**Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies**

# Video Games and the Humanities

# Volume 5

# Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies

Edited by Dietmar Meinel

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Soraya Murray
# Coda: Disoriented in the Field of Play

> Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects 'point' somewhere else or they make what is 'here' become strange.
>
> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 160

Sometimes, something odd happens when I enter a gamespace that is new to me. I gravitate toward narrative games in highly articulated, open worlds. Often, they take a long time to load. I wait. I stare at the progress bar. I am full of anticipation. The game begins. Then, not knowing yet what I am supposed to do, or which way I am to go, I become disoriented. I notice the feeling, which passes almost instantly. I orient myself, finding my bearings, and push forward into the game world as if it were my space.

That brief disorientation I experience could be thought of as a mere behavioral quirk, or a moment of indecision, but I think it points to something else: a momentary disjuncture between the spatiality presented by the game and my personal spatial orientation. In that moment, I graft my sense of spatiality onto that of the game. But that means there exists a difference between the two. That difference appears as an ideological gap that must be bridged, in order for me to give sense to the space as a player who finds herself 'out of place' in a social construction inconsistent with her own. That gap has been an object of discomfort, a turbulence in the otherwise smooth transition of mapping one's self onto the technological space of a game. As a critical game theorist, I find these disorientations – these moments of failed orientations to gamespace – useful rather than merely extraneous moments of noise or friction that should be omitted. They point to someplace else, and because they flout the insistent imperative toward immersion – they keep the space strange. And in keeping it strange, they point to the limitations of the space with which we have been presented – which is invaluable because worldbuilding can be so alluring.

Space and spatiality have always been my main access points into the profundity of video games as a medium. Upon becoming drawn to games as objects of scholarly study, I first began thinking about what their spaces mean, how they signify, and the connection between the in-game aesthetic experience and an embodied perception of the lived world (see Murray, "High Art/Low Life"). This focus has run parallel to my interest in a sense of Americanness as being

completely bound up in particular conceptions of space, or more precisely a conception of one's orientation within and command of space as an extension of a more generalized mode of consumption, possession, and predatory intention (see Murray, "Landscapes of Empire"). This is easily confirmed by the program of ideologically framing the American landscape to serve U.S. nation-building in ways that have been already very accurately captured in several of the included essays. These important writings tackle the propensity of video games for reproducing the industrial civilizing of the West, and more generally an imperial gaze connected to mapping, treasure hunting, and colonial adventuring.

The overall critical project of *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies* operates at the intersection of American Studies and Critical Games Studies, with a focus on the theorization of space – American conceptions of space and place. Games can create spatial frictions that start to communicate, on a deeply aesthetic level, things that are unutterable, are never said, or do not occupy the narrative dimension. Increasingly, I am convinced their primary mode of communication is rooted in their engagement with the embodied and the affective. The self-awareness of political feeling or political affect, what Ann Cvetkovich identifies as the "relations between the emotional, the cultural and the political" as it relates to "the everyday experience of sensation and embodiment as ways of tracking [the] intersection of the social and the psychic" (Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynolds 5 – 6), can provide a means to break the smooth hailing of the player by the logics of the gameworld. Their complex manifestations can, across a duration of play, begin to gather up a particular affective experience within the worldbuilding of the game – but which is ultimately informed by larger cultural, social, and political intensities at work in the lived world. This can be conveyed through game rules, mechanics, texture, touch, temporality, narrative, atmosphere, mapping, aesthetics, and in many cases the borrowing of visual literacies from pre-existing media.

The writings collected in this intellectual project have certainly taken up some of the most critical intellectual threads in an ongoing conversation about the spatial from an American Studies perspective of games. But many possibilities for such a conversation in both game design and critical Game Studies still remain untapped. Much of the critical games scholarship on space and worldbuilding has retained some connection to the origins (and perhaps more precisely the original sin) of the U.S.A. as a nation, in terms of its troubled spatial politics. For example, in 1995, Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller were already making implicit connections between the construction of the virtual and the rhetorics of software innovation and the reproduction of colonial paradigms and frontier ideologies (see 57 – 72). This is all true: progress in many games is demarked through the discovery and clearing of territories, the gathering of re-

sources, and the construction of space as existing solely for the purpose of its use-value to the player (see Murray, "The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies").

What possibilities exist for imagining other futures through speculative spaces that break from the presumptive narratives we have been telling ourselves about space? And, just as significantly, how can we understand such dynamics as functions of the present, not merely the past? That is to say, it is not only about the past as it bears upon the present, but also the ongoing ways in which space, in an American context, becomes central to one's conception of what might be possible in the present and future. Here I am thinking of the present conditions of spatiality within the U.S., for those whose bodies, subjectivities, and orientations do not move in the same direction as the spaces they occupy. How can space be understood in the context of the use of music – early hip-hop, for example – in personal devices as well as thumping car speakers, to create a sonic envelope that makes space within the public sphere for those who might not otherwise feel they command it? What ethics of a right to take up space – to occupy it – can be simulated? What raced, gendered, sexed, and ableist inflected notions of space shape contemporary lived American spaces? Who can be the bearer of space, who commands it, who may own it, and who may build intergenerational wealth on account of it? I am thinking of a now famous article on housing discrimination, in which author Ta-Nehisi Coates maps the systematic denial of equitable home ownership and its profound impacts on the African American community across time (see Coates). These nuanced encounters with spatiality in the U.S. context are broadly experienced but under-recognized.

Truly, the great story of the United States of America – with the exception of Native Peoples – is the story of arriving from someplace else and making space for one's self in the nation. And in the interim, it is a story of orientation toward a homeland, disorientation, being out of place, being put in one's place, learning to find a place, existing as a conditional guest, or perhaps an unwanted entity. Sara Ahmed has considered the situatedness of particularized bodies in these terms, theorizing a queer phenomenology that seeks to understand the ramifications for a spectrum of "orientations" in space and time:

> for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not "in place," involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes. And spaces in turn acquire new bodies. So, yes, we should celebrate such arrivals. The "new" is what is possible when what is behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines we have already taken. (Ahmed 61–62)

Ahmed's work theoretically engages queerness as sexual orientation, but also as departure from the normative – and the positionalities that result from occupying space under such conditions. It is inflected by the particularities of what it means to be out of place as someone biracial and, as an immigrant, not at home. But these "arrivals" to places in which bodies are "not already at home" or "in place" articulates a different experience of space, and one that seems potentially very rich in terms of the new understandings of space that might emerge. Queer and trans bodies, multiracial bodies, bodies that in some way cannot be readily assimilated, open up other ways of engaging with space.

For instance, Ahmed writes of how race functions to orient bodies in space: "[I]t [racism] works as a way of orienting bodies in specific directions, thereby affecting how they 'take up' space. We 'become' racialized in how we occupy space, just as space is, as it were, already occupied as an effect of racialization" (24).[1] This describes an experience that would immediately sound familiar to someone whose racial designation others them within a public sphere or an institutional space. This is also a very North American experience of not belonging in space, if one is not considered fully American, or fully normal, or of the proper class. Yet, this is also not an experience of space that is rare – in fact it is an extremely common experience. This is a useful orientation for both affective and phenomenological understandings of gamespaces. Because, of course, a body is never just "a competent body wrapped around an input device: hands tapping at a keyboard, waving at a motion sensor, clutching a joystick, smearing a touchscreen, or, more often than not, wrapped around a gamepad" (Keogh 108). It is all of these things, but in excess of this, it is also a subjective body with a positioning that shapes how meaning in a video game evolves for an individual player and for culture.

Another instance: the gathering U.S.-based nationalist turn has been agitated in a constituency who feels that the country (their place) has been taken from them and that, as true patriots, it is their duty to reclaim it. This invokes the notion of a 'heartland' space that is 'traditional' (i.e. normative and white-identified) though it is not exclusively white. The unrest and major political turmoil around the identity of the United States, specifically the browning of national space, which is almost never overtly discussed, underlies the anxieties of the alt-right, who feel as though traditional America has died (see Hsu). This is

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**1** Brendan Keogh's work provides some of the most valuable observations of how haptic dimensions of the human-computer interface and sensorial perception inform a meaningful experience of embodied gameplay. However, the phenomenological tradition of scholarship to which this work contributes is not specifically engaged with subject position and how that may influence perception and affect.

most recently evident in the 6 January, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol, which has quickly become a Trump-era moment of intense rupture within the nation but was fomenting for decades. One journalist characterized the Capitol riot as "an attack on multiracial democracy" against those whose inclusion and freedom was "less inalienable than those of their countrymen" (Serwer). In the live news footage, it appeared as a reassertion of particular people in command of a symbolic national space and the forcing out of other people whom they feel should be pushed out of place. Their own feelings of having lost their place led to a violence directed to both a symbolic space and a political body. But these things I am saying are not insightful. Anyone who lives the United States knows this about American space, because we live it, and if anything, these spatial relations are so overdetermining as to limit the scope of our imaginations.

An expanded notion of spatial paradigms has not yet been deeply investigated within video games. There are some exceptions, such as the personal games of Anna Anthropy, like her 2012 game *Dys4ia*, which engages with the being-in-the-worldness of gender dysphoria and hormone replacement therapy, or *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), in which fraught temporality challenges normative notions of time. *Lim* (2012) by Merritt Kopas, with its apparent blocky non-spaces, uses reductive but extremely poetic design to point to the ways space can be perilous when one's body does not seem to be in place. Of the same year, *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice, operates in a similar way, engaging with personal experiences of what it means to be a queer body in normative space. *Hair Nah!* (2017) by Momo Pixel pointedly critiques the lack of respect accorded to black bodies in the public sphere through the simple gamic objective of swatting away probing white hands from a black woman's hair. Tracy Fullerton and the USC Game Innovation Lab's *Walden, a Game* (2017) simulates Henry David Thoreau's famous experiment in living at Walden Pond to contemplate self-reliance and living in balance with nature through slow (rather than frantic) forms of engagement with gamespace. Games such as these begin to signal what possibilities are made manifest when one's experience with disorientations begin to point to other places. There is a wealth of untapped opportunity in game design and critical game scholarship for polymorphous understandings of space.

I want to make clear that this is not a plea for representing 'other' spaces in the hopes of currying facile sentiment and generating empathy for the subaltern. In the context of the utopian rhetorics around VR, Lisa Nakamura has warned of an "identity tourism for the 21st century" that peddles a vision of how "racial and gendered otherness can be bridged by 'virtuous' VR that puts you in the shoes of marginalized and threatened bodies" (48). As she explains, it functions as a pernicious liberalism which supposes that in moving about the space of socially defined minorities, by feeling present in their space, one can somehow wit-

ness, know, and commiserate with their suffering. This is equally problematic for video games that mobilize a kind of "toxic empathy" (47) as Nakamura calls it, that confuses identity tourism for authentic empathy and compassion – and even worse – parades as political activism. What I am suggesting is something else; it is about the opportunity of what can be made possible when an enhanced understanding of space and spatiality finds expression in games criticism and theory. This extends to the phenomenological experience of playing the game which is specifically connected to a player's subjectivity or their positionality in relation to the spaces of the game through which they move. But this is all a way of suggesting that there are many prospects for a great untapped conversation, yet to be had, in a language of space that can embrace a queer phenomenology of displacements, being out of place, new lines of movement, disorientations, and other positionalities in space and time. I would point to the exploitation of glitches in games, speedruns, and playing it 'wrong' as glimmers of how a video game can be queered, repurposed, or manipulated into producing other kinds of space.[2]

The social production of space that goes on in video games should not be taken for granted as being about some things and not about others. In fact, one of the key roles of critical Game Studies is to meticulously record displacements and disorientations, divergences and idiosyncratic experiences. It is the documentation of how such spaces are made strange to its players, and what that strangeness means. For those who are not 'at home' in video games, this disorientation can be an asset to mining the political spaces of potential that get arranged within a game. It is the friction between the tool at hand (the video game) and positioned player that can start to become useful.

To break through to what specific video games as cultural objects mean, it is necessary to engage with the phenomenological experience of their spaces. After all, these games are practice-based in the sense that one must play them, and it is through an extended engagement with them that one comes to gather up a sense of their intensities of feeling. This happens through the experiential, through 'being there' in the game for long enough to follow around the affective cues that tell a player what they are to be doing, and how they are to be doing it. As I have written elsewhere, often the most intense experiences players have with games issue from the durational – from engaging with the game for long periods of time and having deeply affective spatio-temporal experiences of the gamespace (see "'America is Dead. Long Live America!'"). These games require

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**2** For example, see Bonnie Ruberg "Playing to Lose" (2017) or *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019).

players to know spaces, to unlock an understanding of key game mechanics, and to learn to take up space in the game through the proper orientation.

An incredibly valuable feature of critical Game Studies remains the documentation of many and varied experiences of what it means to experience a given video game. One early example of this, David Sudnow's obsessive account of playing Atari's *Breakout* (1976), called *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983), predicts one critical pathway for understanding how games work on us and in effect slows down and plants markers that re-orient a player to the intense ways we engage with them. Sudnow's ability to capture the minutia of his zealous fixations with the game, interspersed with personal subjective experience of its role in his life, inaugurated a kind of video game phenomenology. At first, he was not 'at home' in video games. The book catalogues his slow orientation toward *Breakout*, his being out of place in the physical arcade space of games, and the flat in-game space itself, as well as the failures and the frictions of his attempts to engage. Importantly, he gave voice to his own disorientation when encountering with the video game form and provided a sustained narrative of what it meant to be lost and sit with that disorientation.

Like him, I often find myself in an affective experience of being sustained in a worldview foreign to my own. While playing, I follow around the affective cues that tell me what I am to do, and how I am to be doing it. I notice how the spaces push and pull me, attempting to shape me, and that there are moments of disjuncture where the game and I never seem to entirely meet.

Capturing the affective, even mundane aspects of experiencing the game, inclusive of idiosyncratic dimensions of positioning, illuminates meanings and the ways in which it may become constantly revised through our ongoing engagement with them. Much of Game Studies seems to harbor unspoken expectations that its forms of knowledge production have more value if they can be distilled to general rules and assertions. Perhaps, it is wrong to traffic in too many generalizations when it comes to understanding gamespaces. The idiosyncratic interpretation and the 'oppositional' look that creates friction with the space of a game, can open up how the game's sensations and engagements with embodiment contribute to potent political affective intensities (see hooks 115–132).

For example, Jamil Jan Kochai wrote a fictionalized account of playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015), an iconic mainstream video game that is part of a more than three-decade legacy. The first part of the game takes place in Afghanistan in the 1980s. From his position as part of an Afghan immigrant family, and son to a village farmer who served as a member of the mujahideen, his perspective melds a fanboy love of the game with shame and his sense of deep immersion in its impressive spaces:

> [T]he fact that nineteen-eighties Afghanistan is the final setting of the most legendary and artistically significant gaming franchise in the history of time made you all the more excited to get your hands on it, especially since you've been shooting at Afghans in your games (*Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* and *Splinter Cell*) for so long that you've become oddly immune to the self-loathing you felt when you were first massacring wave after wave of militant fighters who looked just like your father. (Kochai)

The writing begins with this orientation, as recognizable observations of a fraught subject position in relation to in-game representations. But increasingly it bends toward irrational fantasies connected to the narrator's trauma and longing projected into the space of the game: "Here is what you're going to do," Kochai writes, "before your father is tortured and his brother murdered, you are going to tranquillize them both and you are going to carry them to your horse and cross Logar's terrain until you reach a safe spot where you can call a helicopter and fly them back to your offshore platform: Mother Base" (Kochai).

Ultimately, the historical record should not only consist of efficient, smooth encounters with gamespace.[3] Critical insight also lies in capturing the phenomenological, the affective, the contemplative, the working-through of it, or the friction that occurs in gameplay.[4] It lies in realizing that you do not like how a game makes you feel. It is about what games make you dream of. It is about understanding the pivotal role of the player's subjectivity in the affective exchange that takes place. One's disorientations are incredibly useful, and certainly nothing to be shaken off as extraneous to legitimate game experience or mastery.

Rather than rejecting these spaces, or feeling ejected by them, go toward them. Sustain yourself in the spaces you do not like, be where you do not belong, sit with the friction, and refuse to be worn down by it. Figure out what is bothering you in games and bump up against their boundaries and strictures. Share what a game's affective impacts generate in you as a subjective player – what it makes you feel in your body. Document everything. Take up space. Point us someplace else.

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**3** Of interest here is Braxton Soderman's critique of flow as a central concept of game design, *Against Flow* (2021).
**4** I want to point here to the important work of Patrick Jagoda (2018) who theorizes difficulty and affect in video games. Jagoda identifies three forms of difficulty: mechanical, interpretive, and affective. He writes: "we might think of difficulty not simply as a problem to overcome but an ambivalent space from which to experiment with our historical present through critical play. In this formulation, difficulty becomes an active practice rather than a mere obstacle." (232).

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