Tourism in Video Games:
Experiences in Digital Worlds

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INTRODUCTION
Games allow players to travel – through history, fantasy worlds, science-fiction imaginaries, virtual museums and theme parks. Perhaps play and travel are intrinsically connected to one another, with early game scholarship already exploring this aspect of games even if not explicitly describing it as travel. Some emphasize "spatial exploration" (Calleja 2011, 73) in video games, where a "complete space" is necessary to make it "explorable" to the player (Galloway 2006, 64). Others see travel as a motif or metaphor to describe a player's immersion to consciously enter digital spaces and then return to their everyday lives (Neitzel 2018, 221). As video game technology advances, enabling both AAA video games and indie developers to create complex digital spaces, traveling in video games is no longer a metaphor but a design imperative to deliver a rich play experience. This research project then investigates play as travel, the player as a traveler or even as a tourist. It aims to explore notions of travel since the dawn of travel literature, examining artistic, explorative but also post-colonial practices of travel and their influence on travel (in media) today. Building on this, the project's goal is to bridge the preceding theoretical approaches to broader notions mediated tourism and games as commodities. In other words, video games are produced, designed, and created with the specific purpose of engaging players in touristic ways. To illustrate how this is achieved, the project will examine games on a case study basis and conduct interviews with game developers.

VIDEO GAME TOURISM
Video game tourism has usually been referred to a player's travel and physical movement to and from real places instigated by playing games. In this sense, video games and in their portrayal of specific locales are similar to other media such as film or literature that inspire fans to seek out the same locales in the real world, a phenomenon referred to as fan pilgrimages (Thelen and Kim 2021) or contents tourism (Jimura 2021). As far as video games are concerned, location-based games such as *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) have ignited interest in tourism- and travel-related questions as it pushes the boundaries between digital and real spaces (Stokes 2019). An inward investigation of these questions has been, by comparison, sparse. While video games have usually been described with vocabulary of travel, such as movement in space, exploration, or a player's sense of being in a space and place, explicit notions of travel have been peripheral at best. There are, however, some exceptions, such as Nökkvi Jarl Bjarnason's article titled *Playing as Travelling: At the Border of Leisure and Learning*, discussing the potential for "learning and self-cultivation, accumulating cultural capital and developing character [for players]" (Bjarnason 2020, 12). Further, Melissa Kagen's book *Wandering Games* (2022) on walking simulator games features

a chapter on the explicit connections between play and travel, its roots in travel literature and consequentially, the post-colonial practices embodied within it. The recent dates of these publications illustrate the beginning of a new avenue to explore video game culture.

GAMES AS TOURIST EXPERIENCE

This research project seeks to contextualise travel, or rather, to frame play as a tourist experience. Borrowing from John Urry and Jonas Larsen's notion of the tourist gaze (2011), as well as Joseph Pine's and James Gilmore's of the experience economy (1998), a tourist experience in video games describes the traversal and appropriation of game spaces and the player's particular relationship to them. Additionally, the term tourism – as opposed to travel – seeks to address the creation of game spaces as an artistic but also controlled endeavour. This allows to critically assess video games as a product of the experience economy within a mass media consumer culture. Games such as the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007 – 2020) franchise, *Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games 2018), and *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions 2020) among others use historical sites, cities, islands, and other locales as inspiration for game spaces. More importantly however, they use pop-cultural conventions to make them interesting to the player, to build anticipation "constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist technologies, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, CDs, DVDs and videos […]" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 4). Although the aforementioned games are mainly open-world games, this is not necessarily different from other approaches. More linear game space such as in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) afford exploration through points of interests and visual vistas in a post-apocalyptic US. In other cases, the game also does not need to feature real locales but can be entirely fictional, such as *No Man's Sky*'s (2016) very premise of traveling to vast unexplored planets in far-away galaxies.

While this project will look at several games for its theoretical and more general outlook on tourist experiences in video games, the case studies will be focused on games that feature 'Japanese aesthetics.' These are games that are either set in Japan or feature visual elements of Japan, giving rise to a particular (staged) atmosphere of the game. Following Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flohr Sørensen, staged atmospheres are affective environments that serve as commodities embedded in power relations and cultural-social dynamics (2014, 31). Japan has been a source of fascination and appropriation since its global rise to economic power and cultural influence in the 1980s, and the cyberpunk genre brought Japanese aesthetics to a wider mainstream appeal in popular culture. Films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Akira* (1988), and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) remain popular references in sci-fi or cyberpunk imaginations. *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) for instance, the first case study to capture a sense of Japanese aesthetics in video games, plays with pop-cultural expectations inherited by the genre and go further in its apparent Japanophile spaces such as city districts called Japantown or Kabuki. The case study explores the cyberpunk genre as one of the first instances in pop culture of Japanese aesthetics in narrative spaces and how it relates to current sci-fi and cyberpunk games today. It examines how this is embodied in its game spaces and other ways of play, such as in-game photography and the game's own explicit and implicit commentary on Japan, or at least its perceptions of the country.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considering current endeavours by developers and designers to push limits of game worlds, framing play as travel and games as touristic sites may extend an understanding of games more integrated into practices of pop-culture and even everyday life as opposed to a self-contained experience. As this project is still in its initial stages of research, some case studies or themes may still be subject to change.

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