

The Disciplinary Architecture of Videogame Houses

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INTRODUCTION

Within videogames, as in our own everyday lives, houses and places of residence often figure centrally. Their reasons for appearing in game environments include to offer players and their avatars sites of virtual rest, regeneration of avatar attributes and resources, access to narrative content, and interaction with extraludic functions (saving and loading game states, for example). A critical difference between the virtual homes of avatars and the ‘real world’ homes players inhabit is that, typically, players have no input into the aesthetic, architectural, cultural or political substance of an ingame residential space. Rather, game designers, developers and sometimes even procedurally-generating algorithms and engines act as architects and builders of these virtual spaces, and build them to suit their own purposes rather than those of the inhabitants’.

We argue that virtual homes are sites that act to discipline and control upon players and to shape their behaviour within gameworlds. Westerside and Holopainen’s notion that *gameplace* – specific locations within broader gamespaces that evoke meaning – guides this argument, as it draws attention to the ways such virtual places both reflect and engender site-specific performances by players (2019). We also draw from Michel Foucault’s critique of *panoptical* environments – a term drawn from the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s discussion of prisons designed for omnipresent observation of inmates, which came to represent for Foucault capitalistic systems of networked power. In the ludic houses studied, players are persistently and invisibly surveilled by the gaze of the game’s programming and artificial intelligence engines. Foucault observes that the primary effect of the panopticon “is to induce ... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1995, 201). The architectural affordance of such monitoring power works to “transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them” (Foucault 1995, 172). Building on this idea, and analysis by Tom van Nuenen of the logics of procedural surveillance deployed in *Dark Souls* (2016), we consider how the panoptical experience of these houses works to normalize, and co-opt players

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into endorsing, the cycles of control and behavioural management undertaken by videogame systems.

With Foucault's observations in mind, we conduct textual analysis of three videogame texts and illustrate the disciplinary nature of the architecture of their virtual homes. In each case study we find distinct illustrations of the variety of ways videogame systems are able to exercise their algorithmic power over avatars and users. In the survival horror title *Sweet Home* (Capcom 1989), the architecture of the titular home explored by players reinforces the dialectics of power and powerlessness that Tanya Krzywinska argues lie at the heart of ludic fear (2003, 13). In the vast open world of *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 1999), the home of avatar Ryo Hazuki serves a crucial venue for inducting players into the game's expectations of virtual, routinized everyday life. Finally, encampments, hotel rooms and cabins in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios, 2018) are demonstrated as spaces of bodily control, impressing upon players and their virtual stand-ins the game's broader thematic concerns surrounding the collapse of legitimacy of the figure of the cowboy's particular construct of muscular, colonial masculinity.

Considering the close cognitive, physical and sensorial entanglement between player and avatar (Keogh 2018, 19–50), the influence of these patterns of algorithmic power inside such videogames cannot be presumed to terminate with the fictional avatar. How the player's own body might be guided by these efforts at avatarial discipline, and the relationship between the *gameplace* of their virtual homes and the setting of their own physical play context stand are critical questions this analysis raises. Foucault himself reminds us that, in effect, all spatial design effects some form of control and that there is no potential for the 'liberating' design of environment, since "liberty is a practice" (1984, 245). As such, we also address the relationship between physical and virtual bodies and homes as a circuit of power relations in which players might act to *resist* the architecture of discipline and control in videogames.

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