

## DOUBLE CITIES – REREADING THE REAL-LIFE METROPOLIS BEHIND THE SCREEN

Spiros Papadopoulos<sup>1</sup>, Angeliki Malakasioti<sup>2</sup>

1: Department of Architecture  
University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece  
e-mail: spap@uth.gr, web: <http://www.arch.uth.gr>

2: Department of Architecture  
University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece  
e-mail: malakasioti@uth.gr web: <http://www.arch.uth.gr>

### Abstract

This paper reflects on the relationship between video games and the urban environment. More specifically, it focuses on the representations of existing cities, or features of them, in video game environments, and the way experiencing these environments during gameplay, is capable of stimulating a hybridization process. This process is seen as an emergent phenomenon of our culture, and, at the same time, a promising educational tool, leading to a series of concepts about digital cities that often accrete on the image of real-life metropolises.

**Keywords:** video games, architecture, urban landscapes, representation, digitality, education

## INTRODUCTION

*“What strange phenomena we find in a great city,  
all we need to do is stroll about with our eyes open.  
Life swarms with innocent monsters.”*  
(Baudelaire, 2009)

The notion of the city has always mirrored the cultural qualities of today and the ambitions of tomorrow. And this notion is constantly changing, sweeping along its image, its activities, even the life of its own citizens. Every day passing, we delve deeper into a technological era. And on their turn, technological developments have catalyzing effects on the urban environment, to such an extent, that, in many cases, when a new technological breakthrough is introduced, reality appears to overcome fiction. Furthermore, with every step of technological advance, futuristic scenarios of the past come to fruition. While, cities are transforming in a plethora of levels, new modes of urbanism are introduced, redefining the ‘feel’ of our urban experience.

At the same time, video games nowadays are also an emergent and well-settled cultural phenomenon themselves. They form an influential and contemporary sociocultural practice, nurturing generations of gamers -therefore citizens- that have spent lots of hours hovering in the digital realm. They are an equally, ever-shifting expression of digitality, as they implement the latest technological advances. And this is one of the reasons that make them an indubitable economic force (Stamford, 2013). Fiction, in this context, constitutes an inextricable aspect of their design. Contemporary video game design can go further than the mere representation of space. It can communicate ideas, identities, symbolisms, and other elements of a narrative process.

All these aspects are what make video games a growing area of pure potential and academic study. Especially when focusing on urban representations in video games, they are seen as a really contemporary tool for exploring the mediated experience of the city. The mediated worlds of video games and the real-life cities, when brought together, are capable of forming new emergencies, that add up to our experience of the urban environment. When these mediated worlds represent existing cities, a ‘composite’ situation appears, where the act of composition essentially resides in the human experiential realm, and consequently, in the conceptual one.

## BLENDING

A sense of ‘hybridity’ comes up. With the experience of every virtual real-life city, sperms of hybrid emergencies seem to sprout. Real city simulations in ‘gaming’ environments give birth to new dimensions of urban experience. The already known urban realms, that usually come in the form of a metropolis - a significant and influential place in the world, a considerable economic or political hub, and at the same time, an outstanding cultural centre or urban area - appear to evoke a whole new series of spatial qualities that append to their existing image.

The player of those simulated environments encounters those cities in many different manners: the city can be either experienced as its exact three-dimensional copy, or as a more abstract representation of its image, or even as a single locus, a well known location, a building, a monument, or anything else that gives away a recognizable urban identity. Whether it is about a carefully

reproduced duplicate, or about an abstract and nearly elusive 'touch' of the city's character, the gaming experience is itself a contemporary hybridization process that takes place individually, through the player's, as well as the citizen's, point of view. "Experiencing a city is more than a matter of physical action or awareness. A city is a play with presence and non-presence. The city is around me, above me, under me, in me. I am the city." (Van Houtum et al., 2001) New York or London citizens will never be the same after having been chased in a street pursuit, or after having survived from a bunch of alien invaders. In other words, after having experienced their city in an other way, during a fictional mission behind the screen.

So, hybridity, in this case, brings together the two distinct spheres of the physical and the virtual. Besides, this is an already existing phenomenon of our times, since the line between the two seems to blur more and more with the passing of time. Additionally to that, locative-based media have attempted to do the same in the reverse way, to bring the game experience out to the streets of the physical world. These two entities, each with its own differentiated spatial qualities, seem to open up a wide range of novel urban conditions, and with them, a wide scope of theoretical issues, enriching, as a result, our current understanding of the city. The result is a more dynamic and fluctuating experience of the urban realm, the impact of which can be narrowed down to a series of arguments concerning its relationship with the digital sphere.

#### **COMMON GROUND**

A communicative channel opens between the two. As Neil Leach explained: "if the analog model of the city follows certain logics of development that are commensurable with the operations of digital computation, then digital simulations can offer certain insights into the behaviour of the physical city" (Leach, 2007). But one can observe that this is already happening, since "the global fantasy architecture of places like Dubai, Shanghai and even the new London skyline, elasticating the limits of spatial feasibility, seems to have been pulled direct from the digital realm" (Hoard, 2014). Furthermore, any idea of a smart, augmented and always connected city, constitutes a former futuristic fantasy, a desire for what Adam Greenfield calls 'everyware' (Greenfield, 2006) [bringing together the notions of 'everywhere' and 'software'], the everyday use of ubiquitous computing, location-based media and other digitized forms of social presence.

This model of human-computer interaction has been deeply integrated in the latest generations' culture, reshaping the understanding of the city. Video games affect people, the exact same way "photography, cinema, print, and advertising have trained our senses to experience modern life through images." "...Visuality is integral to our knowledge and practice. It is thus that the image of the city imperceptibly becomes the imagined space in which we live. Visuality saturates the symbols, values, and desires that make up urban society as an imaginary institution." (Prakash, 2010)

Besides, and with this as their experiential inventory, video gamers are offered the ability to experiment with countless possibilities of urban presence. And these playful scenarios can be afterwards acted out on the real streets, as if placing themselves within a suspended narrative of the game. This narrative extends to include real life this time. It blends past and present experiences, 'injecting' a dose of fiction in one's own every day civic life.

The power of video games to reshape our urban experience also resides in the fact that they constitute a social practice. At the same time, they also encourage the understanding of social practice. Games like Sim City for example, "depict social bodies as complex dynamic systems"

(Squire, 2002). Every action requires a socio-cultural context, and gamers that have immersed themselves for hours, for example, in a fictional version of New York, they have entertained, and at the same time, educated themselves in a particular manner.

And if one is talking about gamers that are to become architects or urban planners, the sense of challenging, imagination, curiosity or adventure seems to get critically and yet productively engaged in the process of design. In the context of architectural education, video games are regarded as a revolutionary tool that evolves along with technological advances and which can be related with all stages of design, including narrative creation, architectural composition, as well as issues about spatial perception. James Paul Gee also referred to the “goal-driven problem space” (Gee, 2008) in games which awaits for an answer, similarly to architecture. In other words, the architect is asked to define the conditions of a ‘game’, which means to direct the spatial experience itself. In any case, the process of design, either it is related with games or cities, is in effect a determinative factor of the formation of urban spatial experience.\*

## **DOUBLE CITIES**

All those digitally replicated metropolises, or even the fragments of them, have the ability to form the vessel for a whole new series of events to take place. Races, murders, love affairs, mysteries and destructions can sprout in places that one might already be familiar with. The narratives taking place in both physical and virtual cities sometimes might seem to blend. And some other times, they deviate a lot from each other. Games imitate reality or sometimes deny it, but in any case, they seem to draw inspiration from the existing cities.

Real city simulations in video games are the result of a mimicking process - the creation of a copy, a process of generating a duplicate, an echo of an existing city in digital space. It is important to note that mimicking is a deeply inherent learning process. The real-life cities are ‘reloaded’ in the video game environment, they are turned on and off according to the player’s will. And every time, they serve a purpose, the perfect backdrop for a fictional narrative, the background of an imaginary story in which the player wants to immerse. This looks like the feeling of delight Italo Calvino was talking about: “You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours” (Calvino, 2013). The response one could say to your own expectations.

This looks like a second chance – a second city with an alternate narrative, the creation of a parallel, uncanny ‘double’, which acts as the ‘other side’ of Alice’s mirror, as a virtual wonderland (Carroll, 2010). These ‘remade’ virtual cities are not only a mere shift of their image, a mere displacement of our point of view. They are, in essence, the birth of a double, codified version, an augmentation of the city in the digital world. As Jean Baudrillard describes, the double “is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again...” (Baudrillard, 1994). This ‘double’ proves to be not only a conceptual prosthesis, but also a reflection which is mirrored back to its viewer in the form of a new altered image.

## **URBAN SAMPLES**

Contemplating on a series of examples of those digitally replicated cities, various observations seem to sprout. Some of them recurrently appearing, and some more extraordinary or unique, they both

form the stimulus for a variety of concepts concerning the experience of the urban landscape. Every “category of thought” concerning the represented city, “designates a space produced by the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication, and so forth” (Donald, 1999). These concepts seem to introduce novel modes of urbanism, that usually emphasize on one specific characteristic of the real-life city, and translate it in an alternate spatial vocabulary. As a result, this new vocabulary, as well as any spatial issues that are brought forward with this discussion, are regarded as a promising, innovative tool that can be used for educational purposes, either it is game rhetoric or architectural education.

An initial observation is related with the fact that replicated cities are usually important and well-known real-life locations. This explains why the majority of these reconstructions concern some of the largest and most powerful metropolises of the world. In any case, “the city is an abstraction, which claims to identify what, if anything, is common to all cities” (Donald, 1999). Their use is straightforwardly related to the designers’ tactic in order to evoke feelings of familiarity with the game’s environment, an element which often affects orientation, navigation, or even the narrative itself.

In this context, a series of conceptual narratives are introduced below:

### **The pedestrian cities**

One of the most common characteristics of these metropolises is the emphasis given on the cultural elements, as they are manifested during a walk through characteristic neighborhoods of the city. In many occasions, the image of the city seems to outline places of specific cultural, even touristic, interest, usually observed from the pedestrian’s, namely the tourists, point of view. The pedestrian’s practice seems to form a unique way of ‘reading’, therefore connecting, with the city. “The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations... It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors)... These diverse aspects provide the basis of a rhetoric” (De Certeau, 2011). Cities like Kathmandu in Nepal, from the game *Naughty Dog*, demonstrate the use of color in every aspect of their culture. The virtual Hong Kong in the game *Sleeping Dogs*, also encourages cultural consumption by highlighting a series of things that one can do there, like massage, karaoke, fight clubs, cockfights, or gambling. Even the red light district of Kabukicho, found in Tokyo, is distinctly reproduced in the game *Yakuza*.

### **The cities of nooks and crannies**

Cultural characteristics often relate to the morphology of the city. In *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations*, Istanbul appears to be the ideal place to host the game’s narrative. The representation of the city goes much deeper than a mere pedestrian view. The city is approached as a vivid landscape, and life is infused in all its morphological levels, from the catacombs, to the roofs. Every remote or hard to find nook and cranny seems to matter within a city’s special and elaborate architecture. This reminds of the latent importance of Gaston Bachelard’s corner: “Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house” (Bachelard, 1994). It is interesting to note that this observation reminds of the use of city surveillance systems. In the recently launched game *Watch Dogs*, the city of Chicago, the flow of information mainly relies on

the ability of the protagonist to access every inaccessible space, therefore, every unreachable or hard to find information that is important for the game's march of events. The overall venture appears to comment on the authorities as well as the historical aspects of the real-life city, translating it into a probable narrative of the near future, a great 'voyeur'.

### **The cities of American dream**

"Canadian cities looked the way American cities did on television" claimed William Gibson (Gibson, 2007). But this time, it seems to be more appropriate for video game cities picturing an American metropolis. Cases like the game series *Grand Theft Auto* seem to depict versions of New York, Los Angeles or Miami, encouraging a particular lifestyle. A new and fast car, a new career, a new life, and lots of money. Aspects of an American dream, born out of the former ideals of freedom, the pursuit of happiness and wealth for all. Especially, Los Angeles in the game *L.A. Noire*, seems to underline the ideals that formed this glitzy city itself, taking as an example, the representation of the famous Hollywood Boulevard, and also, placing it chronologically in the golden age of the city's history. The American Dream, in all its shades and expressions, as well as fame, fortune and corruption, can be realized in those cities.

### **The trauma cities**

The prominence of a city's recognizable characteristics does not always focus on the 'positive' cultural elements. In cases like the game *Stalker: Shadow of Chernobyl*, a traumatic historical event seems to give the inspiration for the game's location. The game is set in the area of The Zone, an area surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, determining this way the narrative itself. The same happens with the city of the game *Silent Hill*, which is in fact representing a real location found in Pennsylvania which was also abandoned after an accident. The traumatic event acquires a new layer of meaning. Its virtualization and use of its spatial information is a process of turning a wound into an architectural entity, a memorial.

### **The cities of speed**

Michel de Certeau claimed that "space is a practiced place", where place is defined as "an instantaneous configuration of positions" (De Certeau, 2011). Cities like San Francisco in the game *Driver: San Francisco*, London in *Project Gotham Racing*, or Madrid in *Gran Turismo 5* seem to focus on the act of running or navigating, to such an extent that any other characteristics merely fade out. The player practices urban space itself through an elusive shift of positions.

Also, the feeling of being in a real location is very interesting when compared to the real circulatory problems the city might have. In any case, "Speedrunning is, of course, one such emergent gameplay practice, one that often reappropriates or ignores these things that are carefully placed on the screen by the designer" (Scully-Blaker, 2014). It appears that this game practice makes the urban experience acquire characteristics of abstraction: an abstract and fleeting look of the surroundings, in the form of an obscure and elusive 'motion blur' of the image.

### **The cities gone wrong**

A whole series of cities are represented in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Every such case depicts ruins

of an existing city within a narrative where something went wrong and the city was destroyed. In some cases, this act bears a strong symbolism behind the image, especially when the city is a powerful capital, a strong political and historical location in the world, like, for example, the city of Washington in the game *Fallout 3*. Those dystopic urban cases, are in essence, 'dark' and often terrifying representations of a city, that introduce a form of "urban criticism" (Prakash, 2010). This can be also seen as an act of resistance, a rebellious form of counter-representation of all social or political conventions. Reality is also reversed in city of Tokyo in the game *Tokyo Jungle*, where the most technologically advanced metropolis turns into jungle. Or, in the game *Spec Ops: the line*, the paradise city of Dubai, that symbolizes all fantasy architecture and edenic life, and which has lately seen the largest growth rates, turns into ruins.

### THE BRANDING OF FRAGMENTS

All these cities appear to make use of basic metropolis characteristics such as densities, speed, flow, political and cultural symbolism, technology implementations and other aspects of civic life, in the form of selected abstracts. The double metropolises are represented through a fragmented image, which attempts to give an overall impression when combined with the narrative. Each urban fragment constitutes a game's essential point of focus. Also, it often appears to be the vaulting point for the game's concept's formation and the role this urban 'reuse' might play.

In most occasions cities keep *branding* themselves in the exact same way they do for other purposes. Video games seem to emphasize on a distinct set of brand attributes of the city, "which can form the basis for engendering positive perceptions of the city across multiple audiences" (Dinnie, 2010). One could say that video game 'double' cities are 'egocentric', they project their need for manifesting their very own qualities onto the context in which they are used. "Both living in the real city and the represented city imply a mnemonic act, a construction of a collective memory, through the aggregation of individually personalized lived spaces." (Papadopoulos et al., 2012). As a result, a whole system of meaning is overlaid on the game environment, most of the times on purpose, but many other times by accident, or by association or correspondence.

Furthermore, the emerging elements of computer and gaming culture fall into the broader context of cyberspatial culture. And as the inventor of Cyberspace William Gibson described, cyberspace is a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson, 1986), a digital, though a drastic and effective, reality. Thus, it appears that video game culture has a multitude of things to teach back to physical reality – the importance of the alternate, the efficacy of the 'other side' and the most important of all, the productive and originative blending of the two, into one and a whole hybrid urban experience.

### REFERENCES

- Bachelard, G., *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p.136
- Baudelaire, C., *Petits poèmes en prose : Le Spleen de Paris*, Pocket, 2009
- Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulations*, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p.95
- Calvino, I., *Invisible Cities*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, p.44
- Carroll, L., *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Penguin UK, 2010

- De Certeau, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 2011, p.101, 117
- Dinnie, K., *City Branding: Theory and Cases*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p.5
- Donald, J., *Imagining the modern city*: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, ch. 01
- Gee, J.P. The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning) in K. Salen ed., *Learning and games*, The MIT Press, 2008, pp.21-40
- Gibson, W. *Neuromancer*, Ace; 1st edition, 1986, σ.51
- Gibson, W., *Spook Country*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2007
- Greenfield, A., *Everyware: the dawning age of ubiquitous computing*: 1st ed., Berkeley, California, New Riders Publishing, 2006
- Hoard Phil, From Watch Dogs to GTA V, 'Why video games are going to reshape our cities', theguardian.com, 2014, Available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/jun/10/watch-dogs-gtav-video-games-reshape-cities-sim-city-will-wright>
- Leach, N. Play Stations, In Von Borries, Friedrich; P. Walz, Steffen; Bottger, Matthias, eds. *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level*, Birkhäuser Architecture, 2007, p. 328-331
- Papadopoulos, S., Malakasioti, A., Direct it - Arcade games as a qualitative urban weave, EURAU 2012, Available online at: <http://eurau12.arq.up.pt/sites/default/files/222.pdf>
- Prakash, G., (ed), *Noir urbanisms*: Princeton University Press, 2010, p.2
- Scully-Blaker, R., A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio, *Game Studies*, August 2014, vol.14, iss.1, Available online at <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker>
- Squire, K., Cultural framing of computer/video games, *Game Studies*, July 2002, vol.2, iss. 1, Available online at <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/>
- Stamford, C., Gartner Says Worldwide Video Game Market to Total \$93 Billion in 2013, Gartner, 2013, Available online at <http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2614915>
- Van Houtum, H. & Ernste, H., Re-imagining spaces of (in)difference: Contextualising and reflecting on the intertwining of cities across borders, *GeoJournal*, vol. 54, 2001, pp. 101–105

*\*This discussion constitutes part of an ongoing research project under the title: "Urban Landscapes in Video Games - Representations and Spatial Narratives", which is running since 2011 in the Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly. The activities of the research project are also related with the homonym architectural course run by the project team EscapeLab. [http://www.arch.uth.gr/urbanlandscapesinvideogames]*

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Spiros Papadopoulos** is Professor of Architecture and Chair, Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, Greece. He holds a PhD from the Polytechnic University of Madrid (ETSAM, 1997) and a Diploma of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens (NTUA, 1991). He is actively involved with audiovisual media and multimodal design in the fields of architecture and visual arts researching the

*interdisciplinary interaction among contemporary urban design issues and new technology. His work was presented at several exhibitions and film festivals. He was the scientific coordinator and the director of the television program "Metalocus", dealt with the contemporary perception of visual arts and urban culture (Channel Seven, 2000). Since 1999 he has been the co-editor of the international journal "Metalocus", which has been awarded for the dissemination of architecture.*

**Angeliki Malakasioti** is an architect, graduated from the School of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. She has completed the postgraduate MArch Architectural Design course of the Bartlett School of Architecture, (U.C.L., 2008) and she is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Architecture in the University of Thessaly, working on the field of digital technologies, on the subject of "The Anatomy of the Digital Body". Her work deals with architectural projects, experimental short films and digital imaging. She has also been tutor in several design studios. Her interests revolve around the themes of cyberspace, digital experience and fictional spaces. She has participated in international scientific conferences, exhibitions and festivals.