Who Owns the Gamespace? Negotiating Spatial Agency in Video Games

Hamza Bashandy
Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa,
ON, K1S 5B6, Canada
hamza.bashandy@carleton.ca

INTRODUCTION

The discussion on agency and cheating is prevalent in contemporary game studies (Consalvo 2009; Zagal 2012; Passmore et al. 2020). This paper examines cheating and players' agency in video games from a spatial perspective. In game studies, spatial agency is generally described as the degree to which a game allows a player to navigate the gamespace (Bódi 2023). In this text, I propose to define spatial agency as the level of ownership a player can assert over the gamespace as soon as the video game becomes publicly available. In the following sections, I explore the concept of "spatial agency" and "cheating" by examining the integration of real-world spatial data through digital mapping interfaces (e.g., Google Maps, OpenStreetMap) in video games such as *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (Asobo Studio 2020) with a specific emphasis on location-based games, particularly *Pokémon-GO* (Niantic, Inc. 2016).

MODDING, CHEATING, OR VANDALIZING? UNFOLDING THE STORY

In 2017, Niantic switched its map provider from Google Maps to OpenStreetMap (OSM). Unlike Google Maps, which charges per the number of users loading the map, OSM is a free crowdsourcing mapping platform that depends on users' input to create and update an editable geographical map of the world. When players' communities on Reddit (e.g., TheSilphRoad subreddit) discovered that the location of spawn points in *Pokémon Go* is related to the function of the space, they participated in editing the map on OSM. Nevertheless, other players sorted out the algorithm behind the distribution of spawn points and in-game items (e.g., PokéStops and gems). They modified the OSM base map with untrue (false) inputs. For example, many users redefined their home backyard on OSM as 'parks' or 'lakes' to attract rare items around them.

Such performance caused a significant rift between players' communities from one side and cartographers' researchers and Niantic from the other side. From an ethical perspective, this research questions how we should position players' interventions. Is it a transgressive (Jørgensen and Karlsen 2018) act of modding the gamespace? Are players vandalizing the map as argued by the cartographer's community (Truong et al. 2018; Juhász et al. 2020)? Or are they cheating, as Niantic tends to describe penalized players?

NEGOTIATING SPATIAL AGENCY

Players frequently alter the gamespace through Mods. Short for modifications, mods enable players to customize and create new content for games, tailoring their spatial experience. For game studios, it has become evident that relinquishing their ownership over the gamespace by embracing mods can increase the longevity of their product, leading to more profit and exposure. The negotiation of spatial agency over the gamespace typically occurs through a "level/map editor," which may be developed by the community or provided by developers. Examples of such editors include Doom's Editing Utilities (DEUs), Far Cry map editors, and, more recently, the Unreal Editor for Fortnite.

When players modify the gamespace in computer or console games, it only affects the virtual world's physics. However, in the case of *Pokémon Go*, players not only change the fictional map of the game but also modify the digital map of OSM. Unlike other game studios, Niantic has not withdrawn its ownership over the game map. They penalize players for cheating when they subvert such ownership, as in the case of spoofing, which is modifying GPS coordinates to play the game in locations where players are not physically present. Such spatial monopoly neutralizes players' performance in the street, which is continually governed by Niantic spatial algorithms that surveil and monitor users' behaviors (Zuboff 2019) while navigating the public space (e.g., Niantic adding Adventure Sync for step tracking or adding sponsored locations for corporations like McDonald's).

WHO OWNS THE GAME MAP?

The OSM-free model has undergone significant distortions in recent years. From a community-oriented editor's model to a capitalist-driven platform (Srnicek 2017) shaped and controlled by private corporations such as Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft (Anderson & al 2019) Then, claiming the game map becomes a challenging endeavor, especially when game developers refuse to negotiate their ownership over the map with the player. However, Hong Kong protesters disrupted such a monopoly when, in 2019, they used custom usernames for *Pokémon GO's* Pokéstops around the Polytechnic University campus to signal their location status. (Wirman and Jones, 2020) They claimed to be players congregating to play *Pokémon GO* to circumvent police denying permission for assembly (Davies, 2020).

Niantic engineered *Pokémon GO* to be played in a specific way. Failure to follow the rules, Niantic calls these players cheaters and bans them as an act of punishment and discipline. However, during the Hong Kong protest, protesters temporarily suspended Niantic rules of how and where the game shall be played and imposed their proper rules over the gamespace. They subverted, even temporarily, the purpose of the playable map to serve their cause rather than Niantic's agenda.

If we agree that modifying the gamespace in video games is an act of modding, the question then becomes, is altering the gamespace of a location-based game cheating? I position myself on the players' side to argue that the moment the game is published to be played in the public space, the game itself becomes a public space. It is no longer a private space because it touches material spaces and geographies. The gamespace becomes a shared space established by its code, but our performance also constitutes it. Therefore, I identify players' interventions through the Reddit community as a transgressive tactic of modding and hijacking (détournement) of the gamespace. In

this case, modding is not a subject of moral bankruptcy or shortcomings. It is a natural claim over a space that its imaginary has been monopolized by hegemonic ideologies (either map-providers such as Google or OSM or game developers such as Niantic). Players did not vandalize the map or cheat; however, imposing their spatial agency over the playable map disrupts the digital neo-colonial (Mouton and Burns 2021) and exploitative model of Niantic/OSM.

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