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Playing the Urban Future: The Scripting of Movement and Space in *Mirror's Edge* (2008)

From *Pong* (1972) to *Pac-Man* (1980), from *Space Invaders* (1978) to *Donkey Kong* (1981), movement in virtual space has been one core mechanic of most video games. As computers and consoles became increasingly more powerful, both the digital representation of space and of movement in space became more elaborate, most notably in games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *Sonic: The Hedgehog* (1991), *Prince of Persia* (1989), or *Metal Gear Solid* (1998).[1] Yet while navigating a digital world continues to be an essential feature of modern-day first-person shooters, open-world games, competitive fighting games, or MMORPGs, movement in space mostly functions as an appendage to other game mechanics. A rare exception, *Mirror's Edge* (2008) puts players in the shoes of a female courier runner and asks them to sprint, jump, glide, and climb through a dystopian high-tech metropolis in order to deliver information. Players enter individual stages or levels after a comic-style cutscene and are tasked to move from one point in the city to another. They control their character, Faith Connors, from a first-person perspective and have to rush through a particular part of the level as they are being chased by police officers or are chasing after other characters themselves. These speed sections alternate with platforming sections in which players attempt to find a path, for example into an office building or out of the urban sewer system. Here, players are less in danger from the police and need to find their way vertically rather than traversing the landscape horizontally. Eventually, mastering (fast) movement through the urban landscape mechanically will challenge the surveillance state narratively.

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1 In "Allegories of Space" (2007), Espen Aarseth defines the experience of "spatiality" in video games as their main purpose—even as he omits any reference to movement in space as the main practice to experience most digital environments: "The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore the classification of a computer game can be based on how it represents or, perhaps, implements space. More than time (which in most games can be stopped), more than actions, events and goals (which are tediously similar from game to game) and unquestionably more than characterization (which is usually nonexistent), games celebrate and explore spatial representations as a central motif and raison d'être" (44).

Since movement in an urban world is the essential ludic feature of *Mirror's Edge*, this paper examines its production of space.[2] In the spirit of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), I particularly explore the various ways in which the video game mediates urban environments with the help of its architecture, its visuals, and its level and world design. Yet, *Mirror's Edge* not only offers insights into the signs and symbols of the (digital) "representations of space" (Lefebvre 33) as its interactive nature also invites questions about the ways in which the game scripts urban experiences in the act of playing. The notion of "scripting," to borrow from urban literary scholars Barbara Buchenau and Jens Martin Gurr, indicates a horizon of possible interactions with and within an urban environment. In their conceptualization, scripts function "as powerful unconscious or semi-conscious guides of individual and collective human behavior" ("Textuality" 136). Although many daily practices, such as a restaurant visit, prescribe social interactions, Buchenau and Gurr are particularly interested in the various ways the infrastructure of urban environments and the "detailed guidelines about proper usage of standard urban commodities and amenities (...) script what urban dwellers do and don't do" ("Textuality" 136). Just as architectural and urban scripts may "initiate various sets of action" ("Textuality" 148), the urban environments in *Mirror's Edge* similarly script interactions with its digital spaces and places. Encouraging players to frantically traverse the top of skyscrapers or race through the local sewer system, however, the video game suspends the "detailed guidelines about proper usage of standard urban commodities" and instead proposes novel scripts for the experience of its environments.

In particular, *Mirror's Edge* re-scripts expected behavior in urban space by explicitly borrowing from Parkour. This subcultural practice of moving through an urban environment at high speed by finding unexpected pathways necessitates a re-reading of the city and its architecture. In the eyes of Elizabeth Freitas, such subcultural re-scripting constitutes "a subversive practice that *transforms* the built environment" (emphasis in original, 210). Since Parkour runners, or *traceurs*, defy the prescriptive uses of urban spaces, Michael Atkinson maintains that Parkour is "an innovative form of anarcho-environmentalist resistance (...) [and] a political *re-appropriation* of commercial urban spaces" in which "[b]uildings, parks, walkways, dumpsters, steps, and practically any edifice is viewed as an obstacle to be used for spiritual and physical development and site for disrupting the order of technocapitalist space" (emphasis mine, 183). Where most

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2 In linking mobility to urban space, this paper follows urban theory in conceptualizing mobility as "constitutive of urbanism" (Söderström 198).

of us may see walls and other obstacles, *traceurs* as well as players in *Mirror's Edge* are asked to see opportunities to arrive at seemingly unreachable destinations seizing ledges, tubes, or vents. In drawing on Parkour, *Mirror's Edge* undermines established urban movement scripts as players use everything but the sidewalk to traverse the digital metropolis.[3]

In re-scripting movement in urban environments, *Mirror's Edge* simultaneously implements novel scripts of traversing its unnamed metropolis. Such guidelines about the usage of space, as this paper aims to show, are not only shaped by the game world and the level design but by their aesthetic mediation as well as the gameplay mechanics. Eventually, *Mirror's Edge* appropriates the subversive potential of everyday practices for its story about a dystopian urban future. However, while the video game converts "non-places," to use a term from urban studies scholar Marc Auge, such as rooftops and sewers into sites of urban spectacle, the organization of the world into separate levels segregates the city into playgrounds of entertainment and thereby undermines the narrative of subcultural resistance, female agency, and political liberation the game aims to tell. Ultimately, the production of space in *Mirror's Edge* follows a neoliberal urban script.

Consequentially, this paper draws from the long-standing tradition in American Studies to explore the role of mobility and space in the making (not only) of US culture. From the first white colonists arriving in North America to the displacement of Native American cultures and the transportation of enslaved African men and women, movement and mobility have been at the heart of American experiences. Writing in *American Mobilities* (2016), for example, Julia Leyda understands mobility as "a key feature in American culture from the settlement of the original colonies to the nation's expansion toward new territories. Even after the closing of the frontier in 1890, Eastern populations continued to spread westward in search of property and prosperity" (11). Indeed, the (in)famous essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) by Frederick Jackson Turner described the process of becoming a US American as a practice of westward movement into the space of 'the frontier.' Writing from and about a white Eurocentric perspective (even as he hoped to substitute the former with a white US American perspective), Turner was not the first and would not be the last scholar to link the westward movement of settlers and colonists to particular spaces. Well into the twentieth century, notions of a "wilderness," a "virgin land," a "garden," the "frontier," or a "city upon a hill" continued to indicate

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3 In many game sections, landing on the sidewalk actually leads to the death of the player character, regardless of the height of the fall.

the centrality of spatial conceptions of the United States in American Studies.[4] Even as numerous scholars from Gloria Anzaldúa to Patricia Limerick have challenged such views to highlight the countless experiences of multi-directional mobility, their work also introduces novel spatial conceptions of North America and the United States as a contact zone, borderland, or transnational site, thereby exemplifying the persistence of a spatial language.[5] In recent decades scholarship in American Studies has increasingly interrogated the imperial and neo-colonial features of the geopolitics of movement and space to draw attention to their legacies in the present. Spatiality, as Klaus Benesch asserts in his introduction to *Space in America* (2005), is "perhaps the most important single driving force not only to build a new nation but to imagine one" (18). Yet, such notions of space are not only shaped by geographical and physical experiences of movement.

When Leyda reminds us that "American national identity has always concerned itself with movement—into the wilderness, across the continent, into middle and upper classes, into outer space" (18), she also highlights the social

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4 I am particularly thinking of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1952), Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence* (1973).

5 In *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), Patricia Limerick challenges not only the Turnerian notion of the frontier as a "civilizing" process but the entire idea of Westward movement as progress. For Limerick, Turner and his frontier thesis "had arbitrary limits that excluded more than they contained. Turner was, to put it mildly, ethnocentric and nationalistic. English-speaking white men were the stars of his story; Indians, Hispanics, French Canadians, and Asians were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible. Nearly as invisible were women of all ethnicities. Turner was also primarily concerned with agrarian settlement and folk democracy in the comparatively well watered Midwest. Deserts, mountains, mines, towns, cities, railroads, territorial government, and the institutions of commerce and finance never found much of a home in his model" (21). Limerick therefore prefers to understand the American West as "an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected" (27) and were shaped by the pursuit of conquest. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa similarly shifts perspective by detailing the history of movements on the North American continent from early human settlement to the present. Anzaldúa places the numerous experiences of movement (and displacement) of indigenous and Mexican people at the heart of that history. Borders do not separate two irreconcilable opposites as Western historians tended to rationalize European colonial and imperial conquest, but are products of cultural, economic, political, and social struggles for Anzaldúa. As a consequence, indigenous and Mexican people (not only) in the US-American South have been and continue to inhabit a borderland: "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary [that] is in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 3). With this shift in perspective away from a white Anglo-centered history, Anzaldúa connects the hope of fostering a "mestiza way" (82).

facets of space and mobility. Spatial movement also connotes social movement most prominently in the much ballyhooed American Dream. While for some "westward movement had always implied progress, development, and opportunity, and thus been linked ideologically with upward class mobility" (Leyda 12), for many physical movement did not translate into social (upward) mobility. From the Black Atlantic to Native American removal in the past to the policing of African Americans and people of color today, mobility is still highly contested as (the control of) movement and space continue(s) to shape everyday experiences. Likewise, the detention centers at US borders exemplify correspondingly what Maryemma Graham and Wilfried Raussert describe in their introduction to *Mobile and Entangled America(s)* (2016) as "an understanding of culture and cultural contacts that is based upon mobility's being entailed in, and in turn (re)producing, *geographic and social immobilities* and concepts of territory(ialit)y" (emphasis mine, 5).

The extent of spatial or social (im)moblities today is intimately tied to modern technology. Whereas present-day means of transportation allow for the ever-expanding global flow of goods and people in the physical world, contemporary means of communication enable the immediate travel of information and ideas at the palms of our hands in the digital word. In his introduction to *Culture and Mobility* (2013), Benesch acknowledges that "[t]hanks to the new mobile communication technologies we can 'go places' even while standing in line at a ticket counter, waiting at a street light or being stuck in a traffic jam," and he concludes that "[w]e are all in motion, constantly" (2). Though one may interject that travel writing and particularly American road narratives would also have their readers "go places," technology does offer novel ways of experiencing space, movement, and mobility. The interactive experience of three-dimensional video game spaces, in particular, provides players with the possibility of traveling to places either beyond the reach of their personal means or into historical pasts, imagined futures, and the fantastic. It is in this light that the following passages examine *Mirror's Edge*, a game also demanding that players be "in motion, constantly." Keeping in mind both the liberating and debilitating qualities of geographical and social mobility, this paper explores the ludic pleasure of movement in space and its simultaneous production of a neoliberal urban script.

Neoliberal Rationales in Video Games

At first glance, *Mirror's Edge* possesses none of the in-game mechanics most scholars have read as perpetuating neoliberal rationales. For example, in "Governmentality, Neoliberalism, and the Digital Game" (2009), Andrew Baerg focus-

es on the freedom of choice in connection with the fixation on numerical values in video games to describe their "potential to reproduce procedural rhetorics linked to neoliberal political rationalities" (125). Video games "potentially legitimize and naturalize" neoliberal rationales by favoring "free choice" in their "stress on player choice" combined with a "calculative rationality applied to risk management" ("Governmentality" 125). Whether it is through the possibilities of developing a particular player avatar, the necessity to constantly make choices, or the weighing of risk-reward scenarios, video games ask players to evaluate their options and manage risk by rendering all the necessary information for their decision process as numerical entities, for example when developing an avatar's attributes, tracing their progress with experience points, or measuring their damage output. Numbers quantify risks and choices through discourses of calculation (cf. Baerg "Neoliberalism").[6]

Whereas Baerg probed into role-playing and sports-managing games, Oliver Perez-Latorre and Merce Olivia extend their examination of neoliberal rationales into the game mechanics of (first-person) action adventures with role playing elements (cf. 15). Analyzing *BioShock Infinite* (2013), they describe the ability to customize an avatar, the amassing and consumption of in-game items for character improvement, the narrative of the "individualist epic," and the competiveness within an incentive-driven system as (potentially) following a neoliberal logic (cf. 11–14). Particularly when experienced together in a single game, these features foster a neoliberal individualism in which "[c]ollective wellbeing should be achieved through the sum of the actions (free and autonomous) of individuals and companies who try to maximize their own wellbeing" while advocating "the dismantling of public policies" (Perez-Latorre and Olvia 11).[7]

Since players cannot accumulate in-game items, earn experience points to optimize their character, or manage their risk of moving through a hostile environment according to numerical values, *Mirror's Edge* may seem devoid of neo-

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6 Baerg further describes the neoliberal logic of personal risk management via numerical value calculation as an (in)voluntary feature of gaming: "In being deployed in digital games, the numbers become an indicator of both potential risk and how well a gamer may be managing risk. In weighing the risks of a choice against its potential benefits, all against the backdrop of quantitatively inflected variables, gamers become responsibilized to minimize risk in keeping with a neoliberal calculative rationality. Certainly users are not forced to make the most prudent choices, but failing to act responsibly inevitably leads to a failure to win or potentially a failure to enjoy the digital game experience and accrue the benefits that derive from victory and/or participation. The rational gamer aims to successfully confront the virtual world from a calculative perspective and, in doing so, responsibly manages risk" ("Governmentality" 124).

7 Such game mechanics, as Perez-Latorre and Olivia emphasize, extend beyond any single game or genre (cf. 15–16).

liberal game mechanics. Because the video game scripts its urban environment akin to segregated sites of entertainment, its production of space nonetheless follows a neoliberal rationale. The notion of a 'progressive neoliberalism' will eventually provide a framework to think through such ambiguities. In the following, I will first explore the ways in which a fractured urban environment and fluid movement—instead of accumulation, consumption, and risk management —model a neoliberal rationale of mobility.[8]

Scripting Urban Environments in Digital Media

With its focus on frantic running, jumping, and climbing, *Mirror's Edge* draws on a host of earlier platforming games but faces the challenge to provide adequate information for a smooth and seamless movement across its chaotic environments. Particularly its first-person perspective immerses players in a dystopian world yet complicates a quick reading of urban space. Since most platforming titles utilize a third-person perspective, they often allow players to control the camera angle to provide a better view of a particularly challenging section. Although *Mirror's Edge* plays from the narrower first-person perspective, no such options exist.[9] Instead, the opening section of most levels offers a moment of orientation when little or no action has been initiated and players may tentatively sketch a path toward their distant objective. Since unforeseen obstacles can appear at any moment, players sometimes need to chase other characters, or the setting simply moves from rooftops to underground or indoor sections, one can hardly plan the fastest route before beginning the level properly. The moment players step from the starting platform, they have to quickly respond to shots fired from police officers, sudden obstacles in the environment, or new in-

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8 Although mobility and movement are often used interchangeably, this paper understands mobility as distinct from movement in that the former "encompasses different types of movement and their interrelations" (Söderström 198). In this sense, movement may connote the geographical, spatial, or physical change of place while mobility refers to "the capacity to be mobile" and therefore functions as "a specific form of 'spatial capital'" (Söderström 198).

9 In an interview with *mtv.com*, senior producer Owen O'Brien explains the design decision behind the game's first-person perspective: "the camera in our game does quite a lot of clever things. It's simulating your eyes rather than your head. I think what a lot of people have done in the past is they've stuck a camera in the person's head and they move around like robots (...) The field of view is very important. A lot of first-person games have a very claustrophobic point of view, usually to create tension or scares. We've got a very wide field of view which gives you much more peripheral view of the city. And you get much less disoriented" (qtd. in Totilo).

formation from other characters. The plethora of visual information, the in-game sounds as well as the controller feedback further immerse players in the game world. *Mirror's Edge* thereby scripts movement in its urban environment as fast, frantic, and empowering (when successful) as players scramble to find the quickest path away from gunshots and toward safety. Such a scripting of movement in urban spaces at high velocity, however, necessitates the curbing of sensory information.

As players receive visual as well as sonic and sensory information, strategies of curating that information seem particularly pertinent in video games not least because players simultaneously provide input into the medium. Photographers and filmmakers, for example, choose perspectives, compose shots, and crop images in post-production to organize information.[10] To ensure playability, games borrow or remediate these practices yet also provide simplified means of reading the game world such as in-game maps, radars, and dotted lines to orient players. *Mirror's Edge* refrains from using such established mechanics and instead opts to curate its information primarily via its gameplay, its aesthetics, and its structuring of urban spaces.

Such design decisions not only shape the immediate playing experience but also contribute to the overall composition of the game world. The urban environment of *Mirror's Edge* eventually "shape[s] a player's particular understanding of a larger set of spatial ideologies inherent to the game" (Magnet 143)—to adopt Shoshana Magnet's analysis of the role of digital landscapes in her essay "Playing at Colonization" (2006). As the virtual environments are not "static objects 'to-be-looked-at,' but are dynamic and require the active involvement of the player in their construction" (143), Magnet draws from the work of Henri Lefebvre and W. H. K. Chun to conceptualize the production of these spaces, or "gamescapes," as the result of "repetitious (...) spatial practice of gameplay" (147). Ultimately, the reduction of possible interactions with the game environment and sensory information not only enables players to maneuver through the game world fast and efficiently but also contributes to the production of a desolate (albeit stylized) urban environment in the act of playing.

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10 In *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (2008), Michael Nitsche explores the parallels (and dissimilarities) between the cinematographic work in film and its adaption in video games. He argues that "[t]he plane of the mediated space is part of the interactive system in video games, but it quotes many visual traditions from cinema. In order to keep the mediation legible, 3D games have lined themselves up in the tradition of the moving image, and it is not surprising that a remarkable amount of effort has gone into the use of cinematic visualization techniques in video games" (79).

Although the setting of *Mirror's Edge* is a vast and sprawling metropolis, interaction with the world is limited to a handful of button prompts. As players move from the top floors of a skyscraper to the underground sewers, the gameplay stays the same throughout all levels: running, a lot of jumping, and occasional climbing. Since the jump button also doubles for grabbing objects and pulling the character onto platforms, the game makes only partial use of the controller layout. In addition to scripting a small set of interactions with the environment, *Mirror's Edge* also provides only a partial urban experience. Neither driving a vehicle nor going shopping or enjoying a coffee are part of that experience. Similarly doors are usually not opened but kicked in, and elevators appear to have only an up and a down button.

The spatial design of the urban environment as well as of interior spaces exhibits similar constraints. Urban spaces are generally kept in a sleek white to give the city a futuristic touch. At closer inspection, the architecture of many buildings and the surfaces of objects, however, are kept simple. Crates, tubes, doors, or house fronts, for example, have very little detail. As graphical assets are continuously re-used, the exterior spaces and buildings may deviate in height and arrangement but rarely in surface, color, or design. Indeed, as white cubes dominate the urban landscape, the metropolis in *Mirror's Edge* brings architectural scale models to mind. The interior spaces appear even more generic. The metropolis in *Mirror's Edge* has an uncanny visual conformity because of the extensive use of white and the relative absence of details. Thematically fitting for a dystopian urban future, the minimal design also assists and immerses players in the world of an urban courier runner.

In addition to the gameplay and the visual representation of the urban environment, *Mirror's Edge* helps orient players with its "runner's vision" mechanic. Because of the unfamiliarity of the environment, the unforeseeable gaps between buildings, or the spontaneous appearance of enemies, players cannot predesign their way to the end of a level. Similarly, I found myself often misjudging distances, choosing the wrong path, and thereby falling to my death or losing momentum. *Mirror's Edge* aims to circumvent these complexities of its urban environments—and frustrating game experiences—by highlighting single objects in red which players may use to their advantage. Available in easy and normal mode, this "runner's vision" simulates the ability to see unconventional paths Faith developed from years of experience and the player may be missing. Similarly, should players feel completely lost, pressing a single button lets Faith look into the general direction of her destination. *Mirror's Edge* hence organizes the complexity of urban environments by visual cues that script possible paths through its urban gamescape; its "set of spatial ideologies" (Magnet 143) further

aim to contribute to a narrative about challenging a totalitarian surveillance state.

Running the Digital City

As players learn the fastest paths through the individual levels, their playing or running of the urban maze becomes a mode of reading the digital urban environment and a subversive practice within the story. In light of the disciplining power urban spaces exert in "determining conditions of social life," urban scholar Michel de Certeau contends, everyday practices become "individual mode[s] of re-appropriation" (96). Particularly walking in urban spaces possesses the potential to "elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised" (de Certeau 96), or—as Deborah Stevenson explicates in her reading of de Certeau—walking "take[s] place within existing (imposed) regulatory frameworks but manage[s] to avoid the nets of surveillance, policing and discipline" (67).[11] In the future city of *Mirror's Edge*, that kind of walking is painstakingly hard to experience as Faith immediately falls into a quick stride at the slightest push of the controller. Nonetheless, physical movement possesses a similar potential to undermine urban disciplinary frameworks because the completion of an in-game section of the metropolis, albeit in the form of running, functions as a subversive practice within the narrative logic. The more often players speed through a level, the faster the seemingly chaotic gamescape becomes readable as Faith successfully "eludes the surveillance, policing, and discipline" of the state. Since players are encouraged to enter individual sections repeatedly to compete for faster completion time, they will eventually master the game mechanically and thereby expose the evildoings of the totalitarian regime narratively. Running the city, players challenge the dystopian police state.

The scripting of movement in an urban environment not only serves to elude discipline in *Mirror's Edge*. In drawing on Parkour, the game appropriates a subculture which similarly subverts the everyday practices of movement in urban space. Elizabeth Freitas, for example, describes Parkour as a transformation of the built environment that "speaks back to the dominant spatial practices prescribed therein" (209). Similarly, for Michael Atkinson, Parkour provides an experience of freedom and thereby "challeng[es] dominant social constructions of (...) urban environment as sanitized corporate space" (170). In loping, vaulting,

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11 Historically, the notion of the act of walking in de Certeau corresponds to the ascendancy of the urban planning paradigm of the automotive city in the twentieth century.

or scaling the urban architecture, *traceurs* appropriate and re-script the "determining conditions" de Certeau sees at work in urban spaces. Atkinson even draws parallels to the nineteenth-century *flâneur* as he asserts that both "deliberately call attention to the late modern city's spatial organization and its environmentally sterile, commercial policing" (174). Seen from this perspective, the practice of Parkour "eschew[s] the totalitarian technocapitalist enframing of the late modern city" as *traceurs* inscribe into (local) urban spaces "their physical, emotional, and psychological needs as urbanites" (Atkinson 178, 180). Leaving the question aside whether the late modern city can be described exclusively as "technocapitalist," *Mirror's Edge* adapts the subversive aspects of Parkour into a story about a surveillance state but shifts its narrative critique from commercial to governmental policing.

In centering on Faith Connors, *Mirror's Edge* furthermore constitutes one of the rare instances of a playable female and Asian American protagonist, as both continue to be utterly underrepresented in Western video game development to this day. Tom Farrer, one of the game's producers, spoke about the ambition "to get away from the typical portrayal of women in games, that they're all just kind of tits and ass in a steel bikini. We wanted her to look athletic and fit and strong [enough] that she could do the things that she's doing. We wanted her to be attractive, but we didn't want her to be a supermodel" (qtd. in Ashcraft). For players and game critics, the developers have succeed with their aspiration as Faith "manages to be athletic, stealthy and attractive without relying on suggestive camera angles or physically impossible cleavage" and is "dressed for success, wearing clothes runners actually don while hopping through parking garages" (Elston). Not surprisingly, Faith continuously appears on lists ranking the "Most Inspirational Female Characters in Game" (*GamesRadar*), the "Greatest Video Game Heroines" (*SFGate*), the "Greatest Heroines in Video Game History" (*Complex*), or "Kick-Ass Women in Videogames" (*Entertainment Weekly*). She is even hailed as "[o]ne of the strongest women in the modern gaming landscape" (Vance). Such widely-shared appreciation for the playable heroine in *Mirror's Edge* seem to further foreground the progressive politics of a narrative about civil disobedience by having players run in Faith's shoes.[12]

Whereas *Mirror's Edge* links the empowerment of a marginalized citizenry to the fast-paced movement of a female protagonist through space, Andreas Höhne

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12 In this context, the first-person perspective further contributes to this sense of giving voice and empowerment to Faith via the player. Although players do not acquire weapons or in-game abilities in *Mirror's Edge*, Nitsche's statement about first-person shooters still applies: "[t]he view stays consistent, but the dramatic position of the hero changes from victim to killer" and "*the game space changes from threat to familiar and mastered ground*" (emphasis mine, 105).

reminds us that "we must be careful to not simply bestow fluidity and mobility with positive connotations while perceiving immobility as a sign of exclusion and marginalization" (161). Höhne draws from the field of mobility studies and its insights into "the doctrines at the very core of (neo)liberal ideology of being mobile, flexible, and connected" (161–62). Indeed, *Mirror's Edge* constantly incentivizes players to stay on the move as the narrative, the dialogues, or the mission design foster a permanent urgency to progress.[13] Seen from this perspective, the scripting of high-speed urban mobility complicates the narrative framing of empowerment in the game as slowing down and actually walking along the tops of the metropolis would constitute a subversive practice within the spatial logic of *Mirror's Edge*. However, not only does the immediate experience of movement in a single level adhere to a neoliberal logic of mobility, *Mirror's Edge* also scripts all of its mediations of the urban environment as a postmodern space of late capitalism.

The Urban Script of Progressive Neoliberalism

In spite of the possibilities to explore the city of *Mirror's Edge*, the urban environment becomes only partially readable because of its fractured mediation. While players see most of the metropolis through a first-person perspective, the game depicts the city in two additional ways, thereby scripting a neoliberal experience of urban space. First, players actually enter the urban environment via the starting screen. Here, they can choose to replay completed levels or continue with the main story. As players select a particular section of the city, they also receive a visual approximation of the entire metropolis. Although only depicted as a three-dimensional urban planning model of various white cubes, its skyline of skyscrapers brings to mind contemporary megacities such as New York or Shanghai. This urban vista draws from high modernist planning ideas and the notion of the Vertical City in particular. Inspired by the work of Le Corbusier and his rigorously geometrical principles, the high-rising architecture was "underpinned by a modernist concern with efficiency, rationality and simplicity" and "had façades and interiors that were relatively free from 'unnecessary' ornamentation and references to the past" (Stevenson 82–83). This high-modernist style appears a suitable choice for a dystopian gamescape in which, as Faith explains in the

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13 The time-trial mode further contributes to such a reading. After finishing a level players may choose to replay the section in a timed mode and compete for the fastest completion time with other players on a global online score board.

opening scene, the expansion of the police state succeed slowly as most citizens "didn't realize, or didn't care, and accepted" the curbing of civil rights in favor of leading "a comfortable life" (*Mirror's Edge*). The minimalistic design and simplistic layout of the map, however, contribute little to the overall understanding of the spatial organization of the city acquired in the individual levels.

Similarly, after the completion of every level, the game provides a cutscene narrating the main story. Presented in an anime style, the scenes introduce major and minor characters to tell the game's story of a city-wide conspiracy. Here, the perspective shifts from a first-person view to an external camera. Spatially, these scenes are often situated in locations never visited by the player and not highlighted on the map screen. For example, Faith meets a police informant in an underground garage the location of which remains opaque since players never arrive at the garage at the end of a level and the game offers no geographical indication on the map screen. By having players race the individual levels, interact with the map screen, and watch cutscenes, *Mirror's Edge* thus scripts its experience of urban space as an assemblage of three distinct perspectives.

In the eyes of Frederic Jameson, such unreadability is an essential quality of postmodern spaces. The assemblage of a multitude of often contradictory referents, Jameson diagnoses, renders postmodern spaces "illegible" (156). In the postmodern aesthetics of *Mirror's Edge*, players do possess the capacity, in contrast to Jameson's assertion, to "map [their] position in a mappable external world" (43). Even as the fragmented depictions of urban space—the first-person perspective, the map screen, and the cutscenes—preclude a coherent reading of the metropolis, that assemblage never inhibits or completely deters a comprehension of the game world. What seemed disorienting about space in the late 1980s and postmodernism in general has come to designate, as many scholars have noted since, an established and readable feature of contemporary (urban) aesthetics (cf. Patton 112–24). Similarly, the fragmentation of a video game into individual levels which are accessible through the larger game world (or from a map screen) is also an established mode of in-game world design. In this sense, *Mirror's Edge* draws on postmodern aesthetics to offer ludic pleasure to players running and reading a fractured urban space; its assemblage of assorted spatial experiences thereby exemplifies "the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 46). Thanks to its scripting of the game world, *Mirror's Edge* produces a spatial experience scholarly literature refers to as 'neoliberal urbanism.'

In his contribution to *Urban Theory: New Critical Perspectives* (2017), Ugo Rossi describes the neoliberal commodification of cities as an obliteration of "the publicness of contemporary cities through myriad process of enclosure" (217). Neoliberal urbanism or urban segregation, in his view, is driven by "the

urbanization of creativity" (the widespread policies catering to a "creative class") and "the mobilization of culture for urban regeneration purposes" (Rossi 215). Particularly the latter sees tourism as an opportunity for expanding the local and regional service industry sector. While neither creativity nor tourism figure prominently within *Mirror's Edge*, its urban experience also hinges on a "process of enclosure" to foster the ludic pleasure of frantic movement as players only traverse those sections of the metropolis that provide speed, tension, and challenge (avoiding all other areas through cutscenes and the map screen). The fragmentation of the metropolis into meticulously designed and conveniently accessible sites of entertainment lets players consume the city as a present-day tourist.

Rather than a tourist, however, *Mirror's Edge* stylizes its protagonist as a subcultural revolutionary. In combining subversive narrative elements with scripting a late-capitalist experience of urban space, *Mirror's Edge* exemplifies what Rossi describes as the "co-optation of alternative subjectivities (...) and the spectacularization of social and cultural diversity" (214), and what Nancy Fraser concisely labels "progressive neoliberalism." The combination of a female Asian American protagonist challenging a totalitarian political system thanks to her extensive spatial mobility bears close resemblance to what Fraser describes as "an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end 'symbolic' and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other." As progressive movements and ideas joined modern forms of capitalism in this seemingly unexpected partnership, "the former lend their charisma to the latter [as] [i]deals like diversity and empowerment, which could in principle serve different ends, now gloss policies that have devastated manufacturing and what were once middle-class lives" (Fraser). Similar to the experience of urban space, the subversive potential of Faith's "individualistic epic" eventually contributes to a neoliberal rationale in *Mirror's Edge*.

Conclusion

All games, even the *GTA* or *Assassin's Creed* series with their sprawling open worlds, script the complexity of urban environments. Since *Mirror's Edge* particularly constricts its dystopian world to a narrow set of mostly non-places players often need to traverse at high speed, this paper has concentrated on the production of urban space via movement. To mediate its spatial experience, *Mirror's Edge* appropriates the subculture of Parkour to tell a story about civic disobedience against total surveillance. As players learn to read the unnamed metropolis

by dashing through the levels, *Mirror's Edge* toys with the idea of the subversive potential of everyday practices.

At the same time, the game uses not only in-game world design but also cinematic cutscenes and a map screen to assemble its metropolis from a variety of divergent perspectives. Although such a scripting of urban space complicates a coherent reading of the city, in tune with postmodern architecture or fiction, the fragmentation of the urban environment actually contributes to the pleasure of the game as its initial unreadability prefigures its subsequent mastery. Indeed, the fragmentation of urban space further enhances *Mirror's Edge*'s ludic pleasure by minimizing the need to traverse longer stretches of urban spaces without any meaningful interaction. Yet the ludic pleasure of the fragmented urban environment in *Mirror's Edge* thereby also curates a ghettoized urban experience in which only the privileged few—extensively trained, able-bodied, and highly mobile—experience the city as a spectacle of entertainment. In letting players run in the shoes of a female Asian American courier, the game eventually mediates a neoliberal urban space in the spirit of a 'progressive neoliberalism.' Instead of subverting the dystopian status quo in a narrative about the political oppression of a vulnerable citizenry and individual revolt, the seamless accessibility of curated sites of entertainment lets players consume the city akin to urban tourists.

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