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Gaming the City: The Monetization of Urban Affect and Homemaking in Popular Video Games

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Digital gaming has become a major global cultural industry, and many popular video games feature cityscapes. While scholars have critiqued the neoliberal and dystopian representations of urban environments, much less attention is given to how video games offer players a sense of belonging: an immersive city where they can feel at home. Game developers create affective urban worlds to attract and maintain a large player base for continuous revenue. We argue that high-budget and popular video games balance a chaotic urban gamescape with opportunities for privatized homemaking that keep players engaged. First, they use emergent gameplay to simulate the urban environment as sensational places where players must prepare for unpredictable, often dangerous, and violent encounters. Second, they provide players with homemaking opportunities and the means to own and curate private spaces. These opportunities, however, reflect and perpetuate a privatized purpose of homemaking that perpetuates gendered and capitalistic assumptions, socializing players into engaging with urban life in a very selective manner. While we analyze several video games, *GTA V* provides a specific example of how this homemaking is monetized. Our analysis combines scholarly debates on affective geographies and gamescapes. **Key Words:** affect, gameplay, homemaking, urban, video games.

TRULY IMMERSIVE CITIES?

In the popular video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2022), players explore the streets of *Night City*: a neon-heavy, dystopian city inspired by various Japanese anime and the highly influential *Blade Runner* movies. *Night City* is governed by corrupt corporations and filled with gangs and advanced vehicles. It also has a tourist website that displays body count reports and local police (the NCPD) threat level (Lee 2021). While entirely fictional, the city and its outskirts represent urban environments and the more extensive geography found alongside the West Coast of the United States, especially Morro Bay and Los Osos in Northern California, while its neon aesthetics recall East Asian metropolises. *Night City* is often referred to as the “City of Dreams” due to the thrills and opportunities it offers to its residents. Yet, much like the American Dream, the promise of *Night City* is afforded to very few. Controlled by corrupt corporations and violent criminal groups, the player is expected to navigate urban dangers and threats, climb the socio-economic ladder, and complete the game’s storyline. *Cyberpunk 2077* (2022) promises the exhilaration of exploring the unknown and immersing yourself in a lively and dangerous metropolis with narrow passageways, imposing skylines, and flashing neon lights. There are even weather and day-night cycles. A lead developer explained that *Night City* was meant to speak to the imagination of gamers, to their preferred fictitious urban worlds (Lee 2021). Indeed, reviewers reported that the “streets feel alive, thanks to the monumental job of world-building” (Lee 2021).

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Despite technical and gameplay issues at launch, players and reviewers typically lauded CD Project Red, the game's developer and publisher, for creating a vibrant virtual urban space that feels real and that people want to inhabit.

In media and game studies, scholars have generally adopted either a narratological perspective (i.e., studying how video games convey a narrative or story) or a ludo-logical perspective (i.e., linking video games to broader understandings of games and play in human culture). Many problematize the neoliberal and dystopian representation of cities in video games: urban landscapes are generally imagined in a restricted fashion, with post-apocalyptic narratives, gameplay, and aesthetics centered on violence and decay (Fraser 2016). While cultural geographers have sought to understand how a digital transition affects cities (e.g., smart cities, platform urbanism), they have given less attention to video games as digital and virtual spaces. Geographers interested in video games tend to focus on player experiences (e.g., Shaw and Warf 2009), the spaces of production, the consumption of digital media, and the representation of geographies (Ash and Gallacher 2011). However, what receives much less attention across the geo-humanities is understanding how affective play and inviting urban worlds in popular video games are fundamentally shaped by the developer's aims of mass appeal and player retention. More than cultural objects and depictions of neoliberal power fantasies (Bailes 2019), digital gaming concerns political, affective, and spatial gameplay that necessitate scholarly attention that draws together recent work in cultural geography and media studies.

In their simulations of everyday city life, developers enable and encourage specific interactions between players and the virtual urban landscapes while limiting others. We are specifically interested in how commercially minded game developers and publishers curate and craft virtual cities that attract and maintain a large player base. What elements do game developers use in creating these fictive yet immersive and attractive urban worlds, and what do they deliberately leave out?

Based on a cultural analysis of several high-budget, popular, and recent video games, most notably *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA)* (2013) and its spin-off *GTA Online*, we found that two spatial elements are mobilized to maintain player engagement: emergent gameplay and homemaking. Emergent gameplay is a game design mechanic that makes in-game encounters appear unexpected yet generated based on player and environmental interactions. The mechanic is meant to simulate urban encounters that are unpredictable and surprising in their constellation of materialities, identities, and power relations that structure order and chance in places at different times (Massey 2005), and also present understandable and negotiable unknowns (Wilson and Darling 2016). It makes virtual cities sensational and enchanting environments that promise players a never-ending amount and variety of encounters and challenges. At the same time, game developers allow players to find spaces devoid of these insecurities, where they can, quite literally, feel at home. In many virtual cities, players can make their own homes by purchasing them with in-game currency and customizing them to their liking.

Video game developers combine emergent gameplay and homemaking to balance in-game experiences of city life with opportunities for privatized homemaking to keep players engaged, allowing them to invest and return to these virtual worlds. Although homemaking in video games can come in many different forms, developers tend to utilize a specific form: the home is a safe place for players to acquire and invest using in-game currency and real money. These experiences cultivate existing gendered and capitalistic manifestations of the home, socializing players into engaging with urban life and cityscapes in a particular and exclusive manner.

We have studied the projection of everyday city life in large-budget “triple A” video games instead of more alternative “indie” counterparts with lower production and marketing budgets. While video games have traditionally generated value by selling copies as boxed or digital products, producers can now sell and update existing video games through digital marketplaces. This made possible new ways to monetize video games as an asset and service (Bernevega and Gekker 2022). This platformization of video games and the corresponding monetization strategies through micro-transactions and subscription services have led to a new form of rentiership, where players effectively do not own the game but invest additional time and money to maintain access to digital assets such as their customized virtual homes. For instance, after an update of *Cyberpunk 2077* (2022), players can upgrade and purchase additional apartments in *Night City*. Seven flats are available at different prices and locations, giving additional “buffs” (specific bonuses with an in-game effect), such as more health, faster leveling, and extra movement speed and abilities. While these apartments are technically listed as “for rent” on the in-game real estate platform, players can pay a one-time fee that grants them unlimited access to these homes, effectively owning them in practice.

Our analysis brings debates on gamescape in conversation with geographical work on affect, foregrounding the practices and possibilities for players in virtual cities. We mobilize the concept of the gamescape, which “offers a way of thinking about the implications of how the landscape is actively constructed within video games—one that highlights how the gamescape works to shape a player’s particular understanding of a larger set of spatial ideologies inherent to the game” (Magnet 2006, 143). For our purposes, unpacking the logic in popular video games enables us to understand better how financial considerations shape the creation of “ideal” virtual cities. To be clear, urban gamescapes are not objects or static environments but are produced through spatial practices and interactive gameplay – in our case, through emergent gameplay and homemaking. At the same time, it is a joint effort: an interaction between player and game, between consumer and producer. Players play narratives, mechanics, and tropes offered by games but may also subvert them (Steinkuehler 2006).

In the next section, we will examine the relationship between digital gaming and the urban in more detail, discussing different categories of urban games and connecting our research to existing studies on the cultural geography of video games. Next, we will outline our analytical approach, combining scholarship on gamescape with cultural-political and socio-spatial work on homemaking and the simulation of affective urban worlds. Then, we will discuss how emergent gameplay and homemaking are critical dimensions of popular video games, drawing on our study of several virtual cities featured in digital gaming. In our conclusion, we extend our argument beyond the virtual space to incorporate broader power relationships between players and the corporations that produce video games.

URBAN VIDEO GAMES

In 2020, well over ten thousand video games were available for purchase on Steam, the most popular digital storefront in the United States and Western Europe. Many are labeled, listed, and marketed as “urban.” This is often because the built environment is urban: think of games taking place in a suburban mansion or a professional sports stadium with city-branded teams. In many games, players can also explore and actively engage with these urban environments. Players get

to build cities or explore various neighborhoods and areas, interact with new characters, advance storylines, visit local stores, and use services. These games also refer to a limited range of imaginations of what city life looks and feels like, typically based on North American and, to a lesser degree, on Japanese and Western European experiences, attracting players from all over the world.

While analyzing recent and popular urban video games on the storefront platform, we annotated basic characteristics, including a brief statement on how cities and urban landscapes are part of the gameplay, such as city building and first-person interaction with cities. These titles were subsequently studied by studying additional reviews, gameplay videos, and promotional materials. In several cases, the authors were familiar with the games themselves. In addition, we organized gaming sessions, or “playshops,” in which we played several video games together with other game researchers. Examining gameplay material and reviewing the video games ourselves, we were able to describe in more detail how these virtual cities construct and shape digital spatial practices concerning the representation and experience of the urban.

Based on this, we identified two broad categories of urban games. The first category concerns urban design games and simulations. A renowned example here is *SimCity* (1989), which was developed in 1989. Players could design, build, and maintain a city considering several challenges, such as earthquakes and monsters. These video games as cultural products have shaped the work of city planners, introducing players to “the joys and frustrations of zoning, street grids, and infrastructure funding – and influenced a generation of people who plan cities for a living” (Roy 2019). Focused on capitalistic ideals of quality of life and totalitarian control, city-building games ignored structural issues of inequality and environmental problems. Games like *SimCity* (1989) – and its contemporary counterpart the *Cities: Skylines* series – were also based on an American model of urban and infrastructure planning and design without recognizing the related constraints and issues. The second category concerns games that mostly feature urban landscapes. In this category, virtual cities are the environments players can interact and experience as they travel from point A to point B. In this article, we are much more interested in urban games that feature cities as a place to explore and make your own.

Cultural geographers have shown how video games relate to ideological understandings of actual counterparts: representations of physical places and problems in the past and present. In their literature review, Ash and Gallacher (2011) foreground three strands of work: the cultural geographies in video games, the cultural geography of video games, and video games as a cultural geographic practice. Most studies within this discipline have focused on the first strand, examining how “video games represent people, places, and concepts” (2011, 355). This includes the politics and governance embedded within video game representations concerning gender, sexuality, and race, with most studies emphasizing the problematic production of socio-spatial inequality. For instance, Alberto Vanolo (2012) conducted a cultural analysis of *Liberty City*, a virtual representation of New York City and the primary setting of *GTA III* (2005). Vanolo highlights how the representation and governance of the virtual city reflect dominant neoliberal ideals and policies. Yet, players may experience these capitalistic imperatives in differentiated ways. The virtual city should, therefore, be studied as a new and relevant political and technological space; a convergence of “fantasy and reality, the real and the imagined, the self and the other” (Vanolo 2012, 269).

Scholars who study virtual cities in more detail, such as William Huber (2005), emphasize that virtual cities are vital for understanding how questions of race, nation, and ethos are worked

out in fictional cultural geographies. “Nowhere more so than in the cities that populate their imagined landscapes,” Huber (2005, 2) writes, “standing as manifestations of diverse sociocultural organizations.” Drawing on an analysis of *Final Fantasy XI* (2002), Huber examines the video game’s three main cities as bearing the representational traces of “real” world place, drawing connections between architecture and the American experience of race and colonialism in the early 20th century. Atkinson and Willis (2009) describe video games as a “socio-technical alchemy” (405) that contains a “particular moral and social universe” (414) constructed by the game designers. Players can recognize the social hierarchies within the simulated city based on their experience of the “real” city or general impressions of social hierarchies in other cities.

GAMESCAPES AND HOME MAKING

While the discussed scholarship demonstrates political ideologies underlying the representations of urban environments, they tend to overlook gameplay. Video games are about playing, interacting with the virtual city and its characters, exploring and discovering the world, and experiencing the stories that emerge from play. Examining the political imperatives in aesthetics, narratives, but especially gameplay, Shoshana Magnet (2006) introduces the term “gamescape” to foreground interactions between players and the environment. Magnet analyzes the 2001 video game *Tropico* (2001), a popular city-building-oriented game with five sequels. *Tropico* interpellates players “through the historically male paradigm of colonizer” (Magnet 2006, 146). Imposing imperial rules, players ought to maintain hegemonic power relations and expand white supremacy. Central in the argument is how the landscape is articulated through spatial practices, in other words, the production of the gamescape. “The *Tropico* gamescape, beautiful from above, conceals the suffering of its citizens below. Although the game tells you that your citizens are caused suffering through an overall decrease in your bank account, there is no trace of their grief, hunger, or unhappiness” (Magnet 2006, 149).

The concept of gamescape helps us analyze video game worlds because it stresses the participatory nature of the medium; the element of gameplay through which players construct and relate to fictive spaces. This enables us to go beyond an interrogation of problematic spaces in terms of representation and racist beliefs and to consider how gameplay renders certain ideologies and power relations visible or less visible to players (Murray 2018; Magnet 2006). The gamescape approach to players and space resonates with scholarship on affective geographies. Affect is understood and experienced as an emotional state of feeling, but it also involves the actions, dispositions, and agency that a particular place affords (Thrift 2007; Gallagher, Kanngieser, and Prior 2017; Duff 2010; Anderson 2009). Shaw and Warf (2009) theorize that video games, particularly those that play in simulated three-dimensional spaces, should be understood as “worlds of affect.” Video game environments are meant to be experienced, to produce a range of emotions and bodily reactions from playing and being in these virtual places (Ter Minassian 2018). Indeed, “much of the enjoyment derived from video games comes from embracing the in-between moments and events within virtual worlds where players exist ‘outside themselves’ as constellations of shifting affects” (Shaw and Warf 2009, 1340). Before discussing how such “shifts” relate to navigating the urban, we should note that affective environments, both online and offline, are commodities and subject to capitalist innovation (Thrift 2007).

Simply put, providing embodied exhilaration through architecture, urban design, mechanical engineering, or through programming can be highly profitable (see Waitt et al. 2023).

High-budget digital games are produced as immersive entertainment products, yet the urban virtual worlds in them present a safe and convenient alternative to navigating and appropriating dangerously unknown cities. Classic urban scholarship has delved into the relationship between danger and city life, showing how fear and anxiety shape how residents relate to and navigate the urban environment (Lofland 1973; Smith 2010; England and Simon 2010). Practically, people create mental maps of their surroundings and might avoid specific neighborhoods or places because of fear and anxiety (England and Simon 2010). They appropriate spaces by returning regularly, forming pathways, and engaging in place-based social and group activities (Lofland 1973). Through exploration and familiarity, urban dwellers may feel they exert control over a chaotic world where the unexpected and unknown may produce bodily harm. This is not to say that the unknown and perhaps the unsavory may not also be a source of glee and rush. Studies on Red Light Districts, for instance, have highlighted how, nowadays, these areas are commodified spaces promising exaltation and excitement in curated and safe surroundings, at least for casual visitors (Singelenberg and van Gent 2020; Hubbard and Whowell 2008). More generally, urban tourism often revolves around the excitement of exploring unknown cities and neighborhoods.

While navigating the unexpected is relevant, it should be noted that affect is also pronounced in places that are *known*: places that are explored, familiar, and often returned to. In cultural geography, home and homemaking are closely related to creating affective communities and are constituted through certain performances and spatial and habitual practices (Kapchan 2006). More than a personal endeavor or journey, homemaking “highlights the articulation between personal, intimate visions and contested collective affirmations of home, place, and belonging” (Lefort 2022, 267). Homemaking and homeliness seem particularly relevant in an urban context, as the “foreign surfaces of the city are nevertheless those on which one must balance and into which one must delve to secure authentic affective bonds: sense of self and community that are homely” (Rapport and Williksen 2010, 14). Involving both material and immaterial elements, homemaking often happens in a context of power hierarchies and tensions; it shapes and is reflected by broader societal inequalities and tensions, facilitating and intensifying various forms of occupation (Volinz 2021), racism (Wimark 2021), and gender inequality (Rose 1993). While having a home is considered essential for material and immaterial elements of identity formation and citizenship, home ownership is also a significant economic asset and platform for social differentiation. The concept of “home” is closely tied to Anglo-Saxon ideals of ownership, excluding a substantial portion of the population that does not own a house (Bate 2018; Ronald 2008). As a form of tenure, many governments have promoted “homeownership” as financially attractive and culturally significant as the ideal version of home.

Given the importance of the home in human life, it is not surprising that much debate on homemaking concerns how homemaking exemplifies and intensifies all sorts of inequality. Drawing on feminist and cultural geographies of home, Blunt and Dowling (2006) point out how homemaking is essentially gendered, and the home is a crucial site in the oppression of women. “For many women,” the authors write, “home is a space of violence, alienation and emotional turmoil” (2006, 15). Indeed, the idea of the home as a haven, as some kind of sanctuary, does not match the everyday experiences of many women for whom home is a workplace and hostile environment. Likewise, scholarship has extensively documented how the homes of many are

contested, often in the context of migration and the oppression of communities of color (see Wimark 2021; Kim and Smets 2020; Lefort 2022).

Regarding game scholarship, less attention is given to the more existential dimensions of play, including the lingering and the building, compared to active play. Daniel Vella (2019) discusses “hedral dwelling” in video games, which is a form of dwelling that focuses on “inward-looking” and is about rendering meaning to place. Based on an examination of two video games as case studies, Vella draws out various essential features of homemaking, most notably the creation of a privatized sphere and the binary of inside (safe) and outside (unsafe).

While it is important to recognize homemaking in its many different experiences and values from a player’s perspective, it is equally important to highlight the specific conditions carved out by the developer as explicit homemaking opportunities. Especially when they are part of the industry’s broader commercial strategies, studies show that homemaking is about both a physical place and location and a set of feelings grounded in one’s imagination and broader relationship to a place. In video games, however, the home’s geographical location is directly contextualized within the developer’s creative power: they curate both the physicality and the affective experience.

When unpacking the cultural, political, and social dimensions of urban gamescapes, we should remember that the design and development of these virtual spaces differ from a more physical city. Interactions and experiences are mathematically designed, AI-generated, and oriented toward play. Still, developers often rely on their experiences and even visit specific places for inspiration, drawing heavily on popular urban imaginaries and culture. Analyzing these virtual cities, then, is not about the extent to which a city is a recreation of an existing environment but what happens when immersive “realism” and playability come together and are sold as a game with global commercial appeal.

In applying the concept of homemaking in video games, we are specifically interested in the gameplay mechanics and storylines that socialize players in engaging and returning to the virtual city. We focus on how game developers and publishers cultivate affective and immersive virtual cities, and how players can interact and engage with these simulations. Murray (2018, 169) reminds us to examine how video game worlds “naturalize a certain set of relations through a highly curated framing of the playable environment.” In other words, what do game developers emphasize and what is less prominent, or even omitted, when playing the city and interacting with urban worlds that have a global appeal. We take less of an emic perspective, which would centralize around player experiences and subjectivities, but focus on game design and development. In the next section, we first explore how game developers simulate urban landscapes, residential areas, and everyday city life in their products.

MONETIZING AFFECTIVE GAMEPLAY

On a basic level, we found that virtual cities often present themselves as places of excitement and unpredictability. Players typically find themselves in bustling nightlife areas or commercial districts to complete missions, purchase gear, or interact with storyline characters. Many games integrate shops or other purveyors of in-game items in urban environments and typically place them in commercial or designated areas. Cities are also transport hubs, manufacturing sites, holy places, governmental and religious centers representing the halls of power, and economic centers

of commerce, trade, finance, leisure, and entertainment. In open-world games that allow the player to travel freely between different urban landscapes, illegal items or weaponry will typically be available in areas portrayed as dangerous, filthy, overcrowded, and rundown. This may be the lower decks of a space station in the *Mass Effect* (2007) series, the Japanese entertainment districts in the *Yakuza/Like a Dragon* franchise, the American “ghetto” in *GTA V* (2013), the medieval slums in *The Witcher 3’s* (2015) Novigrad, or the 19th-century immigrant neighborhood in *Red Dead Redemption 2’s* (2018) Saint-Denis. These lower-end areas may also offer other activities like gambling, loan sharks, barbers to change character appearance, and missions handed out by computer-programmed characters (i.e., non-player characters, or NPCs) that are portrayed as schemers, fixers, gang members, or criminals. They also provide excellent surroundings for (techno)stealth gameplay (Pape 2024).

Yet, while these areas mimic and amplify urban areas of excitement and danger, affective gameplay is not just derived from set-dressing, storytelling, and game mechanics but also by offering the unexpected emerging from those environments. To accommodate affective experiences like surprise and elation resembling real-world urban experience (but safer), giving the impression that players step into a lived environment rather than a designed or conceived one. To illustrate, the *Grand Theft Auto* (2005; 2013) series is perhaps the most famous for rendering the American city as a playable gamescape (see Vanolo 2012, above). In the fifth installment, *GTA V* (2013), and its multiplayer offshoot, *GTA Online*, which features in-game purchases and a subscription service (GTA+),¹ players can traverse, play, and make their own (see homemaking below) a pastiche version of Los Angeles. The game has been lauded for presenting a level of “realism” in how players interact with their environment. Indeed, a large part of the entertainment lies in enacting transgressions within that normative environment (notably speeding, shooting innocent bystanders, engaging with sex workers, or stealing cars). Yet, it has been noted that the cities become more “alive” with each installment, allowing for affective play. No other game provides players with a highly traversable urban space, offering players “actions with a tremendous degree of freedom and unscripted spontaneity” (Murray 2005, 91). At the time of the release, a review of the single-player version lauds the “sense of place.” The reviewer describes personal moments of elated gameplay and states that “GTA V has an abundance of such moments, big and small, that make San Andreas – the city of Los Santos and its surrounding areas – feel like a living world where anything can happen” (MacDonald 2013).²

There is a sense that the environment and its NPC inhabitants are functioning as a city (and countryside) even if players are absent, giving players a sense of agency and exploration. Due to its varied urban landscape, with many different neighborhoods and areas, the game series is said to strengthen the “flaneuristic dimension of the game experience,” by which Vanolo (2012, 292) means that the esthetic of the game manipulates the geography of affect, “as the capacity of generating pre-cognitive emotions as surprise, fear, anger, disgust, joy, in a cultural construction that is curiously close to that of actual city marketing campaigns” (2012, 293). Yet, these emotions are not just borne out of representation and esthetics but are very much of the emergent systems that offer action potential. Significantly, a large share of online discourse focuses on players encountering unexpected incidents in the city, which can be outlandish but retain suspension of disbelief. These incidents can be animal attacks on NPCs or other animals, car crashes and traffic violations by NPCs, racial profiling by law enforcement, and NPCs stealing vehicles. These incidents can include NPCs attacking animals or other NPCs, car crashes and traffic violations caused by NPCs, racial profiling by law enforcement, or NPCs stealing vehicles. Interestingly,

discussions often revolve around whether these incidents are bugs, developer-scripted, or truly emergent behaviors. If they are bugs or scripted, they are seen as breaking the suspension of disbelief and diminishing the experience, while emergent behavior is praised for adding to the game's "immersiveness." Not surprisingly, this environmental quality became a foundation for the *GTA Online* multiplayer service.

GTA V (2013) transitioned into an online service at a time when major game publishers switched their business model from offering stand-alone releases to "live service games" or "games as services." Updating and supporting existing video games is appealing from the developer's perspective because it generates more revenue than developing entirely new products. To illustrate the scale, the video game industry is expected to reach a revenue of \$282.3 billion in 2024, which is expected to grow in the following years, particularly in Asian markets (Statista 2023). At the same time, video game companies have been scrutinized for utilizing in-game purchasing options, stimulating players to buy randomized rewards that offer new forms of gameplay or esthetics, such as clothing for their characters. These are inherently forms of gambling and have been eventually regulated by law in various countries. There are, however, additional ways through which game developers look to keep players interested in the virtual worlds they have created.

One example is *Tom Clancy's The Division 2* (2019), an online-only tactical shooter developed by Massive Entertainment and published by Ubisoft. A core feature of *The Division 2's* (2019) gameplay involves spatial practices known as "liberating" settlements, control points, and entire urban districts from criminal control that are visible on the map (see Figure 1). In practice, this means shooting and killing enemy forces, calling in reinforcements from civilian resistance forces, and finally taking over a local control point, often a building, in an area previously under

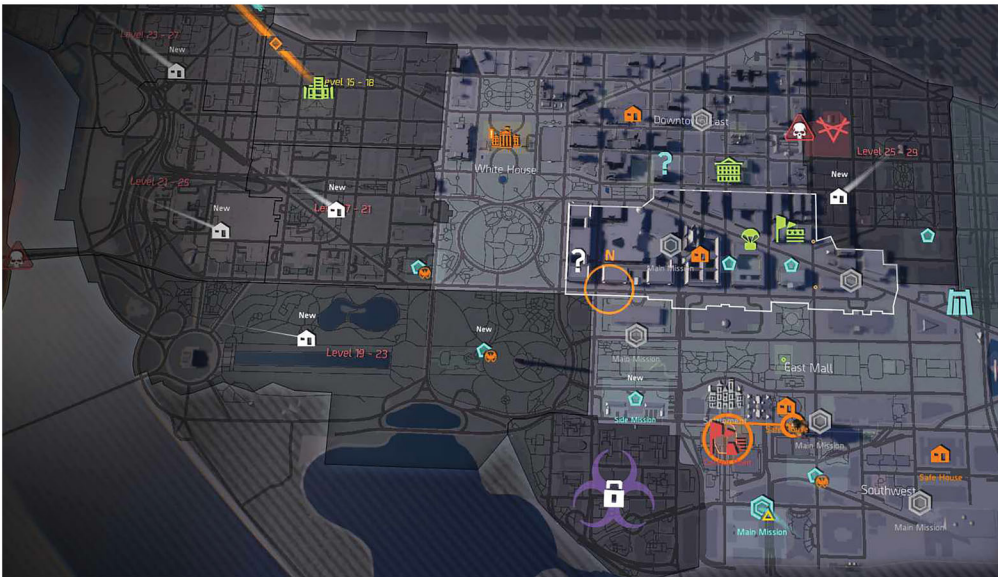


FIGURE 1 Map of *The Division 2* displaying control points, settlements, and various objectives.

control by the criminal faction. This form of gameplay, in which players find themselves completing similar and recurrent challenges, is vital for progress in the game. Initially, players can only access certain parts of the city. Once they reach a specific power ranking by completing missions and quests, boundaries disappear, and players can encounter enemies, unlock new skills and weapons, and develop the storyline in that area of the city. Cityscapes become more than mere simulations of physical counterparts and are produced as diegetic and urban gaming environments or gamescapes. Through exploration and encounters, game developers produce moments of affect that keep players engaged and returning to the virtual city.

While the urban warfare featured in *The Division 2* (2019) is a rather extreme example of sensational and particularly violent gameplay, it indicates how urban games simulate unpredictability for players. In this case, encounters like Hostage Rescue and the liberation of settlements are ongoing and repetitive aspects of the gameplay. Players often find themselves returning to these areas to liberate them again and to engage in combat with another group of armed enemies in a slightly alternative location or setup. Game developers and publishers use emergent gameplay to make urban warfare unique and unscripted, suggesting that these urban worlds are full of unknown and unexpected interactions and surprises.

OWNING A HOME IN THE VIRTUAL CITY

While an arguably necessary element to communicate the urban to players, residential areas rarely feature in popular urban video games, and when they are present, they are typically relatively small compared to commercial and mixed-use areas. They can also be largely inaccessible or only implied and are rarely a point of interest on the maps of virtual cities. When navigable, they offer relatively few interactions and experiences in terms of gameplay. In our playthrough of *The Division 2* (2019), the cities are visually treated as uninhabited, except by hostile factions and friendly resistance forces. Sporadically, players encounter captured civilians whom they need to rescue from captivity. Such an approach highlights the instrumentality of the gamescape: it is a curated and idealized experience with substantial cultural and political implications (see Murray 2005).

In urban games, the imperatives of gameplay also seem largely at odds with the everyday life activities around the dwelling and residential neighborhoods. Dwellings are sometimes featured as places of rest (i.e., health regeneration), and residential areas may offer interactions with NPCs. Some games, like *Skyrim* (2011) and *The Witcher 3* (2015), allow players to visit or break into homes. Here, players quickly learn that the game does not reward the player in terms of interactions, storytelling, or valuable in-game items unless the player is specifically directed to a house as a part of a quest. Searching for items in abandoned dwellings as gameplay is used to better effect in games that emphasize survival in a post-mass-tragedy world. Here, player activity and the place both signify a loss of everyday domesticity; the place is no longer lived but a ruin. By and large, though, the commercial imperative to offer affective and spectacular gamescapes makes that a defining feature of the city; places where people live; residing is the least featured “function” in many popular open-world urban games.

Yet, online service games have been experimenting with ways to offer a meaningful residential experience to their players. In *GTA Online*, where up to 30 players can enter the virtual city together, completing objectives and storylines, the city of *Los Santos* (the virtual representation

of Los Angeles) seems to offer ample opportunity for collective action and community building. Interestingly, while collaborative play is a prominent addition to the online variant, players generally still partake in killing and fighting each other. Consequently, public space is often dangerous (players can be robbed or assaulted) and juxtaposed to private space (indoors is generally safe).

After a major update, players can buy real estate in *Los Santos*. After completing several missions and with enough money in the bank, players can press the up-arrow on their controller, and a smartphone pops up in the bottom right corner of the screen. The “internet” application leads to a full-screen browser with several tabs. One has a link to Dynasty 8, the game’s platform to access “prime property in the Los Santos area” (see Figure 2). The property listings are organized by geographical location and price range. A map will present itself with the locations and prices of available properties in Los Santos. Each listing comes with a description of the dwelling’s amenities. For example, the high-end apartment has a large bedroom with a pool table and a telescope in the living room to view other players in the streets.

Regarding housing, there are three categories: low-end, medium, and high-end penthouse-style apartments in high-rise blocks and standalone houses in more affluent neighborhoods.

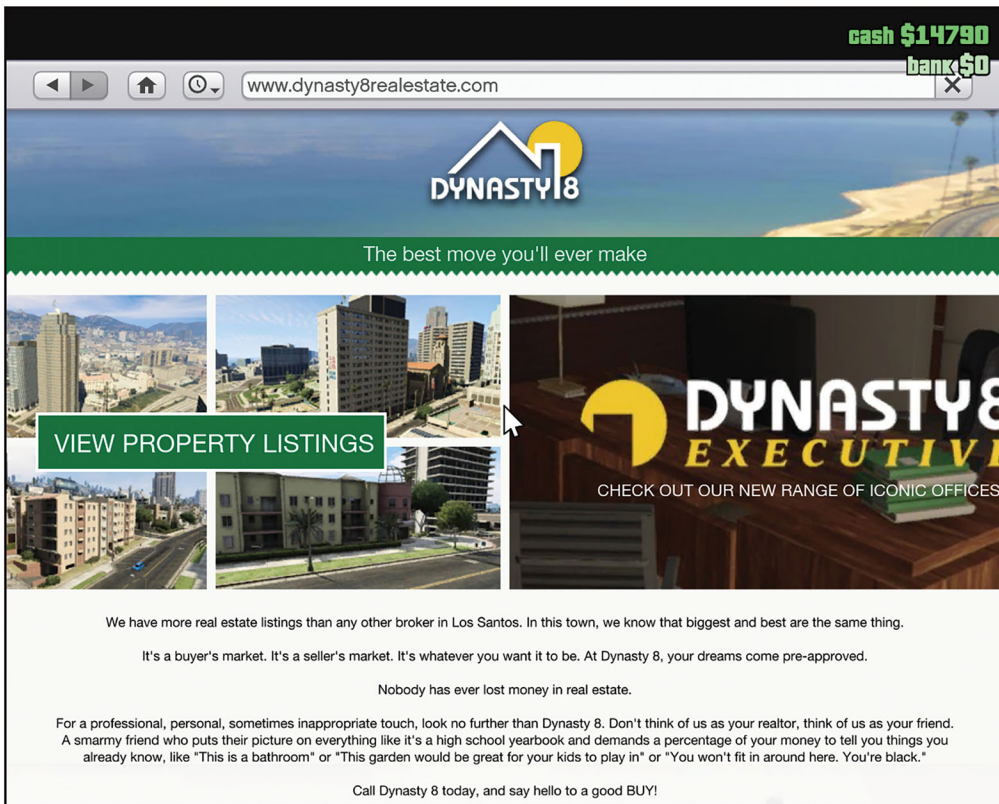


FIGURE 2 The homepage of *Dynasty 8*, the leading platform for real estate listings in *GTA V*.

High-end houses are concentrated in and around the Vinewood neighborhood - a pastiche of Hollywood. Players can purchase up to six houses and garages through the in-game smartphone app or by going to the location and standing in front of the “for sale” sign. After purchase, *Dynasty 8* thanks the player for their purchase and states that “all the paperwork is being automatically signed for you, and the funds removed from your bank account.” Buying a house has never been easier. In the disclaimer, the real estate company writes that it cannot be held liable for financial loss or foreclosure concerning the recently purchased property.

Despite the transactional nature of gameplay, housing in Los Santos is a non-rival good; players do not get unique addresses in the city but can access the same assets and gameplay elements as other players. Also, players cannot sell any property they purchased. There is a small exchange fee when players want to swap real estate. While some houses are free, the more luxurious and desirable apartments cost a lot of in-game currency. This currency can be obtained through gameplay, like completing missions and planning and completing heists. Yet, there are also other ways. Players can connect their Amazon Prime membership to their Rockstar Games Social Club membership, which gifts them \$1,250,000 in-game money, enough to “buy” one luxurious dwelling. More directly, players can use real money to buy “shark cash cards” with in-game currency. The amount of in-game money is more when the players already has a GTA+ subscription.

In late 2021, 85 properties were available for purchase, in addition to several businesses players can own. Owning the latter gives players advantages: it notably offers them new missions to play, rewarding them with in-game currency. However, owning a house provides a different level of benefits. When player characters die, the properties can function as a “spawn point” from where to continue to play. Players can call a mechanic who can repair the player’s vehicles or instantly transport them to their houses. The house’s garage can store 2 to 10 cars, allowing players to save acquired vehicles as part of their property. When players re-enter the online world, the car is still in their garage, which would disappear if they parked elsewhere.

Yet, the *Los Santos* real estate market is not so much about “playing” the housing market or accessing new gameplay elements as it is about homemaking. It promises the experience that the city, quite literally, becomes your own. Upon entering a small blue circle, players can enter their homes or garages. A short cutscene shows the player opening the door, a transition that demarcates inside and outside. Inside, players can eat, drink, change their clothes, shower, surf the Internet on a computer, watch through a telescope, and, in case there is one, swim in a private pool. Most of these amenities, however, have no real impact on the gameplay or storyline. This form of homemaking lacks any practical and substantial forms of domesticity. Players relate to the home as a material good, owned and collected through economic transactions to enrich the immersive experience: to have players feel like they live, work, and play in Los Santos. In the online version, housing real estate provides additional benefits for players, esthetic pleasures, and a sense of accomplishment through virtual commodity accumulation.

This curated experience of home-making also has apparent flaws. Players appear frustrated that the interiors of the different types of houses available are very similar, if not the same. To solve some of these issues, player communities have created unofficial modifications, or “mods,” to the video game that enable players to purchase several apartments. YouTuber *Hazard* (2022) demonstrates how players can walk up to customizable houses marked with a “for sale” sign. *Hazard*’s character demounts from a horse and presses the up-arrow on the controller to buy a property for \$12,000 in-game currency. “We’ve been waiting for so long,” he critiques the lack

of official homemaking opportunities in the game, “I want a cabin or some type of home to come back to and chill at night with my character.” After a quick pop-up notifying the player that they own the property, they can customize the interior and exterior of a house that protects them from violent encounters in the broader gamescape. Hazard continues to show off the bare interior of the house he just purchased and uses in-game currency to upgrade several rooms, which adds additional furniture, objects like flowers and dishes, and more storage for personal items such as weapons. The home here is less related to what has been termed “dwelling” than a further entrenchment in the urban gamescape. This comes with an investment of time, effort, and sometimes actual currency.

The developers also keep developing homes and housing in *GTA*. Rockstar frequently updates *GTA Online*, offering discounts on some properties and expanding the number of properties players can own and the number of cars they can store. These offerings fit in the “games as service” business model, which means that to keep players engaged and spending, developers have to continue to expand the content of their video games, presenting players with new quests, challenges, and gameplay possibilities (Kerr 2017; Bernevega and Gekker 2022). The homemaking experience is part of the effort to keep players engaged and invest time and (real) money in their game. Yet, the experience differs from the usual offerings in that it does not promise the exhilaration of the city but familiarity and comfort. Homemaking allows players to cultivate a private and safe space in otherwise volatile virtual cities.

CONCLUSION

Play has historically been understood as a space characterized by freedom from corporate and political interests. Yet, the digitization of play is driven by global capitalist dynamics and associated political projects. While game producers seem to value player feedback in developing game designs, the corporate imperative of profit remains a primary driver in designing gaming mechanics, narratives, and aesthetics (Bown 2018). The design and play experience of digitized virtual cities is a realization of specific urban imaginaries marketed as players’ dream worlds.

To make urban gamescapes attractive and engaging for extended periods, developers balance an experience of immersive and quotidian city life that is unpredictable – and perhaps violent – with feelings of control and comfort. Based on reviews and popularity, some developers are more successful than others in creating affective urban worlds that combine interesting levels of playability with a necessary form of immersive “realism.” We wondered what makes popular urban games attractive gamescapes from a commercial point of view. Centering on the financial logic of game developers and publishers, this article contributes to our understanding of the political and economic incentives underlying the global appeal of video games and virtual spaces. Emergent gameplay and homemaking are crucial to advancing a sense of belonging in urban games, rewarding players for their continued investment of resources and time with new content, encounters, and homeliness. Immersion—the degree to which players experience a form of “being there” is a crucial asset for product owners and developers of digital products and environments (Blackman 2022). Unpacking how exactly developers translate this experience to concrete gameplay options allows us to generate insight into the commodification and commercialization of urban spaces.

Urban virtual worlds are intensely commodified spaces. The promise of affect is tied to a broader monetization strategy: a way to keep players engaged so they invest time and money in their product or service. When game developers can continue to support their products through online platforms, player retention is stimulated through regular content updates. This strategy can generate immense revenues, and many publishers are offering continuous support of their existing catalog of games; “the classic premium monetization model of singular unitary high-value commodities becomes replaced with alternative approaches” (Bernevega and Gekker 2022, 48). Because many high-budget video games have become a service that receives frequent (paid) updates—with new encounters and purchases available to players—the asymmetric relationship between players and developers becomes a form of rentiership.⁴ Instead of owning a final product, consumers must invest additional time and resources to maintain access to the virtual city and their virtual home.

Our socio-cultural analysis emphasizes how the spatiality of virtual cities is not just located in the digital realm, focusing on corporate interests and player understandings. Yet, the spatiality of video games and gaming remains a promising field for geographical research. As the emerging discipline of digital geographies shows, the boundaries between the digital/virtual and the non-digital/non-virtual have always been opaque, as relationships transcend such boundaries (Leszczynski 2015). The “throwntogetherness” of urban spaces (Massey 2005) is also relevant to seemingly non-material gamescapes. Not only do publishers and developers imprint their interests, ideologies, and understandings on virtual cities, but gamescapes are also produced by the players. Co-production happens in co-op play but also when they engage in online discussions (e.g., Reddit, Discord) and when they consume and debate online content of creators who play, explain, and review games and their development (e.g., YouTube). We have seen some evidence of this above. Taking this one step further, as digital “mediums” in a network of socio-spatial-technical relationships (Leszczynski 2015), urban gamescapes can bleed into material places. When the distinction between players and urban dwellers collapses, we can see how games may mediate and generate understandings, practices, and interactions IRL (in real life). The gamescapes we discussed do not only seek to lay a claim on time(-space) and money but also rehearse understandings and practices of urban life, which are bound to mediate spatialities when players are “being here” (cf. Blackman 2022). These cultural digital geographies remain largely unexplored.

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NOTES

1. GTA+ was introduced in 2022.
2. When finishing this paper, Rockstar Games first announced the sixth installment of GTA. In its publicity, the developer has promised that the urban environments would be even more dynamic and would adapt to player actions to improve the immersive player experience.
3. Rockstar Games aims to make satirical references to everyday urban life in the US. The information at the bottom of this homepage is a case in point. “You won’t fit around here. You’re black,” is a disturbing reference to racialized inequalities that are intrinsic to both past and present real estate markets. While it is probably meant to be read as a critique of contemporary socio-spatial segregation and discrimination, the gamescape is unrelenting in subjecting players to very similar processes and experiences of exclusion and misalignments in terms of gender, class, and race, as well as their intersectionality.
4. Another parallel may be gambling spaces where very similar mechanisms employed to retain players (see Waitt et al. 2023).

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