforeseen, how did you approach and integrate these specific interferences into the performance?

Sam Crane: To me, what's exciting about theatre is the tension between the preparation, the plan that you have in mind, and the possibility of it all going wrong, of chaos ensuing. The threat of this chaos erupting is what makes it exciting. And if it doesn't have that, then it's boring. I'm not saying that it has to happen, but i think for it to be really exciting, you must have the sense that chaos might happen. So it was sometimes frustrating when we were rehearsing and people kept coming and blowing us up, but it was important to keep that element there. We could have just moved in a closed-off server and not let anyone else in. I'm not sure if it's true, but there's also this apocryphal story about Brecht: sometimes in rehearsals or in a performance, if it was going really well, he'd find some drunk tramp from the street and bring him on stage to disrupt the actors. So there's an element of that to the chaos of *GTA*. It's potentially frustrating, but it gives it life and excitement. And that's part of playing the game. The experience of playing *GTA* can be really frustrating, but it also keeps it quite fun.

Sergio Lo Gatto: You decided to create not just a performance, but also a documentary. This film goes beyond simply documenting the rendition of *Hamlet*; it unveils part of the creative process and traces the conceptual journey and devising methods used to stage the work. This approach suggests a deliberate layering–similar to building a "mousetrap" (like in *Hamlet*)–to expose or analyze the (violent) figure of Claudius. Could you elaborate on why this meta-documentary approach was essential to the project?

Sam Crane: Pinny Grylls' background is as a documentary filmmaker, while mine is as a theatre artist, and I think she's always been deeply interested in performance and how people create characters, and made films about that process before. She was always very intrigued when she saw what I was trying to do, as so these two things (documentary and theatre) went hand in hand, and I think sometimes even helped each other. It was a really difficult thing to achieve, to put this production on, there were so many obstacles. The fact that I knew we were also making this documentary at times gave me the energy and determination to to keep going, because we have to do it, there's no choice, because we're making a film about it, so that was quite useful. Another really interesting thing we discovered is this connection, a three-way connection between theatre, documentary films and online video games: they are all very intimately connected with liveness. Making a documentary film, as

opposed to making a scripted fiction film, you have to be agile and responsive in the moment to what's happening. That's obviously the same thing in live performance. You do have a script and you've rehearsed but if someone's forgotten their line, or if something unexpected happens you have to respond immediately. And again, playing online video games there's this tension between the plan, and the in-the-moment chaos. You're doing a mission with friends, you need to go this way, enter that door, you're going to shoot there, you're going to do that, but another person's come in, then you have to readjust and respond.

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