

The Dynamic Roles of Home Bases: Finding Home in Game Worlds

Anh-Thu Nguyen

Ritsumeikan University
56-1 Toji-in Kitamachi, Kita-ku
Kyoto 603-8577 (Japan)
anhthu@kaydenuen.com

ABSTRACT

A player's journey in digital games is often perceived as a continuous forward motion. However, Daniel Vella has emphasized the significance of dwelling in digital games, wherein players pause to find a sense of home and familiarity (2019). As a place where this act of dwelling is particularly prompted, this paper examines home bases as unique loci of dwelling in game environments and the player(-character) who frequents these. These spaces, typically associated with safety and repeated returns, establish boundaries between the familiar and the foreign, the inside and outside, thereby shaping the player's journey within the digital playground. The first part of this paper conceptualises home bases in various digital games, while the second half takes these considerations to *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018), a game where the home base is integral to the question of home. Beyond being a central locus for the player's journey, the game's home base acts as a metaphorical storytelling device to tell the story of the vain quest for home in the Wild West.

Keywords

Dwelling, home, place, space, game world

INTRODUCTION

The notion of play has often been associated with a forward, a continuous journey in virtual spaces. While the term travel may not always be explicitly mentioned, discussions on play and immersion in digital games often revolve around the concept of movement as the primary spatial practice. For instance, scholars like Britta Neitzel emphasize that playing involves developing a sensibility for being transported into digital spaces (2018, 221) and similarly, Gordon Calleja identifies exploration as a fundamental driver of player engagement (2011, 73). Drawing from this perspective, Marc Bonner uses the term *prospect-pacing* to describe practices of play in open world landscapes: “[t]he continuous navigation from horizon to horizon, from hill to mountain top to valley sides, from ledges to watchtowers [...]” (2018, 5). The choice of words such as navigation, exploration, travel, and movement across these and other works on play and spatial practices in digital games are what Daniel Vella identifies as “hermetic dwelling” (2019, 142). This mode accounts for an outward-oriented, decentralized spatial existence defined by movement and wandering in a foreign space. However, this merely constitutes one end of dwelling. As a phenomenological experience of space, the hermetic is in coexistence with hestial

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

© 2024 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

dwelling, derived from Hestia, the goddess of the hearth in Greek mythology: it is “inward-looking, centralized and enclosed. It represents a gathering-in, a lingering, a staying” (143). As Vella notes, considerations of hermetic dwelling in digital games have largely been absent when examining spatial practices in games. For a complete understanding of digital playgrounds, it is not only necessary to examine how players may navigate within it, but also how they seek safety to pause, gaze, and dwell. This contrasts with how video games have usually been examined, which is as a system defined by active inputs through a feedback-loop with its user (Crawford 2004, 45), the basis of interactivity: “if someone does not act on and with the system, they are not playing a video game, but are doing something else” (2014, 181). Instead, examining home bases seeks to push against this rigid perception of interactivity and play in general as the examined spaces prioritize action-reduced play to evoke a sense of safety, intimacy and belonging. In this sense, as today’s playgrounds can become complex simulated game worlds, they are able to contain numerous spatial practices, both in its architectural structure and phenomenological experiences, widening the scope of what it means to play and what it means to be part of it.

To begin, the first half will draw a rudimentary concept of home bases, proposing that the primary objective of bases is to provide a sense of safety through the binary of inside and outside. Following Vella (2019, 143) and Witold Rybczynski’s (1987, 62) understanding of home as an abstract state of being, a home is not necessarily tied to a physical place. When extending this idea to home bases in digital games, they can therefore take on various shapes and forms, at times even none really at all, and they may also be found in multiple locations or even move along with the player through a vessel, like a ship. Identifying hestial qualities then, is not only a question of location but also of ludic affordances and evocative spaces to recognise them as places of safety. The second half of this paper will then investigate home bases and subsequently, the theme of home. Building on preliminary concepts of the home base and how they shape gameplay, *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)* is particularly concerned with the question of home. This is deeply ingrained in the game’s portrayal of its home base, offering a variety of ludic affordances. The open-world game puts the hermetic and the hestial in dynamic tension with one another, a friction that is reflected in the game’s home base and its storytelling.

CONCEPTUALISING HOME BASES

In digital games, home bases evoke safety and security primarily through ludic conventions and evocative narrative elements. In other words, home bases must be visually recognised as such within its game world and provide functions to the player to fulfil the sense of safety. It is for this reason home bases may come in all shapes and formations, such as a rudimentary camp, a simple fireplace, an advanced spaceship or a futuristic submarine. The ensuing exploration of hestial dwelling at home bases will delve into common ludic conventions and distinctive narrative elements to achieve this sense of safety.

Safe, Saved, Saving

Vella outlines a set of features for the image of a home, both in its architectural and existential dimensions: the binary opposition of inside and outside, the idea of home as continuity and as a site of repetition, and finally, the idea of the home as a private sphere (2019, 142). Going beyond Vella’s framework where he extensively speaks of building one’s home in games such as *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo EAD 2012)

and *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2009), the following will instead examine home bases with little to no options for customization and how these provide safety regardless.

Home bases are perhaps most strongly defined by their opposition of inside and outside. The outside is defined by the presence of danger, whereas the inside, the place of safety is defined by “a lack of threats, time constraints and high penalties for mistakes” and instead, “relies on exploration and includes tasks that are easy, repetitive and without time constraints” (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020, 226). In its most rudimentary form, safety in a literal sense means for players to be able to save the game’s progress. It is no surprise that save points are often found inside houses, tents, at the beginning or end of a longer stretch of a journey with enemy encounters. Although manual saves bound to a specific place have become somewhat obsolete, the places in which those save points would usually be found have transformed into fast travel points. This usually triggers an automatic save function instead or offers players the ability to replenish items or their health among others. Safety, then, is a feature unfolding in multiple ludic ways by offering a strategic withdrawal point. As such, the player is invited to remain there for a prolonged period without concerns over enemy encounters or time constraints, preparing for the next encounters or to simply pause, an action that has usually been regarded as an interruption of play (Vella 2019, 149). Generally, spaces of safety are refuge spaces: derived from Jay Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory (1975, 70), Christopher Totten argues that prospect spaces are “open spaces where one is vulnerable to attack” (Totten 2019, 266) and a “refuge, on the other hand, is the contrast to prospect spaces that early humans would return to after their hunt: an intimately sized space that was shielded from view [...]” (ibid.). The placement of these refuge spaces in-between prospect spaces forges paths in digital games for level complexity and degrees of comfort (2019, 265–266).

A video game which reinforces this conceptual idea of safety is the survival shooter *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South 2008), where players frequent safe rooms in between levels. The safe rooms are clear boundaries of the inside and outside, they pose as intermittent goals at the end of each level and become the starting point of the next. Conceptually, the safe rooms the player finds are supposedly different ones every time, yet the way they look and how they function remains the same. This speaks to Vella’s notion of continuity and repetition for the image of the home, as the safe rooms protect and shield players from the outside world. At the end of a level when reaching the safe room, closing the door with all surviving players inside will automatically trigger the transition to the next. A loading screen showcasing individual statistics of party members will be featured while waiting, reflecting on the party’s performance. The safe rooms in *Left 4 Dead* stand out functionally, as even when players draw a whole horde of enemies to the front door, once it is closed and the next level begins, all enemies will have disappeared. Without immediate threats, players can now replenish their items, ammunition, and pause before continuing. Vella has described the home as a “private sphere, a cradle of identity and selfhood” (2019, 142) when referring to games in which the player must build a home themselves. In *Left 4 Dead* however, safe rooms have no options for customization, and instead, they are filled with written and sprayed notes and warnings on the walls left by presumably other survivors. These are evocative narrative elements to provide visual and contextual indicators, they “guide the player’s comprehension” (Nitsche 2009, 37) and “amplify the player’s experience and understanding of the game world” (ibid.). Here, they emphasise the “collapse of familial, governmental, or sacred institutions,” an essential motif in modern zombie narratives (Zani and Meaux 2011,

107). The ambiguous notes and warnings leave traces for hope to find other survivors and a place not yet consumed– the hope of returning home to civilization.

Additionally, safe refuge spaces must be recognised as such through visual indicators. While tents and houses can imply shelter to a certain extent, they are not always safe. Instead, it is their overall visual make-up that is relevant to identify them as spaces of safety. Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun discuss “softness” (2020) as an aesthetic that can create this sense of safety. Although their discussion pertains to the relatively new term of cozy games, their analysis on how cozy games generate feelings of comfort and safety is nevertheless vital to spaces of safety in digital games that fall outside of the cozy games genre. Softness, they write, is “used to describe the art style and design, including a warm and gentle colour palette that does not use high contrasts” (2020, 226) among others. In the action role-playing game *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022) for instance, sites of grace serve as refuge spaces and stand out in its game world as they are easily identifiable from afar: golden particles seemingly suspended in the air draw to a brighter, slightly elevated ray on the ground, the overall image of the site being reminiscent of the fireplaces in *Dark Souls* games (2011–2018) of the same developer. Its distinct visual make-up and illumination stand out in the often rather dark and grim game world, provoking interest, guidance, and orientation to the player in search of safety. Places of safety, then, do not only provide the ludic functions of safety but they must also look as such.

Of Places and Atmospheres

The structure of game spaces has evolved vastly since games such as *Left 4 Dead*, and linear experiences where a safe house follows a hazard space in intermittent sequences no longer rings true. While it helps to model a conceptual understanding of hestial and hermetic dwelling, many digital games invite either mode more flexibly to various degrees, blurring its borders. Rather, game worlds offer various affordances to navigate through various modes of mobility and likewise, their various affordances to dwell put the hestial and hermetic in contest with one another, to an extent where identifying either is not always entirely clear. The following then will explore the various hestial places and its functionalities within game worlds and subsequently, the more intangible elements of what constitutes a hestial atmosphere.

Hestial Places: From fire camps to ships

While a single home base can centre the game experience, many digital games provide multiple sites of safety, offering many opportunities for hestial dwelling along a journey. The shape and form of these home bases and their purpose may vary greatly, such as run-down apartments to luxury residences in open-world games *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) or *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) whose functionality remain largely the same but serve as rewards akin to status symbols of the player’s purchasing power within the neoliberal-capitalist settings of the game worlds. Or as previously discussed, they can be as simple as fireplaces littered throughout the game world, such as in the *Dark Souls* franchise and in *Elden Ring* where hestial possibilities are strongly minimised in the wake of often imminent danger surrounding the player. In this sense, it is essential to view home bases in the context of its game world and their function within it. What can be said generally, however, is that they pose as “home-along-the-way” (Vella 2019, 161) places. As Vella briefly notes in his conclusive thoughts on dwelling, these sites tangle the hestial and hermetic together because they are often the only places providing safety to the

player, allowing them to pause, and rest; yet they are only temporary before the player moves on and ventures onto the next. As the only locations in the game world that offer players the chance to refill their potion flasks and spend their experience points in any way, searching for sites of grace becomes necessary for survival. One may even characterize a player's journey as one constantly looking for home, rather than one venturing out looking for the unknown. Motivated by the prospects of safety and shelter, home bases become a fixation in an otherwise never-ending alien space.

Likewise, settlements, villages or other urban infrastructure may also serve as places of hestial dwelling. Taking the notion of a refuge space further, Bonner uses the term "cyclical refuge spaces" (2018, 12) to describe "[s]ettlements of allied NPCs function as cyclical refuge spaces where quests can be accepted, the game state can be saved and trade can be done" (ibid.). Noting that "the evil is situated beyond those isles of pre-modern civilizations," (ibid.) Bonner too uses an inside and outside distinction, albeit implicitly, though nevertheless mirroring the differential qualities of hermetic and hestial dwelling. Deriving his understanding of cyclical repetition from Henry Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (2013) in which he observes rhythms in urban space, Bonner identifies recurring game affordances as cyclical repetitions. While linear repetitions are various progression systems such as a character's level, the location of particular items or a boss fight, cyclical repetitions refer to weather simulations or crafting systems among others. Cyclical refuge spaces, then, are spaces of safety in which several of these systems of repetition interact with one another. Often, it is in these cyclical refuge spaces where players will be able to find a density of non-player characters offering services such as a blacksmith, places to conduct alchemy, or a stove to cook food. As these affordances invite the player to frequently return throughout the course of the game, it elevates the shelter to anchor points. It is important to note not all settlements and villages in digital games serve as home bases, given they are not always free from potential enemy encounters and danger. However, the act of returning and regularly visiting these facilities can foster a sense of familiarity within the game world.

What underscores and puts emphasis in home bases is also the game's overall portrayal of travel and home. By no coincidence do many video games begin with a sort of shipwreck narrative, of a player who is stranded and finds themselves in foreign lands. Early European exploration and colonization from the 15th to 17th century would go onto produce a variety of travel texts, including ship logs or shipwreck narratives (Thompson 2011, 19), with the latter particularly posing the ultimate catastrophe. In the context of travel and voyages, the ship symbolises both the return to and the home itself as the capacities to travel has been intimately tied to technology (45). The symbolic and functional meaning of the ship as the pinnacle of human civilization play central roles in franchises such as *Star Trek*, a television show about a tight-knit crew, "an ersatz family" (Rabitsch 2022, 93) tasked with the exploration and documentation of foreign worlds, to seek out new life and civilization in space. For digital games, the imagination of spaceships carrying out explorative missions in deep space has continued to inspire game narratives. In video games where players traverse under the premise of exploring and colonising vast planetary systems or the ocean floor, the ship itself has also begun to symbolize a notion of home. *Starfield* (Bethesda Game Studios 2023), for instance, has picked up on the idea of the ship itself as a place of hestial dwelling through its numerous possibilities of customising the space's ship and interior. It is in this same sense that games foster familial relationships through modes of transportation, which is at times reflected through a ship but also through other means, such as cars or horses. While it is not building a car nor a horse in a literal

sense, many digital games will instead offer plenty of customization options for either. *Grand Theft Auto V* allows players to change minute details of their cars, from the shape and colours of the front bumper to LED lighting fixtures underneath, allowing the player to turn an object into something of one's own making. Meanwhile, the player-character's relationship to a horse may be considered essential to the game experience, as many video games feature horse companions, including *RDR2*. In fact, the game features a plethora of mechanics to care and nurture for one's horse by cleaning and feeding them. In *RDR2*, the final climax of the story has the player's horse fatally wounded, adding to a dramatic turn of events to mark a point of no return within the story. Losing one's horse or the primary mode of transportation often marks the end of how the player has acquainted themselves with the game world and now enters unfamiliar territory both in gameplay and story.

Evidently, hestial places can be versatile and at times, not necessarily bound to a place at all. They can, however, structure gameplay and game spaces, and depending on the game's ludic affordances at hestial places, make them places of dire need, or places to advance the game's progression. Although Vella's framework on dwelling has emphasized the act of building as an integral part to foster a sense of belonging and home in a game world, many games can achieve a similar effect through other means of gameplay.

Hestial Atmospheres of Home

Although specific places may give way to hestial dwelling, it remains primarily a phenomenological experience. What I suggest here, then, is a hestial atmosphere: in order to *be* safe, comfortable and homely, the player must first be made to feel as such. A hestial atmosphere is achieved through a mixture of evocative elements, environmental storytelling, as well as ludic conventions to make a space become an attractor of hestial dwelling: "Atmospheres fill spaces; they emanate from things, constellation of things, and persons" (Böhme 2017, 25). This has already been implied through previous discussions of how safety can be portrayed visually through colours or patterns, the absence of enemies, familiarity with places and objects, and the act of returning. Felix Zimmermann who has developed a framework of atmosphere for digital games, particularly historical digital games, has linked his work to Vella's terms of dwelling as one of the many terms related to an atmospheric understanding of game worlds (2023, 78). Atmospheric experiences, Zimmermann and Huberts note, are created through a total impression ("*Totaleindruck*") in which both subject and object infuse the space "with a potential to alter the subjects' feelings" (2019, 34). This paper is far from a holistic approach of analysing hestial atmospheres and so far, it has been primarily occupied with places, structures and particular objects. What has been largely missing is the role of (player-)characters, their relationship to the game world, and how these also play a quintessential role in forming moments of hestial dwelling and atmosphere in games.

As a game where building and customization is nearly non-essential, *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix Business Division 2 2016) exhibits remarkable hestial qualities through its cyclical refuge spaces and more importantly, through its characters. As the fifteenth instalment of the *Final Fantasy* franchise, the action role-playing game is usually centred on battles, exploration, and traversing from one point to the other. The overall narrative framework of the game sets the tone as an adventure game, as the characters embark on a journey together beyond their home, the crown city of Lucis, for the very first time. In this sense, it is with excitement, eagerness, and

enthusiasm the party sets out, despite the more sinister and urgent story developments later. The rather humorous tone of the game is set in the beginning, as the opening sequence to the game sees its four main characters Noctis, Prompto, Ignis and Gladiolus push their broken-down car, lamenting the heat while still bantering which each other. Other than this sequence being reminiscent of a shipwreck narrative to underline traveling in and to foreign places, it portrays the relationship between the characters as one beyond mere travel companions, but a bond shared through friendship. It is for these reasons, the game has since been dubbed a “road trip simulation” (Moore 2016) at times jokingly, and at other times seriously by fans and critics alike.

Central to *Final Fantasy XV*'s game world are its campgrounds. Found in the wilderness and called havens in the game, they are pre-designated places in which players set up camp and as such, they are home-along-the-way places and cyclical refuge spaces. Similar to *Elden Ring* and the *Dark Souls* franchise, the camps are incentivized primarily through the game's level system as experience points will only be spent once players take a rest at a rest spot, such as the camp or hotels. They also act within the temporal logics of the game, as nighttime will bring out strong enemies in the wilderness and the player is tasked to ideally find a haven before dawn. Resting at the camp will thus fast-forward in time, where the player may begin their travels again in the morning. Other game affordances in the form of linear repetitions also find use here, such as using resources for cooking and photographs. It is here where the characters of *Final Fantasy XV* particularly stand out, as cooking and photography is an ascribed ability of a specific character, with Ignis and Prompto respectively. Photography plays a central role in the game, speaking to a game world that is “oriented toward a photographic aesthetic” (Gerling 2018, 161), encouraging players to seek out points of interests to gaze at them in the sense of hermetic dwelling. When coming across an interesting point of interest, it is Prompto who will comment on the location, often encouraging the player to take a photograph. Unique to *Final Fantasy XV* however, is how photography ties into havens, as players are asked to review photographs that have been taken since their last rest at the camp. As the game limits the number of total photos to 200, the player is encouraged to choose their favourites. Camping at a haven is usually finalized through a cooking sequence by Ignis. This is unique to the havens and cannot be done at any other resting points such as hotels or other lodging facilities. As Waszkiewicz notes, the visual detail of the food presented by Ignis is almost astounding, and realistic visuals help to make dishes look appetizing (2022, 112). However, as Waszkiewicz also notes, food in *Final Fantasy XV* is not essential, rather, it is “ornamental and thus, artistic” (ibid.). Food here is not meant as an essential game mechanic, rather than as “a means of strengthening the bond between friends” (111).

All these elements, in addition to the cutscenes that play as the friends gather their gear to set up the camp, prepare food together, or simply lounge around their camping chairs unquestionably give a rise to a hestial atmosphere best described as a genuine place of the domestic, the intimate and hearth. While it is important to consider the various objects and structures that can project feelings of safety and offer shelter, it is also the characters that shape the way in which hestial qualities can be framed in story-driven games.

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2: HOME IN THE WILD WEST

What now follows is taking prior considerations of a home base and its capacities for hestial dwelling through safety and atmosphere and applying this to *RDR2*. Alongside

its many hestial offerings of places in its open world such as the player's main camp, flexible camp sites, and settlements, the game is also thematically occupied with the question of home. *Red Dead Redemption 2* has been described as a dense network of various themes by critics and scholars alike, at times described as an "intriguing cultural palimpsest" (Murray 2023, 208–209) of the Western genre, to being able to achieve a certain sense of "gameplace" (Westerside and Holopainen 2019) by not only emulating historical and mythical aspects of the American frontier but also through pop-cultural connections of the Western genre to achieve an affective experience of its game world. As *RDR2* centres on an outlaw gang at the end of the Wild West and the move towards industrialization, it marks a critical moment as the gang attempts to outrun, literally and metaphorically, the change of times. Amidst the complex thematic networks the game touches on and places itself in, the question and search of home plays a central role in the game and in the experience of its game world. This binds the hestial and hermetic in complex ways to one another, pushing against each other in dynamic tension. The search of home is intensified through the potential act of homecoming, as Vella notes: "The traveler carries her home with her along the journey – the hardships of the wilderness are sharpened by the memory of the home that has been left behind, and mitigated by the hope of either returning or of settling down in a new home at the journey's end" (2019, 144). It is the gang's leader, Dutch van der Linde, who promises to find a home for the group, a promise he offers to convince members of the gang to trust him and go along with his plans. For the gang, however, their journey's end is the destruction of their familial relationships and dismantling any sense of home they have had in a dramatic finale. The gang's tale, from its initial stages as a tight-knit family towards its ultimate destruction and disbandment can be observed through the portrayal of the gang's main camp and its relation to it with the player-character, Arthur Morgan.

The Gang's Camp

Serving as the initial fixation within the game world, the gang sets up camp after a failed heist to deter and escape from law enforcement. The gang is unfamiliar with the area, making the gang's camp one of the first and only point of familiarity where safety and shelter is provided. Depending on the story's progression, the camp moves several times and thus it can serve as a cyclical refuge space in different locations throughout the game, refreshing on the game's experience by having new settings and new points of interests to explore from its base. Although the player can set up home-along-the-way style camps in the open world, depending on the area Arthur might still get attacked by hostile factions and thus, they only marginally offer safety. Thus, the camp serves as the main anchor point as far as shelter and safety is concerned, and as such the camp's offerings remain largely the same and invite the player to regularly frequent the camp, providing shelter, ammunition, food, and other options for customization for Arthur himself and the camp. It is in meticulous detail the camp frames all its offerings, such as Arthur flipping through the camp's ledger as the player browses through the potential upgrades they can purchase for the camp, to Arthur standing beside the camp's fire as he takes consecutive bites of his food. The camp and its members make it a point for Arthur and by extension, the player, to stay and dwell in the camp: if the player stays away from the camp for too long, some gang members will find Arthur in the wilderness, remarking that Dutch has been worried about him, giving the player the option to follow them back to camp. In other times, when the player returns to camp, gang members will in fact express their concern over his long absence and show relief at his return. Importantly, the decision to stay away from camp has no consequences on the story's progression, nor does it

affect any gameplay. In a similar way, players are encouraged to follow up on chores at the camp, such as chopping wood, moving hay bales, or filling up buckets with water for the camp's hygienic needs. Again, not doing the chores has no direct consequences, although doing them counts as a good deed towards the game's honour system, where increasing one's honour counts towards Arthur's reputation. However, the contribution of chores towards the honour system is so trivial, it borderlines insignificance. Yet, doing them regularly will noticeably improve the member's moods, often verbally expressing their satisfaction at the camp's upkeep and complimenting Arthur for doing so.

The key observation here is the game's effort to create a space that invites and even demands the player to spend time in the camp without rewards. Yet the detail in which these actions within the camp are portrayed and performed speak to the "gameplace" Andrew Westerside and Jussi Holopainen identify in *RDR2* in general, as its "gameworld is not just a space for traversal, but a world for *being in*" (emphasis in original, 2019, 3). Although Westerside and Holopainen refer to the game overall, it is no doubt it is the gang's camp where this current is at its strongest. Upon entering the camp's vicinity, the player is slowed down and must get off their horse before proceeding, quite literally halting the player's movement, a prerequisite to Vella's hestial dwelling. The camp demands the player to take their time with its affordances, spending stretches of time to simply walk in a slow pace to get from one point to another despite them being close, in addition to being unable to draw any weapons. It is a place of slow game time, as John Vanderhoef and Thomas Payne describe in reference to *RDR2*: "slow game time differs considerably from hegemonic game time" (2022), the latter dominating conventional game design such as "leaderboards celebrating completion times and high scores to livestreamed speedrunning competitions [...] gaming communities frequently celebrate players' abilities to best one another and their own previous records" (ibid.). In other words, slow game time as featured at the camp stands in strong contrast of what may be called productive play, prevalent in many other games. None of the camp's affordances reward players in a way typical for productive play, such as performing actions for the sake of receiving an item or a weapon that might assist the player throughout their gameplay in a significant way. Doing chores and dwelling at the camp, then, goes against an "ideological and temporal regime," where "wasting time engenders guilt, shame, or a sense of squandered potential" (ibid.). *RDR2*'s home base in the shape of the gang's camp expresses its hestial qualities through slow play and slow game time, an aspect that is present throughout its game world but is most prominent in the place Arthur himself refers to as home.

Slowness in video games has been explored elsewhere, though often under different themes or terms and at times to genres of digital games, such as boredom (Möring 2014), ambient play (Fizek 2022), or action-reduced experiences in walking simulator games (Zimmermann and Huberts 2019), with Zimmermann proposing the term atmosphere to describe what all of these have in common: to describe an affective way of experiencing a gamespace (2023). Although these are certainly all relevant to describing home bases in *RDR2*, they are not exclusive to the camps. Rather, what makes them distinguishable from a slow play sequence of, for instance, fishing at a lake, is that the camp embodies the everyday sphere and Arthur's social relationships to his gang. To borrow a perspective from tourism studies, the everyday is the realm of habit and repetition, usually seen as the counterpart to adventure found elsewhere: "The repetition of daily, weekly and annual routines, how and when to eat wash, move, work and play, constitutes a realm of 'common-sense', habitual performance which offers a deep understanding of the link between culture and

identity” (Edensor 2001, 61). In this understanding of the everyday which mirrors the way in which Vella understands the hestial, habits “organize life for individuals, linking them to groups” for the purpose of community (ibid.). His social obligations are the reason why gang members will remind him to return to camp if he has gone away for too long, the reason why members will be dissatisfied if Arthur is not performing his role of a member when not doing chores. Consequently, the camp does not only offer a particular way of hestial playing but it negotiates the everyday sphere with the elsewhere marked by the hermetic and anchors Arthur’s identity as a gang member whose social relationships determine much of his character and actions.

As *RDR2* reconciles various spheres and modes of play, critical perceptions of the game underline the ambivalence of hestial elements in a media form that is usually pre-occupied with hermetic modes of play. Prior considerations of safety and food have taken Waszkiewicz and Bakun’s work on cozy games into account, who see the genre as an answer to the change of a sociopolitical climate: video games have usually been marketed towards a male-dominated demographic and as such, fast-paced genres such as shooters and racing games have often been considered masculine (2020, 230). As others have noted, the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise “has always been a masculine experience of the American West – and a white masculine experience, at that” (Wills and Wright 2023, 4). Again, these observations mirror notions of the everyday life, as Jonas Larsen offers a brief gendered reading of these spheres: “While ‘heroic life’ is male, unpredictable and nomadic, everyday life is fixed to a female and routinized domestic sphere” (2008, 23). Although these rigid notions of everyday spheres have also been contested (see Edensor 2001 and Larsen 2008), this perspective allows to observe similar readings in *RDR2*. The game is full of masculine motifs and narratives, such as leadership and fatherhood, which ultimately disrupts the hestial sphere as will be shown in more detail later. When Dutch’s decision-making becomes ever so more questionable, it pushes gang members to question his position and finally, Arthur himself who gradually “assumes the role of the gang’s leader and patriarch” (Lawlor 2023, 46). In this light, the game is far from what the genre of cozy game poses to the wider cast of mainstream video games, yet as far as gameplay aspects are concerned, comes close to it in some regards to its home base. Similar to how critics and fans consider *Final Fantasy XV* a road trip simulation, *RDR2* has been credited with simulator qualities (Vanderhoef and Payne 2022), both praising and infantilising it, due to its meticulous eye for detail when it comes to mundane, nearly non-rewarding actions. From the discussion of hestial and hermetic dwelling and their interchanging nature to complement one another, it might be suggested that it is *because* the franchise is a masculine experience at heart that these moments of slowness particularly stand out. It is then unsurprising then that this slowness has been praised by some, as Vanderhoef and Payne highlight critics who applaud its efforts for slowness but has also stirred some negative user reviews lamenting the game’s tediousness, although these remain in the minority in the wake of the game’s overall commercial success (2022).

The Question of Home

To conclude these considerations of home bases, what now follows is a brief analysis of the gang’s camp as a place that initially begins with many hestial qualities but are increasingly disrupted as the gang’s search for home escalates. As the game’s main theme of changing times rapidly catches up to the gang, the conflict invades the very private sphere of the group, and the rising tensions are expressed through changing dynamics in the camp itself. The question and search of home for the gang is not a

matter of location as much as they believe it to be than it is the idea of home, as Westerside and Holopainen too have observed (2019, 9). The depiction of the Wild West and the mythical frontier are undoubtedly ideologically charged, and such is the case with the camp that uses “representational space” (Lefebvre 2013, 39) to capture notions of home, to borrow a term by Lefebvre. As such, the camp makes “symbolic use of its objects” (ibid.) to act as a metaphor mirroring the story’s gradual downfall of the character’s familial relationships until its ultimate catastrophe.

The initial locations of the gang’s camp are Horseshoe Overlook followed by Clemens Point, places tucked away behind forests and close to freshwater sources to deliver a particular scenic experience of nature. These almost picturesque landscapes capture the “nostalgic remnants of a lost freedom” (Carter 2013, 29–30) in the Wild West. Unlike prior examples of a home base’s binary between the inside and outside where the base would often exhibit advanced technology in contrast to the game world’s wilderness, the gang’s camp is a makeshift place with rudimentary facilities. Technology and by extension civilization and industrialization is instead the outside boundary, the threat that the gang attempts to run from. These initial camps also underscore Arthur as the player-character and protagonist whose perspective shapes this representational space even more so, as he is “a mortal hero who is, nonetheless, marvellous in his actions and superior to those around him [...]”, and “while ultimately siding with ‘progress’, the hero remains ambiguous in his attitude towards civilization [...]” (ibid.). Indeed, Arthur’s mortality is a major theme in *RDR2* as his diagnosis with tuberculosis propels the potential for him to become independent from and critical of Dutch, as well as to reflect on past wrongdoings: “Arthur’s physical decay is linked to an increasing moral integrity” (Görge 2023, 103). Evidently, Arthur’s tale as a hero is marked by time, both through encroaching civilization and his body’s decay. Despite his capabilities to care and nurture for the camp and its idyllic location(s), the gravity brought on by changes and Arthur’s own decay mean any sense of home in this camp is only a temporary one.

Forced to escape both locations due to law enforcement and other hostile factions, the locations that follow tie into the difficult situations the gang finds itself in. The gang first moves to Shady Belle, a colonial house where the player must get rid of a rival gang and then bury their bodies nearby before using it as a camp location. In addition to the property’s private graveyard, the house had been abandoned, and the overall estate’s condition is lacklustre with the surrounding swamp area far removed from the idyllic sceneries of Horseshoe Overlook and Clemens Point. The poor condition of the house as well its location is particularly commented on by the gang’s members, making it clear that Shady Belle only serves as a temporary solution. In their search of a new home, the gang proceeds to move further and further away from a location that could be considered homely, constantly in the proximity of violence, threat and in this case literally death and decay. In the final arcs of the game, it is perhaps unsurprising that some members of the gang become shipwrecked, with the player losing access to the camp altogether. The very last camp then is Beaver Hollow, and similar to Shady Belle, the player must first rid of another hostile faction before being able to use the location as a camp. Although the gang is no stranger to violence, or rather, as the game has a natural inclination towards violence as a fixation “drawn from revisionist Westerns and from the affordances of the messy open-world form” (Schoppmeier 2023, 27) the Murfree Brood gang is described as a particularly depraved one. The cave they inhabit at the camp’s location is a dark, cold and humid place, a location of torture for pleasure and murder. Although the gang is aware of their role as outlaws, they attempt to maintain a sense of ethical and moral boundaries. Yet, as the gang’s camp and familial relationship grow into disarray, the

spiral of violence in the quest of home pushes its members into more frantic and violent actions. As at this point the gang has already lost several of its core members, the question is no longer how far the gang is willing to go, rather than whether they have already gone too far. The camp and its members essentially break into two factions, with hostility running rampant until the climax sees guns drawn and pointed at each other by its own members at their very own camp. Here, any notion of safety and shelter relinquishes, with violence and death leading to the erosion of familial relationships and any notion of home the camps had embodied. What had loomed throughout the entire game finally becomes true: no longer is there space for outlaws and cowboys, no longer can the gang outrun the inevitable. Arthur, too, is out of time, as the last explosive conflict at the camp sees him bid farewell to his closest friends, suffer the loss of his horse, and then face death himself.

Although neither the camp nor Arthur survive, the dream of a home is carried on by John Marston, a fellow member of the Dutch van der Linde gang and the new player-character for the epilogue and remainder of the game. On a functional level, giving the player a new player-character allows them to keep exploring the open-world of the game. However, the epilogue's central theme is for John to restore and rebuild a sense of home: as a man who attempts to leave his life of an outlaw behind him and attempts to embrace modernity, he first finds work as a farm hand before he manages to buy property to build himself a home for his wife and son. The game expands on some activities the player is already familiar with from the gang's camp, such as chores that now include milking cows, cleaning up manure or loading eggs onto wagons. It is only fitting John's ranch is named Beecher's Hope, with the game contributing a whole sequence to John and some of the remaining gang members helping him build it. Indeed, the act of building a house is one of the final story sequences, one that is humorously accompanied by an upbeat song named the *The Housebuilding Song* where John and his friends hammer away with the beat. Beecher's Hope becomes a new fixation for both the player and the player-character in the game world, and by the end of the story, it seems John has managed to build himself a home for his family. That is, of course, before all of this is threatened once more in the story of the very first *Red Dead Redemption*, where John serves as its protagonist.

CONCLUSION

A home base is not only a location within a game world, rather, it structures play and offers a different mode of play. By taking Vella's understanding of hestial dwelling in digital games, home bases have been discussed on how they may provide this by offering shelter and safety first and foremost. Yet, to achieve something that can be called home, much more intangible elements come into consideration, such as the evocative space, characters, food, atmospheres, or gameplay aspects that may slow down a player's actions in a home base to achieve the phenomenological experience of a home. In this regard, home bases can occupy a variety of roles of significance for its game world. Due to its rather detailed portrayal of a home base, *RDR2* was chosen to explore home bases further as it merges all of the discussed aspects. Its ideologically and charged notion of home makes the camp a metaphorical space for the question of home, a theme that dominates the overall Wild West narrative of the game. It is in this sense that home bases in digital games can provide a functional understanding of gameplay but also help understand the various dynamics at play, from the various spatial practices to modes of experiences through atmosphere and slowness. This very cursory examination of home bases hopes to draw attention to what has so often not been considered play itself, rather game worlds in which not

only seeking new adventures for the thrill of it it are at its forefront but also the moments and places in which players are allowed to simply rest.

REFERENCES

Appleton, J. 1975. *The Experience of Landscape*. London: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Bethesda Game Studios. 2023. *Starfield*. PC game. Bethesda Softworks.

Böhme, G. 2017. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. Edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Bonner, M. 2018. "On Striated Wilderness and Prospect Pacing: Rural Open World Games as Liminal Spaces of the Man-Nature Dichotomy." Paper present at *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2018)*, Turin, Italy, 25-28 July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DIGRA_2018_paper_18.pdf.

Calleja, G. 2011. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Carter, M. 2014. *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

CD Projekt Red. 2015. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. PC game. CD Projekt.

CD Projekt Red. 2020. *Cyberpunk 2077*. PC game. CD Projekt.

Edensor, T. 2001. 'Performing Tourism, Staging Tourism: (Re)Producing Tourist Space and Practice'. In *Tourist Studies* 1 (1): 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100104>.

Fizek, S. 2022. *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13605.001.0001>.

FromSoftware. 2011–2018. *Dark Souls* franchise. PC game. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

FromSoftware. 2022. *Elden Ring*. PC game. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Gerling, W. 2018. 'PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE DIGITAL: Screenshot and in-Game Photography'. *Photographies* 11 (2–3): 149–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2018.1445013>.

Görge, A. 2023. "The Medicalization of Arthur Morgan: Tuberculosis as the Good Death in Red Dead Redemption 2." In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, edited by J. Wills and E. Wright, 94–110. The Popular West. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Lawlor, S. 2023. "Frontier Fatherhood: Examining Paternal Masculinity in Red Dead's Old West." In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, edited by J. Wills and E. Wright, 45–58. The Popular West. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Larsen, J. 2008. 'De-exoticizing Tourist Travel: Everyday Life and Sociality on the Move'. In *Leisure Studies* 27 (1): 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360701198030>.

- Lefebvre, H. 2013. *The Production of Space*. 33. print. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mojang Studios. 2009. *Minecraft*. PC game. Majong Studios.
- Moore, V. 2023. 'Final Fantasy 16 Vs. Final Fantasy 15: Which Game Is Better?' TheGamer. 23 July 2023. <https://www.thegamer.com/final-fantasy-16-vs-final-fantasy-15-which-game-is-better/>.
- Möring, S. 2014. "Freedom in Games – Between Fear and Boredom." Paper present at the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference (PCG 2014), Istanbul, Turkey, 13-15 November.
- Murray, S. 2023. "No Country for Old Tropes: Representation and Political Affect in Red Dead Redemption 2." In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, edited by J. Wills and E. Wright, 203–220. The Popular West. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Neitzel, B. 2018. 'Involvement'. In *Game Studies*, edited by Benjamin Beil, Thomas Hensel, and Andreas Rauscher, 219–34. Film, Fernsehen, neue Medien. Wiesbaden [Heidelberg]: Springer VS.
- Nintendo EAD. 2012. *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. Nintendo 3DS. Nintendo.
- Nitsche, M. 2008. *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262141017.001.0001>.
- Payne, T., and J. Vanderhoef. 2022. 'Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in Red Dead Redemption 2'. *Game Studies* 22 (3). https://gamestudies.org/2203/articles/vanderhoef_payne.
- Rabitsch, S. 2022. "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan." In *The Routledge Handbook of Star Trek*, edited by L. Garcia-Siino, S. Mittermeier and S. Rabitsch, 93–98. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429347917>.
- Rockstar North. 2013. *Grand Theft Auto V*. PC game. Rockstar Games.
- Rockstar Studios. 2018. *Red Dead Redemption 2*. PC game. Rockstar Games.
- Rybczynski, W. 1987. *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. Repr. New York: Penguin Books.
- Schoppmeier, S. 2023. "The Gameworld, the Interface, and the Genre: Red Dead Redemption and the Western in the Digital Age." In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, edited by J. Wills and E. Wright, 27–44. The Popular West. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Square Enix Business Division 2. 2016. *Final Fantasy XV*. PS4 game. Square Enix.
- Thompson, C. 2011. *Travel Writing*. 1st ed. The New Critical Idiom. New York: Routledge.
- Totten, C. W. 2019. *Architectural Approach to Level Design*. Second edition. Boca Raton: CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Vella, D. 2019. 'There's No Place Like Home: Dwelling and Being at Home in Digital Games'. In *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games*, edited by Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel, 141–66.
- Valve South. 2008. *Left 4 Dead*. PC game. Valve.

- Wardrip-Fruin, N., and P. Harrigan, eds. 2004. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Waszkiewicz, Agata. 2022. *Delicious Pixels: Food in Video Games*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Waszkiewicz, Agata, and Martyna Bakun. 2020. 'Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games'. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12 (3): 225–40. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00017_1.
- Westerside, A., and J. Holopainen. 2019. "Sites of Play: Locating Gameplace in Red Dead Redemption 2." Paper present at *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2019)*, Kyoto, Japan, 6-10 August. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2019_paper_360.pdf.
- Wills, J., and E. Wright, eds. 2023. *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*. The Popular West. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Wolf, Mark J. P., and B. Perron, eds. 2014. *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. Routledge Companions. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Zani, S. and K. Meaux. 2011. "Lucio Fulci and the Decaying Definition of Zombie Narratives." In: *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, edited by D. Christie and S. J. Lauro, 98–115. 1st ed. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Zimmermann, F. 2023. *Virtuelle Wirklichkeiten: Atmosphärisches Vergangenheitserleben im Digitalen Spiel*. 1st ed. BÜCHNER-Verlag eG. <https://doi.org/10.14631/978-3-96317-881-8>.
- Zimmermann, F., and C. Huberts. 2019. 'From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre' *Press Start* 5 (2): 29–50. <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/126>.