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Vincent Hui¹, *Professor, Ryerson University, Canada*

Tatiana Estrina², *Ms., Ryerson University, Canada*

Yah Weh Wong³, *Mr., Ryerson University, Canada*

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yahwehwong@ryerson.ca

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Vincent Hui¹, *Professor, Ryerson University, Canada*

Tatiana Estrina², *Ms., Ryerson University, Canada*

Yah Weh Wong³, *Mr., Ryerson University, Canada*

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Abstract

In recent decades, video games have become a billion-dollar industry, serving as a ubiquitous interactive media. With significant technological advancements in graphics and performance, their fidelity in the representation of the built environment has improved the immersive experience, leading to increased impact on the player's understanding of the architectural identity of places. Video games reference urban conditions to contextualise narratives yet are able to provide an additional dimension of navigability and interactivity within these virtual spaces. As a result, this medium has a considerable influence on the players' awareness of and engagement with architectural and urban environments. The digital representation of spatial conditions becomes a substantial component of level design, with titles often relying on tropes and iconography associated with particular cities to contextualise virtual environments. Due to globalisation, Washington D.C. has become universally recognised as the epicentre of Western politics, housing many iconic architectures that shape their distinctive urban environments. Numerous video games take advantage of this recognizability and significance by siting their narratives within the city's iconic urban and cultural identity.

This paper examines the potential influence of in-game caricatures of architectural space on identity and urban memory within the global collective consciousness. By analysing the portrayal of Washington D.C. within prevalent video games; the paper examines their approach and use of urban context within the gameplay. Engaging several game modalities, including alternative histories, post-apocalyptic futures, espionage, and vehicular exploration, this paper presents trends of representation predominant within individual game categories. Through the assessment of the aforementioned titles, abstraction of the urbanscape, celebrity of architectural landmarks, contextualisation through prominent architectures, and ironic manipulation of architectural imagery emerge methods of falsification of the urban context. This paper concludes with a discussion of the impact of in-game representations of cities on the public's perception and understanding of architectural and urban space.

Keywords: globalisation, video game architecture, urban identity, Washington D.C., digital space

1. Introduction

As cultural products, video games serve as both entertainment and "manifestations of a society

Corresponding Author: Yah Weh Wong, Mr., Ryerson University, yahwehwong@ryerson.ca

in a specific period” (Indaverea, 2015). The architecture and video game industries have been developing in a co-dependent fashion in recent decades, with several tools and theories shared between the two fields (Di Mascio, 2017). Since their conception, video games have extensively borrowed and used architectural elements for world-building, capitalising on digital environments. Architectural contexts play a critical role in shaping environments and gameplay within virtual narratives. Although a number of fictitious urban environments have been created for video game worlds, such as those of Super Mario Bros or Halo, many more titles borrow from existing cityscapes.

Unsurprisingly, despite their fantastic diversity, these video game archetypes adhere to general parameters inculcated in urban design authorities, including Kevin Lynch. He described the “image of a city” as stemming from both community and individual growth, noting the image’s importance as a “generalised mental picture of the exterior world held by an individual (Lynch, 1962). Five distinct elements become the components of the physical form: edges and districts as boundaries within the city, paths as channels of passage, nodes as prominent points of observation, and most notably, landmarks as physical points of reference and differentiation (Tillander, 2014). In addition to these elements, many cities are defined by their primary roles in the country’s economy, such as New York City’s position as a financial centre or Los Angeles’ as the heart of the film industry, as well as stereotypes with regard to the residents of the locale.

Although cities have been portrayed in a variety of media in the past, from literature to film to music, the cultural phenomenon of video games is able to surpass other forms of media in their immersive and navigable representations of urban environments. Game worlds are able to have a significant impact on the experience of existing cities and, consequently, the “image of a city” that the player holds as a result of the title’s portrayal of the space.

1.1. Use of Washington D.C. in Gameplay

While urban conditions serve as settings for countless game titles, Washington, D.C., has become a particularly prevalent in-game location. As both a political centre of power and containing many recognisable landmarks, the city proves to be a particularly lucrative location for game world designers. While other prominent urban centres, such as New York City or London, exist in the collective consciousness as an urban aggregation of built works, Washington, D.C. is often characterised by a handful of key landmarks amidst expanses of lawn. Thus, by siting a game in the District of Columbia, designers need only to present players with a couple of key architectural elements to site them in the city, alleviating many of the difficulties in retaining the recognizability of location. Consequently, many titles across genres and eras have selected Washington, D.C., as the primary architectural context for their gameplay.

Table 1. Game categorisation and overview.

Game Typologies	Games
Alternative History Games	Turning Point, Fall of Liberty Call of Duty: Black Ops Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus Rogue Trip: Vacation 2012
Driving and Racing Games	Knight Rider Cruis'n USA The Crew The Crew 2
Spy Games	Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent Hitman: Blood Money Payday 2 The Conduit
Post-Apocalyptic Games	Fallout 3 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 Tom Clancy's The Division 2 Overkill's The Walking Dead Saints Row IV

Through the exhaustive compilation of video games that prominently feature urban conditions in Washington D.C., four primary groupings, made up of genre and stylistic categorisations, have emerged (Table 1).

2. Driving and Racing Games

Although the image-based experience of architecture has been commodified via social and popular media forms, immersive forms of experience remain nascent outside of video games. Being non-static environments, video games are experienced via motion, travel, and navigation, one aspect that is currently extensively confined to the typology (Schweizer, 2013). Methods with which the navigation occurs within the digital space have emerged as their own independent typologies, significantly influencing the depictions of the urban contexts.

The popular driving and racing video game genre is characterised by vehicular gameplay as a focus, with the objective of reaching a destination rapidly or faster than in-game opponents (Lee et al., 2014). Although generally located within various urban and rural conditions as context, games in this genre are largely divorced from their locations, save for the identifiability of the streets and roads as the racetrack from a driver's perspective. Instead, contexts in these games serve several other purposes, including the addition of visual noise, increase of realism, and contribution to the journey narrative.

A number of the racing games examined feature Washington, D.C., among other American cities, in a 'cross country journey'. In the cases of early games, including *Knight Rider* and *Cruis'n USA*, the Washington D.C. tracks involve what seems to be a green pasture with a handful of landmarks, such as the Washington Monument, the Capitol Building, and the White House scattered throughout (Figure 1). Although the fidelity to both the buildings and the urban landscape is very low, these levels enjoy recognisability that other in-game urban depictions lack. Despite the lack of fidelity in the abstracted representations of these monuments, Washington, D.C., is depicted with more specificity than other cities like New York or Chicago, which are portrayed as a collection of generic skyscrapers. This specificity is brought about by a combination of the recognisability of the buildings and a relative lack of significant urban context to accompany them.



Figure 1. Washington D.C. in *Knight Rider* (left) (Pack-In-Video, 1988) and *Cruis'n USA* (right) (Games, 1994).

The linear nature of driving games, with a singular road or track guiding the progression through urban conditions, is particularly destructive to games' faithfulness to represent wholistic urban identity. This road-like procession significantly impacts the player's navigation within earlier games. Meanwhile, in later games, the world-building is prioritised more, deviating from the linearity and allowing for a much more immersive driving experience.

While some racing games constrain players to navigate linear road systems, others engage the cityscape more holistically by adopting "open world" or "sandbox" parameters and allowing players to manoeuvre their vehicles off-road. Games such as *The Crew 2* have begun to remove barriers and fences present in earlier renditions of the game to give players more freedom of movement. For instance, where previously there was a fence separating the Capitol building from the road, removing the fencing allows players to access the upper levels of the building. In addition, *The Crew 2* offers a range of motor, air, and water vehicles for players to use when navigating the landscape, giving the added opportunity of diverse viewpoints and increasing accessibility for the landmarks above (Figure 2). Thus, an increased fidelity across scales is required, ranging from increasing architectural accuracy to including lights to illuminate the building at night. In addition, despite the majority of racing-focused games omitting any pedestrian population within the portrayals of cities, *Crew 2* includes a number of passers-by as well as other vehicular traffic on the streets of Washington, D.C.



Figure 2. The Capitol Building in *The Crew* (left) (Ubisoft Reflections, 2014) and *The Crew 2* (Ubisoft, 2020), which, by removing the fencing, allows players to drive up the staircases and enter different levels within the game (right).

3. Espionage Games

Games within the espionage genre combine ideas from the role-playing game (RPG), first-person shooter (FPS) and puzzle genres in order to situate the player in place as a spy within a fictitious narrative (Wang, 2014). Although not an accurate representation of the profession, this genre, which gained traction after the events of 9/11, incorporates additional elements such as storytelling, puzzle solving, and strategy that allow for various approaches and experimentation within gameplay.

Games that fall within this genre are often in the first- or third-person perspective to provide a more accurate simulation of character experiences (Ouriques et al., 2019). As a result, increased attention to detail and architectural fidelity is required within the spy genre, as gameplay requires players to interact directly with both exterior and interior elements of buildings. Games set in Washington D.C. include exploring the interiors of many architectural landmarks, including the White House and the Capitol Building, among others. However, as many of these buildings maintain a high degree of secrecy as they protect matters of national security, their in-game depictions are often abstracted as a collection of a small number of recognisable spaces.

The White House, arguably the most well-known building in the city as the residence of the president of the United States, their various meetings, gatherings, and televised events, is featured in many games. However, due to restricted access, officials curate a small selection of rooms for public viewing (WH Info, 2021). Thus, architectural style and spatial experience within in-game representations of the building extensively rely on the depictions available to the public rather than a thorough investigation of the nature of the diverse assortment of spaces. Video game designers use the public's ignorance of the building's interior to their advantage, freely adjusting and concocting spatial configurations of the interior. So long as the central rooms of the buildings are included, along with their various architectural elements and styles, the player does not doubt their location within the White House.

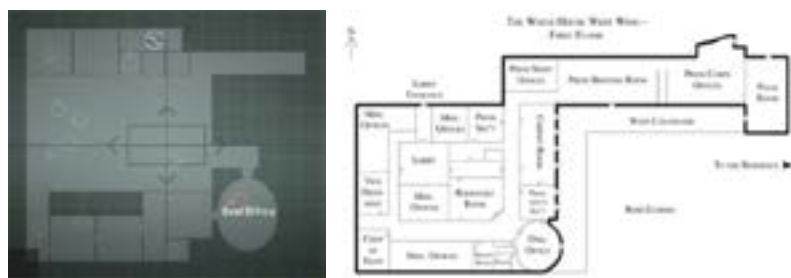


Figure 3. Map featured in *Hitman: Blood Money* (left) in comparison to the plan of the White House west wing-first floor [1] (right).

For instance, games such as Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, *Hitman: Blood Money*, and *The Conduit* feature single-player focused gameplay designed in a linear organisation of rooms separated by corridors. Players are guided through visual cues, plot descriptions, and occasional maps (Hullett, 2012). Although players are able to make decisions within assignments, the key mission objectives are located in pre-prescribed rooms within the White House, often situated in recognisable rooms and associated architectures. Rooms are usually simplified, with only familiar or distinct spaces labelled to emphasise their importance. To allow for variability, additional rooms are provided for the player to explore; however, they serve as an intermediary

context between more prominent spaces. When the floor plan within Hitman is compared to that of the White House, noticeable differences in the spatial organisation through the removal of rooms, inaccessible spaces, and alteration of the form of the floor plate are noticeable (Figure 3). Although these distortions prove helpful in guiding gameplay and simplifying environments, they may be harmful in their inaccuracies as viewers gain incorrect impressions of the space.

Alternatively, games geared towards multiplayer gameplay utilise larger, more open maps with more opportunities for diverse navigation routes as they need to consider all players occupying the space simultaneously. For example, Payday 2 features a multiplayer virtual heist, which also occurs in the White House. However, with the participation of multiple players, not only is the map much larger than those featured in the single-player games, but a more diverse collection of rooms is available for navigation. To accommodate more players, additional rooms are included, thus building a more accurate reflection of the spatial organisation of the building. Many support spaces, such as security, storage, bathrooms, and even the subterranean Presidential bunker, are available for the players to navigate freely. This alternative approach found in multi-player games allows viewers to understand the building and its systems more holistically, as support and interstitial spaces are not omitted in favour of linear gameplay. In this way, Payday 2 is able to deconstruct the god-like perception public consciousness holds of the president and the White House as a whole.

4. Post-Apocalyptic Future Games

Digital worlds, most notably those found in video games, are able to offer and frequently capitalise on representations of destruction. Without the inhibitions, laws, and societal rules in games, violence and destruction, especially that of architecture, becomes an alluring game element for players. This phenomenon, termed by Mathias Fuchs as “Ruinensehnsucht” or “longing for ruin”, manifests itself in numerous games, with many commercially successful post-apocalyptic, war-torn, and dystopic titles (Fuchs, 2017). The majority of such games can be categorised as first-person or third-person shooters, focusing on violent and destructive gameplay.

A vast number of games involving post-destructive environments find themselves set within the District of Columbia. In such game settings, the player is given very little to ground them to their location, as much of their surroundings are unrecognisable. Unlike other media, such as film, where the viewer is only able to see what they are shown, be it from an aerial view or worms’ eye view, video games remain restricted by the viewpoint of the player and thus face the challenge of visually placing the action in a particular site. Consequently, the game designers are able to capitalise on the recognisable monumentality found within Washington D.C. to blatantly indicate to players their intended siting (Figure 4).

Bethesda Games’ Fallout 3 imagines a future where a nuclear war between the United States and China has caused much of Washington D.C. to become a wasteland. Within such an environment, the context is not defined by the presence of humanity but by its remnants and carnage. The game then challenges players to navigate the destructed landscape as they engage in first-person combat. Similarly, the Battle of Washington in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 uses the city as an active battlefield. The player is thrust into the National Mall, engulfed in flames and covered in trenches and barbed wire.



Figure 4. Remnants of Monuments (Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial) in Fallout 3’s game-scape (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008).

The games’ siting within Washington D.C. becomes an ironic one, contrasting the worries of the present in the form of advertisements, billboards, and various household items scattered

throughout the landscape with the magnitude of carnage (McClancy, 2018). The city, which is currently a centre of power for the United States, is contrasted with the destruction and loss of life, as the juxtaposition of “the consequence of human-system building” with the symbol of democracy (Domsch, 2015).

In the barren and unrecognisable landscape of *Fallout 3* and *Modern Warfare 2*, a number of the landmarks remain and are ever-present in the player’s view throughout the gameplay. Despite the very low likelihood of structural capacity, all the significant architecture, including the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and Capitol building, remain (Figure 5). These anomalies within the games are able to contextualise and ground players within the unfamiliar post-nuclear or war-torn landscapes. Without the ever-present markers that the prominent buildings become, navigating the city or recognising Washington D.C. among the destruction would be a challenge. Thus, despite structurally unstable damage, such as missing columns, cave-ins of halves of domes, and central chunks removed from the Washington Monument, these structures remain standing. In addition, both *Modern Warfare 2* and *Overkill’s Walking Dead* use the juxtaposition of red and brown tones in the landscape with the white of the architecture to emphasise its presence.

The ways in which players navigate post-apocalyptic cities are largely impacted by the architectural remnants present within the landscape. In *Fallout 3*, the continued presence of the Washington D.C. subway system allows the player to access areas of the city despite debris on the surface and a means to transition between areas of the map seamlessly. Meanwhile, in *Saints Row IV*, players must navigate the city via the interiors of buildings due to the dangers found on the exterior. (B. Schweizer, 2014)



Figure 5. Battle of Washington in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009).

5. Alternative History Games

Embodying the idea of “What if...?”, the alternative history genre is a speculative narration on the different outcomes of historical events. The analysis of history combined with explorations of fictional outcomes provide players with a unique alternate present-day to explore. Allohistorical narratives, as Gavriel Rosenfeld writes, can be divided into two scenarios: nightmare and fantasy, with the earlier as an alternate past “worse” than the actual past, and the latter serves as a paragon to express the errors of the present (Rosenfeld, 2002). With a unique urban landscape and easily recognisable structures, Washington D.C., a symbol of the democratic power of the United States of America, is often used as an alternative historical setting due to the juxtaposition of iconography.

The outcomes of a German Nazi victory during the Second World War proved a frequently explored narrative in allohistorical studies (Rosenfeld, 2002). This is categorised as a nightmare scenario, with games such as *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty* and *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* both exploring these alternative realities within Washington, D.C. Using banners to display the Nazi insignia prominently is a common method to juxtapose the foreign presence with recognisable yet untouched landmarks, including the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Capitol Building, and the White House (Figure 6). The particular focus on the decoration of these prominent buildings lies in their strength as symbols of democratic power. This recognisability only increases the power of juxtaposition of the fascist décor and strengthens the narrative of the game via the architecture.

In the case of *Wolfenstein II*, the German forces had situated themselves for a longer duration, emphasising their advanced technology. As a result, architecture, reminiscent of Nazi construction

circa WWII, integrated into the urban fabric. National Mall, which currently houses green space and an artificial lake, is altered within *Wolfenstein II*, with all greenery replaced by foot soldiers and large utilitarian and industrial structures. Despite the changes, the architecture of the buildings remains untouched and is featured within the skylines and backgrounds of the gameplay. However, the Lincoln Memorial is adorned with banners along the columns. Although it appears as though the statue of Abraham Lincoln remains touched, the face is replaced by that of Adolf Hitler (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The juxtaposition between Nazi German occupation and American icons in *Wolfenstein II* (left, centre) (MachineGames, 2018) and *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty* (right) (Spark Unlimited, 2008).

Games within this genre do not always base their narrative on past historical events. Many conjure entirely fictional narratives in order to justify a unique portrayal of the present. Oskari Kallio and Masood Masoodian write that the baseline for all comedy is in reference to what exists or is the norm. Parody, satire, and the de-normalization of pre-existing narratives by imitation (Kallio & Masoodian, 2019). *Rogue Trip: Vacation 2012* features a parodied reality in order to represent a satire on American society, requiring the player to serve as a chauffeur for tourists travelling within the destroyed, post-nuclear landscape of the United States. One destination within the game, labelled as “The Maul”, served as a caricature of the National Mall and featured on the map are many of the prominent structures found in the District of Columbia. However, many buildings are altered in a satirical manner. For instance, the White House is converted to a casino; the Capitol Building is partially sunken into the ground, and the game even encourages the player to “blow off” Abraham Lincoln’s head, rewarding them with additional currency.

Games within this genre do not always base their narrative on past historical events. Many conjure entirely fictional narratives in order to justify a unique portrayal of the present (Kallio & Masoodian, 2019).



Figure 7. Alternations of iconic architectural references found in *Rogue Trip: Vacation 2012* map (SingleTrac, 1998).

As a form of cultural commodity, video games can go beyond their expected roles as entertainment to convey social narratives and criticism. As such, video game designers are able to capitalise on the architectural significance within cities in order to explore narratives, but real and alternative, using juxtaposition, caricature, and satire of the existing prominent spaces.

6. Conclusion

While many forms of media have been able to capitalise on architectural landmarks as a means to guide viewer’s perception of space, none have been able to be more immersive and engaging than video games. Thus, the representations of cities in games have a higher impact on the general public’s “image of the city” when compared to less experiential media such as film or literature.

Washington, D.C., garners a significant number of visitors each year, with approximately 4,000 visitors to the White House each day (DC, 2019). However, these pales compared to visitation to

this site through the virtual medium. Within the first 24 hours of its release. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, a title discussed in this paper, managed to sell 4.7 million copies of the videogame, with nearly 25.02 million copies of this game alone (Clement, 2019). With numerous new titles constantly arriving, it is now safe to say that a majority of players will gain experiences of the city solely through their exploration within a virtual iteration.

Unfortunately, the spatial dilation and emphasis of monumentality found in video game portrayals of Washington, D.C., perpetuates a false understanding of the spatial and urban relationships within the city. Despite the benefits of recognition that siting of action provides for titles, the identity of the city itself becomes increasingly marred within the alternate messaging and abstraction. Despite increasing recognizability and celebrity, cities like Washington D.C., which have become frequently featured in gameplay receive, they have grown increasingly caricatured in the minds of the public. Of the abovementioned elements discussed by Lynch, landmarks became overly emphasised and used as defining features of the city. Similarly, the city of Washington was primarily explored solely within its political significance, ignoring its cultural and everyday constructions. This emphasis on prominent architecture extends into the interiors of buildings, with well-known rooms given more emphasis over support and technical spaces.

Meanwhile, paths and urban landscapes are overlooked; instead, linear or expanses of space are frequently dotted with occasional prominent buildings. Such skewed depictions and representations of the urban space become problematic in their effect on the “image of the city” within the collective consciousness. The perception of cities may become reduced to their landmarks and void of any populous or perception of urban fabric. Video games must remain conscious of their potential impact on audiences and be mindful of portraying spaces in a variety of ways in order to reduce the abstraction and caricature of urban identity.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

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