

Images of the city

On the depiction of the city in *Grand Theft Auto V*



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Abstract:

In this research I answer the question what kind of ideological messages about the city are being portrayed in the computer game *Grand Theft Auto V*. The narrative of the game revolves around the fictional city of Los Santos. This contemporary city is being designed and depicted in a certain way, thus conveying certain messages. To analyse the possible ideological messages in the depiction of the city by this game, I have used the theory of Henri Lefebvre on the spatial triad and the theory of Ian Bogost on the procedural rhetorics of computer games as structuring principles in my research. The research is divided up into three parts, respectively on the conceived space, representational space and spatial practices. There are several conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of the parts of the spatial triad. The conceived space of the city to give the player the fake impression of freedom friendly at first but quite often the city can also be very oppressive and restrictive as well. The game also seems to nudge the player into the direction of spatial practices which are related to violence and reckless behaviour. Finally, the game adds many layers of ironic interpretations of American or Western culture to the city, yet offers no alternative. This way the city which is depicted in the game effectively becomes a parody on American society. Although the method which I used for this research is adequate for analysing the meaning of city spaces, it seems less suited for analysing the role of the player's temporal place in the narrative in the experience of these city spaces. This could be the starting point for further research.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1- Introduction

The first time I played the game *Grand Theft Auto V*, I was impressed at the extremely detailed surroundings and the sheer size of the digital world presented in the game.¹ Unlike any of the similar computer games I had played before, this game really fitted within the description of an open world game. Simply exploring the immense landscape and city in this game, became a goal in itself.

Although computer games are often still regarded as part of pop culture rather than high culture, many contemporary games can actually have quite subtle yet complex and deeper meanings incorporated in them. The *Grand Theft Auto* series have often be labelled in a negative way. Supposedly the games would encourage aggressive or even criminal behaviour amongst children. I think it would be interesting to show that even a game from a series that has caused a lot of controversies and has often been labeled as the cause of violent behaviour, can have these deeper layers of meanings. This research is by no means meant a defence for this game nor a defence for the practice of gaming in general. This is simply the background against which this research takes place and my more personal underlying motivation for this subject.

The computer game *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V* for short) takes place in a contemporary yet fictional city called Los Santos, located in the fictional American state San Andreas. It is a characteristic of this game that the player has the ability to freely explore the city by controlling his or her avatar and freely roaming through the city's different areas or surroundings. This makes it

1 Rockstar North (2013) *Grand Theft Auto V*. S.l.: Rockstar Games.

possible for the player to get a specific image or experience of this city because it is designed in a certain way. Since this computer game is also part of a specific culture, it takes a certain position within this cultural discourse and thus contains ideological messages.² It might be interesting to see what kind of commentaries or messages are told through the representation of the city in this game. In this bachelor thesis I will analyse what ideological messages about the city are told through the computer game *Grand Theft Auto V*.

1.1.1. Introduction to the game:

Grand Theft Auto V is an open world, action-adventure game, developed by Rockstar Games in 2013. The events in the game take place in the fictional city Los Santos and the narrative of the game revolves around the three main characters Franklin, Michael and Trevor. The player has to control these characters in their attempts to rob banks and strike it rich. The player needs complete missions in order to advance in the plot, involving in all sorts of crime such as robbery, heavy violence, escaping from the police and of course, as the title of the game suggests, theft of cars. The player can also choose to partake in the many activities in the city of Los Santos or simply explore the immense city and its surroundings.

The game's narrative starts off with a prologue, showing the events that took place in North Yankton, nine years before the start of the main story in Los Santos. Back then Michael, Trevor and Brad, another one of their companions, attempted to rob a bank but were caught. Michael and Brad appear to get shot while Trevor manages to escape. The game then jumps nine years into the future to the city of Los Santos, showing a cutscene in which Michael turns out to be alive, sitting at a psychiatrist talking about his problems. After this event, the game switches to Franklin, who is working for a shady car dealer, helping him scam his victims into buying cars for exorbitant interest rates and then “repossessing” them. This work eventually leads him to the situation where he scams Michael's son. Acknowledging Franklin's talent, Michael stays in touch with him and the two become friends. After Michael is forced out of his apparent “retirement” as a bank robber, him and Franklin successfully rob a jewellery store. Their victory is short lived though.

Later on in the game it turns out that Michael sold out his comrades to the FIB nine years ago, so that he could get out and retire with his family. Brad was killed and buried in Michael's place, causing Trevor to believe that both of his comrades were either dead or in penitentiary. Because of the robbery of the jewellery store gets on the news however, Trevor becomes suspicious and decides to come to Los Santos looking for Michael, whom he eventually finds. Unaware of the deal with the FIB and the death of Brad, Trevor becomes a part of the gang again. Meanwhile, the FIB is forcing Michael and eventually Franklin and Trevor as well, to do all kind of dirty work for them in exchange for keeping their past deal a secret. Although Trevor later finds out about Michael's intentions nine years ago, he eventually forgives him and together with Franklin, they decide to do one more bank robbery, targeting the largest bank of Los Santos. Depending on the choice the player makes in the aftermath of this robbery, either Michael or Trevor gets killed and the remaining two break their bonds, or all three survive and end up extremely rich.

1.1.2. Methodology:

A lot has been written over the course of fifteen years about the fields of game studies, resulting in many specialised theories for analysing the different formal and technical aspects of computer games. Recent examples are the books *Computer Game Studies* by Raessens and Goldstein or *Understanding Video Games* by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al, which both offer an overview of the history of game studies and distinguishes the different genres within gaming, it's mechanics, and it's

² Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. et al. (2013) *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. Second edition; New York: Routledge: p. 35-36.

different characteristics.³ However, I feel that simply analysing this computer game according to these theories would yield an overly formalistic interpretation of the gameplay, while the actual experience of the city inside this game plays a big part as well.

Instead, I will try to analyse the city space and its ideological messages as depicted in the computer game. I will use the spatial triad of Henri Lefebvre as described by Merrifield in the text *Place and Space* to analyse the city.⁴ Lefebvre divides the concept of space up into three elements, the conceived space, the representation of space and the spatial practices, which each influence one another. Together, they are part and form the concept of space. The conceived space is the space as it is intended by architects, urban planners and politicians, dividing the city up in parts with clear functions. The representational space is the space as it is experienced by its inhabitants, both depending on the conceived space but also depending on their own discursive position. Finally, there is a range of spatial practices as adopted by the inhabitants of the city, using these spaces in certain ways.

Although Lefebvre mainly used this theory as an argument how citizens should have their right to the city, I feel that this theory on the analysis of space will help me gain handholds for analysing this digital city, allowing to take the actual experience of the city into account while also allowing room for the analysis of formal elements of the gameplay as well.⁵ This research will therefore not only take place within the field of computer game studies but also take place within the fields of visual culture and will have other interdisciplinary links to the subject of city culture. I will analyse the portrayal of the city through the lens of the visual appearance of the city space, the narratives linked to these spaces and the gameplay, mainly through the range of different possibilities which the player has to interact and manipulate these different spaces.

I will also be using the article and book from Ian Bogost for this research, both offering a method for analysing the ideological message of a game.⁶ Like every cultural product, this video game was developed within a specific cultural discourse, thus conveying an ideological message. Video games inherently transmit this ideology through the rhetorics of the procedures of the game. Thus the video game *GTA V* positions a specific ideology with its procedural rhetorics. The way in which the city is being depicted in this game is part of this ideology. Bogost also states in the already mentioned chapter of his book *Unit Operations* that in a comparison between *GTA III* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, *GTA III* fails to maintain credible human responses to shifting player actions.⁷ However, this statement was based on an earlier, less detailed version from the *GTA* series, and much has changed since.

Because the city in *GTA V* has become much more detailed and complex in design, adopting theories from different academic fields more suited for analysing city spaces might yield new results in comparison to the more specialised theories from the field of game studies. By adopting this approach I will attempt to come up with new insights on analysing a digital city, as an addition to the already existing literature specialised in analysing computer games. Holding onto the idea of

3 Raessens, J. & Goldstein, J. (2005) *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon et al. (2013) *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. Second edition; New York: Routledge.

4 Merrifield, A. (1993) "Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation", in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 18, No. 4: p. 516-531.

5 Lefebvre, H. (2000) "The Right to the City", in: *Writings on Cities: Henri Lefebvre*. Oxford: Blackwell: p. 147-159.

6 Bogost, I. (2008) "The Rhetoric of Video Games", in: *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Cambridge: The MIT: p. 117-139. And: Bogost, I. (2006) *Unit Operations: An approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press: p. 153-171.

7 Bogost, I. (2006) *Unit Operations: An approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press: p. 153-171.

Lefebvre's spatial triad as a framework, I will divide my research into three parts, each covering a parts of this spatial triad.

1.2.- The chapters

1.2.1. Part 1: Of which elements is the city composed?

The first chapter will be an analysis of the conceived space of the city. Like a normal city, the city has different elements such as roads and buildings, which makes us recognise them as such. Although many functions of these elements are similar to the functions which they have in existing, historical cities, I suspect that the representations of these elements often have a whole different range of other functions inside the procedural rhetorics of the game. In order to analyse what kind of possibilities the city spaces offer to the player, and thus influence the player's experience of these spaces, I will first need to analyse what kind of spaces the city of Los Santos consists of. There have been many writings on the city which have tried to distinguish the different core components which every city consists of. An important and relevant work is from Kevin Lynch.⁸ In his theory he claims that the city is cognitively mapped out in five different elements, paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. The way in which Lynch distinguishes different elements of the city overlaps with the idea of the conceived space of Lefebvre; the analysis of the city space on a macro level. I will use the theories of Lynch as a framework for this chapter to get a grip on the notion of space and to see how these five spaces function in *GTA V*. I will then use these five elements to analyse in what way the player might experience a conceived space, in order to formulate the possible implications which this conceived space has on the creation of ideological messages in the game.

1.2.2. Part 2: What intertextual references can be found in the game?

The second chapter will be about the representational space, the structures of feeling as they are experienced by the player. Although the spatial practices also play a large role in the type of feelings a player might feel in their experience of the city, I suspect that the things which determine the player's experience of a space are mainly the many references which the game makes to American culture. Grand Theft Auto *V* is known for intentionally implementing representations of parts from other cities – mainly from Los Angeles – into the digital cityscape of the game. By referencing to cultural practices as well as referencing to existing buildings or even whole districts, the game portrays these locations in a certain way, infesting them with new layers of meaning. An important theory for this chapter is the text *American Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Interpictorial Clusters in American Studies* by Udo Hebel.⁹ He describes interpictorial references as hybrid systems of signification, comparing them to palimpsests which are being drawn over the original, adding additional layers of meaning to them. Another recent and relevant theory for this chapter is the book *Echo's Echo's*, by Paul Claes. He describes the different relations between the so called “Fenotekst” and the “Architekst” to which it refers.¹⁰ In order to analyse what kind of representational space is being created in this game, I will use both these theories to analyse the different intertextual and interpictorial references.

1.2.3. Part 3: What kind of spatial practices can be found within the game?

The final element which makes up the concept of space are the spatial practices. Since computer games don't allow the player unrestricted freedom in their play, most games are regulated by rules. The way in which the game allows the player to interact with their surroundings and the different characters in the first place, creates different spatial practices. Within the framework of rules, the player is furthermore encouraged by the game to make the decisions which are most suited in the

8 Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*. Massachusetts: MIT Press: p. 46-82.

9 Hebel, U. (S.d.) *American Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Interpictorial Clusters in American Studies*. http://escholarship.org/uc/acgcc_jtas?volume=6:issue=1 (15-05-2015).

10 Claes, P. (2011) *Echo's echo's: de kunst van allusie*. Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt.

specific situations created by the game. This way, the game both restricts the player in their actions and furthermore nudges them into certain directions. Although it is possible for the player to try and ignore these things, it are mostly these factors which determine the spatial practices of a space. For this chapter I will use the idea of procedural rhetorics as a framework to analyse the different possible spatial practices which the gameplay encourages the player to adopt. This analysis will lead to an interpretation of these practices and what kind of image this gives of the city portrayed in this game.

I will combine my findings from each of these chapters into a synthesis at the final chapter, which will function as a conclusion. With the conclusions from each of these chapters I will try to answer the question what ideological messages about the city can be found in this computer game. Lastly I will discuss suggestions for further research on this subject.

Chapter 2: The conceived space of Los Santos

2.1.- Introduction

In order to analyse what kind of image of the city is being portrayed in this game, it is necessary to analyse the conceived space and the effect it has on the player.¹¹ I will try doing this by using the theory of Kevin Lynch which he describes in his text *The Image of the City*.¹² Lynch's theory on cognitive mapping seems compatible with the Lefebvrian notion of conceived space. The different spaces of the city are designed by the developers of the game with a certain purpose. Since navigating the city is an important aspect of this game, dividing the city space up into different elements will make it easier to analyse for which purpose these elements have been designed and altered by the developers. Although some of the locations are copied from existing locations, it is the vast majority of the city which has been designed directly for this computer game (Image 1). I will use this chapter to analyse the formal aspects of the city with the help of Lynch's theory on cognitive mapping and the effect of these spaces on the players, in order to answer the question what kind of conceived space is created through the design of the city.

According to Kevin Lynch there are several recurrent elements which can be observed in most cities. These elements are paths, nodes, edges, districts and landmarks.¹³ He argues that we both consciously as well as unconsciously divide the city into these parts for navigational purposes. Since the narrative of the game takes place in the city of Los Santos, I think this theory on cognitive mapping could also be applied to this. Although Lynch's theory is not originally intended for analysing digital cities inside computer games, I don't think that it is therefore incompatible. It could be noted as a problem that this city is only a representation of a city.¹⁴ Since this computer game has a specific procedural rhetoric, it means that most of these digital representations have quite different functions in comparison to their physical counterparts.¹⁵ After all, the elements in a computer game are simply the means to build up a narrative, and thus they serve different purposes.

This doesn't need to be a problem though. We do recognise many of these spaces as actual parts of a city. Because of this, even though this city is only a digital representation of one, we do have certain expectations about these locations, regardless of their different functions. These expectations, although influenced by the procedural rhetorics, cause the player to nevertheless construct a cognitive map of the city in a similar process which Lynch describes in this theory. From this perspective the theory on cognitive mapping can still be a useful tool to analyse the conceived space of this city.

2.2.- Elements of the city

2.2.1. A myriad of paths

I will first discuss the notion of paths in the city of Los Santos. Kevin Lynch defines the paths as:

“[...] the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, railroads. For many people, these are the predominant elements in their image. People observe the city while moving through it, and along these paths the other environmental elements are arranged and related”.¹⁶

11 Merrifield, A. (1993): “Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation”, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622564> (24 april 2015): p. 522-526.

12 Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*. London: MIT Press.

13 Lynch, K. (1960): p. 49-83.

14 Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. et al. (2013) *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. Second edition: New York: Routledge: p. 117.

15 Bogost, I. (2008) “The Rhetoric of Video Games”, in: *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press: p. 125-128.

16 Lynch, K. (1960): p. 46-47.

These same type of paths can be seen in Los Santos. The city has many highways, streets, walkways, railroads, a few canals and a network of transit lines. The problem with these paths is that they are solely representations of the streets, walkways, canals or other forms of paths which one can normally encounter in most physical cities. Although they do represent their physical counterparts, they have a slightly different function within this game. This change in function alters the way in which the player experiences them, which in turn changes the conceived space. There are several changes to the notion of paths.

The paths of this city are first of all quite “softer” in comparison to their physical counterparts. The conventional paths whilst driving a car are the roads, streets or the highways. However, these paths can be ignored at all times in this game. The player can choose to drive on the streets, but can also decide to ignore these streets altogether and drive over the walkways instead, drive against the flow of traffic, or steer his vehicle through the public gardens in the city. This means that almost every empty space in this city, which isn't occupied by a building, could be considered as a possible path. The notion of a path can thus be deconstructed at any given time by the whims of the player.

This is not just a possibility; the game itself seems to actively encourage the player to ignore these conventional paths. For example, many of the alleyways seem just broad enough for a car to pass through in order to give the player some room to use these as an escape route. Furthermore, there are numerous conveniently placed construction sites, repair work on the roads, or other objects located throughout the city, intended to serve as ramps or points which the player can use to jump off and deviate from the current path.¹⁷ It is quite often that the player is forced to use these and thus break these paths in order to effectively escape the police, or to pursue one of their targets.

Finally, the notion of paths is dependent on the type of vehicle which the player uses as a means of transportation. This is even more the case when it comes to other vehicles beside cars. The player can also steal ships, helicopters or planes. If the player manages to break into the close by military base, he or she can even steal tanks or fighter jets. Especially when it comes to the flying vehicles, the player no longer has any clearly distinct paths in the city, as they can simply fly wherever they want. All the paths which the player first perceived as such, dissolve as the player is free to move wherever he or she wants to go. This creates a sense of freedom since there seems to be an abundance of potential paths within the city. There are visual representations of the paths but they are only there to be broken. That is why the notion of a path seems to be quite “softer” or more malleable in comparison to the physical paths.

2.2.2. The absence of nodes

A node is another element which we use according to Lynch to draw our cognitive map of the city. Nodes are:

“[...] the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another. Or the nodes may simply be concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character, as a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square”.¹⁸

17 The player is encouraged by the game to use these ramps in the form of paratextual achievements. These can be acquired by successfully using these ramps to complete so called “stunt jumps”.

18 Lynch, K. (1960): p. 47.

By analysing the possible ways of transportation in the game, it is possible to discern several context-dependent nodes and several general nodes in the city. Since many functions of the player's surroundings change, the function of these nodes and thus the definition of a node in this game also changes. Nodes are still concentrations but are no longer characterised by their function of key junction points in travel. In the same way as with paths, the experience of particular spots as nodes is often dependent on the vehicle used by the player to navigate through the city.

While looking at the representation of the city, Lynch's original concept of a node does not seem to change. There are some major nodes in the form of highway junction points. Examples of these are the points where the Del Perro, La Puerta, Olympic or the Los Santos freeways intertwine with one another (Image 2). However, we have already seen that just like paths, nodes are also quite situational. While the player is flying through the city, or is simply walking, these nodes can quickly dissipate as the player can experience the city without having to pass through certain locations in order to reach a particular part of the city. What is more, because there are so many possible paths the traditional concept of nodes by Lynch seems to somewhat “soften up” or dissipate within this game. This is why the meaning of a node as a place through which a player needs to travel in order to reach a destination, seems to disappear in this city.

Yet because of the specific gameplay, it is still possible to mention several nodes which aren't linked to the practice of transportations. These type of nodes are places in the city which the player has to frequently visit in order to keep on playing the game and advance the storyline. A node is in this case only a concentration which gains its importance from being a condensations of use. In this game, these spots are the different “usable” buildings in the city.¹⁹ There are several of these places located in the city (Image 3). For example, there are several buildings in the city which the player can use to buy weapons, restock on ammunition, shops where they can repair or upgrade their vehicle, which can provide a source of income once the player robs them or by buys them, buildings which can be used as a safe house or buildings which the player needs to go to in order to complete a mission. Exactly because the player needs the services these places can offer, they will often change their trajectory in order to stop by one of these locations before continuing their travel. These buildings will, once the player visits them often enough, come to function as nodes as well.

A final change to the meaning of this element is that its functions largely overlap with that of a landmark within the game. Landmarks often function because of their size or outstanding appearance as waypoints in the city; points of reference which indicate where a person might be located inside a city. However, because of the specific gameplay, the numerous “usable” locations are of much higher interest to the player than any of these large skyscrapers which would normally function as landmarks. What's more, the game interface allows for the player to navigate the city with a whole different logic. Part of the interface is a small map of the city, often referred to as the mini-map, which displays the player's current location and surroundings within a specific block or district (Image 4). In this mini-map some of the usable buildings are displayed with an icon, giving the player a clear indication where they can find these. This makes it easier for the player to orientate themselves with the help of these symbols, than it would be to look for the different landmarks as point reference. This causes these usable buildings to function as points of reference instead of any of these conventional landmarks: the player will sooner learn where the different gun stores are located than the location the different monuments or skyscrapers of the city.

¹⁹ Most of the buildings simply function as a scenery. This means that the player can see them or climb over them, but can't enter them or explore them from the inside. There are actually only a select view buildings in the city which can be entered and used by the player. These are the buildings which function as nodes in the city.

2.2.3. Restrictive edges

Edges are perhaps the most important element of the city in this game. Lynch defines the edges as:

“[...] the linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer. They are the boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroads, cuts, edges of development, walls. They are lateral references rather than coordinate axes. Such edges may be barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another; or they may be seams, lines along which two regions are related and joined together”²⁰

Edges in the sense in which Kevin Lynch talks about them, still exist within the game, but rather than really being edges, they function once again as digital representations of their physical counterparts, and have a whole different function and thus a different logic connected to them. Edges in the landscape which the player can encounter within the game include rivers, the mountain ranges outside the city and finally the seas surrounding the island on which the city is located. Edges within the city itself include fences, walls and highways, most notably the Del Perro, Olympic, La Puerta and the Los Santos freeways, since all effectively dividing the city into different parts. However, depending on the situation, the concept of edges change as well. Depending on the situation, the notion of edges either softens up or changes into even more restrictive forms.

Most of the described edges can easily be broken by the player. This can be done using a specific vehicle but even without one, the player won't have a hard time crossing some of them in comparison to physical edges in existing cities. Since the digital avatar of the player cannot grow tired and thus isn't affected by any form of fatigue, it is easy to swim across rivers or even swim across the sea. It is possible for the player to climb over the highway or even climb the mountain ranges to some extent. When it comes to this, these “conventional” edges only seem to serve as a digital representation to create a reality effect within the gameplay. In some ways, this contributes to a sense of freedom, since the player doesn't seem to be restricted in the way an edge would normally restrict someone from exploring the city.

This is however not fully the case. In the gameplay, there seems to be a different type of edge. Even though the city is depicted as a real city, most of the buildings can be seen as impassable blocks. Even the cheap shabby looking houses in the periphery of the city, or even a tiny brick wall around a parking lot, are completely indestructible. The player can try to drive into them with a car, shoot at them with a tank or even crash a plane into them, but these buildings won't get damaged in any way. This probably has to do with the amount of calculations needed to picture a possible outcome of a player crash driving into a house still being impossible for the gaming platform to handle up to now, but even so, this does effect the way in which these buildings function within the game. This way a new type of edge is created by the specific gameplay: the buildings themselves. Rows of houses or skyscrapers form an effective barrier to the player, which he or she cannot simply pass unless they have a way to fly over them. Thus these buildings function just like an edge would function in Lynch's terms. This is why edges are an important element of the city within the context of this game. Especially in situations where the player doesn't have a lot of time to avoid or circumvent these edges, they become very restrictive, easily lambasting the sense of freedom created by the absence of nodes and the myriad of potential paths.

2.2.4. Distinctive districts

The final element which I will be discussing is the district. Lynch describes this as:

“[...] the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional

²⁰ Lynch, K. (1960): p. 47.

extend, which the observer mentally enters 'inside of,' and which are recognisable as having some common, identifying character. Always identifiable from the inside, they are also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside".²¹

The notion of a district inside the game remains largely unchanged from the notion of districts as used by Kevin Lynch to describe the different districts in existing cities. Like a real city, Los Santos has many different districts, each district having a different feel to it and serving as an indication as to where the player might be located within the city (Image 5).

Each district has its own visual appearance for the player. It is easy to see the differences between the social classes by analysing this appearance, for example by looking at the different type of buildings present in an area. For example, there are several shopping districts, containing a lot of shops and a few high quality houses nearby. Sometimes it is already enough to look at the name of the district to deduce what type of surroundings the player can expect.

Each districts can also be distinguished by it's own set of moral codes. These are reflected in the way of talking and the way of dressing. For example, in the districts associated with the upper class citizens, you will see different kinds of Non Player-controlled Characters (NPC's) as when you would be in the periphery of the city. The NPC's will wear more expensive clothes, and talk/react in a different way to you when you happen to pass by.

Finally it is possible to distinguish the different districts by looking at the possible modes of behaviour which the player can encounter in a particular districts. This is reflected in the possibilities of encountering specific situations. Since the player can play as different characters which each start out in a different neighbourhood, they can encounter/expect different situations. For example, while playing as the character Franklin who at first lives in a shabby neighbourhood, he is bound to see some gang violence occur around him now and then. The same goes for the range of responses when the player walks through a specific district and decides to make specific type of actions. Bumping into NPC's in the wrong neighbourhood can cause these NPC's to attack the player, or even gang up on him, while doing this same thing in another district will only earn the player some scornful remarks. These things make it easy to make distinctions between the different districts in the city, causing the identifiable character of the districts to be emphasised within by this game.

2.3.- Conclusion

In this chapter I tried to analyse the conceived space of the city by using the theories on cognitive mapping by Kevin Lynch. From this analysis, I came to the following conclusions. Since the city is being presented through the medium of a computer game, most elements are only digital representations of their physical counterparts, causing these elements to have a different set of logics and possibilities, depending on the procedural rhetorics of the game. Many of the elements which Lynch describes change because of this. They all have different functions while still evoking the same type of expectations from the player, creating a reality effect, yet adding new possibilities to them.

The three elements which determine the conceived space of the city the most, and which also change the most, are the paths, nodes and edges of the city. Because of the possibilities which the gameplay offers, the player will be less likely to experience any clear paths or nodes in the city. The abundance of possible paths in combination with lack of any distinct nodes, except for the visual representations of these in the game, causes the player to experience some sense of freedom. The gameplay seems to encourage them to create their own paths through the city for most of the time.

21 Lynch, K. (1960): p. 47.

Edges on the other hand become much more restrictive. Every building in the city can potentially become an obstacle once the player tries to make use of that freedom.

Furthermore, the notion of districts as being different areas with their own identifiable character, get emphasised by the game. The difference in visual appearance and behaviour shown by the NPC's of a district, cause each district to have a unique feel to them. Finally, it needs to be noted that I have chosen not to discuss the element of landmarks to a great extent in this chapter. The reason for this is because this element of the city will be central in the next chapter, where I describe the many intertextual references made through representation of these landmarks inside the game. One of the reasons why the distinctive character of each district gets emphasised is because of the many references made through them as well. I will discuss this in the next chapter.

2.4.- Images



Image 1: An overview of the entire city as if it would have been seen from a satellite image.

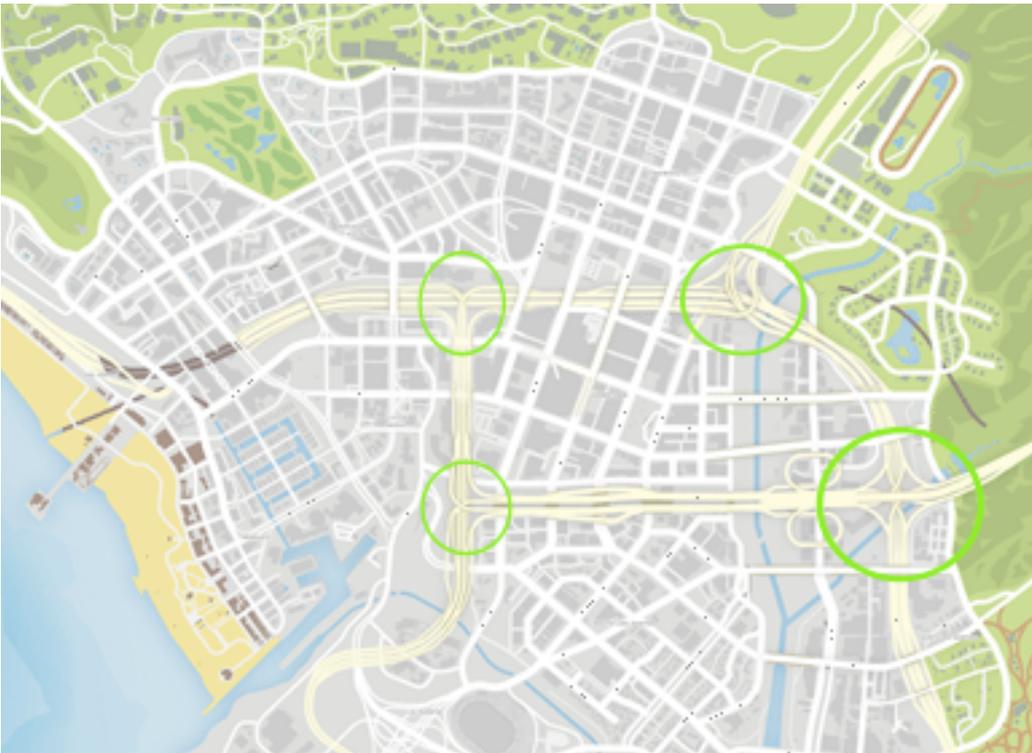


Image 2: The different points which could be mentioned as nodes in the city, since they function as key junction points for the traffic and thus for the player while he or she traverses the city in a car.

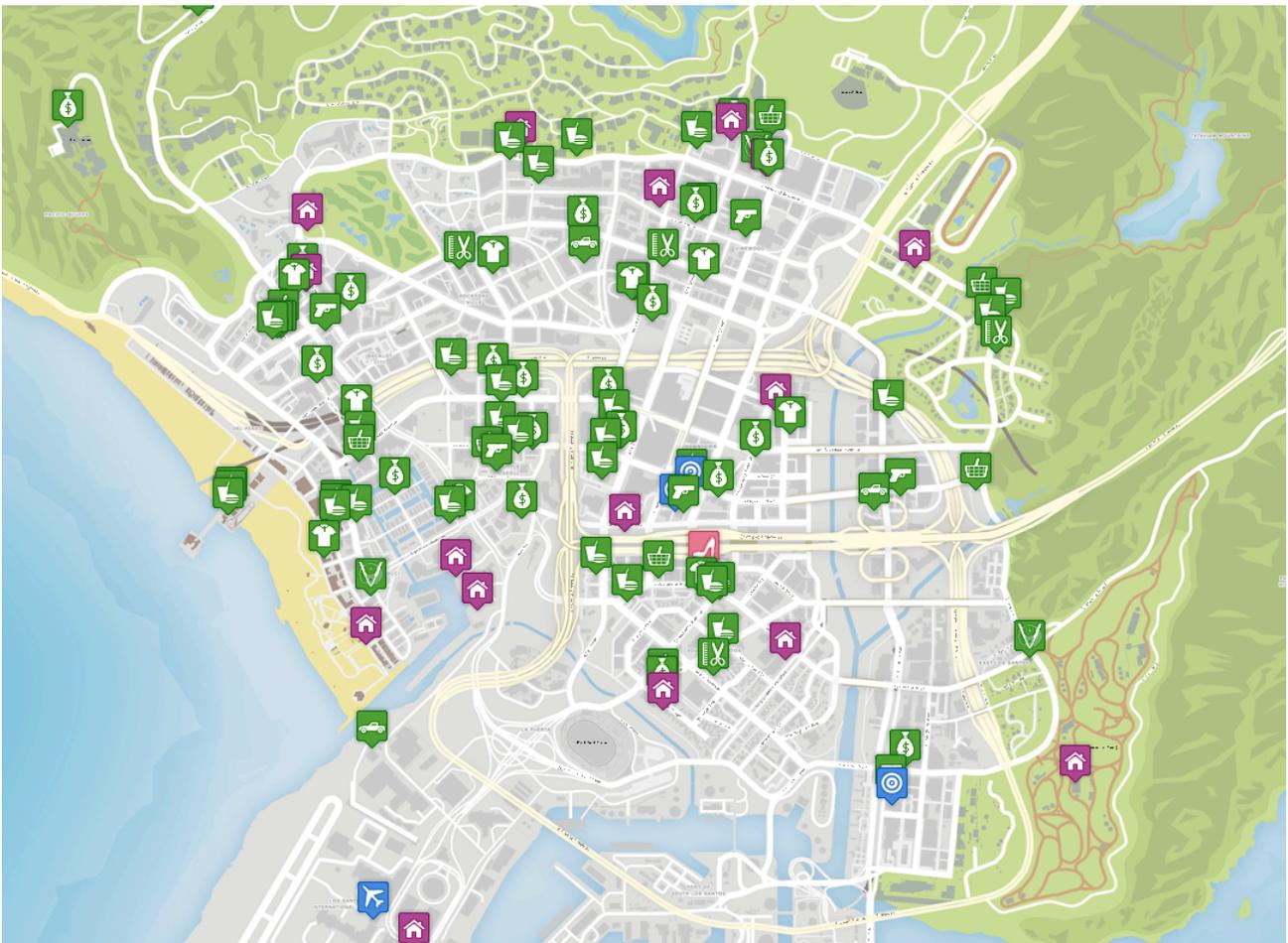


Image 3: These locations could be mentioned as other nodes in the city as these are the locations which the player regularly needs to visit.



Image 4: To the lower left is the small map which displays several icons. For example, the cinema to the right is displayed as a small icon of a an early 20th century camera and the clothing store behind the player is displayed with the icon of a shirt.



Image 5: The different areas in Los Santos which can be highlighted as districts.

Chapter 3: The representational space

3.1.- Introduction

3.1.1. The representational space

When I first started playing this game I had no idea what kind of city I would experience. After playing through the main storyline and most of the side missions related to it, I gradually started to get a picture of the different areas of the city, each story adding an additional layer or dimension of meaning to it, colouring my experience about these parts of the city in a different way. There are myriads of references to existing cultural phenomena, such as famous landmarks, specific type of social groups or stereotypical or parodic representations of characters. All these narratives and references to the existing cultural landmarks and practices and the way in which they get infested with new meaning, constitute to a certain experience of the city. This chapter aims at analysing these references and stories in order to describe what structures of feeling could be seen as the result.

Since there are so many elements to take into account while analysing the possible experience of a space, I will limit myself to analysing the different intertextual or inter pictorial references throughout the game. The structures of feeling connected to the references through a specific place or space in the city, will largely be dependent on either the different buildings, monuments, landmarks or on the different NPC's present in that area. In this chapter I will analyse examples of both of these elements in order to describe a possible impression of the representational space.²² The problematic part about this approach is that the experience of space is dependent upon a subjective point of view. References are furthermore often discursive, depending heavily upon specific knowledge or insight in a cultural discourse. Hence it should be taken into account that this chapter will be described from my own subjective point of view, adopting an approach that holds the middle between a reconstructive and constructive approach.

3.1.2. Intertextual and inter pictorial references

Especially useful for this analysis were the theories on intertextuality and inter pictoriality, respectively by Paul Claes and Udo J. Hebel, since both theories offer a method of analysing references in both the narrow and the broad sense of the word. In the introduction of his book *Echo's Echo's*, Claes writes about his method of analysing literary intertextual references in the narrow sense of the word.²³ Claes makes a distinction between the so called “architekst”, the text to which is being referenced, and the “fenotekst”, the text which references to the already existing architekst. By analysing the differences between these two, Claes distinguishes three possible transformations. The first one is one of affirmation, where the fenotekst transforms yet still affirms the content of the architekst. The second one is a destructive transformation. This is when the fenotekst rejects parts or the whole architekst, ridiculing or otherwise destroying the story told by the architekst. Finally there is the deconstructive transformation, uncovering and analysing the different assumptions connected to the architekst and thus putting the content into a different light.

References in the broad sense of the word is being described by Udo J. Hebel in his text *American Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Inter pictorial Clusters in American Studies*. In explaining inter pictorial references he first quotes Winfried Fluck on the narrative context of images:

“The meaning that we attribute to the image is the result of a narrative context that we bring to it and weave around it. [...] Fortunately, American Studies has always insisted that it is

22 Merrifield, A. (1993): “Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation”, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622564> (24 april 2015): p. 522-525.

23 Claes, P. (2011) *Echo's echo's: de kunst van allusie*. Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt.

not sufficient to look at single texts or objects. We have to look at the narratives about America that come along with them. Fluck, 'Poor Like Us' p. 91".²⁴

Hebel then continues to describe inter pictorial references as being “(Re)construction and exploration of the implicit and explicit interplay between pictures”. “Inter pictorially charged pictures”, he later continues, “are hybrid systems of signification with both referential and symbolic functions [...] multi-layered palimpsest-like options for recognition”.²⁵ Both of these theories helped me to gain some handholds in analysing the many intertextual and inter pictorial references made by this computer game. I have used these theories as methods and starting points in analysing both the references made through the different locations in the city, such as landmarks, as well as the references made through characters in this game.

3.2.- References through monuments, locations and landmarks

3.2.1. The Vinewood landmark

I will first describe how these intertextual references are taking shape through the different buildings and locations in the city. Some of these are copied from existing historical cities and altered in a specific way. Through this transformation and through the juxtaposition of these two versions, a specific ideological view can be analysed from these differences. The transformation which I most frequently observed in this game is a destructive transformation, where the new version becomes a parody on the original.²⁶ I will try to analyse one of these parodies by using the district Vinewood Hills as a case study in which I analyse the references it makes to the Hollywood Hills district in Los Angeles.

A prime example of a reference made through this district would be the landmark of the Vinewood sign (Image 1). While viewing it, I quickly made a connection between this sign and the famous Hollywood sign. It has the same typological style, has about the same size and this fictional landmark characterises the district Vinewood Hills as the district where most of the celebrities of Los Santos live, in the same way as the Hollywood sign does. Being an intertextual reference to the Hollywood sign, this fictional sign seems to portray a specific ideological view on its original in the way in which it has been designed and in the way in which it functions within the game. Since this sign plays little to no role in the actual development of the main storyline in the game, its ideological message is mainly found within its formal aspects.

In a comparison with the original, we see that the letters “Holly” are being replaced by the letters “Vine”. The word “vine” can have different meanings in this context. One possible translation is that of the vine from a vineyard. In this interpretation Vinewood seems to be an affirmation to the celebrities living there, as wine could be seen as a symbol of status. The other definition of a vine, however, is a short video made by amateurs which is generally of low quality. In this interpretation the Vinewood sign suddenly becomes a destructive comment on the film history of Hollywood, portraying a juxtaposition of the Hollywood movies and the short and cheap amateur videos. In Claes' terms, this would be a destruction of the architekst (Hollywood) by the fenotekst (Vinewood).

24 Hebel, U. (S.d.) *American Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Inter pictorial Clusters in American Studies*. http://escholarship.org/uc/acgcc_jtas?volume=6;issue=1 (15-05-2015): p. 404.

25 Hebel, U. (S.d.): p. 413-415.

26 Parody as described in Bishop, R. (2013): “Chapter 4 Parody: Targeting Cinema's Narrative Technics”, in: *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgsbt> (20 april 2015): p. 93-95. and in

Bishop, R. (2013): “Chapter 5 The Unspeakable and Political Satire: Performance, Perception and technology”, in: *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgsbt> (20 april 2015): p. 126-129.

This latter interpretation seems to be more likely than the first one, seen against the background of the many stories revolving around the Vinewood district. During the main storyline and during the many side missions, the player will experience all kind of stories relating to the Vinewood Hills, each of them further colouring the view which the player develops throughout the game about this particular district. For example, at a certain point in the game, the player has the option to pay for a tour through Vinewood Hills and its surroundings. The player will enter a touring car, and the guide will talk about several of the landmarks and different stories attached to them as the player gets driven past them.²⁷ These stories consist mainly out of scandals, slander, envy and murder, giving the player a rather negative view about the inhabitants of Vinewood Hills. Because the players can get to know all these little details and all these additional stories, they will come to function like a palimpsest, each story adding different layers of meaning to a location. Although the Vinewood Hills district is just one example, many of the locations which are represented and transformed by the game function as a parody on their original, adding a negative yet humorous commentary to them.

3.3.- References through characters

3.3.1. Strangers and Freaks

Aside from the many references through famous landmarks or locations, there are also many references and ideological messages to be found through the different Non-Player Controlled Characters (NPC's) within the game. The way in which these characters are being presented to the player and the way in which they function within the story world will give the player a certain impression of the type of inhabitants of the city, thus influencing the way in which a player experiences the city. There are different types of NPC's to be discerned within the game, apart from the main characters: the characters from side missions, the special characters which the player first needs to find, and the more general, larger social groups.

I will first analyse the characters from the side missions. The player can get to know these people by doing sidetrack missions, which are fittingly labelled by the game as “Strangers and Freaks”. During these type of missions the player gets to know all sort of strange, eccentric and often shady inhabitants of Los Santos, which the player has to aid in order to complete these missions. Each of the three main characters can encounter different “strangers and freaks” throughout the city. The way in which the player is being introduced to these characters also adds to the seemingly strange encounters with them. Some of these characters seem to have some history with the main characters, but most often the player doesn't get any form of introduction. In fact, most of the time the player doesn't know these characters at all when they start the missions; they just follow the instructions while wondering why they are actually helping these characters in the first place, making these encounters seem quite random and all the more strange. This in combination with the weird kind of situations the player might find him or herself in during these missions, they indeed seem to experience these encounters as an encounter with the many “strangers and freaks” of Los Santos.

Some of these characters seem to reference back to existing organisations or specific types of extreme behaviours found within a metropolitan city. For example, while playing as the character Michael, the player can get in touch with members of a cult, called the Epsilon programme, which seems to be a reference to the church of Scientology. Like this religion, the Epsilon programme also talks about aliens as a core element of belief. Furthermore, several debates/scandals around the church of Scientology, such as systematically robbing and defrauding their members or being recognised as a tax-free religion, seem to return in the stories the player gets to play through during the missions of the Epsilon programme, portraying this organisation as a parody on this religion.

²⁷ Holy Cowlick (2013) *GTA V: Vinewood Start Tours*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEvlX0KU02Q> (16-04-15).

For example, when Michael gets in touch with members from this cult for the first time, he is tasked to say a password in front of a car, but then gets knocked unconscious and wakes up in the middle of a desert in his underwear. After this he hears the voice of the founder of this cult, Cris Formage, urging him to donate \$500,- to the cult.²⁸ Furthermore, while listening to the radio, the player can hear a news report of a lawsuit against the Epsilon programme, claiming that the government of the United States no longer recognises them as a religion exempt from taxation. According to the radio, Formage was then seen after the verdict, crying on the doorstep of the courthouse. By foregrounding all these negative associations of a social group similar to the church of Scientology, a destructive interpretation is giving on this movement.

3.3.2. Hidden Characters

Aside from the characters from the strangers and freaks sidetrack missions, there are several interesting characters scattered throughout the city, intended to be “found” by the player. These characters will only show up as a small blue dot on the player's mini-map once they are close enough. Many of these NPC's will appear as eccentric inhabitants on Los Santos, seemingly foregrounded by the developers of the game in order to give the player an idea as to what type of people could live in this city. These characters seem to embody a certain message in the way in which they have been designed and in the way they are being presented to the player. A good example of one of these characters is Jesse (Image 2).

Jesse is one of these minor characters found throughout the city. He doesn't play any role in the advancement of the main plot, but he seems to function more like a kind of easter egg which the player can discover whilst exploring the city. This character is standing on the Del Perro pier at Vespucci Beach. At first glance I thought this was a representation of some late hippie talking about peace and love.

However, upon closer inspection it seemed as if Jesse was actually a reference to Jesus Christ. Jesse wears a crucifix symbol around his neck, has the same brown hair colour and hairstyle, the same type of beard and is dressed in the same long white garb in which Jesus is often depicted. The only visual difference which makes him seem modern is the fact that he wears blue jeans. He also constantly talks about stories from the bible, although he puts them in his own words and situates them in a more contemporary context. The feeling of similarity based on these things was later confirmed when one of the main characters, Michael, talks to his daughter about the weird people that live in Los Santos. Jesse is being described in this conversation as “that guy on the Del Perro pier who thinks he is Jesus”.

This character seems to be yet another parody, this time on Jesus Christ. The way in which Jesse is presented in the game, it is almost impossible to take him serious.²⁹ The stories which he tells seem to be mocking versions or ironic commentaries on the stories from the bible. Jesse tells these stories in an unclear rambling, as if he is constantly under the influence of weed or marijuana. His messages vaguely resemble the stories from Genesis and the New Testament, yet because of the form in which they are told, they are closer to evoke laughter than they are to inspire awe, hence they lose their impact. He isn't presented as an awe inspiring person or the son of god at all. For example, amongst the stories which Jesse talks about, there is one which seems to be referring to the idea of the holy trinity, the father, the son and the holy spirit. Jesse describes this trinity as following:

28 VGFAQ (2013) *Grand Theft Auto V Seeking The Truth Walkthrough 100% (Gold) Completion*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcGuAIBXjGA> (16-04-15).

29 Dynasty (2013) *Grand Theft Auto 5 | Jesus Christ “Pothead Jesse” Easter Egg! (GTA V)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfWtkSOLN54> (12-04-15).

“So, like, yeah, the really important thing is to make sure everything's clear. That's what my dad says. Make it clear, I mean it's me, him and this other guy who no one really understands, because he like doesn't speak or do anything, and I'm like, we're all supposed to be equal the three of us, and I'm like, 'Dad, that's not fair.' and he's like, 'I don't make the rules.' and I'm like, 'Yes, you do.'”

The way in which the holy spirit is often metaphorically described as a non-material being or influence is being ridiculed in this story. By making Jesse describe the holy spirit as a person which he doesn't understand because he is only there but doesn't seem to do anything, this story seems to be a critique on the area of pneumatology, mocking the fact that despite all the research through the ages on this subject, they still haven't reached a consensus about what the holy spirit is exactly.

Jesse appears in the game as some sort of palimpsest of a hippie, painted over the image and stories of Jesus Christ, infesting this figure with another layer of meaning. This layer seems to be a rather destructive view on the figure of Jesus Christ and to a certain extent on the whole of Christianity. In but a few short, unclear sentences, Jesse summarises whole stories from parts of the bible. Although these summaries are short, the language and the form in which they are told cause the player experience them as unnecessary long, unclear and insignificant rambling, almost implying that because the stories in the bible are even longer, they are even more indistinct or unclear ramblings as well. Through the character of Jesse, Jesus Christ is being depicted as a displaced peace-loving yet weird and unclear hippie, preaching about seemingly random things which he doesn't even seem to quite understand himself, ultimately implying that the ideas of Jesus Christ and Christianity don't make sense at all.

3.3.3. Ethnic and social groups

Finally there are many intertextual references to be found in this game, related to the different social or ethnical groups of people one can encounter in the city. This is mostly through the stereotypical depiction of certain ethnic or social groups: it is quite easy for the player to estimate in which district his main character is located, based on the behaviour and chatter he hears from the NPC's around him.

For example, in many of the downtown neighbourhoods you'll notice that many of the NPC's are clustered in groups of gangs which are usually very violent toward the player's character. In the other districts, interacting with NPC's will result in a greeting or perhaps a conversation. Attacking someone in one of the well-off areas of the city will often only result in the victim making a run for it. However, attacking, insulting, or even so much as trying to interact with the wrong person in particular districts will result in all the NPC's currently present in the area ganging up on the player, engaging in a fist fight or even starting a shootout. All of these districts, mainly Little Seoul and Downtown, are seemingly occupied solely by immigrants with an Asian background or by Afro-Americans. Because of this clear segregation between the different districts, the player gets a rather stereotypical image of many of these neighbourhoods and the different social and ethnic groups that live here.

However, the social group with which the player has to deal with the most is the police. Since the player's goal in the main storyline is to rob banks or commit crime in general, they often have to evade or fight the police in order to achieve their goals. Finding peaceful solutions or trying to negotiate aren't an option within this game, so fight or flight are often the only options the player has. The police could be named as a whole group on its own, because they are present in such numbers, act that different from the rest of the NPC's and play such an important role in the

gameplay that they can be seen as a separate group. If I were asked to describe this group in a few words, corruption and extreme violence would be my choice.

First off, there are many stories revolving around the police which will influence the player's view on them. During several missions the player will encounter many corrupt government officials. Examples of these are FIB agent Norton, and FIB agent Steve Haines.³⁰ Respectively, they aided the player in betraying and killing their fellow gang members, and tasked the player to do their dirty work which they can't afford doing themselves, such as using torturing methods like waterboarding and electrocution on a suspect in order to extract information. Furthermore, during the mission in which the player is in the process of robbing a bank, a cinematic scene will show two officers proclaiming to one another "I don't care if they surrender, I'm going to kill myself some bad guys".³¹

As for the excessive violence, in most of the player's interaction with the police, they will act with extreme prejudice toward any actions of the player. If the player happens to do as much as to accidentally bump into an officer, they will immediately open fire with killing intent, regardless of any further retaliation from the player or not. This use of excessive violence in the behaviour of the police will remind many to the recent events in Ferguson and other states, affirming the image of the police as racists and murderers. What's more, once the player kills one of the cops chasing after him, the police will start an all-out manhunt on the player, gradually calling in more and more reinforcements, swarming the player with helicopters and even SWAT teams. This ruthless behaviour is perfectly symbolised by the motto (Image 3) of the police department: instead of being "Serve and Protect" as one can expect from the police, the motto is the fitting message "Obey and Survive".

Of course, seeing as the main characters are notorious bank robbers and dangerous criminals, this type of behaviour could be justified. However, in every other occasion in which the player sees the police in action, they are displaying exactly the same ruthless behaviour and lack of concern for collateral damage. The first time I saw the police driving over several pedestrians in order to shoot every last coloured man in the car they were chasing, leaving it burned out in the middle of the street, I couldn't help but notice that they were more focussed on punishing the culprits than on protecting the innocent civilians.

3.4.- Conclusion

Most intertextual and inter pictorial references made through this game are parodies on their originals. Because so many aspects from American or Western culture are being used and overwritten with ironic commentaries, or are otherwise supplemented or transformed with obelising stories, it eventually becomes very hard to take any of these serious anymore. The player has, on the one hand, their expectations from reality, depending on their knowledge of the city Los Angeles and their knowledge of the displayed cultural elements. On the other hand, there is the game, with all its ironic and destructive comments on these elements, functioning like an additional layer of stories and ideas, shifting the original meaning toward a negative direction.

Most of the many references, be it through famous landmarks, or references through NPC's, cause the player to think quite cynical about these different aspects from American society, making the game something of a parody or satirical interpretation on American society itself. Like some sort of palimpsest, all these layers of stories and representations are being drawn over the elements which

30 GTA Series Videos (2013) *GTA 5 – Mission #24 – Three's Company [100% Gold Medal Walkthrough]*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cqie82TX0KY> (15-04-15).

31 GTA Series Videos (2013) *GTA 5 – Mission #52 – The Paleto Score [100% Gold Medal Walkthrough]*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3JG9LtE9pQ> (08-06-15): 6:35-7:04.

the player might recognise from American or western culture, constantly colouring these and infesting them with negative meaning.

Rather than being experienced as a dystopic place however, the structure of feeling which is being presented through the game, could instead be compared to that of a cynic, added with a lot of humour. By constantly receiving an overload of destructive views, the player will eventually become blasé and pass it all up with a shrug of amusement. The city is filled with strangers and freaks which are all equally ridiculed and superficial yet are all entertaining to watch. Because of this, it is hard for the player to take any of the inhabitants serious, giving shape to the city of Los Santos as some sort of anthology of all sort of weird specimens put together for the player's amusement. Furthermore, after meeting many of these people, and even sharing in many of the weird things, because the player is made to do them themselves during the many missions, they experience the city less as a city and more as a humorous caricature of one, filled with stories who confirm every possible ironic preconception of the city and its inhabitants.

3.5.- Images



Image 1: The Vinewood Sign.



Image 2: The character Jesse, respectively seen from third person and first person perspective.



Image 3: The side of a police stinger, showing the emblem of the Los Santos Police Department and their motto.

Chapter 4: The spatial practices

4.1.- Introduction

In this final chapter I will try to analyse the spatial practices in *GTA V*. Although a game space can be seen as a possibility space, the procedural rhetorics still influence the player's behaviour to a large extent.³² They nudge the player in a certain direction by shaping a specific environment, in which specific options are more useful or logical in specific type of situations. The representational space and the conceived space also influence the practices of the player, since the conceived space partially determines how the player can interact with city while the representational space influences how the player might feel about these different type of interactions. To structure the analysis of the many ways in which the player can interact with the game, I will make a distinction between the player's interaction with their surroundings and the player's interaction with other characters.

Before I start with the analysis of the spatial practices of the game, I will first mention the things which I have taken into account as the groundwork for my analysis. To analyse the spatial practices of the game, I have taken certain parts of the aesthetics of the game into consideration. Aesthetics are being described by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al as “all aspects of video games which are experienced by the player, whether directly – such as audio and graphics – or indirectly – such as rules”.³³ Rules influence what type of behaviour is encouraged and which types are less suited for the gameplay, both indirectly as directly. Geography and representation influence what kind of interaction is possible between the player's character and the surroundings.³⁴ Together, these could be described as the components of the overall procedural rhetorics of the game. While analysing the possible interactions with the surroundings and with the characters, I have taken these two components into account.

The distinction between “paidia”, unrestricted play or the urge to play itself and “ludus”, the use of practice and rules, is important here.³⁵ The possible spatial practices of the game depend heavily on the room which the game leaves the player to interact in the first place. Although a game like *GTA V* is an open world with a lot of room for the player to make their own choice, they are nevertheless limited in their actions by the rules of the game and specific properties of the geography and representations of the world. Both directly and indirectly, these will influence the actions of the player, and thus the spatial practices. Of course, it is possible for the player to adopt spatial practices which are detached or partially unrelated to the behaviour the game nudges the player to adopt. However, since that type of analysis would result in the description of possible glitches found within the game which leaves room for these other practices, and since these practices would therefore be paidia and thus highly subjective, I will focus on analysing the different spatial practices which derive from the game.

The story also plays an important role in the spatial practices, since a lot of these practices are being predefined by the activities in which the player is supposed to participate to complete the game. The player controls three characters who are trying to strike it rich by robbing banks. This means that the player is bound to experience situations in which a lot of violence occurs, clashing with the police and even the private army from time to time. Sometimes, when violence isn't an option, the

32 Bogost, I. (2008) “The Rhetoric of Video Games”, in: *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press: p. 125-128.

33 Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. et al. (2013) *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. New York & London: Routledge: p. 117-153.

34 Although the number of players is also mentioned as part of the aesthetics of a game, it doesn't play an important role in my analysis. Since my research is about the single player version of the game, it means that only one player can play the game, which makes this category unimportant to take into account.

35 Raessens, J. & Goldstein, J. (2005) *Handbook of Computer Games*. London: The MIT Press: p. 229.

player is tasked to outrun the police. These type of situations determine for a large part what kind of logic the player will adopt while he or she is being faced with these. Gradually, as I progressed further into the game, I noticed I got used to fighting with the police and escaping from them if necessary. This in turn, also affected the the type of behaviour I showed outside of these missions. I will first describe the spatial practices related to the interaction with other characters, followed by the spatial practices related to the interaction with props and the general environment.

4.2.- Interaction with other characters

4.2.1. Fight or flight

I will first analyse the different possible interactions which the player can have with the different NPC's throughout the game. This determines for a large part what types of practices the player can adopt. There are the predetermined actions which are dependent on the goals of the missions, and the type of actions which aren't dependent on anything but the whims of the player and the range options they have in their interaction. Although the game does offer a large variety of choice, this variety isn't present in the options for communication: this variety is present in the different possibilities in which the player can decide to deal with his or her opponents. All the possible interactions with NPC's in this game seem to be geared toward first creating an opponent and, once this is done, either fighting that opponent or escaping from it.

An important fact is that the player, unless they talk to a major character from the storyline, can only talk or communicate with other NPC's in a very limited way. When it comes to the main storyline and the missions related to it, all the dialogues are predetermined by the developers of the game. The player can only influence what type of dialogues get shown by picking a different approach in order to complete a mission or by picking different characters to aid them during these missions. Aside from these choices the player cannot influence the things the main character says during different situations. The only moment where the player can actually influence a conversation is when they try to interact with random NPC's in the city, such as the pedestrians, drivers or NPC's offering a service in a number of shops. Yet even here the actual influence of the player is extremely limited. When it comes to control over these conversations, the player can only choose when to interact with another character but the player cannot influence what is being said during this conversation.

While trying to communicate with these NPC's, no matter which kind, there are only two possible outcomes: the NPC runs away, or the NPC tries to attack the player. While starting a conversation, depending on which of the main characters the player uses, the player's character will first say several random greetings for the first few times. After a while the player's character will automatically start insulting the NPC he is having a conversation with. Depending on which district the player is in, as well as depending on the gender of the NPC, this character will either run from you, or start insulting you back, after which he or she will usually start attacking you. This way the game inevitably steers the player toward committing acts of violence. If the NPC isn't already attacking the player, it is usually the player who starts the fight, since being offended is more than enough reason for this. Very often I noticed that I simply started beating people up, just to see what kind of funny reactions they would give this time. From time to time, the main character is even taunting his victim before or after they are defeated, shouting things like "Ain't the American dream grand?" or "You know what, you should see a doctor for that shit".

4.2.2. Room for violence

What is more, because of the specific rules in the game, there is plenty of room for random acts of violence. Committing violent actions will eventually lead to the situation where the player has to flee from the police and after that somehow has to escape from the detection. Otherwise the police

will simply swarm the player in larger and larger numbers, making fighting back virtually impossible. However, within a certain timespan, the game allows the player to attack or even kill any character without attracting notice of the police, as long as the player doesn't use an automatic weapon and as long as this character isn't a cop. This means that the player can beat up anyone they like and wherever they want, without any negative consequences. It should also be noted that many of the inhabitants of the city carry cash on them, which they will drop upon defeat. Especially in the early stages of the game, money will be hard to come by. This in turn will make it even more profitable to start beating people up for their money.

Of course, with the chances of having the police chasing after you in overwhelming numbers, the chance of dying becomes more than a possibility. This would normally be enough to stop the player from committing violent acts, were it not that the death of player's character isn't nearly as prohibiting as it might sound. In fact the player's character can't exactly die. Once the character gets beaten up too badly or gets shot too often, the game time will gradually slow down while the word "Wasted" will be displayed on the screen, followed by a fade out. After that the player's character will simply end up in the hospital. The only penalty for this situation is that the player has to pay for their hospital bills. These bills are however only a small percentage of the player's total amount of money, with a maximum of \$5.000,-. Especially later in the game, when the player easily owns over \$20 million or more, defeat becomes only a minor annoyance. This is how the game both directly and indirectly nudges the player towards violent actions.

4.2.3. The main characters

An example of how the game nudges the player toward either fighting or fleeing could be a comparison between the three main characters (Image 1) which the player can choose to control. If we compare these three main characters with each other, we will see that the game once again steers or at least tries to nudge the player toward specific ways of playing with each of these characters, often involving either violence or fleeing. Franklin, Michael and Trevor each have different skills and abilities, making each character more suited for different situations in comparison. All three characters, once the player "unlocks" them during the progression of the game, have developed numerous statistics, excelling in some of them while others seem neglected. The possible statistics are stamina, strength, stealth, lung capacity, shooting, driving and flying (Image 2). Respectively, they determine how much distance a character can run before getting tired, how much damage their punches will inflict, how long they can hold their breath under water, how well they are at handling all sorts of weaponry, and how well they can drive a car or fly a plane. These statistics can be improved over time by doing activities related to these stats. All these skills seems designed to either fighting or fleeing from an opponent.

Furthermore, each character has one special ability which he can briefly use in order to gain an advantage in specific situation. This in turn also determines which method the player would use for each character to get out of a tough situation. Image 2 for example shows that Franklin has a highly developed driving skill. He also has the special ability to briefly slow time while he is driving a car, which increases his control over the vehicle, allowing the player to make sharper turns and giving the player a better chance to anticipate the traffic. This makes him well suited for escaping any ill situations by car, but since he lacks much experience in shooting, it makes him less suited for engaging his opponents. Michael on the other hand is very experienced in shooting and stealth, and has the ability to briefly slow time while he is shooting, allowing the player much more time to aim and pinpoint the enemy's weak-points before they can retaliate, allowing the player to quickly outwit their opponents, especially while they use stealth to sneak up on them.³⁶ Finally, Trevor has

36 Sly Shooter (2013) *GTA5 Five Star Police Station Massacre/Chase*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc-JuXtonpw> (01-06-2015): 1:10-1:35. In this video the player controls the character Michael. At this point in the

both high strength and shooting skills. This in combination with his special ability which dramatically increases his damage done and which makes him nearly invulnerable to any attacks, allows him to take out almost any opposition, even when he is heavily outnumbered. This makes both Michael and Trevor very suited for fighting with other characters and getting away with it.

4.3.- Interaction with the surroundings

4.3.1. Difference in corporeality

So far we have seen that the first set of spatial practices related to the interaction with other characters involves either fighting or fleeing. The other set of spatial practices are linked to the interaction between the player and the different objects or their surroundings. An important part of the player's interaction with their surroundings is our actual experience of space inside the game. However, because the experience of space is translated through the medium of a computer game, there seems to be a whole different system of sense.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we perceive and experience space with our body.³⁷ Because we have several senses we can perceive our surroundings. At the same time we know where our body is located within a space. This is called proprioception. Merleau-Ponty describes this by comparing the body to a compendium, consisting of the “body scheme” and “body image”.³⁸ The body scheme is the idea of the affordances of our body. The body image is the actual experience of our body during our actions. This combination of body scheme and body image allow us to do many things automatically, such as walking. However, both the body scheme and the body image are being disturbed through the medium of computer games. We no longer have a full idea of the affordances of our bodies, since we have to control our digital avatars with different controls. Neither do we have a body image, since we cannot directly sense the body of our digital avatar. This creates a difference in the experience of corporeality.

What is more, the narrative is told through this medium, and thus it is told in a particular way, dependent on the characteristics of the medium. Marie-Laure Ryan describes this in her text *On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology*.³⁹ Each medium has different channels through which a story can be told and has specific material or technological qualities which alters the possibilities in which a story can be told. The channels being used to translate the stimuli are sight, hearing and partially touch. This means that these senses are emphasised in the medium while the other ones are “switched off”.⁴⁰ Although this results in a whole different, generally more limited way of perceiving things, it doesn't mean that the player perceives this as a barrier.

Quite the opposite seems to be the case. The player can execute all sort of stunts and dared manoeuvres through the digital avatar without feeling or having to fear the negative consequences of it, exactly because of this change in corporeality. Finally being able to control our character, despite our lack of information of the body scheme and image, and making him perform all sort of actions gives a sense of euphoria. This in turn leads to much more reckless behaviour. This idea is

video, he briefly slows down time in order to have more time to shoot the police. Once activated, the player will hear sounds similar to the beating of a heart while some of the colour from the game gets removed, possibly indicating that the character is focussing, and time gets slowed down.

37 Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002) “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility”, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge: p. 112-125.

38 Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002): p. 113-118.

39 Ryan, M. (2005) “On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology”, in: Jan Christoph Meister, *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism. Mediality, Disciplinarity*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter: p. 1-24.

40 The game emphasises the sensory stimuli of sight, hearing and partially feeling. Smell and taste aren't being used at all. The stimuli of touch are also only partially translated, since the only way to give signals through this channel is by making the controller shake.

already expressed by Lori Landay in her text *The Mirror of Performance* as the exceeding of one's bodily limits.⁴¹ Because we see our character exceeding his bodily limits, we partly experience this for ourselves and try to constantly recreate these situations.

This behaviour seems to be actively encouraged by the gameplay, both directly through a range of various activities which the player can participate in, such as parachuting, stunt jumping, driving fast cars or flying planes and helicopters, as well as indirectly through the general layout of the city. There are ramps or other objects which can be used as ramps throughout the whole city and the game provides the player with ample of opportunity to use these. What's more, the player can unlock several paratextual achievement by doing stunts like these, meaning they will get a trophy once they complete several of these stunt jumps done by car or bike, or by flying recklessly under several bridges with a plane. This way the player is challenged to actively seek out dangerous situations like these.

4.3.1. Harder edges

Part of the spatial practices can also be seen as the result of the conceived space. The way in which the game allows the player to interact with the environment allows for certain types of behaviours, and makes certain of those practices more efficient than others. This once again nudges the player toward a specific style of playing the game. The most important elements which the player has to deal with during their interaction with the environment are so called edges and paths. Although these are “softer” they still force the player to adapt their way of transportation to them. Especially the edges can cause the player quite some trouble during the gameplay.⁴² Because most of the actions of the player will force them towards a confrontation with the police, they will have to navigate through the city in order to escape persecution. Although fighting can slow the police down in some occasions, it isn't really an option most of the time.⁴³ Since the game is designed in such a way that the player will eventually be swarmed by unending waves of police reinforcements, running and hiding is the only option to avoid defeat.

This is where the function of architecture becomes important in the spatial practices which the player will often adopt for escaping the police. Because escaping on foot is often an impractical option, many players will try to escape by car. However, many roads are surrounded by city blocks or other buildings which function as edged because no matter how small they are, be it a concrete or metal guardrail or a wooden power line, the player cannot ignore these.⁴⁴ As a result to this, the player needs to be constantly aware not to crash into one of these things, adapting their way of driving to these. When it comes to paths the player is encouraged to actively ignore the conventional paths such as the highways or streets, and adopt the practice of seeking alternatives to

41 Landay, L. (2012) “The Mirror of Performance: Kinaesthetics, Subjectivity, and the Body in Film, Television, and Virtual Worlds”, in: *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 51. S.I.: p. 129-136.

42 This can be seen in the Youtube video: MuffinNarwhalMafia (2013) *GTA5: Wasted!*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc-JuXtonpw> (01-06-2015). In between 2:54-4:30 when the player tries to steal a truck, he drives around the city, easily bumping cars out of the way with his huge vehicle. However, at 4:20 even this huge truck isn't enough to bump through a simple brick wall around a parking lot.

43 A player's wanted level is displayed in the top right corner of the screen, ranging from one to five stars. The higher the player's wanted level, the more effort the police will put in bringing the player to justice, going after him or her in increasingly high numbers. Although the player can easily escape the police at wanted level one or two, as that will only result in them being chased down by three or four police cars at the same time, wanted levels above three will result in the police sending in choppers and even heavily armed SWAT teams. An example of this can be seen during the Youtube video: Sly Shooter (2013) *GTA5 Five Star Police Station Massacre/Chase*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc-JuXtonpw> (01-06-2015).

44 Many of the things mentioned function as obstacles for the player. For example, whilst driving a car, the player is able to knock over lampposts, but he or she isn't able to knock over the poles of power lines or trees, even though these seem more flimsy or smaller than lamppost. The same goes for the guardrails. These are completely impenetrable, even while the player is driving a tank or shoots rockets at them, they will remain undamaged.

these, such as driving against the flow of the traffic on the wrong side of the road, using tight alleyways to escape, jump off bridges or use the many objects scattered throughout the city as ramps to change direction.

4.3.2. Fast cars

Another part of the spatial practices related to the interaction with the surroundings is the interaction with props. The most important props which the player is able to use in the city are the cars and weapons. The spatial practices which weapons encourage seem rather obvious. However, cars also evoke different kind of practices. An example of how the gameplay indirectly steers the player to adopt a certain way of playing the game, is through the control of cars. As the title of the game suggest, a large part of the game revolves around the stealing and owning of fast expensive cars. This is expressed through the gameplay by a number of means.

This is firstly through the fact that cars are present almost anywhere in the city. Since the player can steal any vehicle they want, this brings about a different logic regarding the player's attitude towards cars. In a normal situation, a car is worth more because some are more scarce than others. Earning money to finally buy an expensive car is quite the work, meaning the owners will be that much more careful with their new possession. In this game however, the player can steal any of them right off the streets, almost without negative consequences aside from risking an angry driver coming after them. Car-theft doesn't seem to have a priority for the police, since they will rarely try to arrest the player for the theft of a car.

Another way is through the increased sensitivity whilst controlling a car. When I first started playing this game, one of the tasks in the first “tutorial” mission, was to drive a car over the escape route to the supposed location of a chopper. However, I immediately noticed the difference in sensitivity of the controls in comparison to when making the main character move by foot. While walking, the player clearly need to keep the controller pointed to the desired direction in order for the character to move there. Whilst driving, a light tap is more than enough to make a sharp turn. What is more, in comparison to the other traffic, the control of the gas pedal seems oversensitive as well: as if the only option to speed up the car is to fully hit the gas. As I gradually started to get used to the sensitive controls while driving a car and didn't constantly bump headfirst into buildings, lamppost, or the other traffic, I started to display the same kind of behaviour one would normally condemn as irresponsible and antisocial behaviour in the traffic: constantly hitting the gas to the maximum and passing the other cars at high speeds, even in narrow roads, often grazing past the other cars, in order to reach my target. What's more, because of this high sensitivity, the player is much more likely to cause accidents in the traffic, or get annoyed by the other traffic, since everything seems to be getting in the way while driving at high speeds. These things once again nudge the player into adopting or exhibiting reckless behaviour.

4.3.3. Dramatic effects

Another example how this reckless behaviour is being emphasised and encouraged by the gameplay is through the music and cinematography. While the player is exploring the city by foot, the only things he hears is the talks from random by passers. He can also change the camera, causing it to pan or tilt around the character. However, once the player enters a vehicle, he or she has the option to turn on the radio. The player can also press a button which cause the game to randomly switch to different camera angles and shots, creating some sort of cinematic mode, making a ride through the city aesthetically more appealing thanks to this variation.⁴⁵

45 Carnage4907 (2013) GTA V my GF Trying to drive in Cinema mode. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xLTYOcxKnY> (01-06-2015): 0:00-0:50.

This changes the way in which the city is being experienced, generally adding a more dramatic effect to situations. This is of course dependent on the player's own choice, since they can switch off the radio or choose not to use this cinematic mode. However from time to time, the radio is being automatically used by the game to add an additional layer of meaning to the actions which the player is tasked to perform. For example, in one of the first missions, the player is tasked as the character Franklin to steal a fast car, and race it back to a certain location with his buddy. During this race through the city, the diegetic rap song "Appetite for Destruction" automatically plays on his car's radio.⁴⁶ In this song, the rapper sings about wanting to quench his thirst for murder and destruction, encouraging the player to get pumped up and perform dangerous manoeuvres in order to gain the upper hand in the race. Another example is when the player reaches a wanted level of at least three stars and is chased down by many police officers at the same time. During this situation, a non-diegetic music track will play, making a police chase aesthetically more enjoyable. This way the game once again steers the player toward reckless behaviour by rewarding them.

4.4.- Conclusion

In this chapter I tried to analyse the spatial practices as described by Henri Lefebvre in this computer game. Since the practices which the player is being able to perform in the first place are being defined by the specific aesthetics of the game, I first made the distinction between the interaction a player can have with the different NPC's in the game, and the interaction the player can have with his surroundings, in order to analyse the possible spatial practices in this game. Since the actions of the player are limited and often steered by the specific procedural rhetorics of the game, an analysis of the spatial practices seemed an analysis of the ways in which the different elements of the game seems to promote and nudge the player to adopt certain types of behaviour.

From the analysis of the possible interaction with NPC's, it seems that the game actively tries to steer the player towards violence. The only way in which a player can interact with others will almost inevitably lead to violence. Every other option which the player has after that seems geared toward the promotion of either fighting or fleeing from a created opponent. Even defeat is mitigated thus far that it isn't prohibiting at all. This promotion of violence seems to be even intensified by the representation of space. Because there are so many parodic stories to so many aspects of the city, it makes it easy to disrespect almost any character you see within the game. This in turn makes it rather easy to justify the violence with the argument "they had it coming anyway".

From analysing the possible interaction of the player with the surroundings, there were a few notable things to mention. First off, there is a whole different bodily experience of space, since the narrative is being told by a different medium. As Marie-Laure Ryan argues, each medium tells a narrative in a different way because of the difference in used channels and the difference in material and technological possibilities of a medium. This causes a change in the body scheme and the body image as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Because there is this different bodily experience, the player is more inclined to exhibit reckless behaviour. Lori Landay describes this as the pleasure of seeing the limits of a body being exceeded. This behaviour is in turn promoted through the different activities which the player can perform inside the game, making the city more like an adventure park or a digital playground.

46 GrandTheftRadioFM (2013) *GTA V Radio [West Coast Classics] N.W.A. | Appetite for Destruction*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dshV1Cadm3Q> (01-06- 2015).

4.5.- Images



Image 1: An image showing the three main characters which the player can control during the game. From left to right: Michael, Franklin and Trevor.



Image 2: An image showing the initial stats of each character at the time when the player first “unlocks” them. From left to right: Michael, Trevor and Franklin.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1.- Summary

I started this research with the question what kind of ideological views on the city are being presented in the computer game *Grand Theft Auto 5*. In order to analyse this game and answer this question, I choose to use Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad and Ian Bogost's theory on procedural rhetorics as frameworks to analyse the experience of the different spaces throughout the city, as opposed to a solely formalistic, reconstructive and technical analysis of the different structures within this computer game. My analysis of the relations between the conceived space, representational space, spatial practices and their ideological messages has lead me to the following conclusions.

5.2.- Conclusions for each chapter

5.2.1. Illusion of freedom

To analyse the conceived space of the city I used Kevin Lynch's theory on cognitive mapping to analyse the different elements of the city. Many of the elements which Lynch describes seems to change, since this game is only a representation of an actual city. Some of these elements become softer while others are being emphasised, depending on the situation. While exploring the city on an easy pace, the conceived space doesn't seem to hinder the player in the least. The edges soften up as the player has all the time to avoid or simply pass them, while the abundance of paths and the absence of nodes during traveling seems to provide the player with some sense of freedom. Although this make it seem as if the player can easily travel through the city, this illusion of freedom is often lambasted once the player actually tries to do something brash, which is often. Suddenly the whole conceived space of the city seems to be working against the player. Edges suddenly become omnipresent and the many paths seems to be blocked by other traffic. This gives way to an image in which the city seems friendly at first but in which the city can also be very oppressive and restrictive as well.

5.2.2. Violence and sensation

The game also seems to nudge the player into the direction of spatial practices relating to violence and reckless behaviour. Although the player has a sense of freedom because of the immense space he or she can explore, the way in which they can actually interact with either the other characters or the surroundings is fairly limited. All interaction with other characters seems to be geared towards first creating an opponent, which the player can then either confront or flee from. The change in corporeality and it's implications for the ways in which the player can thus experience and interact with their surroundings, seems to stimulate reckless behaviour. This is how the procedural rhetorics of the game create the image of the city as a playground, emphasising and encouraging violence and sensation-seeking behaviour.

5.2.3. Parody of society

However, this game isn't simply a glorification of violence. Instead of being a pastiche where violence gets glorified, the game also offers deeper layers of commentary on our society which makes it more of a humorous parody where violence and crime is only a part of a city which doesn't make sense in the first place. Aside from the described conceived space and spatial practices, the game seems to create a representational space by means of intertextual and interpictureorial references as well. To analyse these references I used the theories of Paul Claes' intertextuality and Udo Hebel's theory on interpictureoriality. From the analysis it appears that the game often comments on elements of contemporary western or American culture by means of a parody. Because the game adds so many layers of ironic interpretations of culture and of the city, yet offers no alternative, the city effectively becomes a parody on American society. The city and its inhabitants become a humorous anthology which attempts to show almost every negative preconception or stereotype.

All of this results in quite a cynical image of the city. The conceived space presents the city as seemingly free and open, yet at the same time it can become quite suffocating and restrictive. Distinctions between districts are more clear because their individual characteristics are being emphasised in the game, effectively dividing the city into different discourses, very similar to post-modern thinking about the different cultures. While the player enters and leaves these various discourses, the game will constantly give ironic commentaries on all of these discourses and its participants; portraying the participants as strangers and freaks, equally ridiculing their practices through the many parodies and ironic stories which are being added to or drawn over them. Gradually as the player progresses through the narrative, his characters even become an addition to the many strangers and freaks of the city, since the only way through which the players can express themselves, is through acts of crime and violence and by partaking in activities aimed at giving a feeling of sensation.

5.3.- Suggestions for further research

There are however a few implications about the methods which I used, which could be taken into account in further research on this subject. While using Lefebvre's spatial triad to analyse the different spaces inside the city, I think I made an affective analysis of the possible ideological images of the city which are being presented through this game. Although this theory is useful for analysing spaces and their meaning, it is perhaps less sufficient to analyse how these spaces are being experienced depending on the player's place in the narrative. This element of time could also be seen as a characteristic of computer games.

A computer game has a narrative through which the player needs to play, which means that narrative in a game is not only told through space but also through time. When it comes to the experience of a space, time is a category which isn't always taken into account in my argument. There are several plot twists inside the narrative of this game, as well as a myriad of different side stories which needs to be unlocked by the player, but which nevertheless add different layers of meaning to areas of the city. Once the player doesn't know about these stories, they will experience a space in a whole different way. Further attempts to analyse games, using methods similar to the one I used, could be more focussed on analysing the implications of certain points in time, related to the player's position within the narrative.

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