

HUMA Comprehensive Examination – English

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for Professor Darren Wershler

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**Question:** *To what extent does the philosophy and theory you have been reading about the function of the modern city (especially the metropolis) as medium provide you with a vocabulary to write about digital environments? What is missing from this body of work that you need to know? What do you think that your specific study of the digital metropolis (and, specifically, the digital Metropolis) will allow you to add to this body of work?*

“In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.”

Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: Washed Ashore**

In 1927 cultural critic Walter Benjamin began planning for a small collaborative newspaper article on the iron and glass arcades of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris. Believing the work would only take a few weeks to complete, he found that it soon blossomed into a rather larger project that ran through the Surrealist movement to experiment with techniques of collage in literature and history.<sup>2</sup> As time progressed, the work grew and mutated and grew again, and several related publications and seven years later Benjamin lamented in a letter to a friend that “not a syllable of

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, “Translator’s Foreword,” *The Arcades Project* (London: Belknap Press, 2002), ix-x.

the actual text” existed yet.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, what became *The Arcades Project* outlived Benjamin himself and remains incomplete at over 1,000 pages today. This legacy began its life intended as a short piece on the shopping areas of a city.

Close to 70 years after Benjamin’s passing and nearly 30 years after the initial publication of the collected *Arcades Project*, digital media scholar Michael Nitsche published *Video Game Spaces* in 2008. In his introduction, Nitsche warns that interactive media and “their most prominent and diverse representatives, video games,” have deeply unsettled traditional media theory.<sup>4</sup> Nitsche sees this disruption at its most pronounced in the environments of 3D game worlds, where games “stage our dreams and nightmares and seem to get better at it each year.” In what follows in the book, Nitsche makes a case that the fundamental quality of these environments is their ability to evoke narrative:

The argument here is that game spaces evoke narratives because the player is making sense of them in order to engage with them. Through a comprehension of signs and interaction with them, the player generates new meaning. The elements that are implemented in the game world to assist in the comprehension will be called “evocative narrative elements,” because they do not contain a story themselves but trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player. These processes can lead to the generation of a form of narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Nitsche’s book lays out a collected understanding of how video game spaces function from a narratological perspective. In fashion similar to the way the reader of *The Arcades Project* must cobble together the story of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century European city, Nitsche claims that the players of 3D

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces* (London: The MIT Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

games piece together large and small elements of the game narrative by inhabiting and interacting with the virtual environment. What's clear from looking at both works together is that as impossible a task it was for Benjamin to collage together a picture of *fin de siècle* urban life in Paris from archival materials, theoretical observations, and cultural commentary, it is similarly monumental for Nitsche to chart the growth and future of video game spaces by centralizing focus on player experience and generated narratives. Ultimately, Nitsche tells us, his work is to explore the new universe opened up by the introduction of the third dimension to games.

The fact, however, is that we've not just arrived at the shores of a brave new world; rather, we already live and work and learn and play here, and have done for some 20 years at this point. My project in this paper is to offer an expansion on work into digital worlds, and particularly the virtual, fictional, and transmedia city. I have begun by offering the examples of *The Arcades Project* and *Video Game Spaces* because they call to mind two extremely important caveats that must be stated before embarking on such a task: one, that such a work as trying to critique even a small section of a city is a project without end; and two, that while we may perceive the environments of video game worlds as entirely new, there's much we can learn about how to analyze these spaces from works on the spaces of the 'real' world. Taking a particular methodological approach or framing an exploration of our always-already-new homeland through a specific theoretical lens will only reveal to us a partial overview of the digital world, and in particular the digital city.

Instead, I propose to add to this body of work by employing a methodology developed as a strategy of tactics and by using a vocabulary developed from multiples sources on the nature of cities and circulation, both real and fictional. This paper will proceed to break down the stakes of these issues as I see them and the approaches to exploring and analyzing the city that I've

discovered through eight decades from which we can develop applications of practices and viewpoints to the digital, fictional, and transmedia environment as well. An overview of seminal writings on urban environments and a look at some of the current work on digital worlds will allow me to reveal both the gaps in these fields of scholarship and to propose areas where I may be able to intervene and further articulate and expand upon these bodies of work. The end result will not only constitute a literature review, but a host of methodological vantage points as well—vantage points perfect for surveying the land of these new environments that we've been inhabiting and learning to inhabit for years.

### **Towards a Strategy of Tactics**

Before beginning to turn our attention fully towards virtual worlds, it will help to parse out some methodological pointers for how to best engage with them so as to address gaps in current scholarship and uncover heretofore undiscovered and unconsidered aspects of game environments. An excellent way to start will be to turn towards several important thinkers who have considered humanities methodologies for approaching new media. This will clarify exactly what we mean when we discuss new media, and exactly what we mean when we discuss virtual worlds. At the heart of the issue of new media is the channeling of the past into the present. When Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan wrote that each communication channel codifies reality differently,<sup>6</sup> what they meant is that new media are new languages which in themselves do not seek to reproduce the traits of older languages, but instead reach back and bend those languages to their own rules in translation. For example, the written word produced the rules of grammar and pronunciation far more than the spoken word ever did. Then the book

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, "The New Languages," *Chicago Review* 10.1 (1956), 49.

came along and forced these rules into a structure of extended linearity and the concept of left to right rather than top to bottom, page turns rather than rolling down a scroll, etc. Next, newspapers came along and took the concept of linear written stories and forced them to exist in fields of simultaneity, with multiple stories occupying the same space and our eyes and brains trained to treat each of them in isolation—so it goes. Carpenter and McLuhan warn us, however, that official culture will always strive to force new media to do the work of the old<sup>7</sup> -- and this caution is key in identifying the pitfalls of analyzing new media: we are excellent at training our minds to look at objects in a specific way, and all the vocabulary that we prefer to use in describing and making use of those objects—even as we attempt to train our minds to observe those objects in a novel way—will tend towards older models not necessarily suited to the object in question.

This is exactly where a strategy of tactics can be useful. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, philosopher Michel de Certeau delineates methods in terms of colonialism and occupation. He identifies two ways of approaching conflict: strategies and tactics. A strategy is used by those in power, those with the resources to bend the environment to their will and impose conformity upon their surroundings—essentially, strategies are the realm of long-term plans. On the other side of things, those occupying territory owned by someone else (i.e. someone powerful) must resort to tactics.<sup>8</sup> Tactics are calculated actions determined by the absence of a proper locus; the space of tactics is the space of the other. “Strategies,” de Certeau writes, “are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>8</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36-37.

use, manipulate, and divert.”<sup>9</sup> However, de Certeau notes that although these transverse tactics remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstance, they are under no obligation to obey the law of the place, being neither defined nor identified by it. “In this respect,” he concludes, “they are not any more localizable than the technocratic (and scriptural) *strategies* that seek to create places in conformity with abstract models.”<sup>10</sup>

Not long after de Certeau originally published *The Practice of Everyday Life*, poet Charles Bernstein wrote an article that synthesized the methods of strategies and tactics together for us in poetics. Citing insufficiencies in authoritative poetics that sought to explain its objects rather than address and redress them, Bernstein advocated instead for a poetics “both tropical and socially invested: in short, poetic rather than normative.”<sup>11</sup> Such an approach, he stated, would allow for the employment of various paradigms—critics would be able to see where one paradigm would lead them rather than declare it “the way.”<sup>12</sup>

Taking de Certeau and Bernstein together, I can fully articulate my strategy of tactics methodology. While the academy occupies a position of extreme privilege, it’s not difficult to argue its weaknesses in attempting to observe and analyze non-normative objects within a discipline. Almost no academic discipline was founded and formulated with networked culture in mind (i.e. the excess of supermodernity that Augé describes—more on this shortly), or with the explosion and atomization of culture and media. The traditional discipline operates in terms of strategies, (privileging static objects and spaces), while tactics approach approach objects

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Bernstein, “Optimism and Critical Excess (Process),” *Critical Inquiry* 16.4 (1990), 837-838.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 839.

haphazardly but nimbly<sup>13</sup> (making it better suited to address rapidly appearing and disappearing culture objects). Bernstein even does us the service of relating this back to spatial considerations:

Maps—these schemata so many of us love to create—have their primary value as imaginary construction. Since art is not a fixed subject, it does not have a fixed group or series of objects, such as land masses, to chart. Our critical maps make various possible configurations soon real; it's almost as if the dynamic, shifting field of the works is frozen by our icy projections onto them. Potentiality is taken for actuality.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the established strategic gesture, a strategy of tactics relegates its results to the field of potentiality. This flexibility makes it counterhegemonic: It's about creating an account, not putting forward an explanation. In short, the strategy of tactics allows me to identify the way I would like to find myself theoretically and methodologically: adaptable based on the object that I attend. Because the realm of digital worlds is ever-evolving and no two are the same in the first place, such a methodology will prove extremely helpful in addressing them.

It's also important to take a moment here and acknowledge the limitations of my methodology and how they must shape my work. In most cases, the objects I study (digital worlds) are produced on a massive and collaborative scale. In many instances, they in fact bleed out to other media in print, film, stage; in these situations, my objects can't even adequately be termed "digital worlds," "virtual worlds," or "game worlds," but rather "transmedia worlds." Because of this, I must approach objects from an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) perspective, a framework developed and refined by sociologist Bruno Latour that functions by letting the relations between different elements reveal themselves before trying to dictate terms:

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<sup>13</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, "Optimisms and Critical Excess (Process)", 844.

...instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, ANT claims to be able to find order much better *after* having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed... The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst. This is why, to regain some sense of order, the best solution is to trace connections *between* the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy.<sup>15</sup>

This method relieves the tension identified by social scientists Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli when they write in their article “Technologies of Public Forms” that recourse to “meaning” as a semantic value disseminating between the original and its translation, or entirely lifted off the matrix of the original, “does not nearly do justice to the materiality of these cultural forms—let alone their disjunctive circulatory cultures.”<sup>16</sup> This beautifully put justification for the need to perform research in terms of relationships within a matrix of objects that circulate is clearly conciliatory with the strategy of tactics, as the approach already takes into account the shortfalls of aiming to create explanations rather than accounts. Furthermore, these issues are not new even if our perception of them is. In their book *Transmedia Archaeology*, media scholars Matthew Freeman, Paolo Bertetti, and Carlos Scolari observe that not only is transmedia itself contingent upon the alignment of multiple fields of media production (given how common it has become to theorize transmedia as part of the structures and organizational systems of the corporately converged and integrate media conglomerate<sup>17</sup>), but that such practices and requisites have been in place in popular culture since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—the difference

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<sup>15</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli, “Technologies of Public Forms,” *Public Culture* 15.3 (2003), 394.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Freeman, Paolo Bertetti, and Carlos Scolari, *Transmedia Archaeology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 40.



now being that we've moved from tightly serializing episodes day by day to longer and looser serializations of stories (allowed for by the ease with which we can now review older instalments through windowing practices, digital rentals, binge-watching, etc.<sup>18</sup>).

Mapping such fields is even more difficult when their production is not only collaborative, but also secret. While the rise of DVD-extras, online wikis and databases, and production blogs have given us excellent optics into the processes of single instalments in transmedia narratives or individual elements of media franchise networks, there are a dearth of *networked* production narratives available for our observation and study. In a 2010 article on transmediation and the tensions inherent in negotiating between the drives of fans and corporate producers, Suzanne Scott observes that the decentralization of large-scale transmedia production promised by owners is a kind of bluff of the participatory culture Henry Jenkins writes about in *Convergence Culture*:

What does distinguish commercial transmedia narratives from their unofficial, fan-created counterparts is their implicit promise to decentralize authorship and promote collaboration, both between creators in different mediums and creators and fans. While Jenkins stresses the decentralized or collaborative model of authorship these systems foster, he offers an important qualification that 'the most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control,' thus problematizing a reading of these systems as democratizing creative ownership.<sup>19</sup>

It's definitely hard to justify transmedia as democratizing when even Jenkins acknowledges that it functions most effectively when creative control is centralized. The main question here is: where is the modern transmedia franchise centralized? Who makes the ultimate decisions?

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<sup>18</sup> Freeman et al., *Transmedia Archaeology*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Suzanne Scott, "The Trouble with Transmediation: Fandom's Negotiation of Transmedia Storytelling Systems," *Spectator* 30.1 (2010), 30.

Because at some point, a bunch of players need to sit down at a table and work out a strategy, and in all likelihood there are more people on the 'business' side of the table than there are on the 'creative' side. Which is not necessarily a problem—we just need to recategorize and recognize the creative contributions of these new types of authors and authorities. So the political economies and licensing structures of conglomerated media actively work to obfuscate the strategies of producers. What tactics are then left to us to approach them?

Here, de Certeau poses a question that informs both my own strategy of tactics and my reasons for choosing to focus on worlds in the first place as my object of study: “[I]t remains to be asked what the consumer *makes* of these images and during these hours...the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends—what do they make of what they “absorb,” receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?”<sup>20</sup> This query speaks to the only way I can approach my objects of study: from the end user perspective. In networked cultural production, the nature of creative labour and authorship is warped and obscured by the fact of non-disclosure agreements and transmedia business strategies. The actual customs and practices of creation and control within a cinematic universe or videogame franchise may never be produced for public consumption unless a court order compels them to do so (to my knowledge few such precedent-setting wrinkles have thus far occurred). Because of this, we are only left with the actual product itself and the markers it gives us, both purposely and inadvertently, of its own creation. If we cannot learn who comes up with the ideas and holds editorial oversight from ethnography or official documentation, we must turn to the meta-documentation and paratexts of the cultural objects themselves. This is how we formulate possible answers to de Certeau’s question as it might apply to authorship, and it is our best hope of understanding how the nature

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<sup>20</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.

of authorship has changed in the wake of transmedia franchises. Knowingly or unknowingly, systems determine what data 'counts' in its use of language; consumers themselves produce only “indeterminate trajectories,” apparently meaningless and untraced because they fail to adhere to the constructed space they move through.<sup>21</sup> This itself is relatable to comments offered by Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli in “Technologies of Public Forms” where the authors observe that power-laden cultures of circulation demand transfigurations on the intelligibility and recognizability of texts, events, and practices.<sup>22</sup> So let us make tactical use of the data that the systems have determined do indeed count, the data transfigured into a state of intelligibility, in order to uncover what happens behind the scenes in the construction of vast narrative and ludological worlds.

### **Introduction to a Cartography of Supermodernity**

Now we have our methodologies and caveats in place, we can turn fully towards what modes of approach or novel vantage points can help in adding to the body of existing scholarship on digital worlds. While determining an embarkation point for this project is less a matter of choosing a starting marker than locating oneself on a map, an excellent place to begin is anthropologist Marc Augé’s 1995 book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. In this text, Augé not only gives name to our contemporary mode of being in culture—the epoch he calls supermodernity—but also identifies some of new environments of this era – environmental paradigms we can extrapolate to apply to game worlds and in turn identify some of the aporias of current scholarship on the subject. Augé positions supermodernity as an aspect of the

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<sup>21</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Gaonkar and Povinelli, “Technologies of Public Forms,” 395.

contemporary and the inheritor of postmodernity, and essentially characterized by overabundance:

This need to give a meaning to the present, if not the past, is the price we pay for the overabundance of events corresponding to a situation we could call ‘supermodern’ to express its essential quality: excess... We could say of supermodernity that it is the face of a coin whose obverse represents postmodernity: the positive of a negative. From the viewpoint of supermodernity, difficulty of thinking about time stems from the overabundance of events in the contemporary world.<sup>23</sup>

Augé breaks down this characterization into three primary causes: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and the individualization of references.<sup>24</sup> The concept of supermodernity helps us to reconcile the vast, networked digital milieus that define our media landscape today, and gives a title to the shifts in cultural production and consumption we’ve undergone, shifts which have simultaneously created new spaces for us to explore and demanded new forms of approaching them. It’s this very expansion and shifting of spatial parameters that Augé says creates what he terms non-places, expressions of the overabundance of space in the present.<sup>25</sup> Non-places are the liminal abstracted spaces of supermodernity: the grocery stores, highways, and sidewalks where we lose grasp of our sense of identity by focusing on the task at hand. Consequently, non-places designate two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends, and the relations that individuals have with these spaces:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

[T]he real non-places of supermodernity - the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge waiting for the next flight to London or Marseille - have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their 'instructions for use', which may be prescriptive ('Take right-hand lane'), prohibitive ('No smoking') or informative ('You are now entering the Beaujolais region'). Sometimes these are couched in more or less explicit and codified ideograms (on road signs, maps and tourist guides), sometimes in ordinary language.<sup>27</sup>

It's here that we find our first opportunity for intervention and application to both transmedia and digital game worlds, because such a concept begs the question: what are the real non-places of a fictional world? Does it tend to have such spaces? In literature or film, these may be the unimportant spaces of the background, or the simple descriptions of characters walking down a sidewalk. In virtual worlds—that is, game worlds—the matter may be somewhat more complicated. On the code level, a game's non-places may be load screens or start menus; on the procedural level, they may be the hallways players speed through as they move from one important room to the next (for contemporary games, these are the equivalent of load screens—they offer both a respite from action to the player and some cleverly disguised time for the game's processors to bring up the next open space). Certainly some game worlds are arguably made up mostly of non-places: Internet game spaces like Blizzard's MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) or Bungie's online-only FPS *Destiny* (2014) involve so much grinding that in some ways their entire environments are made up on non-places where no identity is built (save that of a drone performing a repetitive task), and the environment is optimized to afford both the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 96.

fulfilment of specific ends and challenges to and distractions from completing those ends. The questions raised by introducing the concept of non-places to digital worlds are innumerable, and offer a potential new take on the socialization that occurs in many online game environments. While much has been said about the revolutionizing possibilities of connection in virtual worlds like *WoW*, as they become richer and more detailed we might heed Augé's warnings about the effects of supermodernity on places. "This plurality of places," he observes, "the demands it makes on the powers of observation and description (the impossibility of seeing everything or saying everything), and the resulting feeling of 'disorientation,' causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through."<sup>28</sup> Being in non-places requires an abandonment of deeper reflective identity and self-identification processes; you are so much about the task at hand that you're relieved of other issues and aspects of yourself. In this mode, you neither preoccupy yourself with your own identity nor do you relate to others; instead, you experience a surfeit of solitude and similitude.<sup>29</sup> This is no different in the real world than in virtual environments and travels. As players, we often totally disconnect from our games as we move towards goals and interactions--consider all the design work put into the environments of a game like *Destiny* or *WoW* that are simply hurried through because the player doesn't want to hold up the group or find herself wandering unnecessarily. Even more telling is the fact that in such worlds, certain developers have been charged with putting tons of micro details into designing the environment, while others have been tasked with populating them with periodically respawning enemies, so that at times it becomes extremely impractical for the player to ever stop and take in the view.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 103.

Indeed, in the case of online-only game worlds, taking in the view is both discouraged and potentially extremely confusing, because the next time you log on you may not recognize the space you're inhabiting. This is because the world may have been remapped while you were offline, certain features added or discarded for whatever (obvious or unrevealed) reason the developers have determined is best. This fleetingness may even relegate all online worlds to non-places in Augé's view, as ephemerality and fluidity of identity are key features of non-places as he describes them:

The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places...a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it may be amenable...Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.<sup>30</sup>

Augé's project in *Non-Places* is explicitly anthropological, a practice he describes as always having been concerned with the here and now —“all ethnology presupposes the existence of a direct witness to a present actuality.”<sup>31</sup> If we take this in context with the digital world, where is the here and when is the now of ethnologies of virtual worlds? The book *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) offers some

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 78-79

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8.

insight here. In their handbook to performing ethnology in online spaces (and particularly playful game spaces), the authors stipulate that pretending to a “God’s eye view” of a world is impossible.<sup>32</sup> Instead, it is more helpful to focus in on individual interviews and the meta-data offered by chatlogs and interactions, meaningful exchanges over big data approaches of active users and aggregations of time spent in game.<sup>33</sup> In short, the authors advocate for an approach to game worlds that prioritizes the ephemeral and personally expressive as the here and now, rather than the overall design or statistics. This is an excellent user-centred approach to describing online culture in games, and offers methods for capturing exactly those fleeting moments in the larger game world as well—after all, the nature of a chatlog pop-up window and how it embeds into the game display is just as telling about the nature of an environment as that which is not peripheral, and responses in user communities to changes in the virtual world reveal a great deal about how that world functions in terms of geographical design and use.

Returning to Augé, however, raises questions about how effectively we *can* approach the ‘here and now’ of virtual worlds. Augé further takes apart the idea of anthropology as concerned with the here and now when the field’s actual practices are examined: he challenges that ethnology requires historical work, “concerned with the past and derived from the study of documents,”<sup>34</sup> and asks how an ethnology of the near (here) would operate in light of the field’s traditional practices, wondering if the facts, institutions, and modes of assembly and circulation specific to the contemporary world are amenable to anthropological scrutiny.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Augé remains

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 41.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, 9-10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



unconvinced that the continuity of a discipline is proportional to that of its objects<sup>36</sup>—a thought which brings us again to the usefulness of theoretical nimbleness and flexibility in charting digital worlds.

### **Space, Places, and Cities**

As if the terminological questions of this work were not complicated enough, here it is necessary to introduce a new term in order to articulate our next area of intervention in work on virtual worlds. Here we can find multiple writings on the nature of the city and how the individual circulates through it that we can usefully apply to explorations and studies of digital environments. Turning back to de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* he breaks down that *place* is designated by urban planners and architects and so forth, which is then transformed into *space* by the people who use it (the animation of these places by the motion of a moving body). Space is the frequentation of place; created by the movement of the traveller but also the movement of the landscape through the traveller's perception, movement always later sorted into glimpses and snapshots, like photos from a trip.

It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these think or thing curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of route miss what was: the act itself of passing by...[t]he trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property the the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>37</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

This is an opportune point at which to introduce Guy Debord's Situationist concept of the *dérive*, an activity that allows for novel explorations of seemingly familiar geographies. "A *derive*," Debord writes, "is a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll."<sup>38</sup> So *dérives* constitute activities that transform place into space—this is where the user's *use* of a digital world impacts upon the already constructed reality planned by developers. Debord cautions that chance is *not* the underlying principle of the *dérive*. Instead, it's about using the environment to augment and guide your movements, so that the contours of the space become more apparent. How does the geography and design work on us psychologically? What are the principles of design in space that not only regulate, but also subtly suggest and invite and cajole, various types of circulation?<sup>39</sup> If we choose to apply this practice to digital worlds, there are many insights that we can reveal about how these places are constructed and how exactly we transform them into spaces as users. For example, Debord maintains that a *dérive* is less powerful when performed individually—it is at its strongest when practiced collaboratively.<sup>40</sup> What does this say about the possibilities of *dérives* through virtual spaces, which are often single-user experiences? What about a *dérive* of a *Minecraft* server, where several people can move together, but more importantly where there's less a sense of urban planning? In these spaces, everyone is an architect and a builder, but they're not necessarily working together, and probably not regulated by rules about the types of building they can do or how they design the spaces together. Already, we can see the strong potentials of

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<sup>38</sup> Guy Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

taking Situationist practices designed for the real world and applying them to games, as well as the multitude of vagaries and idiosyncrasies different kinds of game worlds afford.

De Certeau offers his own ways of critiquing cities by moving through them as well. “The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it,”<sup>41</sup> he says, a desire to realize the transformation of the urban *fact* into the *concept* of a city.<sup>42</sup> This urge gives birth to the map, a plane projection totalizing observations. De Certeau contrasts the map with the idea of the tour, which, rather than falsely claiming the total knowledge of a God’s eye view, itinerizes the city as a discursive series of operations.<sup>43</sup> Like Debord, de Certeau’s antidote to combatting the false knowledge of the map is realized through walking, the best way to perform a tour of an environment, which selectively actualizes potentialities effectively:

[T]he walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory). He thus makes a selection. ‘The user of a city picks out certain fragments of the statement in order to actualize them in secret.’<sup>44</sup>

This concept of the tour is again an effective and revealing way of exploring and analyzing game worlds. The virtual and fictional map is usually devoid of those names that mean the most for navigation, that is, the names of streets and intersections. A videogame map organizes the player spatially in terms of landmarks and waypoints, interaction opportunities and directional markers.

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<sup>41</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

A real map organizes the traveller in terms of street signs and one-way arrows, traffic lights and roundabouts. In terms of the tour, the real-world pedestrian or motorist relies far less on landmarks than on house numbers and street signs; without these types of features they would be entirely lost. The player, on the other hand, couldn't care less about the absence of a street sign on every corner; both their forms of navigation and circulation and their goals are completely different. This is in perfect harmony with de Certeau's views on subversive approaches to urban spaces, where study of the minutiae of the environment helps counter the all-consuming strategic view of the map:

Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse the upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay. One can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization.<sup>45</sup>

But what do videogame tours look like? Certainly they cannot be identified as playthroughs or walkthroughs (those paratexts found at sites like Twitch or YouTube)—these objects focus largely on non-spatial actions. Does this then mean that increased mastery over a space (which most games afford to the player as they progress through activities and increase in power by

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 96.

leveling up) call for different sets or types of directions and directives? Maps have come to obscure the processes by which they are produced; stories about spaces (tours), on the other hand, describe the operations that allow them.<sup>46</sup> This is true in fictional spaces as well: think of the opening up of the map in an *Assassin's Creed* game--nothing remains afterwards to exhibit the tasks you undertook to reveal those spaces. These questions have in fact been raised before: in a 2011 conference paper, Darren Wershler describes the *Assassin's Creed II*'s player's tendency to articulate Renaissance era Italy in terms of both the overhead map and the ground-level walking tour, with neither functioning to complete the picture without the other.<sup>47</sup> However, much remains to be discovered and discussed in this area, including the observation that game world maps leave no traces of the processes by which the player reveals them—this is true of not only franchises like the *Assassin's Creed* series, but more recent releases like 2015's *Batman: Arkham Knight*.

### **Mediating the City**

Clearly, the introduction of concepts like *dérives*, tours, and maps opens up many questions and possibilities for studies of virtual worlds. When we add to this exploration a view of cities themselves as mediums, we can find even more concordance with the city as mediated through digital technology. In their article “The City is a Medium,” media scholars Friedrich Kittler and Matthew Griffin identify the metropolis as allegorical for computational technologies on a number of levels, all of which reduce the processes of the urban environment to knowledge exchanges:

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>47</sup> Darren Wershler, “Walking in *Assassin's Creed*” (paper presented at Experiencing Stories With/In Digital Games, 24<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Entretiens Jacques Cartier, Concordia University, Montréal, October 2011) 3.

What strikes the eye of the passerby as a growth or entropy is technology, that is, information. Since cities no longer lie within the panopticon of the cathedral or castle and can no longer be enclosed by walls or fortifications, a network made up of intersecting network dissects and connects the city—in particular its fringes, peripheries, and tangents, regardless of whether network transmits information (telephone, radio, television) or energy (water supply, electricity, highway), they all represent forms of information.<sup>48</sup>

Taken in this way, all metropolises are already primed for application to their fictional counterparts. For example, Kittler and Griffin equate railway stations and addresses with data that allow other data to appear. We can draw a parallel between these real-world insights and the nature of fast-travel points or warp tunnels in games: they locate and determine formats of exchange, serving as that very data which allows other data to appear. Fast-travel points also serve both the purposes and practices of railways and addresses: once the player (or citizen) enters them as a command, she is directed to a new named point on the map and in the meantime held in a sort of stasis, carried along by the data (railway cars) in limbo. Here we also find another connection between the theory that dictates the strategy of tactics methodology and the truth behind digital worlds as an object of study: underneath all our considerations lies the importance of circulation. In an entire essay ostensibly on cities, Kittler and Griffin primarily focus on transportation and circulation. Circulation is *key* to the city—both the city inhabited by real people in the physical world and the fictional city of gamespace. Circulation defines cities, just as it complicates cities.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Kittler and Matthew Griffin, “The City is a Medium,” *New Literary History* 27.4 (1996), 718.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 727.

To this rich and complex mix we can profitably add the thinking of Michael Foucault on heterotopias. In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault says that the contemporary era is defined by the same notions of space that de Certeau writes about as delineated from place:

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.<sup>50</sup>

Foucault’s belief that contemporary space is perhaps not still entirely desanctified gives way to his descriptions of heterotopias, spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meets the eye. They are those spaces of both liminality and crisis, somewhat akin to the non-places described by Augé, but different in that they are not necessarily spaces that call for us to ignore our own identities. Indeed, heterotopias can actively call for deeper examinations of ourselves and the world around us, as they include places like old-age homes and cemeteries, which call to mind issues like the sacred and mortality.<sup>51</sup>

So what then are the heterotopias of digital worlds? On one level, we could argue that all digital worlds are essentially heterotopias, as their representation belies their status as constructs of code. This, however, is less useful to us when we remember that our examinations are optimal when we prioritize the end-user experience. If we follow this track, then what heterotopias can be uncovered by casual explorers or players in a game? Perhaps those symbolic levels of games are well suited to thinking in terms of heterotopia—for example, areas of a map in an instalment

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 22.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

of a game series that may conjure up the relationship that game has to other episodes in the franchise?

With this example I have already begun to make headway into explorations. The earlier-mentioned *Batman: Arkham* series, for example, utilizes aspects of the same map over and over again throughout its chapters—a subject I have discussed before in other venues.<sup>52</sup> In the context of the 2013 WB Games Montréal game *Batman: Arkham Origins*, the worldmap of the game incorporates the map of the series previous entry, the 2011 Rocksteady Studio work *Batman: Arkham City*. This re-envisioning of the environment of the game shuffled specific landmarks and addresses of the map while retaining the types of conflicts the player could encounter at the original points on the geography, lending the locales an air of recent nostalgia while offering novel experiences to the spaces. These constitute for the observant player the same kinds of heterotopias Foucault describes, as playing and exploring evoke thoughts of the work's larger relationship to its surrounding culture and the dialectical connection between the Old and the New (more on this shortly).

We can even finally find inroads for the study of digital worlds in other seemingly unrelated writings on transmedia by drawing out correspondences between the concept of a storyworld and a game world. In a chapter in the anthology *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions*, American Studies scholar Daniel Stein describes the immersiveness of connected transmedia narratives in spatial terms, defining these qualities as constituent of immersive story worlds that offer “rich space[s] for interaction among the producers of a text, the text itself, and its

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Kalervo A. Sinervo, “Mapping Gotham: Layering and Transmedia in Batman’s Fictional City,” *First Person Scholar* (2015), [firstpersonscholar.com/mapping-gotham](http://firstpersonscholar.com/mapping-gotham)



recipients.”<sup>53</sup> Can we take this concept of immersive story worlds and apply it instead to games, as immersive play worlds? In doing so, we might also factor in familiarity of mechanics within and sometimes across franchises, styles of challenges (types of boss fights, for example), and so on. Take for example Nintendo’s long-running series *The Legend of Zelda*. This franchise has spawned nearly 20 games across a half dozen platforms in its main series, only one of which is a direct sequel (2000’s *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* for N64). In these games, there’s not a real continuation of story, but rather a constant rebooting, each of which offers a different view of the land of Hyrule in which the series takes place. However, the unfolding of the narrative of the game always follows a familiar track, and familiar points on the map sometimes appear as ruins of a space encountered in a previous instalment (in 2002’s *The Wind Waker*, for example, Hyrule is covered in ocean, with cities and villages becoming islands that the player can travel to, but shrunken as only their highest points are above the waterline). Though perhaps the example of *Zelda* games poses a challenge to the idea of immersive game worlds, or at least a necessary mutation: after all, the main inconsistency between *Zelda* games is the mechanics. How is our approach to these games as nodes in a matrix complicated by alterations in the way users are able to explore and overlook the map? Much like in instances of transmedia licensing, the lore of *The Legend of Zelda* is simply skinned over whatever new mechanic is required to make the game a novel experience for a new platform or returning audience. The flipside of this dynamic is game series like the Traveller’s Tales-produced *Lego* games, where different lores from different media properties are skinned over a consistent mechanic (the action-adventure beat-em-up/puzzle/construction styles signature of almost all *Lego* games). Though different

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Stein, “Spoofin’ Spidey—Rebooting the Bat: Immersive Story Worlds and the Narrative Complexities of Video Spoofs in the Era of the Superhero Blockbuster,” *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 235.

franchises operating through the Danish toy company's aesthetic and cutesy tongue-in-cheek may have different agendas to further, all go through the filter of the same play style, resulting in multiple worlds connected by a singular mode of exploration. As should be clear by now, the more examples we call up for examination, the more complications we encounter in mapping digital worlds and how users circulate through them.

### **Everything New is Old Again**

Through a dextrous methodological approach adroit at adapting itself to the objects it attends, it's clear that many new areas of inquiry become available in the investigation of digital worlds. Allowing the objects to lead us where they may and avoiding the myopia of a traditional overarching theoretical framework takes us to exciting new places when trying to locate the operations and potential insights of a fictional geographical plane. Some of our richest observations certainly derive from the treatment of digital worlds as the urban playgrounds of cyberspace and contemporary culture. But what commonalities can we identify, even from the preliminary work performed here? The trend thus far identified in schematizing digital worlds sees us return again and again to conceptions of novelty and familiarity—either the seeking out or avoidance of one or the other. In his book *Organs without Bodies*, Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek offers a commentary on the dialectical relationship with the Old that allows for the production of the new. In Žižek's view (and indeed in the view of all Marxists, Žižek tells us), the only things 'New' are the things that have been dragged out of the past and given a new materialism.<sup>54</sup> This commentary ties together a number of the thinkers looked at in this paper and some yet to be discussed. To begin with, the concept of a dialectical relationship between the Old

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<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 101.

and the New echoes thoughts expressed by Augé in *Non-Places* about how one of the conditions of supermodernity is the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it.<sup>55</sup> Supermodernity involves a catching up of history to the present, where the old is made into a specific spectacle (something supermodernity does with all exoticism and all local particularity).<sup>56</sup> Putting these two observations in context with one another makes us question the acceleration of history while also wondering just how old the elements of the past composing the new truly are. Both this catching up of history and this production of the new by recapitulating the old are perfectly suited to our current transmedia moment, which seeks to play on both nostalgia and novelty in all its executions. As we hasten towards exciting new release dates for games and films that promise both fidelity to the decades-old stories and properties they derive from and innovation to bring in new audiences in a principle of radical inclusivity, we can see how everything old is new again before it even has the chance to grow old naturally. This connects us again to the ephemerality of the online virtual world, where an evening offline may see the player wake up and log on to a new day where the maps have literally been redrawn. This, in essence, is the very nature of contemporary media production in the excess of supermodernity. In *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, economist Joseph Schumpeter distinguishes that the fundamental mode of late capitalism is one that creates through obliteration: “The process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term,” he writes, “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.”<sup>57</sup> So modes of capitalism are constantly being destroyed by newer modes of

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<sup>55</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, 75.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 83.

capitalism. Does this mean that the one marker of capitalism is that it has to favour centralization rather than diversification? If so, the democratizing promises of transmedia are almost certainly a bluff, and the outlook on the persistence of any given corporate-controlled digital environment (which is most of them) is decidedly bleak.

In any event, the relevance to my project is that it functions the same way that modern transmedia does. The preoccupation with continuity is a residual trace of our old obsessions. The new form of transmedia life is characterized by processes in which the old is discarded (or at best coexists with) the new in terms of content. The 'primary' text is whichever is currently selling best, and continuity's and canonicity's importance is rapidly on the decline. Here is where we identify the urgency of finding new ways to explore virtual worlds. The landscapes of digital cities are the battlegrounds of culture in supermodernity, and only by both turning our attention towards them and revolutionizing our methodologies will we gain any ground in understanding how we circulate and create meaning in contemporary culture. Our history is hastening towards us and we actively work to deconstruct it, and in the meantime entire worlds rise and fall, unnoticed and unstudied. At this point, we can conclude with a comment from communications scholar Jonathan Sterne: "They are already not the history they described, and so it is up to us to find linkages across documents, registers, genres, and problems to give history meaning and intelligibility for ourselves and our readers. To refuse the act of interpretation is to become an instrument of an inchoate world we project back onto our sources; to refuse interpretation is a double *impensé* because it requires an imaginary positivism, or perhaps an equally fantastic transcendental idealism. In the act of interpretation, we think transversally."<sup>58</sup> All we need do is

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Sterne, "Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History," *The Communication Review* 13.1 (2010), 86.

apply this thinking about history to objects still alive and in circulation, and we should always be able to find ourselves on the map.

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