

# **Colliders with Context: Trees in First Person Shooter Computer Games**

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## **Introduction**

This paper analyses the tree as an object in first person shooter computer games to explore how the experience of a computer game environment can be an experience of landscape, and how a computer game relates to histories of landscape representation. I position computer games as a paradigm medium for representing landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by demonstrating how the methodologies used to analyse computer games and landscapes can work together to form a productive and revealing language for understanding computer games as landscapes, and as continuations of deeper historical narratives. If this approach can be justified, we can then look within computer game landscapes to see how they reflect on broader concerns of landscape studies, such as contemporary relationships to the physical environment. Trees were selected to support this goal because they are a typical placeholder for the organic world, but are also highly mutable in their symbolic content. Within game environments, the qualities of trees have enough variation that a meta-discussion of landscape concepts between games might be facilitated by these qualities. My analysis is a close reading of three first person computer games. By choosing a small and related set of games, I compare and contrast the experiential and intertextual differences within a narrow and comparable possibility space. From the results of this initial analysis, I consider how these qualities can be located alongside the qualities of trees in the history of landscape theory. By connecting trees in computer games with trees in historical landscape representations, this paper questions how previous histories of landscape representation can influence our interpretation of computer games, as well as how the unique affordances of computer games can affect our understanding of the possible functions of landscape representation.

A reasonable assumption would be that trees exist within a landscape either because the author explicitly wants them there and/or because both author and audience think the landscape might look strange without them. How trees are used reflects how they are thought of, both deliberately and unintentionally, whether treated as scenic elements, standing reserves, nostalgic motifs for a Nature lost, or other permutations, these are cultural expectations of where the tree should fit as a landscape element. The expectations of the viewer (or player) are influenced by their knowledge of existing representations within which the tree has been co-opted. Within this history there are innumerable variations of ‘tree’ and of processes of representation. But what is a tree in computer game for a player? The tree is there. This is the first point. In the games discussed, it can exist as a 2D or 3D game object, and has properties assigned by the medium of the game (understood by the designer in such terms as image sphere, mesh, texture, collider, sensor, etc.).

If the broader question underlying my analysis of trees in computer games is “how do computer games extend histories of landscape?” – it is necessary to locate definitions of landscape in contemporary discourse, and find a reasonable set of expectations for how landscape might be discussed in computer games, as well as how it is experienced and by whom. The term ‘landscape’ is used in reference to the physical environment (in relation to terms such as ‘site’ and ‘place’) as well as to representations, which I will demonstrate, exist in a mutually transformative relationship with the physical world. Regarding computer game environments and the potential for landscape, Bjarke Liboriussen’s work on the relationship between landscape and computer game experience (Liboriussen 2008) and Daniel Vella’s research into how spatial and interactive properties can generate a *genius loci* (Vella 2013) provide an important background for my paper. This paper sits between the approaches of Liboriussen and Vella – using trees as a game object with a contextual history, I argue that the experience of landscape exists in computer games through the ‘emplacing’ function of the represented landscape, but that the representations of individual game objects can bring with them fragments of various historical narratives. This approach anticipates that within a game environment, contradictory fragments of historical ideologies might be contained within the overall assemblage of game objects.

## The Landscape for the Player

A starting point for the methodology of this paper is to clarify how the landscape exists in the experience of the player, and what different types of player we refer to in a discussion of landscape. Art Historian Charles Harrison argues that any landscape must be judged from a perspective of who it is supposed to effect. Harrison locates the “disinterestedness of vision” that historians typically associate with the landscape genre as a specific characteristic of the “literate empiricist gentleman” who constituted the implied spectator of modernist theory (Harrison 1994: 206). With such historical specificities underwriting an ‘assumed’ viewer, Harrison argues that it is imperative that we ask who the landscape was made for, whom its qualities was intended to affect, and what perceptive disposition was assumed by the communicative qualities of the landscape.

In his paper on landscape experience in computer games, Bjarke Liboriussen brackets out two distinct player perspectives. The first is the competitive specialist (described by Juul) whose goal is to move from an amateur position where the representations of landscape encode survival tips in the game, to a highly skilled competitor who ignores the representational specifics of the game (and modifies their graphic settings accordingly) so that they see only the paths and obstacles essential to successful competitive play (Liboriussen 2008: 148). The second player outlined by Liboriussen seeks to overcome the challenges of the game in order to appreciate the game landscape as a contemplative image (as evidenced by the culture of in-game photography) (Liboriussen 2008: 150). Liboriussen’s second player perspective closely parallels Harrison’s reference to the privileged position of a “disinterestedness of vision”, where both recognise the peculiar privilege required to afford landscape contemplation. The perspectives of Harrison and Liboriussen, as well as that of an external scholar can be located by Olli Leino’s description of first-person and third-person analysis of computer games, which makes explicit the difference between a “game as played” and a “game as a system”

(Leino 2009: 5). In accordance with Leino's description of player perspectives, my analysis is explicit in my shifts from a first-person experience, to third person reflection, accepting this also changes my perceptions of the nature of the game being studied. My gameplay analysis identifies two modes of play from which I make my first-person observations. The first is as an amateur player, when I am new to the game, and my experience is dominated by the gameplay condition that makes me responsible for my ability to remain in the game (Leino 2013: 2). My second first-person mode is as skilful player, where my ability to satisfy the gameplay condition allows me to contemplate the game world and experiment with my inhabitation and its implications for landscape. Both of modes of first-person experience as well as subsequent third person analysis are biased by my scholarly search for landscape in computer games, but they also differ in how I am able to experience what Leino describes as the "deniable" and the "undeniable" meanings of game elements. Put simply, there are meanings that I can deny within the game because they do not alter my ability to act in the game, whereas there are meanings that are undeniable, and if I do not acknowledge these, my ability to act in the game is diminished (Leino 2007: 116).

### **Phenomenology and Cultural/Historical analysis**

In a 2008 seminar on landscape theory, led by art historians Rachel Ziady DeLue and James Elkins, discourse suggested a methodology for landscape studies that balances the phenomenology of experience with the "invisible" trace of cultural and historical narratives (Ziady DeLue and Elkins 2008). The latter, having dominated landscape theory since the late 1970s, defined landscape as the "backcloth to the whole stage of human activity" (Appleton 1975: 2) and "a way of seeing that has its own history...that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society (Cosgrove 1984: xiv). Art historian Jennifer Jane Marshall argues that the fundamental problem with any contextual historical analysis of landscape is that there is no ultimate position of disengagement from which to form judgement, and that history therefore functions as an outright truth separate from the actual landscape. In other words, landscape can be described as a result of historical forces, however phenomenology offers the experience of landscape without a structuring bias prefiguring the experience. Using Edmund Husserl's subject as "being-in-the-world", Marshall positions the landscape as "being-in-perception", defined by its presence to the consciousness of the viewer. For Marshall, the ability to focus on the experiential aspect of landscape means that we can develop analyses free from historical determinism (Marshall 2008: 198). Marshall acknowledges that this approach risks obliterating political, moral and semiotic narratives, but argues that a historical contextual approach similarly hinders the ability of experience itself to challenge the formulation of existing ideological frameworks of landscape (Marshall 2008: 201). For this analysis of trees in first person computer games, I outline a methodology for computer game studies based on the negotiation described in the landscape seminar, between phenomenology of experience and cultural/historical narratives.

### **Emplacement, Simulation and Organisation**

Philosopher Edward Casey defines landscape representation as a process of 'place-making'. Casey uses the work of Merleau-Ponty to argue that landscape imaging requires a shift away

from seeking to represent the totality of a location, and towards the desire to “reimplace” the *experience* of this location into a graphic form. The landscape representation then stands in for the sense of place that results from our interaction with a location, and this interaction itself is often driven by a historical relationship with image-making (i.e. landscape). Casey uses the phrase “chorographic region” to describe how a landscape representation gives us the notion of ‘region’ by establishing a bare minimum vocabulary of landscape qualities that can stand in for the unwieldy complexity of an actual location (Casey 2002: 23, 82). In other words, Casey is saying that landscape is responsible for *creating* the sense of place and region via its simplification of the totality of a location into a smaller set of criteria that are accepted to represent that “chorographic region” or place. Casey locates landscape as a creative process of simplification alongside what Merleau-Ponty calls the “prejudice of the world”, which is the delusion that there is a predetermined world that can be recorded via accurate observation and representation. Casey argues that the physical environment exceeds what the mind can accommodate for it, but also that the mind exceeds what the environment produces in experiential sensation, so that the process of landscape representation sits at a point of mutual eclipse. To this end, Casey agrees with a Kantian subject that perceives, represents and alters the environment whilst being inseparable from it. He accepts that the landscape exists as a subjective image, but argues that the creative simplification of landscape provides an exit point from this “Kantian spiral of endless representations of representations” (Casey 2002: 236). Casey argues that the “place” and “region” that landscape creates is a unique and new result produced – “these places are *presented* not merely *represented*” [author’s italics] (Casey, 2002: 246-7). In other words, the process of landscape perception and representation creates “places” and “regions” out of environments.

Casey’s description of the productive simplification effected by the process of landscape resembles Gonzalo Frasca’s use of the term “simulation” in discussing the representations made by computer games — the “act of modelling system A by a less complex system B, which retains some of A’s original behaviour” (Frasca 2001: 3). In refining the terminology of Frasca, Veli-Matti Karhulahti argues that the scientific meaning of ‘simulation’ is one that mimics another system with a goal to gain empirical knowledge about that system, and that when it comes to discussing computer games, Sebastian Möring’s terminology of representation, play and metaphor might place fewer unnecessary demands on the computer game object than the term ‘simulation’ (Karhulahti 2014). Sebastian Möring’s use of “metaphor” and “representation” describes how representation relies on the difference between the thing and its representation, and how metaphor allows us to discuss the meaning generated by the qualities given to it by gameplay as experienced by the player (Möring 2013). Bjarke Liboriussen uses Casey alongside landscape theorist Stephen C. Bourassa and psychologist Jean Piaget to question the relationship between environment and place and landscapes in computer games. Liboriussen argues that landscape is comprised of places – the “prime numbers” of landscapes (Casey 2002: XV), and that a landscape is the higher level organisation perceived by a viewer of places (Liboriussen 2008: 152). For Liboriussen, the perception of landscape for both a viewer and a player derives from an appreciation of the organisation that landscape communicates, which is specific to the character of the landscape representation made. I connect the organisation that Liboriussen describes as “having the world fall into place as a landscape” and “sensing the connections between the components

that make up the landscape” (Liboriussen 2008: 153) to simplification that facilitates this emplacement, represented by Frasca’s “simulation” and Möring’s “metaphor”.

In my analysis, I will refer to ‘representations’ in computer games when I refer to how “something represents something else although it is not what it represents at the same time” (Möring 2013). I will use ‘metaphor’ to refer to when an object is seen in terms of another object whilst not being that object, and I will use ‘simulation’ when I describe a game or game object as procedurally representing another phenomena by means of simplification in order to shed light upon the source phenomena. Using what I perceive as a structural similarity of productive representation via simplification, I connect the function of landscape emplacement and experience with the representational apparatus of simulation and metaphor in computer games to describe *how* computer games represent landscape.

### **Receptivity to Intertextuality and Trace Histories**

Michael Nitsche uses the term ‘evocative elements’ to describe how a player derives meaning from game objects within a spatially orientated experience. Nitsche argues that ‘placeness’ arises in computer game spaces via the accrual of interaction and player history, which he traces back to Heidegger via Norberg-Schulz, in the sense of place deriving from inhabitation and dwelling. We can connect Nitsche’s reference to ‘evocative elements’ to the player-centered emplacement that can emerge via the interaction of the game objects and the player’s meaningful inhabitation of the game world (Nitsche 2008: 192). In his analysis of the fictional and the simulated, Juul demonstrates that representations of a game give the player immediate clues as to the possible function of game objects, based on their previous experience with computer games as well as with general visual literacy (Juul 2007: 5). For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to the previous experience of the player as receptivity to intertextuality, based around the player’s unique set of cultural points of reference. Positioning myself as a contemplative player, I locate my own in-game experience alongside my position as a scholar of landscape. When studying the game from a third-person perspective, I will not assume a universal subject with the same experiential background, rather I will speculate from my own observations whether my intertextual readings of game objects can make a valuable contribution to discourse surrounding the meaning of the game and the cultural significance of the game as a landscape.

Art Historian Robin Kelsey argues that alongside a phenomenological analysis of landscape, there must be recognition that Western landscape representation is grounded in trace histories, and that an account of trace histories must accompany a phenomenological analysis. I connect such trace histories to the receptivity to intertextuality, where the previous cultural experience of the player can enrich the inhabitation of a space by perceiving deeper histories referenced by the evocative narrative elements of the game. Kelsey also provides a useful umbrella concept of “not belonging” to locate the vast number of trace histories recognised

within Western landscape theory.<sup>1</sup> He describes “not belonging” in terms of Derrida’s critique of Husserl — the “trace history” that cannot be accounted for by phenomenology (Kelsey 2008: 209-10). Kelsey argues that the entire process of landscape representation in the Western imagination is founded on the suppression of a desire *not* to belong, which derives from the historical suppression of humanity’s animality and the humanity of animals. According to Kelsey, Western histories of landscape act as a tool of mediation or reconciliation that suppress the author and viewer’s *desire* for human exceptionalism (for humans not to belong). Kelsey provides four examples of ‘not belonging’ in landscape and the forms of subconscious suppression they rely on: “the mystical” (believing we belong in a spiritual realm), which suppresses the lack of evidence for spiritual realms, “the futuristic” (believing we belong to a distant extra-terrestrial tomorrow), which suppresses the tendency of humans to repeat their mistakes in new settings, “the unilateral” (believing the earth is resilient so our belonging is not necessary), which suppresses the effect of human activity on the earth’s ecology, and “the Romantic” (believing that humans do not belong, but once did, and yearn to belong again), which suppresses our knowledge of the ecological destructiveness of our ancient ancestors. (Kelsey 2008: 208-9). Within this umbrella of “not belonging” Kelsey would also situate the broader host of historical narratives such as post-colonial, feminist, environmentalist and Marxist analyses.

From the perspectives represented above, I have derived the following methodological approach for my reading of trees in *Counterstrike*, *Metro: Last Light* and *Chasing Dead*. My analysis will commence with a first-person experiential account of trees in each game, and will note the perspectives from which I can experience each tree based on my ability to satisfy the gameplay condition. Moving to a third-person perspective, I will make certain observations and judgements according to the perceived place of trees in the overall system of each game. Then considering the functions of emplacement and representation of a region, I will locate the tree in a broader field of organisation that creates an experience of landscape for the player. Within this landscape, I will consider the intertextual readings of each tree to question how each game landscape relates to trace histories of landscape representation. Finally, I will assemble these perspectives to describe how the tree object in the computer game operates within a system of landscape organisation, both internally in the game, and externally as part of a broader cultural system of historical resampling and appropriation. The purpose of this analysis is to examine how trees in computer games are related to a broader history of landscape representation, and therefore how cultural representations are repurposed and their meanings renewed by repurposing them in the relatively young landscape form of computer games.

### **Counterstrike: Global Offensive**

From my first-person amateur perspective, *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* is a fast-paced multiplayer first-person shooter game, with rules comparable to a game of tag, not dissimilar

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<sup>1</sup> Western landscape theory is specifically bracketed here because the points of reference covered by this paper derive exclusively from Western cultural sources. I do not subscribe to the view that ‘Landscape’ is an exclusively Western phenomenon, and I do not wish to use an unqualified universalizing term ‘Landscape’ in conjunction with exclusively Western sources.

to Cops and Robbers, Laser-tag or Paintball. Due to the haste and rapid optical targeting required, the only contemplative pause I have for landscape appreciation is when my character has been killed, and I watch the remainder of the round from the perspective of other players. When playing on a new game map, my objective is to memorise the strategic architecture in order to survive and shoot other players. Despite this severe architectural condition, *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* is mutually enjoyed and discussed by its online community for the rich range of map terrains made available for the game activity, both those provided by the official game product, and those published by the online community themselves. My case study here is the ‘Militia’ terrain map provided with *Counterstrike: Global Offensive*, created by Andrew Aumann (Counterstrike Wiki 2016). Playing as an FBI agent, I begin ‘Militia’ in a driveway outside an American farm, where armoured FBI vehicles are parked beside a cornfield. I run to take my position behind boulders, grain silos and oak trees as a melee ensues with the terrorist players who emerge from inside the main farmhouse. The tree game object is a dominant visual feature in the vocabulary of this game map. From my amateur play, the trees have the deniable quality of resembling a combination of large oak and small birch trees. Within the path-able space of the map, all trees share the undeniable quality of shielding me from the vision and gunfire of enemy players – in this sense they are the same as a rock or a wall. They cannot be climbed, their branches do not blow in the wind, and their root structures do not interfere with the tunnels running directly beneath them. Haste and visual targeting homogenise my primary experience of the game objects into obstacles, shelter and non-path-able space. The trees in the background outside the playable arena share the deniable quality of represented oak and birch trees, but lack the undeniable quality of obstacle and shield. Upon third person reflection, the representation of this map resembles the notorious real world standoffs between the FBI and militia groups, such as those at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992, Waco, Texas in 1993 and more recently at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, Oregon, in 2016. In the ‘Militia’ game map, Cops ‘n’ Robbers is simulated through a first-person shooter engine, and skinned with the represented context of the North American militia movement.



Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Photo by Ambda Peacher/OPB, PBS Newshour, January 4, 2016



Militia, Counterstrike: Global Offensive, Valve Corporation, 2012, author's screenshot, 2016.

The significance of trees in the *Militia* map is twofold. First, the American farm hostage scenario contextualises the fictional relationship between the Cops (the FBI) and the Robbers (the Terrorists). Second, from a third-person perspective, this fictional context recalls the

popularisation of the rural siege in such films as *Ambush in Waco* (1995) as well as the much broader landscape tradition that emplaces the identifiable trope of the American farm (Rollins 2003: 395). To complicate matters further, Counterstrike, and the *Militia* map, are built using the *Half-Life* game engine, so the trees and other game objects are drawn directly from that asset library. Nevertheless, online discussion boards widely agree that *Militia* depicts an American farm, most likely in the Midwest (Counterstrike Wiki 2016). In the socio-political context of the American farm, the object of the oak and birch tree is identifiable within Casey's notion of an emplaced 'region' that contributes to such identification by consensus. From a third-person historical perspective, I think it is possible to examine why an oak tree might be an anticipated component of this emplaced region, given that with only a short sidestep into Western art history, one would identify a glut of historical, political and mythological references in particular to the oak tree. The oak was a key nationalistic symbol and a hotly contested commodity in 18<sup>th</sup> century England when the demands of ship-building produced such a shortage of these slow-growing trees that their representation in rural landscapes was a legible symbol of citizenship (Schama 1995: 168), and in 2004 the United States Congress legislated to make the oak the National Tree of America due to its associations of physical resilience and toughness (The Arbour Day Foundation 2016). Whilst I cannot assume that an ideal player or modder has consciously built such narratives into their game experience, if I position the *Militia* map as a convincing emplacement of that region, Cosgrove's notion of landscape as a continually re-inscribed 'world text' might support the argument that a player's expectation that oak trees *belong* in this setting, and therefore connect them to a deeper tradition of appropriated oak tree symbolism. I have made three possible landscape operations of 'tree' here – collision objects in a game of tag, representational props to support the militia context, and intertextual tropes with a deep history. This might be simplified to 'collision objects with a context'. The game experience is enhanced by the sensual quality afforded by each game environment, which is based on an exploitation of cultural references.

## **Metro: Last Light**

*Metro: Last Light* (2013) presents a single-player game world based on the post-nuclear apocalyptic vision of Moscow, presented in Dmitry Glukhovsky's novel *Metro 2033*, and its initial game adaptation *Metro 2033* (2010). My first-person player experience is divided between roughly three represented environments: the underground bunker, the catacomb labyrinth and the outdoor post-apocalyptic landscape. Collectively, these environments give me a different experience of undeniable environmental threat. In the bunker, I combat human NPCs by stealth, by unscrewing or turning off lights and gradually eliminating enemies before being detected. In the catacomb labyrinth, I combat mutant light-sensitive spiders (reminiscent of the HR Geiger and Ridley Scott's *Alien*). In the outdoor post-apocalyptic landscape, I must move quickly through the landscape combating fast-moving monsters, while the landscape itself attacks me with its toxic air. Realising that I am constrained by a limited supply of gas masks and a fast-moving enemy, I blunder through the hazardous outdoors past checkpoints, which will eventually lead me back to the relative calm of the claustrophobic underground bunkers. As I transition from amateur to contemplative player, I learn tricks to conserve gas masks and become more adept at disposing of monsters, so that I can peek around a little more at this generally terrifying and desolate environment. Broadly

speaking, the post-apocalyptic plot of the game is articulated by the contrasting modes of threat I experience within the game environment. In their non-visual representation, trees fulfil the peripheral role as game objects I that expect to find in a first-person shooter genre. They are colliders that can protect me from gunfire and proximity attacks. As a contemplative player receptive to intertextuality, I recognise their deniable visual representations as being similar to Romantic visual tropes. German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich exemplified the use of twisted and gnarled trees in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as embodiment of his perception of Nature, in this case as both the physical manifestation of the divine, as well as that from which humanity has been exiled — trees as a meditation on yearning, and a medium to bridge the bifurcation of humanity and nature (in this case read as the Divine) (Mitchell 1977: 103). To consider the sort of place-making that operates within *Metro: Last Light*, my immediate association is Kelsey's notion of landscape as 'not belonging' — *Metro: Last Light* represents environmental threat, either through the combination of darkness and vulnerability (mutant spiders only attack in the dark), or the outside world that has exiled humanity (the air chokes the player). As deniable visual representations, the game objects of the surface landscape— the ruined cars, aeroplanes, apartment buildings and municipal buildings – would not be out of place in various familiar apocalyptic visions, such as John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* or J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, as we see both remnants of conflict as well as an environment reclaimed by Nature. Kelsey locates the Romantic landscape firmly within his determination of "not belonging" ecologically. By associating the language of Kelsey with *Metro: Last Light*, I argue that game simulates for the player the rejection of humanity's animality, and emphasises the Romantic separation of human from nature. The object of landscape and its new resident monsters attack me (including swinging barbed tendrils that hang from trees), whilst I sprint across the overgrown wasteland, frantically shooting before my gas mask expires and I asphyxiate. This exile of humanity where nature flourishes in society's absence corresponds to two of Kelsey's six categories of not belonging – the "unilateral (the earth is obdurate and resilient, so our belonging is not required)" and the "nostalgic Romantic (we don't belong but once did, and long to do so again)" (Kelsey 2008: 208).

This simultaneous recognition of humanity as being separated from Nature as well as landscape as a medium of reconciliation resembles Casey's description of 'emplacement' where "in the face of this alienation of place from us and us from place, perhaps the only transfiguring power of painting, in legion with creative mapmaking, is capable of restoring that primary belongingness which acknowledges our antecedent ties to landscape and those of landscape to us" (Casey 2002: 261). A receptivity to intertextuality can allow me to consider how the visual representation of gnarled trees in *Metro: Last Light* can be metaphorically connected to the Romantic trees of Caspar David Freidrich, and therefore to a long history of landscapes that express "not belonging". I argue that trees as the 'colliders with context' in this game perform an active role in creating a world that humanity has been exiled from, that also suggests a Romantic yearning for reconciliation. Following the plot of *Metro: Last Light*, the narrative journey of the protagonist is indeed defined by a search for safety and "home".



*Metro: Last Light*, 4A Games, 2013, author's screenshot.



Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*, Galerie Neue Meister, 1819/20

### Addendum: Chasing Dead

2020 Venture's *Chasing Dead* is a single-player first-person shooter created in a post-apocalyptic landscape. I present it as a supplementary contrast to *Metro: Last Light* —as a game that shares a thematic similarity but has an interesting contrast in the representation of trees. As a first-person amateur player, *Chasing Dead* places me in a series of depopulated post-apocalyptic landscape environments, from overgrown suburban streets, to Middle Eastern bomb-scarred deserts, to abandoned alpine villages and pine forests. In contrast to *Metro: Last Light*, my first-person experience of undeniable environmental threat is not created by the representation of poisonous air or especially dangerous NPCs, but rather by a curious implementation of game physics. Across the variety of landscapes presented in *Chasing Dead*, trees are the only game objects to have no collision properties (I can walk or drive straight through them). From a third person analytic perspective, the enemy mutant NPCs appear to operate with a ‘follow’ command script that tracks me as soon as I trigger a particular section of the map (I cannot visually hide from NPCs in a house once they have started following me). This combination of physics and programming presents an unexpected challenge — if I enter a forested area, I cannot see approaching mutants through the trees, but the combination of no collision properties and a location-based follow script means that the mutants can't ‘see’ the trees as I do, which effectively leaves me blind in plain sight. The post-apocalyptic landscape of this game lends itself to a similar Romantic reading as *Metro: Last Light*, however the unconventional physics of the trees leads to a new relationship. The tree objects have become an environmental threat to me because they do not exist for the NPCs, either in their tracking or navigation. This now starts to resemble an inversion of Stephen C. Bourassa's biological landscape theory, where the desire for landscape to function as a prospect or refuge (putting me in a position of power and control) is confounded by the exposed position of being seen without seeing (Bourassa 1991). This could easily be disregarded as a flaw in game design, but it is an interesting example of what happens when a game breaks with the interactive expectations of its genre held by the player. When a tree becomes different from a rock or a building in a physics representation that usually treats them equally, the undeniable meaning of the tree game object shifts dramatically. What I

expect to be a barrier between the mutants and myself has become an unfair hazard that inhibits my vision and leaves me visible and vulnerable. Within the limited possibility space of my determination of ‘colliders with context’, this example can contrast my determination of ‘colliders with context’ to illustrate how the intertextual associations of the post-apocalyptic tree remain in a dynamic relationship with the undeniable meanings for the player as created by the simulated game properties. As a landscape object, the trees in *Chasing Dead* illustrate via contrast how the properties of trees within first person computer games contribute to experiences of landscape via a delicate balance of representational qualities.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have created a position where landscape can be considered in computer games both by the experience of emplacement and contemplation as well as by the receptivity to intertextuality that allows the player to consider the relationship between computer game landscape elements and the deeper history of similar representations in cultural/historical works of landscape. By treating the tree as a placeholder for landscape in the first person shooter computer game, I derived the determination of ‘colliders with context’ to describe how the first and third person experiences can form productive and revealing relationships between the representations and their intertextual parallels and predecessors. Comparing my player experience to theories of landscape led me to compare the representations within these computer games to the existing theoretical frameworks, such as the division of prospect and refuge, the Romantic longing to overcome humanity’s exile from Nature, and the symbolic echoes of national identity built into emplacing motifs. The obvious criticism of my analysis is the small number of examples studied, and therefore the narrow scope of possibilities for ‘tree’ in a computer game. Of course the more broadly this analysis is applied, the more complex the range of possible definitions and historical connections I would have to deal with. At this point, I would like to argue that a tree in a computer game exists according to the representations afforded by each particular computer game. The tree in a computer game can contain intertextual connections to a wide range of broader frameworks from landscape theory. If we are to question how computer games contribute to the genre of landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I argue that computer games reveal meaning through their combination of historical references and the undeniable meanings they make for the player. The *context* of my enjoyment of playing Cops and Robbers on an American farm prompted my contemplative speculation on the relationship between this emplacement and the trajectories of landscape history, from nationalism to pastoralism to the Militia movement. The *sensation* of asphyxiating in exile procedurally highlighted the emotional yearning that is embedded in a Romantic view of landscape coupled with an eco-apocalypse. The *unfair* contradiction of a forest that only I could see was a revealing inversion of the human strategic advantage generally embodied in prospect/refuge theory. By considering the intertextual parallels of these game trees, we can open up the player experience of landscape in computer games and question not only how certain representations have intertextual landscape precedents, but also how the effect of these representations within the game can alter our understanding of certain histories and theories of landscape – the backcloth of human history.

## **Games**

CHASING DEAD, 2020 Venture, Mac, 2016

COUNTERSTRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE, Valve Corporation, Mac 2012

METRO: LAST LIGHT, 4A Games, Mac 2013

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