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Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies: An Introduction

This volume aims to bring the methodological richness of American Studies to the study of space in the medium of video games. The essays assembled here map out conversations about spatiality in video games from the vantage point of American Studies, exploring the digital spaces players experience, navigate, and manipulate within games and beyond. Following this approach, video games are not understood as forms of digital literature or as an interactive or playable media (although they certainly are) but first and foremost as a medium of space. Games, we argue, are defined by their spatiality. While this introduction conceptualizes video games as a medium inherently characterized by its various modes of spatial production, the present volume examines a particular kind, one that is keyed to the history and formation of U.S. culture.

From its inception, the experience of space in video games marked the decisive quality of the medium. In one of the earliest video games, *Tennis for Two* (1958), for example, players had to hit a simulated tennis ball on a court at a precise moment to either gain an advantage over their opponent or avoid hitting the ball into the net. Understanding the position of the ball on the digital tennis court (seen from the side) was crucial. Similarly, *Spacewar!* (1962) required players to understand the space – in this case the gravity well of a star in the universe – in which their spaceships moved. Players had to manipulate the simulated gravitational push and pull of the star to gain an advantageous position over the other player to shoot down their ship. Consequentially, Michael Nitsche sees the “representational form and their interactive design” of these early video games as originating from their “spatial realization” (18). Likewise, the popular text-adventure-game genre of the late 1970s and early 1980s also followed less a literary tradition and foregrounded experiences of space. While players encountered the game world only as a written text on a screen and could only interact with that world by typing in commands, text-adventure games, Henry Jenkins reminds us, “centered on enabling players to move through narratively compelling spaces” (“Narrative Spaces” 56).

With the ubiquitous use of 3D graphics today, space and movement in space have become an inherent part of the visual, auditory, and haptic gaming experi-

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ence as navigating a digital world continues to be an essential feature of all genres. From vast open worlds to small one-screen challenge rooms, the play of video games takes place in and produces space. At the same time, space also functions as one of the quintessential narratological forms of video games since the medium tells its stories, Sebastian Domsch asserts, by way of “the experience of navigating through space” (104). Indeed, in the words of Alenda Y. Chang, “[a]lmost by definition, all computer and console games are environments” (58). In the digital spaces and environments of video games, questions about the medium, its mode of narration, its aesthetics, and its form coalesce.

Video Game Studies shares this interest in the function and meaning of spaces with American Studies which possesses an even longer tradition of thinking about space. Historically, notions of space have been crucial in describing the experiences of white settlers in North America and in the development of U.S. culture. While notions of a “wilderness,” a “virgin land,” a “garden,” the “frontier,” or a “city upon a hill” date to the colonial period, these ideas have played an instrumental role in shaping the making of a national culture in the nineteenth century. Since the 1950s, American Studies has wrestled with these ideas whether as myths and symbols, as ideological constructions, or as methodological frameworks of the field. Yet, even when American Studies scholars began to challenge conceptions of North America as a “virgin land” (Perry Miller) or a “garden” (Leo Marx) as a narrow perspective, these interventions tended to deploy a spatial vocabulary, nonetheless. The following introduction aims to provide an overview of the spatial discourse in Video Game Studies and in American Studies. As both fields have undergone a spatial turn in thinking about their subject of study, their distinct theoretical approaches and methodologies provide a critical vocabulary to interrogate the productions of space.

In bringing the two fields into a dialogue about their notions of space, this volume continues a conversation Sascha Pöhlmann initiated with his volume *Playing the Field* (2019). In his introduction, Pöhlmann wonders how conceptions of American Studies change by studying video games. He advocates to “systematically discuss ways in which the study of video games may present a challenge to the methods that are current in the loose interpretative community of American Studies, how it might demand new methods, or how it might reinvigorate those methods that have become unfashionable but are still part of the field’s historical repertoire of cultural criticism” (4). Spatiality, I argue, may offer one such systematic approach to thinking about video games and American Studies.¹

¹ The interest in the role of space developed out of Pöhlmann’s inquiry and led to the organization of the conference “Playing the Field II: American Studies, Video Games, and Space” at the

Consequentially, the following passages trace the development of the role of space in Video Game Studies as one of the defining features of the medium. Similarly, the introduction will then look at the long history of the use of space and spatial vocabulary in American Studies from its early myth-and-symbol school to the(ir) fundamental revisions in the field and present scholarship following a spatial turn in American Studies.²

In tracking the meanings and functions of space in Video Game Studies and American Studies, this introduction sketches the plurality of conceptual and methodological approaches to space in both fields as well as their various intersections. The first part of the introduction examines the development of spatiality and discourses of space in Video Game Studies. This section provides a theoretical framework for the essays in this volume as they adopt the spatial vocabulary of Video Games Studies to critically examine the production of North American spaces in their material. The second part of this introduction provides a history of American Studies, albeit with a particular interest in the role of a spatial vocabulary since the inception of the field. This section thereby aims to demonstrate the centrality of spatiality in the theoretical conceptualizations of American Studies and in its programmatic shifts. By placing spatiality in Video Game Studies in proximity to similar debates in American Studies, the latter part of the introduction furthermore hopes to indicate a path for future explorations. As Video Game Studies moves beyond thinking about space as merely representative or representational to understand the production of space also as an act of playing, American Studies may similarly expand its notions of space as a practice or a form of doing. The introduction hence concludes with the idea of scripting as a current example of spatiality in the field; its interest in the scripted scenarios and the prescriptive actions of physical environments not only illustrates a performative sense of space but may offer novel approaches to thinking about video game spaces as well. Eventually, the individual contributions to the volume expand this overview and provide concrete examples of studying space in video games from an American Studies perspective while si-

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (KWI) in Essen, Germany, in May 2019. This collection of essays grew out of the event.

² In some regard, this volume takes its cue from *Gamer Nation* (2019). In his book, John Wills provides “an analysis of video games within American culture; their presentation of America past, present, and future; and their potential to reframe American experience” (18). By examining gameplay mechanics as well as the production of space, this introduction and the following essays expand on Wills approach of looking at the “representation in (and the narrative geography of) games” (14).

multaneously questioning some of the theoretical premises introduced. In the following pages, I hope to provide a context for these conversations.

Space and Spatiality in Video Game Studies

Early Video Game Studies wrestled with a seemingly simply question: what are video games? Or rather, how should we analyze video games? In the 1990s, these questions were mostly answered with reference to literary theory and narratology. Video games were seen as “interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema” (Eskelinen). By the end of the millennium, this view of video games came under intense scrutiny as scholars increasingly foregrounded elements of play in their studies. Even as video games tell stories, video game scholar Jasper Juul maintains, “if we were to *play* only a single game session of a hypothetical game and end up performing exactly the same sequence of events that constitute *Hamlet*, we would not have had the same experience as had we *watched* *Hamlet* performed” (“Games Telling stories?”; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, the enjoyment of a video game may be completely detached from any story it attempts to tell (if, indeed, a game tries to tell a story in the first place). Scholars eventually transcended debates about the narrative or ludic quality of games as they shifted their exploration of the uniqueness of video games to questions of space, among other issues.

In Video Game Studies, three interrelated notions of space developed over the years. First, literary and media scholar Janet H. Murray describes the uniqueness of digital texts in general as the experience of moving in space. Second, theme park designer Don Carson and video game scholar Henry Jenkins further conceptualize this quality of video games as a form of narrativizing space to argue for their storytelling and worldbuilding potentials. A third strand of thinking, found in the work of video game scholars Espen Aarseth and Michael Nitsche, concentrates less on the narrative potential of space and instead theorizes what kind of space video games produce or how space functions as a digital environment. Stephan Günzel eventually describes this period in the 2000s as a “spatial turn” in the field. By conceptualizing video games as “active navigation through a pictorial space” (Günzel, “The Spatial Turn” 148), hence, scholars (and players) are asked to both read and interact with digital environments (see Günzel, “The Spatial Turn” 147). Lastly, this spatial turn also expanded the vocabulary to engage critically with the politics of representations at work in the medium. Spaces, landscapes, and environments are never empty or merely scenery, a Cultural Studies approach to space argues, but always possess meaning whether in service of various ideologies or as subversive sites thereof.

All these approaches to video game spaces ascribe meaning to the digital environments players experience. For Sebastian Domsch this act of “semanticizing space” (104) is a common occurrence in everyday life but is made particularly prominent in video games. “As we experience spaces,” he explains, “we read them for their meaning and the stories they contain, and as we perform these spaces through movement and interaction, we inscribe our own narrative into them” (104). The narrativization of space through movement stands in stark contrast to sequential forms of storytelling most prominently found in literature and film and constitutes a defining feature of video games (see Domsch 105). Eventually, video game scholars have drawn from insights into the narrative potential of physical spaces to conceptualize virtual ones.

In her pioneering work about digital texts, Janet H. Murray plants the seeds for thinking about digital texts as spatial phenomena (even though she is often considered a proponent of a narratological approach to video games). In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997),³ Murray ascribes the unique means of telling stories in the digital medium to the immersive quality of experiencing the digital world as a “navigable space” (79). Murray does not have video game spaces but hypertext novels of the early 1990s in mind when she argues that whereas “[l]inear media such as books and films can portray space, either by verbal description or image, [...] digital environments can present space that we can move through” (79). She underscores that the spatial quality of the digital medium does not derive from its graphical capabilities or its ability to connect far-flung places in a global communication system. Instead,

[t]he computer's spatial quality is created by the interactive process of navigation. We know that we are in a particular location because when we enter a keyboard or mouse command the (text or graphic) screen display changes appropriately. We can verify the relation of one virtual space to another by retracing our steps. (Murray 80; emphasis added)

This sense of movement in space is furthermore intimately tied to an experience of the narrative since the “navigation of virtual space has been shaped into a dramatic enactment of the plot” (Murray 83). Her conceptualization of digital media foremost as a navigable space refers to hypertext novels but eventually extends to include video games.⁴

³ Her book spawned vivid responses as seen in the earlier quote by Juul. For further critical assessment of her work, see Ryan “Beyond Myth and Metaphor” (2001).

⁴ For a detailed mapping of spatial forms in digital media of which the neologism “cyberspace” coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* is probably one of the most famous instances, see, for example, Ryan “Cyberspace, Cybertexts, Cybermaps” (2004).

Theme-park designer Don Carson was one of the first to bring architectural thinking of physical spaces into conversation with video game spaces. For Carson in “Environmental Storytelling” (2000), a ride in a theme park tells its narrative or story through “the physical space a guest walks or rides through” (Carson). In his view, the physical environment “does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell” as “[c]olor, lighting and even the texture of a place can fill an audience with excitement or dread” (Carson). Thanks to environmental storytelling, a narrative is not a linear procession of plot points but the immersive experience of an entire fictional world. Drawing from his work, Carson asserts that video game players should ultimately “come to a conclusion” about the fictional world “through their experience of the physical space and random encounters with peripheral game characters” (Carson).⁵

In the early 2000s, space seemed a particularly enticing concept for video game scholars, as environmental storytelling connects video games to early forms of play and allowed scholars to segue from fruitless debates about the status of narratology and ludology in the field. In “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” (2004), Henry Jenkins proposes to move the study of video games away from questions about their narratological or ludic quality and instead center the field around spatiality. Jenkins argues “for an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects” (121) as the production, designing, or sculpting of space stands at the heart of video games. For example, the first text-based adventures, although devoid of visual depictions of space, “centered around enabling players to move through narratively-compelling spaces” (Jenkins 121).⁶ As the graphic capabilities of gaming devices advanced, video games did not appeal to players because of their narrative form. On the contrary, early “Nintendo games have simple narrative hooks – rescue Princess Toadstool – but what gamers found astonishing when they first played them were their complex and imaginative graphic realms” (Jenkins 122). Instead of appreciating or analyzing video games exclusively for their narrative complexity or

⁵ In his essay, Carson provides some concrete suggestions for the production of video game spaces from a “set of rules that will guide, the design and the project team to a common goal” to giving players a first sense of their placement in and their relationship to an environment, “Storytelling Through Cause and Effect,” “The Power of Designing the Familiar,” “Using Contrasting Elements to Your Advantage,” and “Remember, This is a Theatre!” (Carson). While Carson hopes to inform and educate designers, his list also represents a set of useful analytical tools.

⁶ Jenkins even harkens back to early table-top role-playing games, an inspiration for the text, noting that a play started “with designing the space – the dungeon – where the players’ quest will take place” (121).

their ludic functionality, Jenkins suggests focusing on the critical examination of gamespaces since “the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces” (122).

Thinking about video game spaces as “narrative architecture,” “narrative space,” or indeed “environmental storytelling” allows Jenkins to theorize video games as a unique form of cultural texts differing from literature and visual media. Jenkins conceptualizes “environmental storytelling” (which he adapts from the essay by Carson) by distinguishing four interrelated features: spatial storytelling references established narratives, spatial storytelling relates its narratives as movement in space, spatial storytelling communicates information in its setting, and spatial storytelling emerges out of the experience of space (see Jenkins 123). The digital environment, in this view, shapes the experience of the game narrative and world. To tell their stories, for one, video games draw from and evoke a “larger narrative system in which story information is communicated through books, film, television, comics and other media” to immerse players in a world they can “wander through and interact with” (Jenkins 124). Secondly, they enact stories through their spaces. These gamespaces privilege “spatial exploration over plot development” by structuring their narratives as “a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist’s forward movement towards resolution” (Jenkins 125). Consequently, the traversal of a gamespace becomes an inherent aspect of the narrative experience because the accessibility of digital environment is tied to advancement in the plot of a game. Simply put: the plot is often organized around movement in space (see Jenkins 125–126). Thirdly, developers embed narrative components in the interactions with the digital world when designing a game. Players must locate and recognize these storytelling elements as games distribute “information across the game space” (Jenkins 126). This requires players to properly read and decipher the digital environment to advance the narrative. Lastly, narratives can be “mapped onto game space” (Jenkins 128) as the narratives emerge from the ways in which players can interact with and thereby produce space. These gamespaces then hold a potential for telling multiple stories or even allowing for player-driven narratives (see Jenkins 128–129). Instead of following a pre-written story, players write their narratives as they traverse a space or find their actions imprinted on the landscape of the game. From the perspective of environmental storytelling then, space moves to the fore of understanding video games.⁷

7 Following Carson and Jenkins, Celia Pearce foregrounds the possibilities an architectural approach holds for the study of video games in her essay “Narrative Environments” (2007).

A third strand in Video Game Studies concentrates less on the narrative potential of space and instead theorizes the kind of digital environments video games produce. An early work to conceptualize space is Espen Aarseth's "Allegories of Space" (2001).⁸ In his view, space in video games poses a dilemma since no physical realms exist which a person can actually enter (as the idea of the holodeck suggests). To solve the quandary of describing digital spaces, he borrows the notions of representational space and represented space from the work of Henri Lefebvre instead.⁹ Aarseth understands computer games as "spatial practice[s]" which are "both representations of space (given their formal systems of relations) and representational spaces (given their symbolic imagery with a primarily aesthetic purpose)" (163). Aarseth moves beyond reading digital environments only as narratives to understand

spatial representation in computer games as a reductive operation leading to a *representation of space that is not in itself spatial, but symbolic and rule-based*. The nature of space is not revealed in this operation, and the resulting product, while fabricating a spatial representation, in fact uses the reductions as a means to achieve the object of gameplay, since the difference between the spatial representation and real space is what makes gameplay-by-automatic-rules possible. (Aarseth 163; emphasis added)

Although gamespaces are representational, Aarseth foregrounds their "automatic rules" as the fundamental element of these digital environments. Obviously, digital environments simulate physical landscapes: anyone who set foot into the New York of *GTA IV* (2008) or the Washington DC of *The Division 2* (2019) will attest to the realist qualities of these depictions of space. Yet, video game spaces "are not exclusively focused on representation since the representation is always serving the primary purpose of gameplay" (Aarseth 47). Indeed, few players have complained about the inability to shop for groceries, sit at a café to read the daily paper, or the absence of the need to sleep, eat, and hydrate in these games since "[g]ameworld design must defer to gameplay design" (Aarseth 47). Consequentially, Aarseth proposes to understand games as "allegories of space" because "they pretend to portray space in ever more realistic ways but

⁸ The essay by Espen Aarseth has seen several reprintings. I will be referring to its initial publication but also to a shortened version of his essay from the volume *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level* (2007) edited by Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, and Matthias Böttger.

⁹ The spatial turn, of course, signals an interest in the exploration of culture with the help of notions of space and place. *La Production de L'Espace* (1974) and its English publication *The Production of Space* (1991) by Henri Lefebvre have become foundational texts in this regard (see Günzel 13).

rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable” (169). The scholarship following this sense of space encounters the challenge of how to adequately analyze digital environments as narratives and symbols (representational spaces) but also as experienceable or playable (representations of space).

In his *Video Game Spaces* (2008), Michael Nitsche provides a toolbox for engaging with the narrative and architectural qualities of digital environments. His work furthermore expands the sense of spatiality in the study of video games by considering the physical places where people play and the social spaces playing produces. Similar to Aarseth, Nitsche does not understand video game spaces merely “as foregrounded spectacles based on visual cues such as perspective and parallax but as presented spaces that are assigned an architectural quality” (3).¹⁰ While his work would echo the writing of Henri Lefebvre in conceptualizing 3D space as representation and representational, Nitsche also draws from narratology and aesthetic theory to explore the making of video game spaces.

To understand (the production of) video game spaces, Nitsche first examines the ways in which the narrative of a video game fosters a sense of space and movement therein. Comparable to the sense of navigable space in digital texts Murray describes, Nitsche also understands storytelling in video games first and foremost as movement in space. When completing a quest in a role-playing game, for example, players experience its narrative not merely as a story told by a non-player character but by comprehending “the events a player causes, triggers, and encounters inside a video game space” (Nitsche 7). Secondly, the aesthetic presentation of a video game world complements this narratological approach as the audiovisual production of space often borrows heavily from cinema to organize the game world and the possible interactions with that environment through a “narrative filter” (Nitsche 7). From (digitally simulated) camera positions and movement to sound design and music, video games produce their spaces by adopting the aesthetic conventions of other audiovisual media (see also Bolter and Grusin *Remediation*). Lastly, Nitsche borrows from architectural theory and design to explore the ways in which video games create a sense of presence and immersion in their spaces (see 159–202). As the production of video games increasingly necessitates to design three-dimensional spaces, their creators become a kind of “spacemaker” or even “narrative architect” and players the “explorer and conqueror of space” (Nitsche 20).¹¹

10 Despite the rich history of space in video games, Nitsche concentrates on 3D navigational space in his work because he sees “fundamental differences among a space described in a written text, a cinematic space, and an interactive navigable virtual world” (5–6).

11 In addition to offering a set of tools to analyze the multi-layered production of space in video games – the mediated space and the fictional space of video games – Nitsche further draws at

In his introduction to the essay collection *Ludotopia* (2019), co-edited with Espen Aarseth, Günzel would further expand this thinking about video game spaces. With his emphasis on video game space as “symbolic space” (21), Günzel aims to move away from questions about “the *what?* of space or the *where?* of place” and towards the “*how?* of space” (22; emphasis in the original). Rather than merely using spatial theories to analyze video games as previous scholarship has done, however, he suggests “look[ing] at computer games themselves *as spatial concepts*” (13; emphasis in original). At times, video games are instances of spatial theory.

Whether “environmental storytelling,” “narrative environments,” “spatial narrative,” or “narrative architecture,” all these concepts describe the role of space in video games as narrative elements, as aesthetic features, and as part of the gameplay mechanics. Yet, the “highly spatialized storytelling techniques” (201) of video games, as Celia Pearce reminds readers in her essay “Narrative Environments” (2007), create a sense of place that is tied to concrete identities, communities, and various forms of agency. Rather than thinking about how video games produce spaces, then, a Cultural-Studies-inspired approach to these digital landscapes explores the politics of their representation.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, as media scholar Soraya Murray asserts, the production of space in video games implicitly or explicitly “naturalize[s] a certain set of relations through a highly curated framing of the playable environment” (142) as every digital rendering of land eventually “make[s] claims about space, place and landscape” (180). In *On Video Games* (2017), she therefore conceptualizes “*landscapes as ideology*” (142, emphasis in the original). Drawing from the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, Murray eventually situates video game spaces in the broader history of landscape art to conceptualize their ideological work as a cultural practice or a form of doing (see 143–144). This doing includes an examination of the perspective on space, its uses and values within the logic of the game, the ways in which space produces meaning, and the gameplay mechanics to experience space (see Murray 180).¹² Murray, for example, reads the

tention to the role of digital environments as a “social space” within a “narrative landscape” (7). *Video Game Spaces* includes a theorization of the locations in which people consume video games, the “*play space*” and the social landscapes games produce as “actions in the virtual world can affect the spaces of other players” (Nitsche 16; emphasis in the original). For another interdisciplinary approach to the study of video game spaces, particularly with an interest in their epistemological potential, see Fraser “Why the Spatial Epistemology of the Video Game Matters” (2011).

¹² For an earlier engagement with the ideologies of digital spaces, see Magnet “Playing at Colonization” (2006).

depiction of 1980s Afghanistan in the open-world game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* as “startlingly devoid of local people, eliminating the possibility of friendly fire or collateral damage;” instead “[t]he land yields resources like medicinal plants and raw diamonds, but is just as easily a site of unexpected danger, such as animal attacks or passing Soviet trucks filled with enemy soldiers” (148–149). While Murray explores the production of space from a critical whiteness perspective in one instance, *Metal Gear Solid V*, Souvik Mukherjee provides a postcolonial look into the spatial ideologies of the medium in general.

With concepts such as Third Space (see Bhabha) and an-Othered space (see Soja), it should not come as a surprise that Postcolonial Studies offer a language to critically engage with spaces in video games.¹³ In his *Videogames and Postcolonialism* (2017), Mukherjee connects the study of video games with a postcolonial perspective through the lens of spatiality. For Mukherjee, the history of colonialism and imperialism and the playing of empire in video games share an interest in “the acquisition of geographical space” (29). Mukherjee underscores the imperial logic of spatial expansion, conquest, and exploitation in (some) video games by looking at their gameplay mechanics of “spatial expansion” (29) and by interrogating “who the player is and whose maps are being represented” (31) in these scenarios. As players engage with, shape, and eventually conquer “the maps that *perpetuate* the logic of colonialism instead of challenging it,” their “personal [experiences and] histories are intertwined with and constructed out of a colonialist logic” (Mukherjee 31; emphasis in the original). Consequentially, many video games – Mukherjee pays particular attention to the 4X and real-time strategy genres with prominent examples being the *Colonization* and the *Total War* series – provide an experience of space akin to the logic of imperialism by situating players at the helm of European empires at the start of their global expansion. In these games, space is something to be conquered, its natural resources and inhabitants exploited for further expansion by military, diplomatic, and religious means (see Mukherjee 40).¹⁴

13 Despite their rich analytical vocabulary, however, Postcolonial Studies have not found their way into the study of video games on a larger scale. For an overview of Postcolonial approaches to the study of video games see Mukherjee 8–9.

14 Mukherjee also locates various challenges to any straightforward sense of ideological interpellation in playing empire in video games. In real-time strategy games and 4X games, players have the opportunity to re-write history and create alternate versions as they lead the nation of their choice (and these games tend to organize human cultures alongside national identities) to global dominance. Yet, even within the “expansionist logic of empire” video games tend to provide moments, scenarios, and non-player characters who (try to) resist and even challenge the control of the player. Mukherjee sees a “thirdspace of protest” (45) at work when non-player groups or settlements hinder player expansion or challenge their seamless authority as non-

Whereas Mukherjee acknowledges the imperial logic informing the game-play mechanics in real-time strategy and 4X games, Alenda Y. Chang examines similarly exploitative relations to gamespaces from an ecocritical perspective. In “Games as Environmental Texts” (2011) and *Playing Nature* (2019), Chang describes three principal roles nature and ecological environments play in video games, namely as “background scenery,” as “stereotyped landscapes,” and as “natural resources” (“Environmental Texts” 58). Digital landscapes in video games often consist simply of hazards and obstacles players need to surpass while their visual portrayal is limited all too often to clichés of an untouched wilderness or a pastoral ideal lacking any regional detail. Possible interactions with these environments furthermore boil down to what use value they have for players (see Chang, “Environmental Texts” 59–60). Consequentially, in-game interactions with the environment script player agency and expression as forms of “dominance,” “manipulation,” and “mastery of the external environment” (Chang, “Environmental Texts” 60).

The examples of the postcolonial and eco-critical approaches to the study of space showcase the development of the earlier spatial interest in Video Game Studies. The notion of space has been at the heart of the field from early attempts to understand the unique quality of digital texts as a form of movement in space to the spatial turn with its conceptualization of space as a narrative, aesthetic, and interactive feature of the medium. This theoretical tradition and its methodological toolbox inform an essential part of the critical work in this volume. Interest in the production of digital spaces, the experiences of the environments, and their politics of representation, however, also resonate with similar interests in the critical examinations of the production of North American spaces in American Studies.

Space and Spatiality in American Studies

Comparable to the spatial turn in Video Game Studies, American Studies underwent a similar change in recent years. While this shift opened novel perspectives bringing the interdisciplinarity of the field into proximity with, for example, Urban Studies, American Studies possesses a long history of thinking about notions of space. These ideas have been essential in characterizing the experiences

player populations protest, revolt, and even acquire independence in various scenarios – a tug-of-war between players pursuing an imperialist logic of expansion and exploitation (even when leading a subaltern group) and moments of resistance to their imperial authority (see 49).

of white settlers in North America and in the development of U.S. culture. Notions of a “wilderness,” a “virgin land,” a “garden,” the “frontier,” or a “city upon a hill” date to the early colonial period, continued to shape the making of a national culture in the nineteenth century, and stood at the center of early American Studies in the mid-twentieth century. From the 1950s to the 2010s, the conceptualization of space and spatiality in American Studies shifted from being understood as myths and symbols mediated in U.S. literature and history (North America as a new garden of Eden) to being used as a geo-political framework to debate the nation-state, American exceptionalism, and the transnational turn in the field.¹⁵

As video game scholars adapted the work of Lefebvre to formulate a spatial understanding of their medium, so can the competing roles of space in American Studies also be described fruitfully with his concepts. The framing of space in the myth-and-symbol school of the 1950s articulates, to borrow from *The Production of Space* (1991) by Lefebvre, a representational sense of space, i.e. “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (39). For Lefebvre, representational space is less concerned with the built or physical environment; instead, it is “making symbolic use of its objects” (39). The myth-and-symbol approach to spatiality in U.S. literature therefore shares with the notion of representational space a tendency “towards more or less coherent *systems of non-verbal symbols and signs*” (39; emphasis added). In the wake of the myth-and-symbol school, American Studies scholars challenged the representational power of the chosen myths and symbols as too narrow to encapsulate the diverse literary (and cultural) production of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Revisionist interventions within the field since the 1970s also foregrounded, in the words of Lefebvre, the multiple spatial practices in North America to adjust, critique, or even dismiss notions of “the garden” or “the frontier.” In highlighting the possibilities of the borderland or in linking U.S. culture and literature to U.S. imperialism and advocating for transnational perspectives in the field, American Studies scholars explore the multiple local, national, and global “spatial sets characteristic of [their] social formation” (Lefebvre 33). Recent years have also seen attempts to

¹⁵ For an introduction to the development of the video game industry and digital play in the United States, see, for example, *The Video Game Explosion* (2007), *From Playgrounds to PlayStation* (2016), *Atari Age* (2017), or *Gamer Nation* (2019).

¹⁶ Revisionist approaches to American Studies questioned whether a set of tropes, such as “virgin land” or “the machine in the garden,” could be representative of American society – and whether canonical authors could actually offer a “radical resistance” against the rationalization of human life as the “[h]ighbrow writers in the tradition of the American Renaissance [...] [were] described as racist, sexist, imperialistic and complicit with the system” (Fluck 79).

bridge the divide between a representational view of space and the representation of space when thinking about the ways in which texts as well as built environments script stories and actions. In the following, I will spotlight some of the moments when notions of space shifted in American Studies.

Scholarship about the early colonial period in North America has shown the long history of European spatial concepts informing perceptions of North America. Oliver Scheiding, for example, examines the reorganization of Christian maps of the world from the Middle Ages to incorporate the North American continent after 1492. Scheiding reads early mappings of and storytelling about North America as cultural practices shaping “the colonial imagination of British America” (1). Scheiding refers to a “geography of salvation” in the writing of Richard Hakluyt about North America which fostered “the colonial imagination of British America and serves as a point of departure for understanding the global dynamics of empire building” (2). Similarly, the maps of Theodor de Bry – depicting North American spaces and people – framed Native Americans as “the descendants of Noah who have only forgotten social virtues as they turned into hunters over time” (Scheiding 14). Through maps, illustrations, and paintings, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans wrote North America into their perception of the world. For Ralph Bauer, the mapping of the North American continent complicated and ruptured European systems of knowledge production. More importantly, his *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures* (2003) argues that “the transformations in the organization of early modern knowledge must in part be understood as a response to the distinct geo-political questions raised by European settler colonialism in the Americas” (3). Knowledge and knowledge production in the colonial period should not only be understood as an expression of social hierarchies informing the political organization of the European empires. Epistemic systems were also organized “in geographic space in early modern settler empires;” Bauer understands colonial notions of science or “the early modern scientific paradigm” as “territorialized economies of knowledge production, ‘empires of truth’ that were structured by a geo-political order that might be characterized as forms of epistemic mercantilism” (4). In addition to placing the formation of knowledge within frameworks of historical developments and change – i.e. time – Bauer underscores “the spatial dialectics that were foundational in the making of modernity” (12).

Although indebted to European notions of space, the nineteenth century experienced a popularization of spatial language in an attempt to formulate a decidedly U.S. American perspective. One of the most (in)famous examples, the essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) by Frederick Jackson Turner, describes the process of becoming a U.S. American as a practice of westward movement into a frontier. For Turner, life on the frontier remade Eu-

ropean immigrants into U.S. Americans through a form of rebirth fostered by the unique qualities of that space. Initially, the frontier experience overwhelmed the European immigrants, depriving them of their heritage, and forcing them to adopt the ways of the Natives for survival. As the frontier wilderness changes the settler completely, “the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, [...] [but] a new product that is American” (Turner 61). By stripping the settlers of their past, as historian Richard White explains, the frontier gives “them a new and uniform set of American characteristics [individualism and democracy]” (26). Writing from and about a white Eurocentric perspective (even as he hoped to substitute the former with a white U.S. American perspective), Turner was not the first and would not be the last scholar to link the search for an American national character to space.

Well into the twentieth century, notions of a “virgin land,” a “wilderness,” a “garden,” or the “frontier” continued to indicate the centrality of spatial conceptions in American Studies. I am particularly thinking of Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950), Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956) and Leo Marx’ *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). While these scholars are usually subsumed under the label of the myth-and-symbol school, strikingly, their work refers to and revolves surprisingly often around notions of space in U.S. literature.¹⁷ Space in the myth-and-symbol thinking is mostly an imagined landscape – the pastoral for example – with “symbolic power” in that these spaces bring “the political and the psychic dissonance associated with the onset of industrialization into a single pattern of meaning” (Marx 30). Rather than embracing earlier ideas of space uncritically, these scholars bemoaned that the myth of a wilderness, a virgin land, or said frontier, in the words of Nash Smith, “ceased very early to be useful in interpreting American society as a whole because they offered no intellectual apparatus for taking account of the industrial revolution” (259). Eventually, the myth-and-symbol school engaged (not only) with spatial myths about the United States in nineteenth-century literature because the frontier, the garden, or the virgin land, i.e. the agrarian myth in U.S. culture, have “appeared with increasing frequency in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization” (Marx 7). The myth-and-symbol school hence cared little for a theorization of physical environments. They preferred to explore the mythologization of spaces in nineteenth-

¹⁷ Even the last publication in the spirit of this first generation of American Studies scholars, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (1965) by Alan Trachtenberg, refers to a distinct space to think about U.S. culture.

century literature in order to formulate a critique of mid-twentieth-century capitalism.¹⁸

Revisionist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s would formulate their challenge of the myth-and-symbol consensus with attention to spatial language. Indeed, even as numerous scholars from Annette Kolodny to Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Limerick, and Marie Louise Pratt have highlighted the countless experiences complicating frontier stories of westward expansion, notions of a virgin land, or gardens endangered by technology, their works also introduce novel spatial conceptions of North America and the United States as a contact zone or borderland, thereby exemplifying the persistence of a spatial language. Conceptually speaking, however, these revisions also challenged the merely allegorical understanding of space as a symbol for ways of writing (and reading) North American landscapes. While the feminist intervention of the 1970s would still operate under the paradigm of space as an allegory albeit one of gender, revisionist scholars of the 1980s would increasingly ask what other spaces and experiences thereof exist in the United States to question the function of national boundaries and frameworks altogether. Spaces, as video game scholars would later maintain, did not merely tell stories and were not only representational.

In the 1970s, Annette Kolodny criticized the prevailing notions of space in U.S. literature and in American Studies as predominantly male-centered metaphors and fantasies. In *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Kolodny traces the myth of the garden to early colonial writings about North America underscoring its gendered connotations. The idea of North America as a lost garden of Eden and its use as metaphor for a “regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (Kolodny 6) first appeared in promotional texts hoping to lure settlers to the continent. Kolodny situates this framing of the North American landscape within the broader colonial project of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the westward expansion

18 Since the 1970s, however, scholars have similarly emphasized the “reactionary or false ideology” embedded within the myth-and-symbol approach. Examining the status of space in the myth-and-symbol school, Richard Slotkin complicates the notion of the frontier in proposing a wider, more inclusive perspective in his *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973). Instead of focusing entirely on the function of the myth of the frontier (or, by extension, of a virgin land or the garden) in U.S. literature, his work points to the importance of thinking about the implied assumptions and perspectives – or social structures – operating in these concepts. In his view, (canonical) literature was not merely using the myth of the frontier to formulate a critique of the longing for a pastoral past in an industrialized society but failed to acknowledge the history of economic exploitation, the racism of slavery and Segregation, environmental destruction, and Native American genocide (see Slotkin 5). For another early critique of the myth-and-symbol school, see Sklar “American Studies and the Realities of America.”

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to ask rhetorically whether a need existed “to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown?” (9). Indeed, the depiction of the North American landscape in literature and culture, Kolodny maintains, constitutes “probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine” (4). In her feminist reading, Kolodny interrogates the male premises informing the literary and scholarly productions of space.

In the 1980s, various scholars continued to follow this path of questioning the prevalent ideas about U.S. American space. In *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), for example, historian 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 privileged the perspective of “English-speaking white men” (21) and “agrarian settlement and folk democracy in the comparatively well watered Midwest” (21) at the expense of a plurality of other people, spaces, and experiences. Limerick therefore prefers to understand the American West as an intersection of multiple cultures all shaped by the pursuit of conquest (see 27). In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa places the movement (and displacement) of indigenous and Mexican people at the heart of the history of the North American continent. For Anzaldúa, 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. Consequently, indigenous and Mexican people (not only) in the U.S. American South have been and continue to inhabit a borderland (see Anzaldúa 3). Where Turner depicted the frontier as a vast and uninhabited space of immense transitory power but also in need of cultivation by white settlers, Anzaldúa challenges this clear-cut distinction foregrounding the conceptual work the frontier vocabulary does: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (Anzaldúa 25; emphasis in the original). Lastly, in her essay “Arts of the Contact Zone” (1991), Mary Louise Pratt introduces the notion of the contact zone to expand on what Anzaldúa labeled borderlands. For Pratt, the contact zone also refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (34), but she extends the contact zone to all parts of the world. Also, whereas Anzaldúa proposed a new conceptualization of border spaces, Pratt foregrounds the modes of expression constitutive of the contact zone or, its “literate arts” (37). These arts include “[a]utoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, media-

tion, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression” (Pratt 37).¹⁹

Alongside these interventions, scholarship further complicated notions of space in literature, culture, and American Studies as expressions of an imperial ideology. The essay collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993) edited by Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan, for example, faults the myth-and-symbol school for its formulation of an American exceptionalism and early American Studies for contributing to the dissemination of U.S. imperialism.²⁰ Whereas reformulations of the role of space in American Studies in the 1970s and 1980s underlined the plurality of experiences and perspectives within North America, the early colonies, and the nation state, Kaplan formulates her critique by embedding the United States and its history in a global network of European colonialism and Western slavery (see 6).

In this critique of American Studies, the conception of space constitutes the central focus of debate. The myth-and-symbol school not only omitted a plurality of perspectives in centering their study of U.S. literature and culture around the garden, the wilderness, or the frontier; the approach also situated the (history of the) United States outside of global networks of exchange and exploitation. Spatiality, then, 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). Given the debates surrounding the premises of American Studies, one may add that spatiality is also “the most important single driving force” to critically interrogate (the idea of) the nation.

19 In *The New American Studies* (2002), John Carlos Rowe develops a comparative approach towards American Studies by discussing the works of Bhabha, Lauter, and Pratt. However, Rowe, ultimately, finds the concept of the “contact zone” most intriguing for a comparative perspective because it avoids the traps of multicultural pluralism, melting-pot assimilationism, and a total fragmentation of evaluation (one culture, one evaluation system). The curriculum of courses should thus focus on texts “through which cultural confrontations have been negotiated historically in the United States” (Rowe 14). Rowe also argues that in all major research fields dealing with U.S. culture and society the contact zone presents a useful tool (Rowe names African American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Native American Studies, Asian-American Studies specifically) (see 15–16).

20 For further critique of American exceptionalism, see, for example, David M. Wrobel *The End of American Exceptionalism* (1993), Daniel T. Rodgers “Exceptionalism” (1998), Rowe *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (2000), Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), Deborah Madsen “American Exceptionalism and Multiculturalism” (2003), Amy Kaplan “The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism” (2004), William V. Spanos *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization* (2008), Donald E. Pease *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), Winfried Fluck *Romance with America?* (2009).

Benesch captured the quintessential role of space at a moment when American Studies would further expand its spatial vocabulary. Following the critique of imperialist premises within the field, American Studies scholars increasingly situated their analyses of U.S. literature and culture in hemispheric and transnational contexts. This approach invited critical exploration of the United States and its cultures from a global perspective in order to de-center the nation-state. In her presidential address to the American Studies Association, “Crossroads of Cultures” (2004), Shelly Fisher Fishkin advocated for a transnational shift in the field to enable scholars to comprehend American culture and literature “from vantage points beyond its borders” (20) and within broader networks.²¹ While a post-nationalist conceptualization of American Studies continues to be a widely shared understanding of the field, not all scholarship embraced the challenge to the nation-state as optimistically as Fisher Fishkin did. A critical view of globalization, the post-national, and the transnational cautions, in the words of Donald Pease, to “enshroud the structural injustices of the contemporary global economic order within the cosmopolitan ethos of a transnational democracy that had not yet materialized” (15). The spatial vocabulary of borderlands, crossroads, and the transnational asks American Studies, to borrow from Janice Radway’s 1998 presidential address, what is in its name.²²

So far, my overview has indicated a tension at the heart of the notion of space in American Studies. Some perspectives foreground the representational or symbolic potential of spatial vocabulary within literary and cultural texts; others may prefer to approach issues of space with an understanding of “their formal systems of relations,” i. e. their lived experiences and ideological formations, in mind. Recent years have seen attempts to bridge this divide. In doing, the work by Barbara Buchenau and Jens Gurr offers a conceptual language to think productively about video game spaces as representational, as representative, and as practices.

21 For further transnational interventions see also Walter D. Mignolo’s *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2000) or Ramón Saldívar’s *The Borderlands of Culture* (2006).

22 In the early 2000s, for example, contributors to the volume *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (2000) cautioned that the national “cannot be easily wished away by the application of the *post*-prefix” (Curiel et al. 2; emphasis in the original). Similarly, a critical view of globalization, the post-national, and the transnational would find articulation, for example, in the edited volume *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (2011). In his introduction, Pease formulates a cautionary assessment of the transnational turn in American Studies when he writes that “no isomorphic relation [exists] between the transnational as a signifier and what it is made to signify” (6).

The examination of the mediated, the lived, and the representational qualities of space is at the heart of the urban scholarship Buchenau and Gurr pursue.²³ Their approach to space lends itself most explicitly to a study of spatiality in video games. In their essay “City Scripts” (2016), Buchenau and Gurr inquire into the “prospects of bringing American studies’ current focus on media, materiality and knowledge into a structured conversation with” the narrative turn in Urban Studies, i.e. its “increasing attention to story, narrative and space” (397). Buchenau and Gurr therefore not only examine the mediations of urban spaces but also explore the narratives that built environments tell as they connect a spatial turn in American Studies with a story turn in Urban Studies (see “City Scripts” 395–398).²⁴ To do so, they introduce the notion of “scripting.” Scripts are, Buchenau and Gurr explain, “pieces and systems of writing” but can also designate “social roles” or function “as theatrical and cinematic manuscripts and typescripts, maps and other visual media” (“City Scripts” 409). As scripting describes a variety of literary and cultural practices, the concept eventually “permits further insights into literature’s ability to tentatively build scenarios and thereby preview future actions” (Buchenau and Gurr, “City Scripts” 409). This scripting of scenarios or prescription of actions, however, not only applies to literary and cultural texts. The notion of “scripting” also indicates a horizon of possible interactions with and within urban environments as scripts provide insights into the ways in which built environments “predicate human behavior and social interactions” (Buchenau and Gurr, “City Scripts” 396, 409).²⁵ Video games, with their imaginary yet simultaneously built environments and their pre-

23 The research group *Scripts for Postindustrial Urban Futures: American Models, Transatlantic Interventions* explores the imaginative strategies and narrative scenarios which the centers of old industries (steel, coal and cars) in the United States and Germany are devising to forge paths into their futures. *City Scripts* is a joint endeavor of the American Studies Departments of the University Alliance Ruhr (Duisburg-Essen, Bochum, Dortmund). The research group is led by Prof. Dr. Barbara Buchenau.

24 Buchenau and Gurr call for greater scholarly attention “to questions of form and shape as they affect both, narrativity and the built environment” with particular interest in the development of “a better understanding of the conjunctions between matters of materiality and matters of media, narrative and representation” (“City Scripts” 398).

25 In their essay “On the Textuality of American Cities and Their Others” (2018) they further elaborate that scripts function “as powerful unconscious or semi-conscious guides of individual and collective human behavior” (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) – as architectural and urban scripts “initiate various sets of action” (“Textuality” 148).

scribed interactions with the game world (and other players), exemplify this conception of scripting.

The story turn in Urban Studies and the spatial turn in American Studies resonate with the understanding of space in video games sketched earlier. For one, video game spaces tell stories. Whether video games simulate concrete cities or draw on imagined worlds from science fiction to the fantastic, as the notion of environmental storytelling argues, space is the essential element of narration. Spaces are furthermore not merely digital approximations of built environments or imaginative worlds to escape to but carry complex cultural connotations as the Cultural Studies approach to video games demonstrates. Digital spaces are never empty; they possess meaning. Comparable to literature, cinema, and other media, video games furthermore “build scenarios” and allow players to “preview future actions.” Cultural and social scripts find playful expression in digital spaces.

Yet, through their gameplay mechanics, video games also script the possible interactions players have with their environments (and other players). Comparable to the usage of physical spaces, video games prescribe concrete interactions with the game world – whether as minute reproductions of urban spaces or in the form of a hostile extraterrestrial wilderness. This scripting of player action via the gameplay mechanics may be limited to running and jumping to complete a level as fast as possible or may follow scripts empowering players to re-shape their digital environments completely.²⁶

To think about spatiality in video games necessitates and fosters interdisciplinary approaches. Video games have been about space from their inception. Video Games Studies have been similarly wrestling with space as scholars continue to develop their critical vocabulary. American Studies not only shares some of that vocabulary for studying space but possesses a long history of thinking about the production of space. In exploring the complexity of video game spaces and by drawing from Video Games Studies, this volume also hopes to deepen the understanding of spatiality in American Studies.

²⁶ Games, however, not only script the proper modes of interacting with the game world, players also re-script these possible interactions for their advantages or pleasure. For example, speedrunning – the attempt to complete a game as fast as possible while using any means available – may include ignoring most of the existing game mechanics or adopting them to further progression. Most notably may be the deliberate killing of the player character to advance in the speedrun or to exploit glitches (programming errors) in the game.

Contributions

This volume is divided into three parts. Each section engages with a concrete feature of video game spaces from an American Studies perspective. Whether traditional spatial tropes, environmental storytelling, or the performative uses of physical space, each part also revolves around a distinct set of video games. The first section focuses exclusively on contemporary mainstream games by AAA companies, while the second part expands its scope to include independent and smaller scale productions. The last section moves away from traditional video games to examine gaming apps as well as the artistic use of video game spaces in stage design and puppetry, in the theater, and the museum.

The first section collects essays critically engaged with traditional notions of space in American Studies. The frontier myth plays a central role here as contributions interrogate its nostalgic, imperial, and gendered dimensions in a variety of contemporary video game franchises. Similarly, video game companies advertise the agency to traverse and shape such vast spaces as an empowering experience for players while narrowing the possible interactions to exploitative practices so intimately tied to the spatial history of the United States. The expansive and post-apocalyptic frontier spaces of recent open-world games, however, also create moments of introspection allowing for critical reflections of the digital landscapes and their relationships with the player character as well as the player.

The first part opens with Sören Schoppmeier and his engagement with the nostalgic quality of the frontier myth in contemporary video games. In “Notes on the State of Montana: The U.S. American Spatial Imagination and the Retrotopia of *Far Cry 5*,” Schoppmeier focuses on the depiction of spaces and interactions with places that never existed in the romanticized video game version of Montana, thereby exemplifying the retrotopian character of *Far Cry 5*.

Felix Zimmermann also focuses on the frontier as a playable space. “Ethical Boredom in the Wilderness: Treating *Red Dead Redemption 2* as an Ambience Action Game” not only reads the frontier as a narrative device as well as a site of violence and settler colonialism in the Western game. The essay also understands the frontier as a space of introspection since its vast traversable landscape asks for little engagement from players, thereby fostering an experience of ethical boredom.

Nathalie Aghoro continues this cluster of essays about the mediation of the frontier myth in video games. In “On Postapocalyptic Frontiers in *Horizon Zero Dawn*,” Aghoro argues that the projection of the frontier myth onto a postapocalyptic landscape in the video game undermines its hegemonial status as the spa-

tial knowledge players acquire in their exploration of the game world foregrounds the ecological precarity stemming from the exploitation inherent in Western expansionism.

David Callahan expands discussions of the frontier myth by examining its imperial dimension in “Owning Global Spaces and the Frontier in *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End*.” Callahan critically probes the function of non-European spaces as playgrounds of masculine bravado by situating the protagonist of *Uncharted 4* within the long Euro-American history of imperial adventure stories and the frontier myth from James Fenimore Cooper to Frederick Jackson Turner and Edgar Rice Burroughs in particular.

Andrei Nae continues the examination of imperial themes of the frontier myth in video games Callahan began but shifts from a critical assessment of masculinity to femininity. In “From Male to Colonial Gaze: The Intersection of Patriarchy and Colonial Discourse in the Rebooted *Tomb Raider* Video Game Series,” Nae questions whether the most recent incarnation of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series presents a progressive femininity by foregrounding the imperial discourse encoded in the gamespaces the heroine traverses.

Lastly, the ideological premises of adventuring in a world of seemingly endless opportunities stand at the center of “The Inevitable Fate of the ‘Dragon-born:’ Selling Player Agency in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.” In her essay, Hanne Nijtmans questions the promise of player agency *Skyrim* advertises by foregrounding the absence of any meaningful action players can take in the game and the limited possibilities they have in shaping this expansive game world. This kind of agency, Nijtmans argues, fosters an exploitative relationship with the gamespace.

Part II of this volume shifts from long-standing spatial myths in U.S. culture to an exploration of video games and their ability to narrate stories through their spaces. Contributions examine the role of in-game maps to make spaces readable and to shape the understanding of the landscape they symbolize. Mapping, however, is not only a cartographical practice but can also serve as a tool to navigate the sprawling and multi-nodal plots of contemporary video games. Although historically maps and mapping have often functioned as means of conquest, contributions in this section shift attention from the exploitative to the collaborative potential of gamespaces. The stories inscribed in these digital environments can derive from player interactions, but modes of environmental storytelling similarly draw from long-standing literary traditions and discourses. This section hence also sees contributors examining the role of the Gothic mode in video games or the potential of digital spaces to create culturally-hybrid environments. Given its interest in unconventional spatial modes of storytelling, this

section shifts away from the most popular mainstream games and sees an increased interest in smaller, independently produced titles.

Maps, mapping, and their role in telling stories are intimately linked to the exploration of open-world games, Damien Schlarb shows in his contribution. Drawing on scholarship about cultural geography in Early American Studies, “Filling Out the Map: The Anxiety of Situatedness and the Topological Poesis of Cartographic Maps in Video Games” examines the ways in which in-game maps render space legible, demarcate playable areas, encourage exploration, and express spatial politics.

While also examining the role of mapping in video games, Juliane Borosch moves from spatial to narrative mapping. In “*Detroit: Become Human* – Orientational Mapping in the City and (Hi)Story,” she explores the ways in which Detroit is re-imagined in an alternate, science fiction future not only through its landmarks but also through a sprawling narrative that players are able to map with the help of various in-game tools. Eventually, *Detroit: Become Human* presents its various stories as navigable spaces.

A similar interest in the ideologies of space guides Stefan Schubert’s “Playing for Space: Negotiating and Narrativizing Space in *One Hour One Life*.” In his contribution, however, Schubert examines practices of spatial exploration and management not as conflict and struggle but as cooperation. As player-characters only exist for a single hour, *One Hour One Life* fosters collaboration within the game and communication outside leading to communal spatial practices.

In contrast to the interest in mapping and collaborative spaces as narrative practices, Greta Kaisen examines the use of the Gothic mode in *Gone Home* as players discover the haunting past of a mansion by exploring the various spaces of the house. In “There is no Place like *Gone Home*: Exploring Gothic Settings in Video Games,” Kaisen not only reads the setting as a defining feature of Gothic texts but also scrutinizes the restrictions to movement, the haunting presence players leave behind in the game world, and the nostalgic tone of the locations as part of a digital American Gothic.

Florian Deckers looks at the spatial design of *Grim Fandango* and its depiction of a culturally-hybrid urbanity rarely present in video games. “Exploring the Digital Land of the Dead: Hybrid Pan-Latinidad in *Grim Fandango*” analyzes the hybrid formations of various North American cultures in the built environment of a metropolis for the dead located in the architecture of its buildings, the character design of its inhabitants, and the sound design of its scenes.

Part III concludes the exploration of spatiality in video games by moving away from the TV or computer screen. Contributions focus on the intersection of digital play and physical space as people use apps to exercise in urban environments or plant vegetables in virtual gardens only to harvest actual produce.

Essays not only critically interrogate the cultural tropes embedded in these spatial practices but simultaneously examine the ways in which video game spaces shape our perception of the world around us. More explorative in nature than the previous parts, contributors sketch the various uses of video game spaces as a workshopping tool in stage design or a training ground for puppetry. Similarly, this section introduces the perspective of artists creating experimental theater inspired by jump-and-run games and curators offer insights into their decisions when arranging museum spaces for video game exhibitions. All essays share a desire to move beyond an analysis of virtual gamespaces to explore the manifold adaptations and creative uses of digital landscapes in artistic, commercial, institutional, and urban spaces. Consequentially, Part III brings American Studies into conversation with other disciplines, most notably Urban and Performance Studies, foregrounding the interdisciplinary nature of the field and the study of space.

In “Breaking Worlds Three Ways,” Michael Nitsche explores the potential of video game spaces for artistic and creative work. They function as workshops in stage design but also help to conceptualize the blending of the physical and the digital world in everyday life as social environments or they become performance spaces for non-human agents such as virtual puppets. In his examples, Nitsche fuses video game spaces with Performance Studies, new materialism, or the posthuman to indicate the potentialities of the medium.

Maria Sulimma continues to explore the intersection of physical and digital spaces, albeit with a critical look at the commercialization of these spaces in fitness apps. “Surviving the City: *Zombies, Run!* and the Horrors of Urban Exercise” particularly discusses the liberating potential the running app *Zombies, Run!* possesses for female runners by re-scripting physical urban spaces as fictional post-apocalyptic environments in its narrative, design, and interface.

The entanglement of production, marketing, and consumption inscribed at the intersection of physical and digital spaces moves to the center of the next contribution as Elisabeth Haefs looks at the gamification of gardening and small-scale agriculture. In “‘#Gameüse:’ Planting the Digital Garden,” Haefs interrogates the use of the pastoral ideal in the marketing of *IPGarten*, a start-up provider of all-inclusive gardening services, as well as the digital interface consumers use to manage and surveil the cultivation of their parcels.

Drawing from a performative approach to digital gamespaces, Kirsten Möller’s “Performative Playground: Narrative Spaces in Theater Games” introduces the work of the artist collective AnnaKpok and their use of the narrative and interactive features of video games for the theater. Möller particularly details the ways in which space shapes the creative process of adapting video games to the

traditional stage as well as to unconventional sites of performance such as repurposed buildings.

In a related manner, Lauren Kolodkin and Ryan Linthicum conclude this section by examining the intersections of video game worlds and physical space in the museum. In “Museum Space Invaders: Video Gaming at the Smithsonian American Art Museum,” they present their curatorial work in the *The Art of Video Games* exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, detailing the design decisions going into the exhibition as well as discussing their choices of exhibited games.

Soraya Murray concludes this volume with her coda “Disoriented in the Field of Play.” Murray brings together the various intellectual threads addressed throughout the chapters to describe possible future trajectories for the study of video game spaces. Central to her intervention is an invitation to scholars engaging with digital environments not only to critically examine familiar spatial tropes as this volume attempts to do. In addition, Murray calls for an engagement with unfamiliar, disorientating, possibly uncomfortable digital environments and the affective, phenomenological, or contemplative frictions they produce. Eventually, her coda asks to move beyond the all too familiar comfort zone of critical distance and encourages scholars to “point us someplace else.”

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