Disciplined Play: Finding Foucauldian Architecture in Virtual Worlds

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INTRODUCTION
This paper reflects an ongoing project addressing the use of virtual architecture within videogames as a means to both reinforce and destabilize discursive positions. I draw upon the philosopher Michel Foucault's considerations of space and governmentality to suggest how game developers construct, and players experience, virtual environments with ideological, cultural, political significance.

Space and narrative are familiar bedfellows, of course. Michael Nitsche comments on the close interconnection of space and narrative in videogames, observing that uncovering "space, its drama, and meaning goes hand in hand with the gradual comprehension of events and objects into narrative context" (2008, 45). I argue that videogame spaces – in virtual houses and cityscapes in the particular examples I draw upon – are sites that act to discipline and control upon players and to shape their behaviour both within and outside gameworlds. Westerside and Holopainen's notion that *gameplace* – specific locations within broader gamespaces that evoke meaning – guides this argument, as it draws attention to the ways such virtual places both reflect and engender site-specific performances by players (2019). Laure-Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu further observe that, in digital media, "space is not merely a static background for narrative events, it is also actively involved in those events" (2016, 9). Videogame rules and systems, player interactivity, narrative design and space all work together as actors in a discursive circuit.

I conduct textual analysis of two videogames to develop this argument: *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios, 2018) and *Kowloon's Gate VR: Suzaku* (Jetman, 2017). In addressing *Red Dead Redemption 2* I turn to Michel Foucault's critique of *panoptical* environments – a term drawn from the philosopher Jeremy Bentham's discussion of prisons designed for ominpresent observation of inmates, which came to represent for Foucault capitalistic systems of networked power. The architectures I address in this case study are the encampments, hotel rooms and cabins that dot the game's rendering of the late-nineteenth century American wild west. In these environments players find themselves persistently and invisibly surveilled by the gaze of the game's programming and artificial intelligence engines. Foucault observes that the primary effect of the panopticon "is to induce ... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1995, 201). The architectural affordance of such monitoring power works to "transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them" (Foucault 1995, 172). The structures in *Red Dead Redemption 2* are demonstrated as spaces of bodily control,

impressing upon players and their virtual stand-ins the game's broader thematic concerns surrounding the collapse of legitimacy of the figure of the cowboy's particular construct of muscular, colonial masculinity.

In *Kowloon's Gate VR: Suzaku*, I trace another kind of history – that of the Kowloon Walled City, the now-demolished, infamous settlement – rendered through the virtual architecture of a cityscape in a way that both unsettles and reinforces accepted histories of the city's former physical and societal presence. In oscillating between hegemonic and non-hegemonic accounts of the ideas and events of the past, *Kowloon's Gate VR: Suzaku* creates and opens up for players the types of space Foucault described as a *'heterotopia'*. Heterotopic spaces are linked to and shaped by 'real' spaces, yet at the same time function in contradiction to these referent sites, offering a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault 1986, 24). Foucault uses the mirror to further explain heterotopia: it is an object that exists in concrete, physical terms for its user, but its reflective surface generates an artificial version of the user and their immediate surroundings. This results in a space that is "at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point" that re-renders reality (Foucault 1986, 24). *Kowloon's Gate VR: Suzaku* provides, for my analysis, a heterotopic carnivalesque and spiritualised reimagining of the Kowloon Walled City. As with the contradictory ability of a heterotopia to simultaneously sustain both reality and unreality, I find that in the way this videogame addresses Chinese histories means that is capable of sustaining both hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourse within its virtual architecture.

Drawing these case studies together, I consider how both panoptical and heterotopic experiences of virtual architecture work to normalize, and co-opt players into endorsing, the cycles of control and behavioural management undertaken by videogame systems. These cycles are not neutral – they are wrapped up in discursive positions that shape and are shaped by histories and ideologies – meaning that identifying the disciplinary influence of videogame spaces is to gain greater understanding of the discursive potential of videogames. Foucault himself reminds us that, in effect, all spatial design effects some form of control and that there is no potential for the 'liberating' design of environment, since "liberty is a practice" (1984, 245). As such, I also begin to consider how players might act to *resist* the architecture of discipline and control in videogames.

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