Historic Spaces and Architectures in Videogames

In the 40s, Alan Turing wrote down the first idea ever drafted for a videogame. It was a machine able to play one of the more ancient and symbolic games of all times: Chess. Nearly eighty years later, digital gaming is now an industry that generates ninety billion dollars in revenues worldwide[1], but, in their essence, videogames are still like chess: sets of rules embodied by relatable pieces of wood/ivory/pixels, that can be played and explained as representations of light popular culture or as intricate discussions on the deepness of human nature. Both interpretations are equally valid, real, and worthy of research. In the same way that chess, videogames can make players casually feel like ancient kings commanding armies in epic good vs. evil confrontations, or sharpen their skills in competitive matches where the ability to read the adversary's mind is key to success.

However, literature and media usually label videogames and digital media as *revolutionary technologies*, unrelated to any previous cultural manifestations or ludic traditions. Other *digital revolutions* in theatre, art, literature, and cinema are shown as natural steps in disciplines that have evolved through centuries, but when it comes to digital games and sports, they are seen as a sort of eternal future, disconnected from older gaming practices and traditions. Academics and scholars answered this issue by creating the field of Game Studies in the late nineties and early 2000s, lead by publications like Game Studies Journal[2], and research centres like the MIT Game Lab[3]. Nowadays, the gaming industry strength is widely recognized. Each year, universities launch new undergraduate and graduate programs such as game design, digital environments, character design, and music for digital media, among others. Another remarkable trend is the growing influence of videogames and digital culture on traditional scholarship, with an especially critical role in digital humanities, but also present in history, art history, architecture, and urban history. New research projects in these fields approach videogames not just as dynamics that can be used for renewing already established practices - *gamification* -, but as complete cultural products whose impact can be better understood through interdisciplinary collaborations.

This idea is aligned with the aims of the present dossier "Historic spaces and architecture in videogames" for Culture & History Digital Journal. Our objective is not to make history through game design techniques but to understand the influences, interpretations, and representations of history in videogames. Our results delve into how digital architectures impact the present notion of spatiality both in contemporary and historical settings. As cultural products, the gaming industry takes part in the development of history and culture; therefore, every videogame has a unique relationship with history from its conception to its final design steps. Game designers work from specific social contexts while connected to global socio-economic networks of intertwined times and places. So, in this way, no videogame is born isolated from its cultural and aesthetic trends. Either if videogames are considered art or not[4], digital products coexist today in a shared global medium strongly influenced by the vanguards of the 20th century and the dynamism of the third millennia. In this sense, videogames offer digital spaces, which are historical in a double sense: *they represent* history while they *belong* to history; thus, they can be studied as products of their time.

This fact does not hinder the capacity of videogames to offer history-based narratives, which take place in architectonic spaces especially designed for ludic purposes. Readers through written descriptions do far from their counterparts in literature because they are fully built by game designers, not imagine the dynamics of these spaces. The digital player is a participating agent, so digital architecture in videogames is different from film scenography where spectators are passive. Moreover, mainstream videogames show detailed models of historical buildings that significantly differ from the ones developed by museums and academic programs. Games do not seek to offer reliable reproductions for scholarly use, but to create digital atmospheres that resonate with players' historical sensitivities while guaranteeing a strong synergy with the rules and dynamics of gameplay. In other words, gameplay is a core aspect of game design, and developers get closer or farther to historical realism depending on the atmosphere they want to create.

Our dossier proposes a research question centred on **how digital narratives are capable of building immersive historical experiences**. Its objective is to characterize the videogame as a genre for historical storytelling with its own place between other contemporary cultural manifestations, posing its own challenges and risks. In the same way that scholars can rigorously document a monument like Agrippa's Pantheon can be rigorously documented by scholars, described in literature, presented by touristic guides or drawn by Piranesi, digital systems can provide new ways to experience its historical and architectural attributes. Historical depictions in videogames are not here to substitute anything but to add new elements to the mix. The main question is to know what they add and how they add it.

The dossier is composed of five papers, separated into two groups. The first couple explores the consequences of postmodernity on the conception of urban space in films

and videogames. In "Mass Media and the postmodern urban experience: From Metropolis to Blade Runner; from cinema to virtual reality," Ph.D. architect Luis Miguel Lus Arana[5] proposes a long journey from the first Lumière brother's projection in 1894 to the latest gaming instalments of the Blade Runner and Alien franchises (Westwood Studios, 19997; Creative Assembly, 2014). Lush focuses on hyper-dense and hyper-complex spaces associated with mass media, analysing how future urban spaces have been depicted in films through the Ext and 21th centuries. His work highlights the urban landscapes of Metropolis (Lang, 1927) and how they show a future built upon previously existing urban remnants. This concept of *used future* will be vital for the development of later urban imageries in Blade Runner and Alien, based not on "a space-time **to come,** but a space-time **that will have been**." Lush shows how the digital versions of these same films struggle with the representation of sceneries that are the product of layered mash-ups between older decorates, discarded plane parts, and recycled elements.

On the other hand, Ph.D. architect Claudio José Rossi[6] analyses urban stereotypes and spaces dedicated to commerce in his text "*Conpsumptionscapes*: videogame stereotypes and Latin-American cities environments." Through the concepts of *stereotype* and *gaming space*[7], Rossi follows the representation of Latin-American landscapes and commercial areas in videogames. He focuses on those examples that recreate historic contexts adapted for the great public, offering stereotypical models like the Caribbean city, equally used for depicting cities like La Habana or Cartagena de Indias with no further distinction. In this way, both Latin American *stereoscapes* and Blade Runner's *used futures* become something higher than the urban landscapes they represent, reaching a crucial status as parts of contemporary digital culture while maintaining their connection with 20th century heritage.

While the texts from Lus and Rossi approach gaming urban spaces through contemporary history, the other three papers present pieces of research with broader temporal coverage. In "Static uses of the past and limits in the view of History as a subject inside a historical videogame", historian Ph.D. researcher Alberto Venegas[8] develops a panoramic study on the adaptation of historical spaces for videogames. Venegas argues that their transformation from rigorous historical depictions to digital playgrounds is based both on the function of the videogame (to play) and the *presence* of space (to play in a specific context). This double basis generates architectures inspired by historical research but exclusively designed for digital activities, offering high potential for encouraging historical sensitivities while also risking biased narratives to the general public. Venegas specifically shows these risks in the cases of *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (Ubisoft 2010) and the *Uncharted* saga (Naughty dog, 2006-2017), explaining how historical spaces are treated like shallow objects that can be freely deformed so they can fulfil a sense historical *authenticity* in their public.

In "Spanish colonial architecture as selective authenticity in historical digital games," historian Federico Peñate[9]

deepens on the work of Adam's Chapman and the conceptual framework he developed in *Digital Games as History* (2016). Peñate applies Chapman's categories to the study of *Assassin's Creed Black Flag* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013) and *Age of Empires III* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2005), which present Spanish colonial buildings as one of their main scenes. Both Venegas and Peñate argue about how the historic resemblances of digital spaces are based on the idea of *selective authenticity*, which highlights some aspects and neglects others with the only criteria of providing an engaging experience. In the cases analysed by Penates, digital historic buildings seem to have a set of shared rules that are exchangeable between periods and cultures. Their defining architectural elements form a particular *style*, which is later, applied to the external façade of standardized volumes without further attention to internal logics or spaces. As Peñate puts it, when videogames approach colonial history, "Spain is just a skin."

The closing paper of the dossier, written by architect Manuel Sánchez[10], is titled "Urban archetypes applied to the study of cities in contemporary historical fictions: Symbolic urban structures in Age of Empires III and Bioshock Infinite." Sánchez draws from digital architectures that depict both historically realist situations or retrofuturist fictions and explores the symbolic structures and meanings present in their cities and buildings. He proposes that it is possible to use similar methodologies for the study of foundational urban structures in both built cities and digital ones. In doing so, Sánchez suggests the use of categories developed by architecture historians like Joseph Rykwert[11] and applies them to the analysis of two cases where history manifests in very different ways. This work intersects several examples and concepts already described in previous papers of this dossier. It closes the circle by showing how digital spaces and videogames present new iterations of ideas and mythologies that have been present in human culture since ancient history.

Altogether, this dossier builds a path that starts from connections between film and cinema as neighbour genres and gradually opens up to global territories - Latin America - and new debates on the rigor of historical representation - *selective authenticity* -. The succession of papers walks an iterative circular road between the present and the past. It covers increasing distances in each iteration in an attempt to identify how global concepts are applied to digital architectures and urban spaces, and signalling how videogames incorporate views and narratives that have been around for a long time. In this manner, the dossier looks at digital landscapes not as abstractions or placebos, not as revolutions that break with everything which came before, but as human creations firmly rooted in culture and history.

The dossier "Historic Spaces and Architectures in Videogames" presents results from several research teams and projects, including the research group *DigitalScapes*, founded in 2014 by professors Claudio J. Rossi and Manuel Sánchez at Los Andes University, Colombia. *DigitalScapes* included a number of undergraduate and graduate members who contributed to this dossier and have been acknowledged for their tasks in each separate paper.

NOTES

1 https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/ consulted on January 15th 2020.
2 http://gamestudies.org/1803
3 http://gamelab.mit.edu/
4 This debate has been tackled during the last decade from most digital culture media.
5 Architect and urban planner (ETSAUN, 2001), Master in Design Studies (Harvard GSD, 2008), and PhD (ETSAUN, 2013). Has received academic awards from the Spanish Ministry of Education (2002), ETSAUN (2002, 2014), and Harvard GSD (2008). He has also been recipient of grants from the Ministry of Education (2000), Obra Social La Caixa (2005), and Caja Madrid (2007). His main lines of research are the History of Utopian Urban Design and the interactions between architecture and mass media. He is currently full-time professor of Architectural Theory and History in the University of Zaragoza (Spain).
6 Phd in Architecture, Master in Urban Design, Architect with over 17 years of experience in architectural and urban projects that have been honored, as the urban project in the central coast of Venezuela after the natural disasters of 1999. [National Award Caracas Architecture Biennale 2001, Honorable Mention Best Urban Project Caracas Biennale 2001] Associate Professor [Faculty], in the Architecture Department at Universidad de Los Andes. Since 2001,
7 As defined in Papadopoulos, Spiros; Malakasioti, Angeliki. (2012). "Arcade Games as a Qualitative". The sixth edition of the European Symposium on Research in Architecture and Urban Design. Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto.
8 Historian, Extremadura University. Masters of History and pedagogy from Extremadura University and UNED. Teaching experience in the areas of Geography, History and Art History. PhD researcher (University of Murcia) centered in History and videogames as member of the project Historia y Videojuegos 2.0, conocimiento, aprendizaje y proyección del pasado en la sociedad digital (HAR2016-78147-P). He has published his work in several platforms and media like Revista de Estudios Extremeños, la revista Espacio, Tiempo y Forma (UNED), Roda do Fortuna and others magazines and press. He has participated in several international congresses focused in Medieval mindsets and public uses of History. He also is member of scientific counsels and redaction teams of historic research journals like Roda do Fortuna o Extremadura, Revista de Historia, etc. He is the director of Presura Magazine of cultural and social critic of videogames. Also collaborates in videogame press media.
9 Undergraduate degree in History (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), a Masters in Contemporary History (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and a Masters in Education (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia). Currently, he is PhD candidate at the Contemporary History Department of Universidad Complutense de Madrid with a thesis focused on the mythical and historical representations of the Spanish Empire and the Conquest of the Americas in videogames. His research is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (FPU15/00414) and is part of the project "Collapsed Empires, post-colonial nations and the construction of the historical consciousness. Infraestructures of memory after 1917" (HAR2015-64115-P). He is also a member of Seminario de Historia y Teoría de la Cultura, a working group centered on the study and discussion of cultural history and cultural studies. He has published several articles and has given speeches on the way historical discourses are reshaped by the ludonarratives of videogames, and organized the I Jornadas de Estudios del Videojuego Histórico (Universidad Complutense de Madrid).
10 Also known as Manuel "Saga", he is a PhD fellow at Politecnico di Torino (Italy), funded by the Italian Ministry of Science. Architect from Granada University (2013) and Masters in Architecture with Cum Laude distinction from Los Andes University, Colombia (2016). Professor of the Architecture Department in Los Andes University between 2016 and 2018. With 7 years of teaching experience in different universities, he has been part of urban and architectural workshops in places like Granada, Barcelona, Cádiz (Spain), Rome, Venice (Italy), Tetouan, Tamnougalt (Morocco), Los Angeles (USA), Cartagena de Indias and Bogota (Colombia). Specialized in research projects on urban history, art history, Islamic heritage, architecture design, game studies and urban studies. Consultant architect for educational projects and facilities. His work has been published by journals like Dearq (Los Andes U.), LOBBY (Bartlett) or Claustro de las Artes (Sevilla U.) as well as general media like Historia National Geographic and ABC. Has been manager of several digital projects like bogotavisible.com, an official site of Los Andes University. Editor and founding member of URBS Revista Científica de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales and its associated digital space blogURBS. Editor of other digital projects as Pedacicos Arquitectónicos and MetaSpace: Architecture and Videogames. Correspondent for Archdaily.com, Fundación Arquia blog (Caja de Arquitectos, Spain) and La Ciudad Viva (Junta de Andalucía, Spain), Urban Living Lab, AAAA Magazine, etc.. Winner of the award of the European Foundation for the Information Society, with the art work "Le Poeme de l'angle droit: Reflexions from inexperience" (2009).
11 Rykwert, J., 1976. *La idea de ciudad : antropología de la forma urbana en el mundo antiguo*, Biblioteca básica de arquitectura. Hermann Blume, Madrid.

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