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Enter the Video Game

Video games are cyberspaces by virtue of projecting a virtual allegory of space in which the player’s actions are meaningful. The representation of the player in the virtual space allows for a much wider range of playful agency than in the earthbound world of physical life. Some media historians believe that what they really study is nothing less than the history of human transcendence, a thorough exploration of virtuality, as experienced and made through evolving cultural forms. Since even ordinary human beings can have out-of-body experiences, it should come as no surprise that our species has been designing virtual spaces since the dawn of time: art.

Scholars and scientists who study VR use the term *presence* (shortened from *telepresence*) to denote the mediated feeling of being somewhere else. Explaining how we are mentally capable of projecting ourselves into the territory of the virtual is the Holy Grail of modern, computerized VR research.³ Although the person involved has a vivid sense of being in another world, s/he does not inhabit that world, but shall forever remain merely a tourist there,⁴ a person whose gaze is guided by the designers of the virtual space in a similar manner to how real-world tourists are instructed by the leisure industry to see a foreign country through the eyes of an acquisitive explorer.⁵ Since the humble beginnings of “travelling with the eye,” as 19th century panoramas were marketed,⁶ simulating other, faraway places has always served political and cultural purposes, which fosters the widespread design of virtual media. The power of simulation (which I do not use in the Baudrillardian sense) raises concerns about the enchanting quality of these places, where the ideological workings of depicting reality is less visible than in representational media, but still present. This is the source of our own age’s anxieties about the effects of electronic entertainment: not that we do not know that we are being manipulated, but that we happily go along with it because it is “fun.”

In this paper, I attempt to sketch out some common themes of video game spaces to investigate their aesthetic functions vis-à-vis the spatial metanarratives they culturally encode. The more abstract a game space is, the harder it is for players to make sense of them. Every video game space encapsulates different regimes of interaction, as the player begins their first few play sessions in a state of unfamiliarity with the controls and the setting of the game. As a result, game designers routinely theme game spaces with familiar stereotypes and frequently emphasize the touristic aspects of gameplay to provide players with a mental attitude well-honed in the real world. These settings evoke a set of practices and cultural iconographies that were already present in other microcosmic

entertainment spaces, such as world’s fairs and theme parks. In computer games, these visuospatial narratives convey culturally decodable “fun” destinations, which enhance the players’ agency by casting them in the role of the tourist, the explorer, the conquistador. Once the iconography coalesces into a theme, it reinforces the illusion that the space the player explores and interacts with is almost real. Video games are revolutionary exactly for this reason: unlike VR installations and self-consciously artistic tech demos, video games make the exploration of the virtual space meaningful in terms of a ludic narrative that engages the player and offers significant incentives to alter the conditions of the simulated world. To clarify what I mean by “video game,” for the remainder of the paper I shall be using my custom definition: video games are digitally operated programs that simulate some sort of virtual space, require the interaction of a living human being who is represented in the digital realm with an avatar as a locus of agency, and whose actions are rewarded by the program along strictly defined, algorithmic rules.

Moving with Purpose in a Series of Tubes: The Linear Quest Narrative in Super Mario Bros.

It has to be said at the outset that the sheer pleasure of experiencing another world, this liminal, shamanic position is a strong psychological incentive in and of itself. Marveling at the detailed, digitally created art-world is an aesthetic motivation on par with the joys of visiting the best museums, castles and landscape gardens. A well-designed game fuses such vivid artwork with themes and game mechanics to construct a place that feels “authentic,” a part of a living-breathing world, whose regions have a history and a potential future which is shaped by the player. Lisbeth Klastrup calls this psychological effect “worldness,” which suggests that

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game spaces are not only spatially but culturally coherent, pseudo-geographical venues of entertainment. The environmental design of a computer game, therefore, does not solely rely on representing areas, it requires them to be mappable and traversable.⁹ As a player, navigating the world and shifting our perspectives in two or three-dimensional space activate ancient cognitive mechanisms in us, which reward us with pleasure for successful way-finding.¹⁰ This is why game designers segment the exploration of the game-world into domains which can be unlocked with the death-defying feats of the players. They reward performance with the expansion of narrative territory.

Representing focalized movement is already a protonarrative (“I went there, this is different from my original position in these ways”), since there is an emotional, qualitative, motivated component to the protagonist’s movements in the storyworld. So, game design can be fruitfully described as “narrative architecture,”¹¹ as long as designers can shape the traversable space to elicit an emotional reaction from the player. Every game-world thus is an opportunity to practice what psychogeographers call dérive, a playful drift in the modern cityscape.¹² Naturally, the goal-oriented approach players bring to the gameworld often override pleasurable loitering, as the protagonists of the game are given tasks and objectives to complete, which makes movement purposeful, driven rather than drifting. When the game-space is displayed, it is never experienced in full. Games are spatially segmented, either discreetly (as levels, stages, rooms, maps) or seamlessly, as larger gameworlds simulate different geographical entities on one continuous map. This is especially true of “open world” or “sandbox” games, which limit the player’s exploration far less than linear narrative architectures – within these open environments, there are usually several biomes or climates that can be explored, along with their respective ecosystems, which reinforces the worldness of the virtual world.

But first, let us take a simple platform game which is linear, the original *Super Mario Bros*. From the perspective of the forty-odd years of video gaming history, *Super Mario* is a rather old game with very simple game mechanics and schematic level design, which makes it a perfect example for demonstrating the basic premises of my main argument. Namely that a.) all computer games use spatial variety to signal progress in some fashion, b.) video game spaces are symbolically connected to a larger, in-game narrative, either explicitly or implicitly, and c.) simulated spaces in computer gamers are only “realistic” to a degree. They are primarily symbolic, more akin to toy theaters and model train scenery than to pleasure gardens and the great outdoors.

In a platform game, the character controlled by the player has to travel from the left side of the screen to the right-hand side, while the screen scrolls continuously until the player reaches the end of the level. This is no trivial matter, however, since simple, ground-level movement is obstructed by bottomless pits, hills or pipes that are insurmountable when walking. There are also enemies, which harm the player when horizontally colliding into them. The player has to mitigate the terrain by jumping over obstacles and the top of the enemies if s/he is to make progress. These obstacles can be avoided by jumping on short, non-contiguous platforms that provide higher ground, hence the name of the genre. Accordingly, the game-world is horizontal and fundamentally tube-like, with no crossroads or bifurcations. Although the screen only moves left and right, there are “warp” pipes, which open upwards or downwards. The players can enter these, but it will not move them “up” or “down” on the map, it merely skips certain parts of the level, like the saccade of an eye when reading. Still, these “warp zones” suggest a less constrained, more vertical world, even though this is not the actual case.

Even at this very early stage of video gaming, the designers felt the need to convey genre and motivational cues for the player to ease the anxiety that comes with playing in a relatively abstract space. Mario begins his adventures on a lush, green, hilly landscape, under a clear, blue sky, but he needs to visit many a castle to find his princess. The end of every level, the right-hand side of the tube is always a green pipe or a castle, whose dark gates allow the protagonist to disappear and reappear at the beginning of the next level. Contiguous spaces are always topologically correct, that is to say, they conform to the folk physics we develop when we are young, but the warp zones disrupt this contiguity.

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13 *Super Mario Bros*, Nintendo, designed by Shigeru Miyamoto, music by Koji Kondo, 1985.
Even when the simulation wants to appear “natural” or intuitive, it can only be an abstraction. In the words of Espen Aarseth, video game levels are “allegories of space”: “they pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways, but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable.”¹⁴ This deviation assuages the unconscious fears of the players that they might lose their hold on reality, as simulations are never perfect – not only from the perspective of an idealized, Platonic philosopher, but from the very enthusiastic gamer’s viewpoint, too. _Euro Truck Simulator 2_¹⁵, an otherwise faithful simulation of long-distance hauling which simulates a large majority of Europe’s road network, *has to* compress space to make the experience of driving over long stretches of open road actually fun. So, travelling from Aberdeen, Scotland to Debrecen, Hungary does not take two real-world days but only a little more than an hour and a half if the player obeys all traffic laws, and a little less if s/he can pay the fines for speeding.

In _Super Mario_, that tired, old cliché of medieval romances, “rescuing the princess” already establishes two stereotypical locations: the idyllic green hills and the castles of Bowser, the fire-breathing tortoise-king, who serves as the main antagonist of Mario. But the Italian plumber also enters dark, chthonic dungeons, he swims through an underwater level, jumps on skyscraping mushrooms high up in the skies, and he must cautiously leap above lava geysers underneath Bowser’s castles. Topologically speaking, these levels are similarly tubular, but the iconography of each stage (the ramparts, clouds, rolling hills, or seaweed and medusae) creates the illusion that our hero takes part in an epic adventure: he travels the whole wide world to save his damsel in distress.

Computer games are an ideal medium for these picaresque quest narratives because of the player’s constant sense of danger, no matter how inconsequential it might appear due to its virtual nature.¹⁶ Therefore it should not come as a surprise that a significant percentage of story-driven games dress their virtual worlds up in the garbs of science fiction and fantasy, since these genres enable the creation of long, epic spatial narratives because they feature vast explorable worlds. Though perilous indeed, familiarity with the genre reduces the anxiety of finding yourself

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in a strange, new place, with customs that are hard to fathom. Since the publication of Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, creators of mass media narratives widely acknowledge the power and universality of the monomythical adventure story, whether in an SF/F guise or as a modern, neo-colonial adventure of relic hunting and tomb raiding. It is especially applicable to computer games, for the main challenge lies not in deciphering the tale, as it uses tried and tested patterns of storytelling, but in mastering the game mechanics themselves. At the same time, the ubiquity and universality of the monomythic adventure renders it easily adaptable to any environment.

The need to transform the quest narrative to many different locales must be also attributed to the very limited processing capacities of early digital machines, when compared with what we have today. If the same game mechanic was transposed to several different areas with a distinctive feel, it lengthened the novelty of the play experience and suggested a steady progress. The change of scenery can also allegorize the ramping up of the difficulty curve: the first level’s Arcadian, lush green fields are followed by the deep, dark forest, after which the heroine must brave the highest peaks of the land. Then the desert awaits, whence the adventurer reaches the icy wastelands, the inhospitable jungles, only to finally delve deep into the bowels of the Earth, where s/he beats the final boss, flanked by flowing lava. In other words, as we stray further and further from the fertile lands of medieval Europe, and the continental, pastoral world preferred by Western culture, we learn more and more about the game mechanics, and we are more willing to accept that we are being challenged time and again. Spatial narratives, therefore, create and sustain the “flow” of optimal experience, in which the play continuously learns new abilities and skills, as well as the kinds of strategies and tactics needed to progress in the game.

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Colonizing the Imagination: Touring Themed Worlds

Let us now turn to a more mature classic platformer, *Sonic and Knuckles*, in which we can examine a greater variety of video game lands, as this game was designed for the fourth generation of video game consoles, and is an iconic showpiece of the 16-bit era. In the series, Sonic, the Hedgehog must collect rings and gems to defeat the evil Dr. Robotnik, who wants to build an evil “Eggman Empire” via his robot army. The “Mushroom Hill Zone” has a pleasing sylvan setting, in which Sonic jumps high from overgrown, trampoline-like mushrooms to reach new heights in his neck of the woods. In “Sandopolis Zone,” he must avoid quicksand traps amidst towering pyramids, he fights scorpions and sandworms, and as he reaches the second stage of the zone, he enters one of the royal tombs, whose interior decoration is crammed chock-full with every possible stereotype about ancient Egyptian burial sites. In order to complete “Lava Reef Zone,” Sonic must overcome the dangers of a mine nestled deep in the underground, and then continue onto the magma chamber of the atoll, where only moving platforms can protect him from certain incineration. Visiting the “Sky Sanctuary Zone” is a trip to a celestial, floating island, which is a sacred shrine to the world’s inhabitants. Here, Sonic pursues his archenemy, who represents the dark side of technological advance, amongst the walls and pillars of the shrine thick with creeping vines and wide-leafed palm trees. Sonic’s success and progress towards his nemesis is clearly signified by the modern, artificial materials and crazy inventions that appear in greater numbers as the player beats the levels of the game. The last level, “The Doomsday Zone” is the culmination of this trend, when Sonic finally trounces Dr. Robotnik in an epic battle IN SPACE! This particular concatenation of levels also suggests that Sonic, the defender of the natural realm and civilization travels through the world to protect it from technocratic authoritarianism. By completing the levels, the player conquers the elemental realms of earth, fire, water and air, as well as becoming the savior of the cultures that comprise the game-world.

In *Sonic* games, and the considerable majority of games that conform to the epic adventure/quest romance narrative, level designers utilize a time-honored set of tropes and settings, which define the grand themes of the levels. For added familiarity, these themes are recycled within game series, game genres and other media. It is not by chance that arctic climes,
tropical islands, ancient ruins, subterranean caverns, sunken cities, haunted mansions and deserts return with a frequency that borders on the unimaginative. These destinations are, of course, the very definition of “exotic,” conspicuously Other spaces in which adventures are usually set. Like computer-aided simulations in real life, they signify being somewhere else by using symbolical props to evoke the iconic visual vocabulary of pop culture.

This practice of setting the scene is called “theming.” Theming is a process by which a commercial venue differentiates itself from its competitors by enhancing its built environment to incorporate symbolic architectural and ornamental motifs which hearken back to a different era or place. The most famous example of this practice can be found in theme parks, whose physical site is structured into different “lands,” but boutique hotels, themed restaurants or other leisure enterprises can also participate in theming to make, say, shopping a pleasant experience. Immersing oneself into the manufactured lands of theme parks bears a certain resemblance to virtual reality scholars’ descriptions of presence. In both cases, a virtual space is constructed, either physically or digitally, to thrill visitors and engender a playful attitude of the tourist and the explorer, who feels like s/he is elsewhere. Gottdiener highlights the fact that every person essentially behaves like a tourist in a themed space, and adds that “The work of tourism is the reexamination, relearning, and creative improvisation of methods for successful interaction. The tourist’s negotiation of the unfamiliar environment is also illustrative of the kind of work we all must do that is often taken for granted in our daily lives.”

His concept of the tourist is startlingly in line with the main tasks of the video game player: both must find a way to reach their goals, they traverse unfamiliar space and must solve problems creatively. Now it becomes much easier to understand why it is so important that props and scenery should change constantly: the designers activate earlier, tacitly acquires cultural skills with these touristic commonplaces as they prime, prepare and prolong the player’s tourist-like attitude.

Similarly to tourists and the great explorers, the video game players must constantly collect objects to ensure their survival. This practice is also meant to strengthen the materiality of gameplay that is fundamentally insubstantial. As part of the work of tourism, newcomers to the uncharted territory must “map” the world, see its sights and wonders, and to interpret

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21 Ibid., 151.
the region’s otherness on their own terms, especially when the built environment and foreign people’s behaviors strike them as odd or puzzling. This sort of “environmental storytelling” puts the player’s actions into context, frames the fiction of the game-world within a familiar metanarrative of conquest, translates the ludic level’s past into material culture which left its mark on the landscape, serving as evidence of human inhabitantion and biological or cosmic events. Representing the built environment, a wide range of buildings and ruins, not to mention other signs of human activities shaping the world lends an air of history to the freshly-made virtual space which cannot decay on its own (unless programmed in), bearing silent witness to the rise and fall of civilizations.

Recurring themes of exoticism, the Middle Ages and science fiction are widespread and popular precisely for the reason that they are deeply embedded in cultural genres that delineated a unifying image of the Western world. As Deborah Philips points out, these genres, which later became the primary source of theme park iconography, were established as conventions during the early period of modern imperialism. Fantasy medievalism and fairy-tale romances were very popular in Britain with the rise of the bourgeois gentlemen because it codified standards of (upper) middle-class masculinity, and ennobled the feudal past which was tarnished by the historical narratives of the Enlightenment. It also effectively forged a more respectable image of Britain. In due course, epic works about Britain’s “historical” past have seeped into the twentieth century: partly due to the late modern fantasy boom and partly to the invention of role-playing games, popular culture preserved this tradition in the sword-and-sorcery pulp adventure novels that form the backbone of current video game RPGs. Gothic novels, developed in the 18th century, presented spine-chilling tales of ghosts and ancient castles that have a direct link to the ghost trains and blood-curdling haunted mansions of amusement parks. These, in turn, appear in the ghostly Boos and ruined

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towers of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, the latter of which is also an excellent place to rescue princesses.

The British and the French empires both discover the treasures of Egypt at the end of the 18th century. From that moment onwards, tales about the secrets of the pyramids, the curse of the Pharaohs, and ancient mummies have inundated the Western press, which never shied away from making a buck or two by catering to the tastes of Western readers. Such sensationalist stories reinforced their sense of superiority when faced with the challenge of various “primitive” cultures, who seemed to live just fine without the fruits of industrial labor. Taking Cleopatra’s Needles, the burial chambers reconstructed in Western museums inadvertently themed the spaces where they were presented to the general public. There, again, is a straight line from here to the roller-coasters of Luna Parks, with their elaborate Egyptian hieroglyphs, sphinxes and scarabs that whoosh past the riders, or to the Luxor Casino in Las Vegas. Computer game levels that are set in Egyptian pyramids and the shifting sands of the desert are proud descendants of this cultural lineage.

Yet another genre, the “boy’s own stories” (what we would call today “Young Adult” adventure fiction) have embellished the tall tales of seamen about unspoiled tropical islands, pirates and treasure, as well as primitive natives. Whole generations have been brought up on the exploits of undaunted sailors and privateers, who ravaged the Spanish Main or explored the Polynesian archipelago. The idyllic beauty of desert islands conjured up the image of the land of Cockaigne in the minds of a populace who lived an increasingly more hectic life in a developing capitalist society. As such, they became a smash favorite of entertainment businesses which wanted to lend an atmosphere of exotic leisure to a commercial venture. This also helped to generate larger revenues, as an earthly Paradise is not the place to be thrifty. Swinging pirate ships, Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition’s Treasure Island and others of their ilk have firmly lodged themselves into popular consciousness as a metaphor of carefree, affluent life and pleasure. In computer games, tropical islands and pirate-infested archipelagos can be found in literally any genre.

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24 *Super Mario Bros. 3*, Nintendo, designed by Shigeru Miyamoto, music by Koji Kondo, 1988.
Keep on Fallin’ In and Out of Love with Utopia: 
*Fallout 3* as a Playful Dystopia

Finally, I examine a game that employs the science fiction theme to full effect, this time, an action-adventure third person shooter. *Fallout 3*\(^{25}\) is set in 2277, two hundred years after the world has been set on fire in an all-out nuclear war between Asia and the US. Washington D.C. and the surrounding area has become uninhabitable due to the devastation caused by the atomic bombs, and the remaining survivors by and large have confined themselves to nuclear shelters the size of smaller towns to ride out the worst period in relative safety. The protagonist, a former Vault Dweller emerges from one of these shelters to see what the world has turned into. Two hundred years have not passed without a trace: as he travels around the desolate Capital Wasteland, he witnesses a country in shambles. Two-headed cows graze on the ruins of D.C., derailed, decaying monorails house small groups of survivors, former buildings are taken apart and converted into decrepit shacks, and what were functioning factories once are now the outposts of marauders.

Nonetheless, there are many objects that tell the tale of what has become of the old world. Pre-war money is useless, people trade in coke bottle caps. The motivational posters and comic books are inspired by the visual language and color scheme of the 1950s, the computers look like the old mainframe-era beasts, and some survivors worship an unexploded atomic bomb like some latter-day Black Stone of Islam. Although the player’s most important goal is to mow down all sorts of mutants and rogue bandits, in fact, it could be argued that the real task and greatest pleasure is to begin with these props and artefacts and then build a coherent picture of how history turned out since the Atomic wars, unearthing the secrets and motivations of the warring factions, as colonizing conquistadores and archaeologists have conducted their fieldwork in the nineteenth century.

The anachronistic visual world of *Fallout 3* is an experiment to criticize Cold War paranoia by means of an almost cutesy, but grim retro-futuristic aesthetic. It places our most terrifying fears into the future, and brings them alive, while mocking our most beautiful dreams of progress. The optimistic belief in technology, which characterized the High Modernist era was apprehensible in the many world’s fairs held in the first half of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, whose slogans were futuristic proclamations and

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\(^{25}\) *Fallout 3*, Bethesda Softworks. Bethesda Game Studios, designed by Emil Pagliarulo, Joel Burgess and Adam Adamowicz, 2008.
coherent themes that connected consumption, edification and a vision of things to come. Spatially, these were expressed in the layout of the utopic venue of the world’s fair, which was the first entertainment venue where a smaller, virtual microcosm of the world was organized along the lines of a symbolic theme.\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Fallout 3} is a dystopic, ironic playground of the imagination that resurrects a bygone era’s ideals and subverts them, but in a way to ensure the survival of the fair’s logic of representation: theming.

Although computer games were originally reputed to be a superficial, trigger-happy pastime for adolescent males within Western cultural commentary, potentially damaging because violence was woven into the very fabric of video game play, after the initial condemnatory period, newly emerging scholars have sought to redefine and celebrate the medium.\textsuperscript{27} This created a utopizing period of games scholarship, epitomized by Edward Castronova’s thought-provoking book title \textit{Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality}.\textsuperscript{28} In the story of Vault 112, \textit{Fallout 3} presents a critical reexamination of the trope that the virtual world can somehow prove to be an idyllic phalanstery, removed from the anxieties of ordinary life.

In game lore, Vault 112 was one of the last fallout shelters produced by the Vault-Tec Corporation, and it was designated to be a social experiment. They recruited 85 lucky test subjects, called Tranquility Loungers, and suspended these individuals in cryogenic vats, the Lounges, while hooking them up to virtual reality systems, so they may not suffer from the sensory deprivation of living in a desolate Vault for several hundred years. The virtual reality simulation itself is a Normal Rockwellesque, 1950s suburb called Tranquility Lane, complete with picket fences, gingham skirts, knit vests and tricycles. However, as soon as the subjects were connected to the system, the Lead Overseer of the project, Dr. Stanislaus Brown overtook the VR systems and used the subjects as puppets for his own perverted joy, controlling them with manic glee until he got bored with it.

He convinces the player to wreak havoc within the simulation, making one of the little boys cry, breaking up the marriage of one of the couples, killing them, and finally, to mass-murder everyone inside the make-believe world in exchange for freeing the player character’s father.

\textsuperscript{26} Scott A. Lukas, \textit{Theme Park}, Objekt Series, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 34.
\textsuperscript{27} Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter, \textit{Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxiv-xxix.
Turning the nostalgic, sepia-toned, picture-perfect world of Tranquility Lane into a slaughterhouse, the player is complicit in the destruction of the experiment. The game designers use the mechanics of role-playing game quests and object-hunting to comment upon the virtuality of post-WWII suburban America, but also to critique the general obedience required of the player to complete any game, which frequently ends in massacres of genocidal proportions. It exposes the god-like properties of the designers, symbolized by the mad scientist Dr. Braun, and uses satire to poke fun at our anxieties about games being “murder simulators,” rife with anarchy and entertaining carnage. On the other hand, it reinforces the aforementioned complicity of the player in the ideology of militaristic entertainment, in which the greatest fun is to kill on command and be rewarded for it. By showing the flip side of game design as the ruthless machination of a crazed German scientist, the designers elide their own role in this, and whether the players make the connection between the two simulations is left to them alone.

Conclusion

The virtual worlds of computer game, just like

[F]he newest theme parks[,] act as powerful lifespaces—as physical places that project educational, political, and lifestyle messages amidst all the consumerism. Like the Paleolithic caves and the real mountains of prehistory that contained some of the species represented in these stores, [they provide] a fully functioning space that fulfills both utilitarian and symbolic needs. . . . Like our early human ancestors who may have used symbolic caves to deal with the unrealities, the difficulties, of the real world, we use these virtual spaces to do much the same.29

Fallout 3 and similar works of interactive art, that is to say, the spaces and stories of computer games have become the most powerful cultural symbols of a world of information technology and unpredictability. They harness the imaginary output of earlier eras to reconfigure our previous notions of media consumption. As a medium that is built upon the agency of the player, computer games rely on purposeful, non-trivial participation within the logic of interactivity. Your choices, your actions matter: they change the world—within certain boundaries, created by the designers.

If game-worlds are fully functioning cultural spaces, they must have their own use and meaning. The most obvious need a game-world fulfills

29 Lukas, Theme Park, 244-245.
is the welcome diversion from obligations issued by the working world. It also educates and, as in non-human animals, prepares the playful subject for the challenges of Life, which in our world is algorithmic, abstract, numerical, statistical, and frequently immaterial. Some would say, virtual. Video games might impart some “general knowledge,” but what they inculcate best is the logic of the digital age, that of programmable destiny, the logic of experimentation and mastery. And they teach it by engaging the player, who learns and relearns through doing. Trial and error eventually gives way to trial and triumph.

But feelings of success and achievement are dwarfed by the symbolic need and reassurance that we live in a meaningful world, one where our actions make a difference. Our modern sense of self depends upon this . . . illusion, ideology or imperative. Narratives make such an understanding of agency possible, and with practice, turn it into an instinct. Video game narratives are predictably drawn from the tropes of mythic adventure stories, from the schemata of the earliest epics that fused their listeners into a legendary community who identified with their culture heroes. Sonic and Mario take on epic quests, travel the world to battle technological or fantastic demigods and restore order to their life-worlds. The global dimension of these world-spanning journeys are signaled by the variety of themes that the player and the character s/he assumes encounters. Themes create microcosmic units, whose inner consistency turn spaces into places. Juxtaposed, they form a macrocosm by including iconic elements that suggest a completeness without dutifully reproducing the world in its entirety.

These symbolic elisions support particular visions of the macrocosm that make sense within the cultural logic of the game-world. In most computer games, that logic is a conflicting one: acquisitive but prosocial, neo-colonial and liberatory, serious and irreverent at the same time. Whenever these conflicts are swept under the rug, we can see the ideology of fun poking through. Fun, in these cases, is to take these basic premises for granted, to bask in the glory of doing, and to do it well. The gaming imagination needs cultural handholds to function well, and these are eagerly supplied by a popular cultural lexicon of imperial adventure, mythopoetic grandeur and conservative satire. But above all, it works, and I hope that my own contribution shed some light on how video game spaces “prefer” these cultural spheres and meanings.

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