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Ruin Representations: Understanding meaning making in video games through urban ruins, allegory and trope theory

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Abstract

Video games have received comparatively little attention in relation to ruinscapes and spaces, despite the fact that the decay or abandonment of human landscapes has been particularly prevalent in 3D, first and third person games for some decades.

This paper considers the way in which specifically urban ruins and decay, as depicted in video games, contribute to meaning making practices and the possibilities of play, in circumstances where making sense of the game is facilitated by the wider contextual meaning of the ruin landscapes (or ruinscapes) depicted. This discussion relies on approaches from urban and modern ruin studies; games and media studies, and geography, with a particular emphasis on the work of Walter Benjamin in reference to ruins, the image, the city, and allegorical perception as it relates to the experience of modernity.

Introduction

This paper considers the way in which urban ruins and decay, as depicted in video games¹, contribute to meaning making practices and the possibilities of play, in circumstances where making sense of the game is facilitated by the wider contextual meaning of the ruin landscapes (or ruinscapes) depicted. This discussion relies on approaches from ruins studies; games and media studies, and geography, with a particular emphasis on the work of Walter Benjamin in relation to ruins, the image, the urban, and allegorical perception.

Video games have received comparatively little attention in relation to ruinscapes and spaces, despite the fact that the decay or abandonment of human landscapes has been

¹ I have chosen to use the term “video games”, rather than digital or computer games to reflect the approach outlined here, which is particularly concerned with visual and navigational qualities of games.

particularly prevalent in 3D, first and third person games since the release of titles such as *Myst* (1993) and *Riven* (1997) in the Nineties (and perhaps even before, if we understand the abstract spaces of the first ever 3D games of the 80s to also be ruinous, such as *Monstermaze* (1983) or *Metroid* (1986)). Exceptions to this lack of attention include Evan Watt's *Ruin, Gender and Digital Games*, which considers the subversive affects of ruin aesthetics in games (Watts, 2011); Dunstan Lowe's *Always Already Ancient* (Lowe, 2013), which offers summary of particularly teleological understandings of classically framed ruination in games, and Daniel Vella's *Spatialised Memory* paper (from an earlier Philosophy of Computer Games conference), which includes a discussion of "The ruins of the past" in terms of embedded narrative in games (Vella, 2011). While Watts focuses somewhat on modern or urban ruins (which are the primary subject of this paper), Lowe and Vella tend to focus more on the ruins of antiquity, or ruins as particularly historical-temporal objects.

Grappling with the relation between representation and meaning in games presents an immediate problem in terms of how we understand the image itself as a conveyor of meaning, "...representation is not conceived as a dilemma but an impossibility, and what can be termed a kind of cynical reason in the realm of art displaces it by way of a multiplicity of images, none of which corresponds to the "truth". (Jameson, 2005, p. 212). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that "computer games are not representational systems in the straightforward sense that their meaning content can be read off from their visual narrative or textual elements" (Kirkpatrick, 2013 p.164). This does not just mean that what appears to be standard visual representation in games must take into account the influence of narrative, play, game rhetoric and logic, and other elements. Neither can we conclude that all ruins in all games mean the same thing to all people, or are inherently meaningful. "Video games are not mere trifles, artefacts created only to distract or amuse. But they are also not *automatically* rich, sophisticated statements about the world around us." (Bogost, 2008, p. 317). Although Graeme Kirkpatrick suggests that what is depicted onscreen is frequently irrelevant to what the game is about, or how it affects play, this does not preclude particular games from affording certain player experiences – particularly that of intercepting meaning – it simply serves as a sharp reminder that the visual or textually readable content of many titles is not only ambiguous in terms of any set meaning for

players collectively (which is true with all media), but also that a great deal of the content for games is abstracted for purposes that don't necessarily correlate to the outcome of play (whether narrative devices, creative design, hardware limitations, and so on). Just because a game is set in ruins does not mean the game itself is fundamentally about ruins and ruination, or that the gameplay design is definitely more effective due to their presence. The depiction of ruins in a "straightforward" representational sense can have little to do with playability – particularly where ruins form a flat backdrop, or appear as the most standard or basic setting that is logical for a given scenario. For example, early 3D "point and click" titles, such as *Myst* and *Riven*, were often set in ruins because these were easily recognisable landscapes that were plausibly generic and devoid of human activity, whilst also being suitably atmospheric. In the case of *Doom* and other FPS from the early 3D console period, blocky landscapes that suggested ruination or the decay of civilisation provided atmospheric settings with the minimum impact on system performance, and without revealing the most obvious graphical limitations of such systems, such as texture detail and complexity.

I would argue, however, that it is increasingly rare for such visual content to bear no influence on the gameplay experience – and ruins are no exception. Further, in considering meaning making in games, it is necessary to move beyond the first level encounter – the basic recognition of what you are seeing – and consider how landscapes of decay and fragmentation are already replete with functional and complex meanings well before they are put to use in games. From a design perspective, the use of ruins in games is deeply entwined with the generation of meaning through the structures of play, production of space, and use of visually communicative content.

This paper, therefore, considers titles like *The Last of Us* (2013), *Hellgate: London* (2007), and series such as *Fallout* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, in order to dissect the allegorical and otherwise representational means by which the depiction of ruined cities in video games – visual, spatial and navigable - produces meaningful spaces of play. In doing so, this paper proposes a method of critique through which meaning in such games can be arrested, analysed, and understood – through the complex trope of ruination. With the increasing complexity of spatially-oriented worlds, the

representational capacity for games is totally reliant upon a mode of meaning making which is almost impossible to comprehend as a whole, and tends instead to appear like the romantic allegory of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* (2008) – fully plundered symbols and signs, assembled from the fragments of earlier representational codes – in which visual representation is a kind of cypher for both the absence or fragility of meaning itself (a mode that Benjamin understood as allegorical perception), and (in the case of video games) the formulation of a spatial and disconnected world of play.

In this context, space itself is representational – the setting, the world and the navigation of the game are manifested through layers and textures which synthesise the sensation of spatiality. But this is a spatiality which also produced – as space which (in image or in navigation) assists the player to draw meaning from what they see onscreen, whether as mapped territories, labyrinthine structures, or simply trope-like references to conceptual imaginaries, such as the urban or (as will be expanded later) the urban ruin imaginary.

Thus, the production of meaning in games will be assessed with particular emphasis on the “representation” of ruined cities in video games whilst acknowledging that, through play, non-representational and embodied practices also come to the fore – ruins do not only produce meaning in games as images of decay and decline which convey specific messages that are related to ruination or expand from it. They also induce and enable formations of play that have wider, affective meanings (Edensor, 2005), spatial productions (Ash, 2013), and other extensions beyond the moment or instance of play. These will be explored via notions of space, the imaginary, and embodiment as they are made sense of through particularly modern, urban ruins.

Why ruins?

The discussion of modern ruins in games that is central to this paper considers some elements from a more classically centred canon of ruin representations, but is focused especially on the critical qualities of urban ruins, and by association the implication for meaning production that the presence of such ruins has in relation to games. Modern ruins offer a particularly interesting avenue of inquiry into the production of meaning in games – increasingly, as activities like urban exploration, or media including ruin photography become more ubiquitous (Apel, 2015; Garrett, 2013),

games, too, become preoccupied with mass ruination of the contemporary landscape, full of ruined cities and landscapes that we can recognise from the “real” world (with varying degrees of abstraction). As Evan Watts writes, “ruin aesthetics serve as the primary setting in many popular games” (Watts, 2011, p. 247), and “ruin imagery appear[s] as a common motif” (*ibid*) – perhaps more common than any other generic setting. In a contemporary context, many games – most notably *The Last of Us* – also take on the stylings of HDR urban exploration photography, both in-game and in art or cutscenes.

The predominance of ruins must partially be due to ease of design for early hardware, which could not cope with the dynamic environments or large numbers of NPCs that a non-ruined setting would require. Ruins, as a tool used by developers at the base level of communication, thus serve to support the flimsy fictions that make games possible. Further, the history of the science fiction and fantasy genres upon which many early games were modelled tend to be full of hypothetical ruins, many of them in response to Cold War fears of mass destruction. They are also easily configured for exploration, and, as highly suggestive environments, can be seen to invite play, as real ruins are also seen to do².

The use of the term ruin here indicates not (or not only) the classical ruins of Rome or Egypt, or even the more contemporary mass ruin of European cities during WWII. Modern ruins include abandoned buildings, derelict hospitals, empty brownfields or Drosscapes (Berger, 2007), fields of rubble from demolitions or earthquakes (Gordillo, 2014), boarded up miner’s cottages and unkempt roadside wastes (Stewart, 1996, 2007), and the burnt out shells of factories, mills and warehouses (Vergara, 1999). Modern ruins – or the ruins of a recent past – extend to any fragmentary or threatened landscape of the contemporary era (that is, non-ancient ruins).

² Detailed analyses of the depiction of ruins in art, film, literature, and elsewhere can be found in *Ruins of Modernity*, particularly Julia Hell’s work on the genealogy of the “scopic scenario” of the fallen city (Hell & Schönle, 2008); Dylan Trigg’s *Aesthetics of Decay* (Trigg, 2006); and *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past* (Olsen & Pétursdóttir, 2014b). Robert Ginsberg’s *The Aesthetics of Ruins* offers a more voluminous account of the various interpretations of the ruin as a vastly productive conceptual phenomenon, building upon Ginsberg’s travels and photography (Ginsberg, 2004), which slightly predates the emergence of modern ruin studies, and includes ancient ruins and both traditional and contemporary ways of seeing and thinking about ruination. A more general-interest publication along a similar vein is *In Ruins* (Woodward, 2002)

The study of ruins belongs to a long philosophical tradition, related to allegorical and symbolic modes of communication (Benjamin, 2008; Simmel, 1959); spatial history and urban memory (Huysen, 2003); the classical and sublime aesthetics of ruins (Woodward, 2002; Ginsberg, 2004), and nostalgia (Boym, 2001) – ruins are already well-contested sites for unique meaning-making and signifying practices. In their contemporary (or modern) form, they have also been adapted for reuse in post-apocalyptic narratives; depictions of the sublime; philosophical arguments; and – most recently – digital 3D depictions of imagined mass decay - to the extent that many researchers and theorists claim that ruins are almost too full of multiple, hyper-meanings to be worthy of analysis or use any longer (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014; Hell & Schönle, 2008).

In a Western context – haunted by a canon of ruination from the romantic sublime to the gothic, and into the modern urban spectacle of mass decay - ruins signify, but they do much more than that - they immediately point beyond their recognisable form as architectural remnants to more complex significations at the level of symbolism, metaphor and allegory – yet they simultaneously occupy a position as the ultimate clichéd expression of mortality and transience, a prescribed message repeated so often as to be almost meaningless, rendering ruins the paradoxical expression of presence a void – materially and in terms of linguistic signification (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014; Dillon, 2014;) This is because the original object – the real, material ruin – even in the flesh is an intricately symbolic site imbued with complex (yet timeworn) meaning – we cannot get away from it (Ginsberg, 2004).

Ruins can therefore be considered as a model for meaning production, with the ruined city a hollowed out signifier of the end of meaning itself: “The ruin is a ruin precisely because it seems to have lost its function or meaning in the present, while retaining a suggestive, unstable semantic potential” (Hell & Schönle, 2008, p. 6). Ruins say everything and nothing, all at once. Video games set in ruins exploit just such an absence of meaning, and abundance of potential – they embody and make navigable the hypothetical “what if?” suggested by (particularly mass, urban) ruination, but they also reproduce nearly every cliché about ruins in the process. The ruins of *The Last of Us* are designed to appear just like the city we know (Boston, Pittsburgh, any American city), in a hypothetical time when the city has been forever changed by a

catastrophic occurrence, producing an epic (and navigable) spectacle of decay which looks much like the post-apocalyptic visions common to both sci-fi film and cinema, and urban exploration photography. This is how we know what we're seeing, because it immediately looks familiar to us. The ruins depicted are at once recognisably banal – the everyday sites of any city, the boarded up windows and collapsing buildings of the urban decay aesthetic – but they are also highly aestheticised grand visions of ruinous demise of the city. The epic and spectacular sublime is particularly prominent in the sweeping vistas populated with a landscape of ruins (which tend to bookend each level), and in the visions of major landmarks like Massachusetts State House or the Fort Duquesne Bridge set amongst a generically crumbling urban ruinscape.

Much of the debate about modern ruins and their meaning potential takes place in the emerging field of modern ruin studies, which can be divided between popular and art-world mediations that tend to reflect more traditional histories of the sublime, and urban focused discussions of real world ruins – urban and industrial decay, abandonment, shrinkage and decline (Edensor, 2005; Oswalt, Bittner, & Fishman, 2005; Trigg, 2006). Brian Dillon's book *Ruin Lust* which accompanied a Tate exhibition of the same name, includes J. M. W. Turner's paintings of the ruined Tintern Abbey, but also asks whether the picturesque can be revisited in a contemporary context without irony (Dillon, 2014, p. 12) so clichéd are the beautiful ruins of Romanticism, from Byron to Shelley and beyond. However, ruins persist and their aesthetic is recycled, according to Dillon, because they are always “available for a variety of meanings” – a quality which has certainly contributed to their use and reuse in games as a shortcut to atmospheric meaning, as well as their recent ubiquity in the media in the form of photographs of urban decay dubbed “ruin porn” (Leary, 2011).

Póra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (Olsen & Pétursdóttir, 2014a) argue that photographs of contemporary ruination (such as amateur images of abandonment and decay posted online, or coffee-table books full of “ruin porn” from America's rust belt cities) also tend to expose pre-existing tropes, from “an aesthetic ruin canon” (p. 10). At the same time, the increasing saturation of urban and modern ruin photography also contributes to the production of a ruin imaginary, including idealised ruin landscapes absent of people, and full of “dead things” (*ibid*) - a

recognisable and repeated trope in post-apocalyptic film and literature, applied to photography of real places.

This aesthetic – and imaginary - also appears in video games, in which desolate, empty, and decaying settings are deployed for a particular spectacularising, affect – the vision of the end of the city. Many games set in ruins portray cities emptied of active human culture, inhabited only by foes and survivors, and filled with broken and abandoned things. In *The Art Of The Last of Us*, a glossy book compiled by the game’s creators - filled with sketches and 3D concept art depicting ruined buildings - one caption (under an image of a dusty and deserted ballroom) reads “Emphasizing the contrast between the tragic decay and the former beauty of a space became an important hallmark of all our environments” (Edidin, 2013, p. 82), a trope (and sentiment) which is widely repeated in contemporary photography of urban ruination.

The Imaginary

Mark J. P. Wolf writes on the construction, or subcreation, of “imaginary worlds” (Wolf, 2012), delineating a clear relation between the history of “world building” from classical Greek and Roman tales to “Imaginary worlds, built of words, images and sounds” (Wolf, 2012, p.2), including video games. These imaginary worlds are produced through extensive image production, which, in the case of urban ruins in games, tend to appear as a pastiche of recognisable objects which serve to locate the player in a specific city (landmarks, road signs, street furniture), overlaid with a veneer of decay that signifies the ruin (overgrowth, filth and grime, rubble, running water, breaks and gaps in the architecture).

As discussed above, *The Last of Us* mobilises such familiar tropes in order to exploit the vast yet acute meaning potential of “the ruin” itself. Another example of such a ruinscape can be found in *Hellgate: London*, a “dark fantasy” action RPG in which players roam a series of ruined London boroughs transferring between each one using the London Underground Network. *Hellgate: London* utilises a range of recognisable locations, icons, and tropes to construct a setting that is simultaneously familiar and antiquated – to the point of directly adapting Gustav Doré’s 1872 etching of The New Zealander (derived from Thomas Babington Macaulay’s speculation on the end of London Bridge and St Paul’s) for the final section of the introductory cut scene. Other

references to historical imaginings of London in ruins appear throughout the game, including a hooded character that closely resembles the New Zealander in Dorés painting.

To analyse the depiction of ruined cities in the *Hellgate: London* it is therefore necessary to understand that the depiction of hypothetical ruination in such games is directly informed by a pre-existing ruin imaginary, which often operates in contrast to an idealised urban imaginary. It is impossible to conceptualise of either an urban imaginary, or a ruin imaginary without a wider, social or cultural framework in which sense is made through shared fictions, hypotheticals, or abstractions from material or sensed reality.

Of significance here is the vacillation between the real and imagined that plays out particularly in the urban imaginary: Cinar and Bender consider multiple urban imaginaries, a variety of categories under which the urban is understood – from dreamworlds and fictions, to the social imaginary under which urban studies operates (Çinar & Bender, 2007). Steve Pile includes image and representation, emotional qualities, as well as fiction (for example, the work of Neil Gaiman) to understand the construction of the “real” urban landscape, the city of experience, and the urban imaginary (Pile, 2005, pp. 2, 5). Andreas Huyssen considers the urban imaginary to be “the way city dwellers imagine their own city as a place of everyday life” (Huyssen, 2008, p. 3), but also – and this is crucial – the binary imaginary of “glittering metropolitan centres” contrasted against “haunting specters of crime, corruption, and decay” (*ibid*, p. 5). To imagine the ideal city is to invite the counter imaginary of the city in decline, in ruin.

The urban ruin imaginary, therefore, can be contrasted clearly against the urban imaginary, in which “[t]he metropolis is a monument to the conquest and subjugation of nature by human kind, and constitutes the principal site of human progress, of the wonders and marvels of technological innovation” (Gilloch & Benjamin, 1996). In *The Last of Us* and *Hellgate: London*, this vision of metropolis, of the triumph over nature, is undone – the city is depicted in slow decay, its permanent built forms (from roads to architecture) obliterated by encroaching weeds, dirt, and water. *Hellgate: London* in particular depicts all of the great monuments of London in the context of

vast ruination, from St Paul's and the Palace of Westminster, to the river and its architecture – not just the end of the city, or the city in ruins, but an epic fall of a quintessential city upon which the urban imaginary itself is partially founded.

If this vision seems familiar, it's because there is nothing particularly novel about the depictions themselves - in fact, they borrow from a long tradition of imagining the end of the city. The contemporary ruin imaginary has a heritage which reaches back at least as far as Piranesi's depictions of Roman ruins during the Eighteenth Century (Huysen, 2010, p. 25), and includes the widely disseminated photography of ruins from World War II (Berlin, Hiroshima, Coventry), and the slow decay of shrinking, post-industrial and post-Soviet cities in recent decades. It also includes fictional and hypothetical ruins, largely from sci-fi novels or blockbuster films – whether the appearance of a ruined San Francisco in *Earth Abides* (with its early, and now endlessly repeated, destruction of the Golden Gate Bridge); or the *Planet of the Apes* films, which, in each iteration (including game titles) portray highly iconic ruins of American monuments or architecture.

Leo Mellor considers slums and burnt out buildings alongside hypothetically ruined landscapes to conclude that the emblematic power of ruins – “symbolic and actual” – provides “aesthetic potency” which need not rely on “genuine” ruins – Ruins impact us regardless of real or fictional status, erasure, renewal, or context. For Mellor, the use of the image of a ruined city is something of a “thought experiment” which offers critique, argues for different ways of thinking about urban space, and generally serves to challenge commonly held supposition regarding what is normal or ordinary for the city. In this reading ruins equal resistance (Mellor, 2011). Anthony Vidler, in a volume on the “ruins of modernity” similarly considers imagined ruins to be major contributors to the “counter-architectural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s”, influenced not only by the real ruins of the second world war, but also the imagined ruins of a hypothetical third world war, reworked Piranesian visions of newly ruined cities which began to emerge in art, fiction, film, and later, television during the cold war period (Vidler, 2010). Further, Watts frames “virtual worlds of ruination” (Watts, 2011, p. 248) in games as having a direct relationship with the depiction of ruins in film, literature, art and other media (particularly the post-apocalyptic aesthetic of films such as *I am Legend*). Ruins in games occupy a position on a continuum

between real and imagined ruins, on which there is never any absolutely real or fully fictive point – the ruin imaginary feeds in and out of real world experience, rendering “real” ruins perpetually signifying to external terrors, and imagined ruins children of the real.

Therefore, the representational imaginary in games has a direct relation back to real world understanding, through the activity of play (rather than as an empty augmentation of it), which, as Ian Bogost suggests, renders games “possibility spaces”, through which games “represent processes in the material world” (Bogost, 2008, p. 121). A further affinity between games and ruins can be found in the real-world counterpart of “adventurous play” where ruins themselves provide spaces for possibility, for both adults and children, (Edensor, 2005, p. 25) offering transgressive and marginal spaces of resistance to “an increasingly smoothed over urban environment” (Edensor 2005 p.30).

If “urban decay *is* the anti-thesis of the Ideal City”, as Abraham Akkerman suggests (Akkerman, 2006, p. 249), then urban ruination depicted in video games affords some reflection of this anti-thesis to the urban norm. Gameplay that takes place – whether virtually, as a simulation, or as a half-real fiction – in a navigable, spatial vision of the end of the city allows us to play with the city form itself. A plausibly playable ruinscape of this type plunders a vast archive of real and imagined ruins, a familiar set of tropes and ways of thinking about the city which in turn carry the weight of an implied “what if?”, producing their own spatial, urban, and ruin imaginaries. This implied potential is far more than the sum of its pixels. It is an immersive apocalypse played out in the hypothetical ruins of cities that are recognisably modern – their complex image spaces; voids of meaning; and real-world counterparts. An imaginary that feeds into and out of our mediatised experience of the urban, and – through ruins – challenges more traditional presumptions of games as closed systems with little impact beyond the immediate experience of play.

Ruins and games

As Gordon Calleja observes, “digital games constitute a broad family of media objects, some of which diverge so much in their constituent characteristics that they cannot all be taken as one homogenous mass” (Calleja, 2011, p. 3). In order to

conceptualise models for meaning-making in games it is therefore necessary to avoid generalisations across genre or platform, and take on specific contexts or examples in which particular modes of meaning production – and by association, play – operate. Thus, the discussion here is not intended to describe an overarching model for interpretation across all games that depict some form of ruin – that is presuming such a generalisation is even possible.

Most of the games that are of interest in terms of urban ruins and meaning tend to be of the fantasy or horror genre – and *modern* ruins are particularly prevalent in the latter. Series such as *Fallout* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* are full of ruins of our present or recent past – in the former, of recognisable icons, in the latter, the replicated ruins of the real-world exclusion zone around Chernobyl. Other titles such as *The Last of Us* also show digitally navigable ruins of real cities, using tropes borrowed largely from urban exploration photography and recent post-apocalyptic cinema – real world ruins transported into the game world. In every case, the ruins are visually depicted, and navigationally explored as part of the gameplay. Older titles, from *Tomb Raider* (1996) and *Doom* (1993) to *Wonderboy* (1986) or *Altered Beast* (1988) are also replete with ruins, but as the trajectory from 2D to 3D and then onto HD shows, it is with more recent developments in 3D artistry that less cartoon-like and more hyper-real ruination comes to bear on gameplay itself, extending beyond the confines of the game and into the images of ruin that circulate more widely across different media. Ruins in games are multifaceted representations, with a diversity of “associational meanings”, from genre and narrative to “individual films, television shows, or other cultural materials” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 59). Such depictions – though frequently shallow or abstract in the first instance – can construct meaning through both their wider referents (to the external world and ways of thinking about ruination), and within the game (in terms of the space of play or the gameworld as a ruinous landscape).

While the approach presented here is not concerned with narrative directly, it has been noted that ruins in games are the natural home of embedded narrative, particularly in their past-oriented presentation. Games themselves – particularly those set in ruins – can appear as chronotopic worlds, in which temporal events are transcribed in space. I would argue that this quality is as much the product of

teleological narratives of historical time – which are often attributed to ruins – as it is accounted for by the capacity for ruins to provide a vehicle for embedded narrative in games (Vella, 2011). The predominance of ruins in games is not simply for ease of narrative or space-time organisation. As modular units of complex meaning, ruins can be deployed to do a great deal of work for game designers – not only to tell the (often incidental) story of a fallen empire, but to do so in a manner that is both direct (we know ruins equal “the apocalypse”, decay and destruction are synonymous with death and endings), but also fantastical and affective. Ruins do not only belong to the sublime or the melancholic – they have also served gothic and horror genres for centuries, and are no less significant conveyors of the uncanny or the incomplete as they are of a linear tale of human progress told in the rise and fall of civilisations.

So the discussion here is not about ancient ruins or linear time passing – or even the ludic sublime as the suggestion of a “whole beyond the grasp of the imagination” (Vella, 2015). Rather than seeing ruination as a naturally narratological form, driven by perceived historical chronology and imbued with transience, the ruin can also – particularly in a contemporary or hypothetical form – be the ultimate fragmented form of the modern world - language, experience, and society. This is the ruin of Poe (Woodward, 2002, p. 55), Baudelaire, and Benjamin - of hauntings and phantoms, of cities, of modernity (Benjamin, 1999b). Such ruin appears, now, in urban ruin photography of rust belt towns and post-industrial wastelands – the end product of almost a century of global, urban centric disintegration of older social and material forms. A more contemporary, urban focused definition of the ruin encompasses what Walter Benjamin knew of catastrophic currents of global change, witnessed in his lifetime, in which “[a] generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin, 1999b). For Benjamin, one of the century’s foremost critical urban theorists, writing between two great wars, pondering ruination did not conjure the great mind grappling with the unknowable, or the weight of time and transience, but the perpetual shock and catastrophe of modernity – and the destructive, not constructive, gaze of the fractured spectator.

Rose Macaulay understood this, too – in her 1950 novel *The World my Wilderness*, ruins are even more than extended metaphors or allegories for the destructive impulse and shattering transformation of the Twentieth century. They appear as the natural home of the traumatised modern subject, the child-woman Barbary, who takes comfort in ruins not as sites of calming meditation facilitated by a pensive ruin-gaze which might reveal a whole and perversely comforting truth of mortality, but as places outside the denial and pretension of a progress driven and supposedly cohesive modernity. In this reading, the inhabited city of London, still full of bombed out quarters, was “where streets were paved and buildings stood up, and a solid improbable world began, less real, less natural than the wasteland”. (Macaulay, 1950, p. 74). The ruins of London were more real than the functional city. A few years later, this view is confirmed in the last lines of *Pleasure of Ruins* (Macaulay, 1953), in which the sublime potential for wholeness presented by long-standing ruins is far harder to detect in “new ruins” which speak instead of “our fearful and fragmented age”, no matter how much we may wish to detect the romantic beauty of the sublime in their jagged forms. New or modern ruins in games can be read through this lens, understood as simultaneously inviting the sublime gaze, but rebutting it in the form of “new” ruins – or the ruins of places that exist in the contemporary world.

Two specific examples of modern ruins in games include the ruins of *Hellgate: London* and *Fallout 3*. On the surface, both display the influence of the sublime – the ruined Capitol building in *Fallout 3* is another iteration, at least aesthetically, of the fall of Rome, reminding us of a time in which “The gilded capital languishes in dust and all the temples of Rome are covered with spider’s webs” (attributed to St Jerome in Woodward, 2002, p. 6). Yet, in *The Art of Fallout 3*, the world is described as varying between “classic post-apocalyptic” and “vaguely Orwellian”, while “the neoclassic buildings that pervade the heart of the capital are ever-present” (Pely, 2008, p. 71). *Fallout 3* refers to the sublime to the extent that all ruination is framed by it, but the represented ruins are equally informed by more contemporary aesthetics of decay, particularly those of popular culture and science fiction. In *Hellgate: London*, although we see the near-exact replica of Gustav Dorés etching *The New Zealander*, showing a figure looking out across the future ruins of London, we are also presented with scenes of ruination that are far more akin to the sad “new ruins” of Rose Macaulay’s account, reminiscent of the bombed out cellars and streets of the post-war

period – both in-game and in the associated cut scenes and concept and cover art – more gritty than sublime.

If we propose a link between meaning, ruins, and modernity, even the hollowed out sublime has an additional order within the imaginary, where the seemingly arbitrary mash-up of the new and the antiquated in *Hellgate: London*; and the spectacularised modern ruins of *The Last of Us*, produces a particular affect which speaks of a fractured and fragmented modernity, as well as the tensions between the old and the new city - even as it communicates through archaic tropes of the classical sublime, or the empty excess of contemporary ruin photography, *ruinenelust*, or “ruin porn”.

For Svetlana Boym, the contemporary expansion in the taste for ruins is framed as a “ruinophilia” - which is not post-modern, but rather off-modern - in which the fundamentally unstable category of the ruin offers not the old fascination with wholeness and mortality, but the latest iteration of the deconstructive possibilities of an evolving and destructive ruin gaze: “The contemporary ruin-gaze is the gaze reconciled to perspectivism, to conjectural history and spatial discontinuity. The contemporary ruin-gaze requires an acceptance of disharmony and of the contrapuntal relationship of human, historical, and natural temporality. Most importantly, present-day ruinophilia is not merely a neoromantic malaise and a reflection of our inner landscapes. Rediscovered, off-modern ruins are not only symptoms but also sites for a new exploration and production of meanings”. (Boym, 2008)

In this problematisation of ruinophilia, Boym understands the production of meaning through ruins as the product of multiple gazes, and multiple modes of interpretation, with a variety of contrasting sensations which interweave like melodies and harmonies in music – reflecting Jameson’s observations about contemporary representation as a multiplicity with no fixed meaning. Ruins are the ultimate fragmented form of modernity – with no fixed interpretation, but with a particularly potent capacity to augment meaning in context, in a modular, adaptable fashion, as multivalent tropes which can produce multifaceted and plain meaning in parallel, and allow the exploration – in every sense – of newly productive ways of understanding the world.

Ruin Tropes

Ruins in games can best be understood in their most basic form as tropes, deployed as a shortcut to meaning, and as a means to communicate representationally. Tropes, in this sense, refer to modular images or ideas (often simplistic in nature), which can be assembled around particular themes (or within genres) and are reconfigured repeatedly in new formations, using familiar signs and signifiers (in the sense of Barthes' Semiotics, but also in the sense of science fiction films, comic books, and repeated popular culture and conceptual formations, such as "the end of the world").

As an example for the operation of tropes in video games, Aarseth and Backe, in a Digra Paper on *Ludic Zombies* refer to the zombie trope as an ubiquitous class of enemy in many games (Aarseth & Backe, 2013). This is significant to this discussion in the first instance because zombies and ruins often co-occur in games, particularly in the horror genre, with *The Last of Us* and *Fallout 3* both featuring zombie-like foes. But this similarity extends to their more complex meaning – both zombies and ruins are reminders of mortality; the living dead; the putrefying corpse that persists – and yet, both are subject to the same caveat – that meaning might be imminent, but whether it is intercepted by the player is contingent on such a variety of factors as to be ambiguous, at best. Whether such meaning can be (or is) critically excavated on a routine basis is even less certain. In its basic form the representation of the undead "deliberately reduces zombies to a cultural trope or meme almost devoid of denotative or connotative meaning" (Aarseth & Backe, 2013, p. 2). This, however, need not limit the potentially complex social and cultural relevance of the zombie figure (and associated ideas) as a trope which possesses that capacity, through iconography, to embed the allegory of "the commodification of human bodies and the threat of consumerism to human culture" within the game (Aarseth & Backe, 2013, p. 13). Across games of different genres, the "zombie" trope is "inherently fused with suggestive potential" (Aarseth & Backe, 2013, p. 4). This ambiguity – the vacillation between hyper or full meaning and void or meaninglessness is the very quality of both the ruin and the zombie which lends them to an allegorical interpretation, and this content can be carried by the trope itself, basic though it is.

To return to the ruin as possessing unstable semantic potential: "The semantic instability of the ruin owes much to the fact that it bespeaks a potential vacuity of

meaning. The ruin signals the impending breakdown of meaning and therefore fosters intensive compensatory discourse activity. In its ambivalence and amorphousness, the ruin functions as a uniquely flexible and productive trope for modernity's self awareness. Indeed, it is one of the master tropes of modern reflexivity, precisely because it encapsulates vacuity and loss as underlying constituents of modern identity." (Hell & Schönle, 2008, pp. 6-7) In this way both zombies and ruins point to extensive "master tropes" that tell more complex tales (often in the allegorical mode) about humanity and society at large.

Aarseth and Back's approach also cites the work of Shaviro, in relation to the allegorical significance of zombies, read through the work of Walter Benjamin, in which the trope is understood to be always embodying the impossibility of total meaning, and by association, enabling subversion in the suggestion of death and decay. This is exactly the claim which can be made of the ruin (and, depending on the reading, the claim which Benjamin himself makes, particularly in relation to the romantic and emblematic sensibility of the German Baroque in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin, 2008)).

Backe and Aarseth conclude that: "the question arises whether the ludification of zombies ignores and disavows the allegorical dimensions, or whether rules and gameplay can actually work in favor of it – a question not yet broached in pertinent research." (Aarseth & Backe, 2013, pp. 2-4) The ludification of zombies or ruins might very well present only the barest surface complexity of the either trope – tropes themselves being inherently modular and standardised. However, the potential is there for a far deeper construction and interpretation of meaning within the context of play, through allegory and the latent capacity for critical interpretation that might be afforded by certain qualities of games – not necessarily as allegories for space, but as allegories for "contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous infomatic control" (Galloway, 2006, p. 106). The metainterpretation of meaning through play is then about *acting through* this allegory via entwined play and content – the metacommunication through play (*ibid*) – in this case, playing in ruins, where ruins themselves are in fact a shortcut to more fleshed out concepts, simultaneously as allegories for the fragmentation of modern experience and the more romantic allegorical perception of eternal transience.

Thus, although video games, as textual, code-based *representations* of space may in fact be “figurative comments on the ultimate impossibility of representing space” (Aarseth, 2000, p. 169), this does not necessarily preclude them from having a role in the real-world production of space, or producing their own kind of space. “Games do not function as allegories or as poor imitations of the real: games feed back into our understanding of lived space, into the decisions we make as we orient and move in the world of consensus reality” (Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, p. 10). Games, on the level of representation, can never fully recreate the real world – but they don’t need to, because they are not separate from it.

Even if we accept Espen Aarseth’s assertion (rejected by Swalwell and Wilson) that games are allegories of space, Weigel’s reading of the allegorical in Benjamin’s work defines allegories as “the building blocks in the archive of cultural memory” (Weigel, 1996, p. 92), that is, there is a direct relation between allegorical understanding, perception, and lived experience. Allegories are the sites upon which the battle for knowledge of the world is fought, knowledge which “with the aid of the structures of the imaginary and through the interpretation of all forms of imagistic perception, becomes inscribed in the experience and everyday life of individuals” (*ibid*). Further, as Weigel states, “Benjamin’s dialectical image is without doubt a cognitive one, but it refers in manifold ways to seen images, imaginary things, and the images of the unconscious” (*ibid*, p. 63). This is not a conflation of image, imaginary, and the imagined. Rather, the relationship between bodily experience – particularly visual perception – and representation can be understood in terms of the world we encounter – our urban imaginaries and ruin imaginaries appear in our games, dreams, and fictions at the same time as they are built from and colour our perception of the cities all around us.

Paradoxically, when thinking about the ruins of modernity, even the classical ruin imaginary is embedded in modern experience and its development. “The architectural ruin seems to hover in the background of an aesthetic imagination that privileges fragment and allegory, collage and montage, freedom from ornament and the reduction of the material” (Huyssen, 2010, p. 19). In this reading, the complex ruin imaginary extends beyond visual tropes, to penetrate a particular way of thinking

about the world, which feeds back between the fragment and the whole. As Benjamin's notes in the *Arcades Project* suggest "[a]llegory views existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin" (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 330).

The relationship between ruins and the allegorical is clear, but it can also be extended to include the allegorical dimensions of games themselves. As Kirkpatrick's application of Walter Benjamin's work on Baroque drama suggests, games, in the allegorical mode, are simultaneously "mere machine, automated emblems in a work bereft of signification", and hovering "over a vertiginous excess of potential meaning" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 185). The form of games therefore enables the doubling of allegory and multiplicity of (both deep and shallow) meanings – a quality also attributed to ruins in the allegorical mode. Not only are games – as Aarseth foregrounds – working in favour of the allegorical as a particularly contemporary conduit for such complex meaning, but ruins and games, as conduits of meaning, complement one another when paired with the metacommunicative and polyvalent "doing" that produces meaning through play (Galloway, 2006, p. 105). When analysing such simultaneously rich and empty content as zombie or ruin tropes, games themselves, it can be argued, appear to specifically lend themselves to the allegorical mode for a variety of reasons, not least because the interpretation of the allegorical is both spatialised (as a form of scanning), and in a constant flux of shifting meanings (Galloway, 2006, p. 86), just like the composite activities required to play a video game.

To refer back to Benjamin's work on allegory, and on the level of games as allegories for contemporary society, the synchronicity between ruins and games can be mapped to the fragment – meaning in games operates by deploying constructed units and exploiting their meaning content as detached emblems, marshalled into complementary arrangements as needed. In their operations, games manifest a multitude of discrete visual components to produce playable meaning – assemblages of iconographic or pictographic representations that circulate in and out of play, which can be productively analysed as a composite (the playable environment, the ruinscape) or down to a single unit (a zombie). For example, a weapon – the scud launcher – though rarely in-play "remains a signifier whose very particular connotative potential is always available to be mobilized in particular circumstances"

(King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 64). This is true of most objects in games, but also for the ruin itself as stated above, which may appear merely as a non-connotative fragment in circulation (allegorical only insofar as it reflects the fragmented form of games, which in turn might suggest to the cultural critic a relationship to a fragmented modernity), or connotatively in play as a far less ambiguous conveyor of the fractured nature of modern experience and subjectivity, or the more hackneyed meaning potential of the ruin as transience, mortality, and the end of the world.

Spatial meaning through ruins

The readability or meaning content of ruins is only one aspect of the production of meaning through ruins in games. It is in the combination of the potential valency of visual or graphic content in-game with a navigable ruinscape that the significance of ruins as conveyors of meaning through play comes to the fore. Images themselves, in this context, afford spatial experiences in games, which are scopically and navigationally formed. The scopic space of games (for example, the positioning of the camera or POV in relation to the avatar (Taylor, 2002)) is augmented by the navigational space of the game (whether as a map, or as an openworld or sandbox). This further leads to the perception of gameworlds as navigational spaces, which are negotiated (or producer-controlled) via scopic regimes of visual perception (Wiemer and Meldgaard in Fromme & Unger, 2012).

Games are often seen to be fundamentally spatial structures, whether scopically shaped or in a range of more abstract modes (Wolf, 1997; Wolf, 2001a, 2001b) – even text-based games can be understood to be spatial, in terms of sketching structures, diegetic (off-screen) space, or as a technological “precursor to cyberspace” (Wolf, 2001b, p. 53). From a design perspective, most 3D software operates on the same Euclidean geometry as real-world map making, using grids and squares to represent surface area and thus pinpoint definite locations (Flynn in Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, p. 120). The gameworld is akin to filmic space – with on and offscreen elements – but is, crucially, navigable. But beyond this initial comprehension of the spatial elements of games, space itself as a conceptual category is more than just code and pixels, inputs and outputs. The social and cultural construction of space includes every place, every geography, every environment – real and imagined – that we may encounter.

So, in practical terms, space in games is designed, constructed on a grid, graphically sketched, and traversed interactively by a player in a manner that is well accounted for in Rune Klevjer's dual embodiment model, as Klevjer notes "...our engagement with simulated environments is the (notable) exception that does not respond very well to the rules-plus-fiction model" that Jesper Juul uses to describe video games (Klevjer, 2006, p. 61).

This argument is mostly pertinent for games in which the player perspective is first or third person, and is inherently spatially oriented. Dual embodiment can be taken as the fusion of material experience – the tactility of the gaming controls, the environment in which the player is located; the complex imaginary that the player brings to the game (both subjective identity, particularly as a body/mind dichotomy, and the capacity to play the game, and comprehend its fictions, in this case through urban and ruin oriented imaginaries); and the expanded simulated, or virtual world which is embodied by the presence and actions of the 3D avatar. The control of this avatar by the player further supports the notion of duality – they are multiple, yet one and the same. The reading could be extended to a third dimension, which exists in the imaginary – whether a complex set of symbolic representations which make gaming possible, or the social imaginary which produces the gamer, the game, the relationship between the avatar and the self.

James Ash (2013b, p. 123) sees the space of experience in games as a space of image and body, which relates to both the work of Nietzsche's five planes of space in games (Nietzsche, 2008), but also Walter Benjamin's, far more philosophically constructed, body-and-image space, a term used by Sigrid Weigel (Weigel, 1996), which can be read as encompassing both dual embodiment and the expanded – extra-visual – qualities of the image. For Benjamin, the formation of the image can be understood to be topographical, spatial, bodily, experiential, temporal, material, mythic, and conceptual or historiographical. It makes sense to extend Benjamin's reading to include the depiction of urban ruins in video games, since much of his theory was specifically occupied with emerging, technological, visual media (dioramas, film, photography), and the spectacle-oriented perception of the urban, in terms of image and experience, and the production of appearances (Caygill, 1998, pp. 45, 84)

The spatiality of games can also be related to the notion of immersion, or player involvement, a model proposed by Gordon Calleja, which includes spatial involvement: “the spatial qualities of a virtual environment in terms of spatial control, navigation, and exploration” (Calleja, 2011, p. 43). Exploration is significant here, not least because it delineates an affinity between the ruin and the game – both ruins and 3D games which construct worlds to be explored are bound up with imaginations and the imaginary. Ruins allow such considerations to expand beyond games as merely structures and stories, to problematise the imaginaries of space that – in an increasingly 3D and open-world dominated format – produce and are produced by the environments that are visually constructed in the game.

In an argument which compliments discussions on the visually/spatially oriented design process of games, Ash notes that there are “spaces that images *themselves produce*” (2009 p. 2105, emphasis in text) evoking non-representational theory to claim that images signify real phenomena, but – in games in particular – also possess their own material qualities, too. Using a framework that shares similarities with the concept of dual embodiment, Ash seeks to include the gamer’s situated and sensory experiences within the operation of a game: “Video games complicate a history of screen use by producing interactive images in which users' bodies become an active component in the framing of what is on or off screen, a capacity that is absent in ‘older’ technologies of the cinema and the photograph” (*ibid*).

This spatial dimension is not a lazy evocation of the generalised notion of “virtual space” in games, or a “trope”, which Aarseth warns us about: “To regard space as an object is a common trope in media aesthetics. The use of the concept of ”spaces” in the media, instead of ”places”, ”rooms” ”regions”, ”zones” etc. is fashionable, but what does it refer to? What is ”a space”, and what is its relationship to space? (Aarseth, 2000 p.160). For Ash, images don’t just represent space – they produce it, in a mode that reflects real world engagements. In games, images impact materiality, ecologies, architectures, and so on (perhaps as abstract space such as philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre would describe, which dwells in things and signs (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 49)), and feed into and out of lived experience – even if in an existential fashion (several degrees removed). Though Aarseth suggests that space in games is only ever representational, Lefebvre’s insistence that space itself is merely a

symbolic category supports Ash's assertion that there are spaces that images produce – spaces that we navigate, explore, traverse and so on. This is not to say that such space is fused with real world space, but that space in the gameworld is produced and operates just like any other space – through symbols and signs, images, fictions and imaginaries; through lived experience and phenomenological perception; by humans living out their lives, and in the moment of encounter. Thus, it is true to note that there is no “virtual” space, as Aarseth makes clear, but not because space in games is merely representational, but because any space that can be defined *is* space.

Further, space in the gameworld doesn't operate in a way that is cut off from external or physically experienced space – partly because there is no distinct empirical form of space (it is a mental concept), but also because the production of space in the world at large consists of the complex interplay of the real and imagined – whether the way in which images make sense in the wider world, and thus produce space in games, or the way in which games are architectures of space which are built for conscious activity by real players who live real lives. As game design consultant Ernest Adams argues “Architecture is what turns the bare space of the chessboard into the living world of the computer game... Ludic architecture is a somewhat peculiar field, disjoint [sic] in many ways from conventional architecture because of the many practical differences between them, but both are based in a profound aesthetic instinct: the urge to create dramatic and meaningful spaces.” (Adams, 2003).

The production of space in games, through images, is particularly notable in navigation and the perception of distance, and can be described most easily in contexts where the game reflects real-world locations, making the link already one degree less removed. For example, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series consists of several First-Person Shooter Survival Horror titles, which make perhaps the most obvious use of modern ruins as a setting for the game, because the two main *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* titles, *Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007) and *Call of Prip'yat* (2010), take place in an alternative reality where further explosions at the Chernobyl plant produce a variety of horrors in the exclusion Zone around the plant. Like many other gaming series (*Fallout*, for example), this franchise tasks players with surviving in a post-nuclear setting, and takes on most genre-conventions of First-Person Survival games – but what is different about *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* is that it entirely takes place in one of the few places in

the world that is actually currently in a state of mass ruin, uninhabitable due to the effects of radiation.

While segments of *Call of Pripjat* in particular are recognisable as the abandoned city of Pripjat (which is situated within the current exclusion zone, and which I visited in 2009), the most widely recognizable site – the amusement park with the red and yellow Ferris wheel – is not actually a playable landscape in the game. However, the image features dominantly in marketing material and the wheel is viewable in-game, if only from a distance – this distance not only produces space as Ash describes it, but it does so through the image. On one hand, this refers back to the earlier point that many of the most aesthetically charged depictions of ruin are not the ones that we see in-game. On the other, the representational power of this particular image provides an interesting insight into the spaces that images might produce – the image has such currency and is so recognisable that it was created in some detail solely for promotional purposes, and to be glimpsed at a distance in the game. This is significant in that it actually reflects the real-world experience of visitors to the site, who can approach, but not touch, the heavily irradiated metal structures on the site (including the Ferris wheel itself), and is affected primarily by the relationship between the avatar and the distant image – producing a simultaneity of space that transcends that game world and feeds into and out of the space that is the real-world site of the Chernobyl disaster.

To describe this as the “virtual space” of Chernobyl may be easier than understanding this depiction as part of the space of exclusion that defines the physical site – but this would be disingenuous, because this gamespace is not conceptually isolated from the space upon which it was modelled. Moreover, to understand this as a representation of space ignores the touristic practice of visiting Chernobyl that has emerged following the release of the game. It also ignores that fact that the images from this game actually alter the abstract, conceptual space of real-world Chernobyl in the public consciousness, whilst also reflecting – again, primarily through images – the dominant imaginary which constructs the mainstream framing of this space: the widely circulated photographs of the site, and in particular, the iconic Ferris wheel.

Where *Hellgate: London* effectively renders a texture of decay over the urban imaginary of London, the ruins in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series more closely resemble a known reality – one that exists in the real world, and is already strange due the historical events that took place there, and the inaccessibility of the location. The intention behind the game-design is arguably far more political than that of *Hellgate: London* – to disrupt, by way of encounter, the appearance of the exclusion zone as both a static or dormant space, and to encourage a more imaginative, even playful, engagement with one of the few significantly abandoned cities in the world, potentially drawing attention to the precarious situation in the exclusion zone, which is still very much unsafe. However, where the ruins in *Hellgate: London* are adapted from the real city of London, some of the more powerfully signifying locations in real-world Chernobyl are only glimpsed from a distance in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* – indicating perhaps the limits of such possibilities for real-world disruption, or perhaps the intention of the designers to pair the real-world experience of tourists in the zone with the alternative vision they have created – the “shadow” of a genuinely horror-inducing landscape – a mirror space, reflecting the real world, but within the confines and fictions of the gameworld.

It is important to think of “imagining space as always in process, as never a closed system”, concerned with the stories of the world, and opening up the possibility for new imaginaries of space (Massey, 2005, pp. 10-11). It can be argued that hypothetically ruined versions of real cities, as they manifest in games, are not “simulations of space” (Nichols and Ryan in Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, p. 172), but rather a form of spatial imaginary, which allows us to make sense of, and thus play, the world depicted. Like urban imaginaries, spatial imaginaries impact and reflect real world experience - even as they are manifested in video games. For example, Sybille Lammes makes a clear link between the physical experience of space, and in-game spaces, speaking of the relationships between real-world and in-game mapping. Lammes suggests that traditionally ideological mapping practices of the real and the everyday can be challenged through “playful spatial practices” in games (Lammes, 2009, p. 224).

Ultimately, the gameworld or game space does not exist as distinct from the external world. The fact that we comprehend the significance of a game which involves

exploratory play in ruins – ruins which are factually just pictures put together to resemble decaying architecture and laid across a digitally navigable grid – is testament to the complex interpenetration of the real and imagined, of game worlds and real worlds of urban decay. King and Krzywinska understand the virtual cityscape in games such as *The Getaway* in terms of its interrelationship – through explorative possibilities – to the actual city of London. “The pleasure of exploration separated out from other aspects of gameplay, as far as this is possible, might be understood in terms similar to those that apply to spatial exploration in the real, external, world” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 95). Further, “Many game spaces are designed specifically to provide scope for explorations, often including excessively convoluted structures (large or small), the primary motivation for which is to facilitate spatial organisation. Examples include what the designer Ernest Adams describes as the ‘strange and wasteful design’ of one building complex in *Quake*, the complex cave systems of the first *Tomb Raider* and the gothic grandeur of the ‘old dark house’ in Clive Barker’s *Undying*” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 80). We often think of design only as a means to facilitate the rules or structures of play, the procedural qualities of games that make them work – and yet exploration is so frequently a feature which has very little bearing on the goals or mechanics of the game as a whole.

Exploration in ruins and games – and particularly ruins in games – are activities which facilitate meaning making through playful actions in space, most notably exploration. “Digital games and virtual worlds are particularly adept at facilitating spatial exploration that enables players not only to project their imagination into the represented landscapes, but also to traverse them.” (Calleja, 2011, p. 74). The dimension of exploration is one way in which the visual or surface content of ruins-in-games moves beyond the symbolic to shape activities that may impact or facilitate gameplay, performed or practiced actions that are rooted in gameplay (and embodiment). “What makes travel in virtual worlds appealing is not only the affective power of their aesthetic beauty, but also the performed practice of exploring their technical and topographical boundaries” (Calleja, 2011, p. 77). There is no hint that this travel or exploration is some how non-real, or merely representational.

Image and the production of space – graphics, superficial beauty, navigable topographies, the chance to travel or explore – though more challenging to demarcate

than rules, mechanics, rhetorics and so forth – are the more abstract qualities of games that provide them with depth and feed them back into our complex imaginaries which construct the world in which we live. They enable performative and practice-based encounters which provide a compelling connection to material existence. Ruins are one of the primary means by which such phenomena manifest in games – especially those that are set in real-world cities – and through ruins, these evanescent qualities can be momentarily intercepted and exposed to deeper critical analysis which reveals some of the ways in which seemingly arbitrary or incidental graphical content in games might produce more significant meanings than their appearance first suggests – whether representationally or in more tangible ways.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that ruins – and especially modern urban ruins - in games do produce multiple meanings, but the question remains whether this meaning is oriented around the particular communicative and representational content of ruins-as-tropes, or whether games themselves offer a novel deployment the historically rich urban and ruin imaginaries, in the form of spatial and navigable depictions of modern cities in a state of ruin. This relates to the question posed by the conference organisers: How can the experience of meaning arise in computer game play?

This question is important for two reasons: Firstly, if ruins themselves, as a conceptual and modular package of image, space and iconic symbolism, communicate known meanings – the imaginary of the end of the city; the city in ruins; the hypothetical post-apocalypse – then their deployment in games suggests an interesting link across different media – film, literature, 3D artwork – the significance of which has been heretofore very much up for debate in scholarship on games, and invites further questions on the specificity of play as a modulator of otherwise fixed meanings.

Secondly, if games bestow a new quality upon previous tropes of ruination – as navigable manifestations of our urban and ruin imaginations, where play requires movement through produced space via a particular operation of the image – then a study of the urban ruin imaginary in games ought to productively point to the innovative ways in which video games can, in fact, be at least semi-representational,

communicating through images, icons, or tropes (and not just through structures of play, narrative, and technical specificity), but also as objects which can be read non-representationally as lived encounters with space.

In either case, as this paper has demonstrated, the focus on thematically specific representations in games (in this case, urban ruins) offers the potential to open up wider debates about meaning production in games. It is time to return to the basics – whether semiotic, symbolic, visual, imagistic, iconic, trope-centred, spatial or other – to think again about the way in which meaning might be central to play in video games.

While it is broadly true that “computer games are not representational systems in the straightforward sense that their meaning content can be read off from their visual narrative or textual elements” (Kirkpatrick, 2013 p.164), this notion applies most particularly to games of abstraction – Tetris, Pacman – rather than the newer generation of games which are considerably concerned with rendering a spatial interaction – that is, navigable, vast, open to exploration, and emulating real-world space to some degree – perhaps to the extent of producing it. That said, although “associations can come into play, sometimes quite strongly... they are never likely to reach a point approaching that of total gameplay saturation” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 62).

Questions still remain about the extent to which all the varied elements that go together to form a game remain “in-play” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 59), including the visual and often simplistically representational components which form the environment (setting, landscape) of a game – whether as ruins, or some other form. Further discussions about the role of atmospheres (Ash, 2013a; Melhuish, Degen, & Rose, 2014), affect and 3D art (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Nash, 2015) could prove productive in this area, but are beyond the core concerns posed here, particularly in terms of meaning production through ruins.

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Games

- Myst*, 1993, Cyan, Broderbund (Mac)
- Riven*, 1997, Cyan, Red Orb (Mac, PC)
- Monstermaze*, 1983, PC Research, Inc. (DOS)
- Metroid*, 1986, Nintendo Research and Development and Intelligent Systems, Nintendo (NES)
- Wonderboy*, 1986, Escape Sega and Activision, Sega and Activision, (Arcade, Atari, Master System)
- Doom*, 1993, id Software, GT Interactive (PC, Mac, Saturn)
- Tomb Raider*, 1996, Core Design, Eidos Interactive, (Saturn, Playstation)
- Altered Beast*, 1988, Sega (Arcade, Megadrive/Genesis)
- Hellgate: London*, 2007, Flagship Studios, Namco, EA, Hanbitsoft (PC)
- The Last of Us*, 2013, Naughty Dog, Sony Computer Entertainment, (Playstation)
- Fallout 3*, 2008, Bethesda Game Studios, Bethesda Softworks, (PC, Xbox, Playstation)
- S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, 2007, GSC Game World, THQ (PC)
- S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat*, 2010, GSC Game World (PC)