

“The Zone is a very complicated system of traps,
and all of them are deadly... It’s like a super-slang, a
super-superstition, but it works.”
Roadside Picnic (Strugatsky, Strugatsky and
Bormashenko, 2012, p. 15)

“Nature is to zoos as theology is to churches—a
simplified version, for mass consumption.”
Oryx and Crake (Atwood, 2003, p. 184)

Concrete, Steel, Lichen & Blood: Fictioned Landscapes Across Different Mediums Flynn

Fictioning, as described by Burrows and O’Sullivan, is an aspect of art practice that “engender[s] that which does not yet exist” (*Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, 2019, p. 5). It overlays fictional narratives onto real-world contexts to reframe, reinterpret, or create alternative realities. Burrows and O’Sullivan state that, central to this concept are three “myth-functions”: *Mythopoesis*, *Myth-Science*, and *Mythotechnics*. Of these, *Mythopoesis*; “productive of worlds, people, and communities” (2019, p.2) offers a particularly useful lens within the context of this essay, for understanding how artists engage with landscapes

through fictioning (Burrows and O’Sullivan, 2019, p. 125). By intertwining fiction with reality, *Mythopoesis* allows for the reimagining of spaces, drawing attention to their hidden histories, speculative futures, or alternative meanings.

This essay argues that fictioning, through the lens of *Mythopoesis*, enables artists to reinterpret real-world locations by merging the organic (decay, ecology, life) and the inorganic (industry, technology, control). By analysing textual, audiovisual, and interactive practices, I demonstrate how these mediums produce speculative geographies that challenge conventional perceptions of place and history. Through analysis of four case studies; Robert Smithson’s essay *The Monuments of Passaic* (1966), the films *Voodoo Science Park* (Halford and Beard, 2010) and *Robinson in Ruins* (Keiller, 2010), and the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein-Hagen and Bradstreet, 1991), I will explore how fictioning operates across different mediums. By focusing on the unique ways these works engage with landscapes through the lens of *Mythopoesis*, I will show how they create speculative understandings of place and challenge conventional perceptions of reality.

Robert Smithson, in his essay *Entropy and the New Monuments*, describes how films can provide “ritual patterns” that meet the “organic” and “inorganic needs” of artists (1966b). While the organic can be tied to notions of life, decay, and natural processes, the inorganic can refer to industrial systems, architecture, and the impersonal structures of modernity. This duality provides a compelling framework for understanding the processes of fictioning, as they often engage with both the organic (human histories, ecological systems) and the inorganic (urban infrastructure, technological systems). This form of free associating framework mirrors Smithson’s own analysis, in *Entropy and the New Monuments*, of the Park Place Collective’s geometric works (Fig.1) as representative of forms of laughter as crystalline, “solid-models” to explore the fourth dimension



Fig.1 Dean Fleming, *65 purple*, 1965

(1966b). The interplay of this organic/inorganic terminology becomes particularly apparent in works that engage with real-world locations, offering speculative geographies and reimagined histories.

Burrows and O'Sullivan's concept of Mythopoesis, as fictioning of spaces is a symbiotic art practice, one that mutates landscapes by collapsing the boundaries between the organic and inorganic. Smithson's duality of "blood and guts" (organic decay) and "cold steel" (inorganic control) uses this practice as a metabolic act: a process where entropy dissolves industrial monuments into fossils, while sterile technologies simulate "ritual patterns" of control (1966b). Mythopoesis, in this context, forcing us to see the spaces we inhabit, anew, is like lichen—a symbiotic fusion of fungus and algae—it thrives on the collapse of boundaries.

“The movies give a ritual pattern to the lives of many artists, and this induces a kind of “low-budget” mysticism, which keeps them in a perpetual trance. The “blood and guts” of horror movies provides for their “organic needs,” while the “cold steel” of Sci-fic movies provides for their “inorganic needs.” - *Entropy and the New Monuments* (Smithson, 1966b)

Mythopoesis, in this context, operates as a parasitic art practice, built over our landscapes, mutating them and forcing us to see them anew. Like lichen—a symbiotic fusion of fungus and algae—it thrives on the collapse of boundaries.

Monuments of Passaic

“The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and high mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, through the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow doubled as an open grave—a grave that children cheerfully play in.” (R. Smithson, 1966b)

Robert Smithson’s essay *The Monuments of Passaic* (1966a) reimagines the decaying urban landscape of New Jersey as a series of speculative “monuments” to entropy and transformation.

Through his hybrid of documentary observation and speculative narrative, Smithson layers fiction onto everyday spaces, transforming mundane industrial sites into symbols of both the organic (entropy, decay) and the inorganic (industrial systems, impersonal infrastructure).



Fig.2 Robert Smithson *Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River* (1966c)

Smithson's essay fictions Passaic, through text and captured images, as a speculative geography where organic decay and inorganic sterility coexist. For example, his above description of a children's sandpit as a graveyard desert suggests a speculative narrative of erosion and ruin, akin to the landscapes of post apocalyptic, or post human science fictions. This is further reinforced by Smithson's references to Brian Aldiss' *Earthworks*, a novel that explores the collapse of the environment and society under ecological pressures, necessitating the manufacture of artificial soil, providing fuel for Smithson, describing the possibility of falling through Passaic's "cardboard

ground". Smithson's chronological inversion of building sites as "Ruins in Reverse" as well as the inclusion of a map (Fig. 2) in negative -or in Smithson's words "Sidereal," meaning relating to distant stars- of the region travelled lend more to the idea of an imagined, mirror world, overlaid on Passaic.

"While the essay—comprised of original text, literary citations, photographs, and a map — has the trappings of an anthropological travelogue, Smithson distorts the positivism of this genre to create an experimental narrative form shaped by the literature of science fiction and metafiction, the influence of which is signaled by the two epigraphs that frame his essay" Rory O'Dea - *A Speculative Reading of "The Monuments of Passaic"*

2021

These additional fictional components, along with the invoking of science fictions (Both in references to Aldis' *Earthworks* and the opening quote from Henry Kuttner's *Jesting Pilot*, (1947)), cause *Monuments of Passaic* to transcend its own boundaries, academically citing pulp fictions, elevating them and maintaining its academic rigor in spite of their inclusion. It guides the reader in how to interpret the writing and positioning of the mundane photographed industrial infrastructure and building sites of Passaic as markers of both a deteriorating present and an imagined post-industrial and potentially post-anthropocentric future.

Smithson's interplay between the organic and inorganic resonates with his broader interest in entropy. The decaying infrastructure of Passaic becomes a lens through which he explores the inevitability of organic decay within the seemingly permanent structures of the inorganic. The essay's method—using speculative language and writing conventions to reframe reality—underscores how textual fictioning can draw out latent histories and imagined futures embedded in real-world locations.

Voodoo Science Park

Victoria Halford and Steve Beard's *Voodoo Science Park* (2010) overlays archival footage from the Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL) with a fictive narrative, narrated by author Jeff Noon. The film anachronistically explores the Peak District, intertwining political histories of land enclosure, agricultural industrialisation and religious persecution with ancient myth and folklore to recount the tale of Thomas Hobbes and the "Social Contract's" influence on the British state. The archival style footage, characterised by its luscious, organic Peak District greenery, criss-crossed by the contrast



Fig 3. *Voodoo Science Park* still, depicting an HSL simulation

of inorganic, sterile aesthetic of industrial machinery, is fictioning into a speculative meditation on the relationship between human systems and ecological fragility.

In an interview with The Telegraph, Steve Beard explains the film's title;

"Voodoo is the Afro-Caribbean name for the practices of sympathetic magic which underlay much of the pre-scientific world view. These practices suggest that like affects like and that this action can occur at a distance. The voodoo doll is the classic example... ...But aren't HSL practising a kind of voodoo when they simulate accidents in order to prevent them from happening?" (Beard, 2011)

This comparison of accident simulations to the voodoo doll's sympathetic magic suggests that even sterile, technological processes can be analogue to a form of magic and potentially vice-versa. The film's narration, provided by a fictional character, named "Blakey" (a reference to William Blake), calls Thomas Hobbes a "magic man, a fucking voodoo scientist" and explains, in a travelogue format, his experiments and journey in creating a literal, golem-like version of Leviathan, from his book, *Leviathan* (1651), to defeat the primordial British giant, Gogmagog. This interplay blurs the boundaries between the organic (nature, magic, accidents, humans) and the inorganic (technology, simulations, human systems such as politics and states). Through this lens, simulations taking place at HSL are reimagined as Hobbes' experiments in state control and cultural erasure, the organic and inorganic intertwining to probe deeper cultural anxieties about control, disaster, and the fragility of our minds and bodies.

The film's fictioning of landscape and history allow it to critique the systems it portrays, questioning the narrative of industrial progress and situating it within a broader history of political and ecological entanglements. By juxtaposing the inorganic sterility of simulated disaster and statecraft with organic backdrops and narratives of magic, *Voodoo Science Park* demonstrates the

power of audiovisual media to blend fact and fiction, creating new ways of interpreting landscapes and their histories.

Robinson In Ruins

Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) constructs a speculative geography through its meditative narrative, blending real-world landscapes with fictional musings about ecological and social history. The film follows the discoveries of the titular Robinson, a fictional flâneur whose observations, recorded in notebooks and film reels and found by a recycling worker, are speculated on and relayed through the voice of the often bemused narrator, a fictional academic and co-founder of "The Robinson Institute," a group now in possession of these artefacts. As well as being the name of a 2012 Tate Britain exhibition by Keiller that adds to the films mythology, the institute is named for the protagonist in a way reminiscent of, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a 1959 post-apocalyptic novel by Walter M. Miller Jr, about an order of monks dedicated to preserving literature in the aftermath of an anti intellectual purge. This fiction, layered onto documentary style footage exemplifies how audiovisual fictioning can reframe landscapes as sites of speculative meaning by using its audio narrative to guide how the audience views the images they are shown.

Where *Voodoo Science Park* uses the landscape of the Peak District as a setting to explore human histories, *Robinson in Ruins* navigates between the organic and inorganic to explore the impact of human systems on ecological spaces. Robinson's observations draw attention to the organic life of the landscape—its histories of agriculture, ecological systems, and human labor—but these are frequently contrasted with the inorganic systems imposed upon it, such as land ownership and military-industrial infrastructure.

Keiller's slower, meditative style of observing the landscape through a fictional character contrasts with the more dynamic visuals of *Voodoo Science Park*. Where *Voodoo Science Park* interrogates

the sterile violence of simulations, *Robinson in Ruins* adopts a reflective tone, using Robinson's musings to explore life on earth. Robinson's reported belief that he was recruited by a "network of non-human intelligences...to preserve the possibility of life's survival on the planet" stems from his belief in evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis' theories. Margulis argues that symbiogenesis -a process of integration between organisms- is a significant and overlooked factor in the development of life on Earth due to the dominance of 'capitalistic, competitive, cost-benefit' Neo-Darwinist theories.

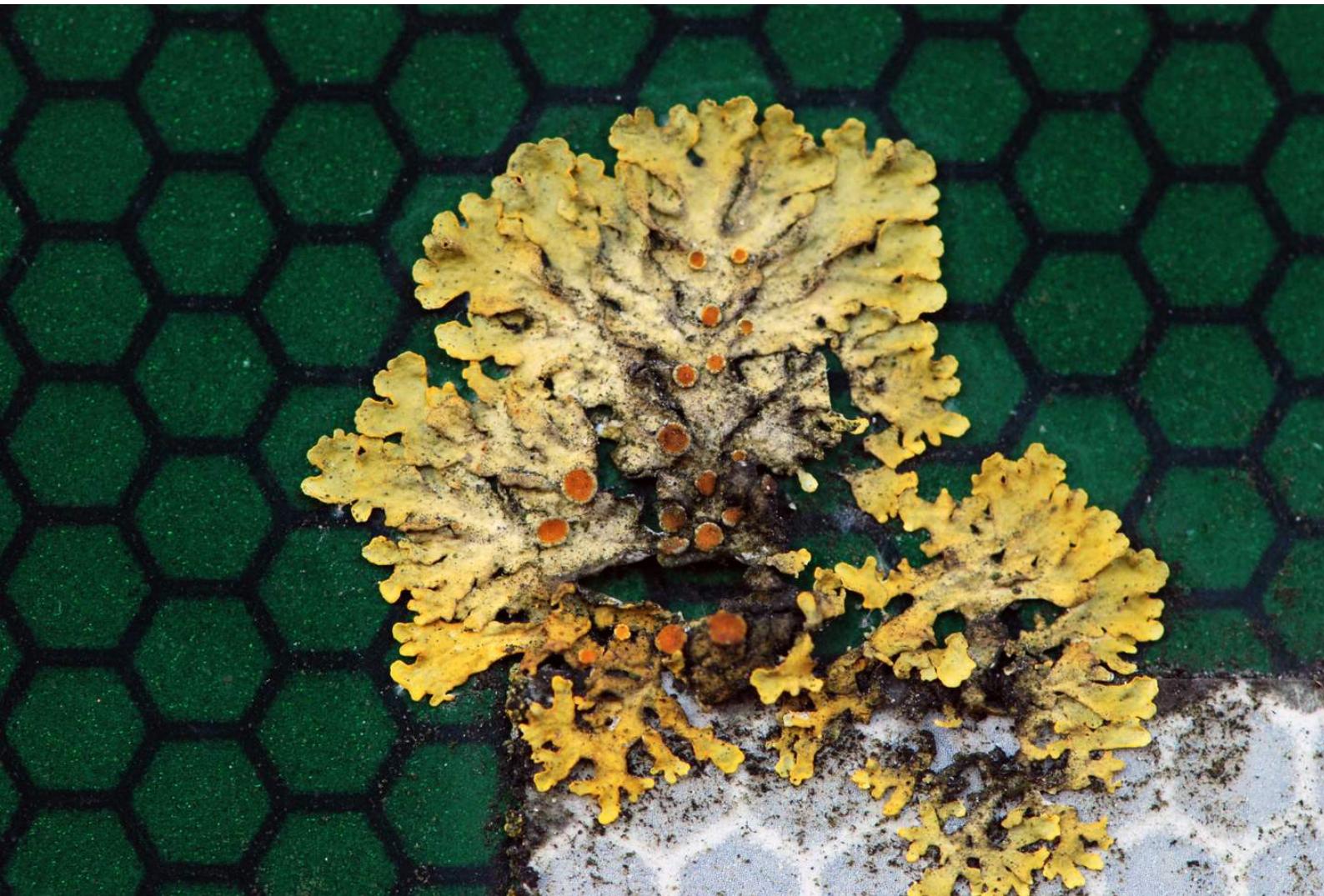


Fig 4. Patrick Keiller, Lichen growing on a roadsign in *Robinson in Ruins*

Margulis explains;

“Symbiogenesis recognizes that the mitochondria [the energy factories] in animal, plant, and fungal cells came from oxygen-respiring bacteria and that chloroplasts in plants and algae—which perform photosynthesis—came from cyanobacteria. These used to be called blue-green algae, and they produce the oxygen that all animals breathe... ...At some point an amoeba ate a bacterium but could not digest it. The bacterium produced oxygen or made vitamins, providing a survival advantage to both itself and the amoeba. Eventually the bacteria inside the amoeba became the mitochondria. The green dots you see in the cells of plants originated as cyanobacteria. This has been proved without a doubt.” (Margulis, 2011)

By incorporating Margulis' views into the fiction, Keiller turns the lichens and other flora Robertson is communing with into revolutionary actors, directing Robertson's rambling, against capitalist structures that would threaten their ecosystems. The purpose this gives Nature, firstly; proper noun status. And secondly; conscious participation in its own survival, blurring of the boundaries between the organic and inorganic

This dual focus on the organic and inorganic creates a posthuman geography, inviting viewers to question their relationships with and the futures of the spaces they inhabit. Keiller shows us the world not as a passive backdrop, but dynamic and interconnected systems, moulded by human and non-human actors.

Vampire: The Masquerade

New York magazine's senior art critic Jerry Saltz said, as advice for art students at a talk in 2016, hosted by the School of Visual Arts, NYC; "You need to be vampires who live in the city with your fellow artists. And stay up all night together." This advice draws comparison to the metabolic, parasitic relationship artists often have with their environments—absorbing the organic histories and contexts of spaces; transforming them into speculative reimaginings. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), a role-playing game which overlays fictional narratives onto modern day locales rather than the medium's typical heroic fantasy; blurring the line between the organic and inorganic, the living and the undead.

First published in 1991 by White Wolf Publishing and by now encompassing many supplements, editions, spin-offs and reboots, employs participatory fictioning to transform real-world cities into shadowy, speculative geographies. Set in a dark mirror of our own, modern, urban world, populated by vampires and other supernatural beings, the game invites players to overlay fictional narratives



Fig 5. Heigham Haven, Flynn, 2025

onto familiar urban landscapes, creating a dynamic interplay between the organic (human horror, decay) and the inorganic (urban architecture, societal systems).

Each city is reshaped by the game's mythos, balancing familiarity with speculative twists. Tyler Brunette, lecturer of Communication studies at the University of Wisconsin, states in their 2015 thesis: *Vampire the Masquerade* city sourcebooks blur the boundaries between real and imagined spaces, mixing "real world-marking (the information regarding the museum's founding and its hours of operation)" with "ludic world-marking (that the museum is a secret haven for violent vampiric anarchists)" (p. 60). This duality allows players to simultaneously engage with the museum as both a real-world institution and a fictive space; showcasing the game's ability to fiction the familiar into something uncanny and new. Games Master, Michael Brereton describes this, in interview, as "making everything slightly worse," (2025) a subtle fictioning of locations that grounds players while emphasising the city's darker underbelly. In Norwich, for example, Chapelfield Gardens park becomes a dangerous shortcut, council buildings are graffitied, and unlit paths reflect economic decline. This world-building is both personal and speculative, intertwining local knowledge with an alternative narrative. "The city you set your game in is another character," Brereton explains, "and should set the atmosphere of the game." The game's participatory nature allows players to co-create these speculative geographies, Activating the fiction by performing as their characters, endowed with the knowledge of urban space like only someone who has lived in it could. By inviting players to engage directly with the landscapes they inhabit, *Vampire: The Masquerade* bridges the organic and inorganic in a uniquely interactive way. The game's fictioning transforms urban spaces into imaginative stages where players are empowered to create deep characters with which they can explore themes of decay, power, and morality, demonstrating the transformative potential of participatory mediums without being held back by the lack of knowledge of a fully imagined world.



Fig 6. Jerry Saltz, photographed by Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from *Jerry Spends a Night at the Guggenheim Museum* (Saltz, 2008)

This speculative reimagining of the museum as a nocturnal haven for the undead is not without precedent. Jerry Saltz's account of sleeping in a museum during a Relational Aesthetics exhibition provides an uncanny echo of *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s narrative tropes. Captured in a photograph, Saltz appears alone at night, dressed entirely in black, his presence casting the museum in a new light—not as a repository of history, but as an active participant in an ongoing fiction. Relational Aesthetics, as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, focuses on 'the realm of human interactions and their social contexts' (2002, p. 14). By occupying the museum overnight, Saltz participates in a relational performance, inhabiting a space usually reserved for the preservation of the past, and transforming it into a site for speculative futures.

And perhaps, like the vampires he critiques, Saltz himself feeds on these spaces to sustain his practice. His description of artists as 'vampires' becomes autobiographical—a slip revealing his true,

undead nature as a museum-dwelling nocturnal being, consuming the energies of the spaces he critiques.

Fictioning operates as a metabolic process across textual, audiovisual, and interactive mediums, each digesting the organic and inorganic to produce speculative geographies that challenge modernity's narratives. While Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic* curates decay through text and image, *Vampire: The Masquerade* invites players to vandalise cities, and *Voodoo Science Park* weaponises folklore against industrial control. These practices reveal fictioning's power to collapse boundaries—between author and audience, documentary and fantasy, decay and creation—while exposing tensions inherent in reimagining place.

Textual fictioning, as exemplified by Smithson, is a foremost authorial method. As a highly engaging writer I want to use Smithson's influence to improve my own writing and assemblage of text. His essay transforms Passaic's industrial sites into "ruins in reverse," framing entropy as both a destructive and creative force. The map (Fig. 2) and sandbox graves are not metaphors but speculative cartographies, collapsing time into a spiral where construction sites build ruins that become new relics. Yet Smithson's work remains monologic; the reader observes his bleak entropic vision, but cannot alter its irreversible process. Just as time flows one way, heat moves to cooler areas and the grey sandbox cannot be returned back to black and white. This mirrors the inorganic's illusion of control—a curated decay that, like the sterile HSL simulations in *Voodoo Science Park*, reveals modernity's obsession with containment. Inspired by Smithson's 'ruins in reverse,' I am cultivating verdigris on bronze casts of industrial motifs—a literal enactment of organic/inorganic interplay. This process mirrors his 'curated decay,' where controlled entropy becomes a speculative practice. If applied to VR/AR, such motifs could destabilize digital permanence, inviting users to witness algorithmic corrosion as a counterpoint to sterile virtual architectures. And be relatively easy to model.

Audiovisual fictioning, however, thrives on informal dialogue. *Voodoo Science Park*'s frenetic clash of HSL footage and Jeff Noon's jovial and dramatic narration critiques neoliberalism's "sympathetic magic," where accident prevention becomes a sterile ritual. The film's referral to Voodoo and Hobbes' Leviathan-as-golem frames statecraft as inorganic alchemy, sterile yet eerily alive. In contrast, *Robinson in Ruins* adopts a meditative symbiosis. Keiller's static shots, biology inspired themes and professional-but-confused voiceover reframe lichen as revolutionary symbioses, blurring human and non-human agency through their influence on our invisible protagonist. Since researching these films for this essay, I've been more interested in narration, with the possibility of linking it to pieces involving using and casting my own body in my art. I've begun to practice how to evoke different vibes from moving and still image, with the mind of creating juxtapositions between image and narrations to create space for speculative narratives to be developed.

TTRPG's interactive fictioning dissolves authorship of events and leaves the Games Master to embellish the urban spaces their players are familiar with. *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s players journey through a world couched in Brereton's "slightly worse" design philosophy, graffitied council buildings, long closed bars and Internet cafes that they mutually agree would be a good fit for this new dark mirror. Unlike Smithson's curated view of monuments, this is ludic digestion—a participatory act where fictioning becomes sabotage, the players recounting rank bars and suggesting what they may think of the council, to be scrawled on its walls in spraypaint. The game's "ludic world-marking" (Brunette, 2015, p. 60) mirrors lichen's reclamation of concrete, blurring real and imagined spaces. Here, the city is both stage and character, its atmosphere shaped by players' nocturnal reimaginings. With the physicality of tabletop miniature games being a large area of my research, utilising ideas from more performative and collaborative games opens up new avenues of research and ways to implement my practice.

Throughout these case studies, fictioning operates as a powerful tool for reinterpreting landscapes across textual, audiovisual, and interactive mediums. These mediums expose one of fictioning's strengths: its ability to critique systems while perpetuating them. Smithson quotes and cites pulp sci-fi but lets the reader come to their own conclusions as to its relevance; *Voodoo Science Park*'s hidden rituals of banished sects echo the sterile simulations Hobbes creates with his Leviathan in a landscape rendered no less beautiful for its scrap metal and industrial sites. Where *Voodoo Science Park* dissects control, *Robinson in Ruins* obfuscates its revolutionary nature, slow cinema becoming a cover for a metabolic exchange between the ecological and the anti-capitalist. *Vampire*'s participatory vandalism empowers players but remains tethered to capitalist urban frameworks. Yet these contradictions are generative, pushing the fiction forward. The Fiction thrives on paradox, metabolising collapse into survival—a practice where lichen and vampires alike feed on modernity's ruins.

“The rain here isn’t water. It’s the city’s sweat, its
bile, its apologies.”

I am in Eskew (Ward, 2018)

FIGURE TABLE

Figure 1. Dean Fleming of the Park Place Collective's geometric which I guess Smithson would have had an idea of the type of laughter it represented, *65 purple*, 1965

Figure 2. Smithson's "sidereal map" of Passaic, a cartography in negative (1966c),

Figure 3. Wrecked trains and luscious forest at HSL in the Peak District. Victoria Halford and Steve Beard, still from *Voodoo Science Park* Available at: <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt2060568/> mediaviewer/rm3998334208/ (Accessed: 12 February 2025).

Figure 4. Persuasive lichen says this is a very good essay. Patrick Keiller, still from *Robinson in Ruins* Available at: <https://patrickkeiller.org/robinson-in-ruins-2/> (Accessed: 13 February 2025).

Figure 5. In my previous V:TM Campaign, facilitated by Game Master Mike, our coterie founded an artist's commune here.

Figure 6. You absolutely cannot tell me that this isn't exactly what a vampire would wear to a secret vampire museum meeting.

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APPENDIX I

Interview with Michael Alexander Brereton, conducted by Flynn - questions edited for brevity- 12/1/2025

What's your history with Vampire the Masquerade?

I started playing in a live action game that was set in Norwich back in 2013. Then started running a table top game also set in Norwich in 2019. Though I first heard about Vampire the Masquerade when I was 12, when we had a Norwegian exchange student who played it stay with us.

What's the material benefit to you, as a both a Games Master and Player, in a game set in the city you live in?:

The main benefit is familiarity with the area, which then gives you confidence in describing the locations and routes the players can take when traversing the city.

I could run a game set in London, but I would have no idea of how someone might get from Islington to Marylebone other than "You take the tube".

Whereas I can easily describe to a player how they might risk a shortcut through Chapelfield gardens to get to Unthank road.

How is Norwich changed in a game you would write?

I think you can take it and make everything "slightly" worse. No need to make it 100% worse (otherwise people wouldn't live there).

But you can make things a bit worse. The council building is still functioning but covered in profanity filled graffiti, and the war memorial is covered in moss because no one maintains it.

Those streetlights in the parks and bike paths shut off early because the council can't afford to keep them running at night.

You can also use it as an opportunity to add things in to the city that used to be there, that you and your players missed. For example, a computer gaming cafe called Battlenet, a dive bar called Havanas.

How do you find players and their characters respond differently when playing in their hometown? Is this hard to separate from the other elements that set VtR aside from mother mainstream RPGs?:

I think they are both familiar and curious - they know the locations, but not how they'll be different.

One of my players works as a nurse, so whilst they may feel in their element if the player characters go to A&E, I would need to show (don't tell) how it's different in this game.

I once played in a vampire LARP set in a version of Norwich where Norwich was a metropolis to rival London. It was an awesome concept but I personally struggled to follow the locations because once the city changes in scale everything also changes inside as well.

In terms of separating this aspect of city from the other elements of VtM I don't think you can. Ultimately the city you set your game in is another character, and should set the atmosphere of the game.

Note the same city can have a different atmosphere with its inhabitants depending on events. I imagine the people of London had a different general mood on September 7th than they did the day before.

Every edition of vampire the masquerade has had a supplement called Chicago by Night which is amongst fans consistently viewed as a standard for designing cities. Specifically through the lens of "I want to design a city whose inhabitants are being manipulated behind the scenes by vampires".

There is no Appendix II