

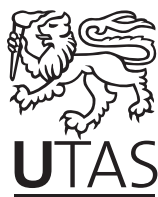


HOUSING
and COMMUNITY
RESEARCH UNIT

**Simulated urbanism and
its effects on the negotiation
of hyperreal cities**

Paper No. 8

**Housing and Community
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Abstract

Urban spaces have become blended even more seamlessly with their portrayal. Such representations are generated via a broad range of media which both influence and sculpt our sense of their constitution so that our sense of what the urban 'is' is inflected by a range of interpretations, atmospheres, inherited viewpoints, dialogues and scenarios derived from these media. In this paper we look at this interpretive skew as generated through intense video gaming activity and from a particular simulated urban context, the city of the game *Grand Theft Auto 3: Liberty City*. Our objective is to conceptualise the linkages between gamers' apprehension of the relative realism of this in-game environment and its influence on their experience of traversing 'real' urban environments. We suggest the notions of slipped and segued viewpoints as a means of understanding the differential degrees to which real and artificial interactive representations, based around violence, gang ecologies and dystopian urban space, bleed unevenly into the everyday urban life of these players. This sense of space appears to influence perceptions of risk, the navigation of urban space, and received understandings of social ecologies and stereotypes which overlap with the non-game world. Gamers move within what we call the ludodrome – a mediated space between immersion in urban simulation and a real world that is simultaneously generated, destabilised and blurred by the effect of such gameplay.

1. Introduction

Theoretical treatments of the interaction between self, mind and the physical and social specificities of the urban context started in one of the earliest phases of urban sociology. In his essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1950), the distinct character of the urban, in particular its social diversity, led Simmel to suggest that in order to cope with the scale and complexity of urban interactions, the individual had to dull his senses using the 'protective organ' of the mind. For Simmel the mass of sensory inputs generated by the city created the reserve of the city dweller and a blasé attitude as a mechanism enabling these inputs to be categorised and moderated. Perhaps we no longer wrestle so much with what the precise character of urbanism in itself, and yet the question of how we respond to the urban and how society operates within what has become the primary locus of human organisation globally (Davis, 2006) exercises contemporary accounts of the city.

We can see much of Simmel's language and concerns in the agenda-setting statements of the early Chicago School of sociology. For writers like Wirth (1929) the density, heterogeneity and scale of urban life similarly defined the city, as distinct from traditional forms of community and townscape, but also emerged as a mediating space through which the individual was connected with the broader society and social

structure. It is to this point of mediation we return in this paper, but from quite a different perspective.

The experience of the urban has often been attached to the significance of Baudelaire's notion of the *flâneur*. However, it was Benjamin's (1990) popularisation of this idea in the notes he made that constituted the *Arcades Project* that has continued to draw repeated inspiration for contemporary accounts of the mind and self in the city. The connection between self, community and the physicality and magic of the urban experience has, then, come to be a central theme of urban theory. It is to this relationship that we focus in this paper. In contemporary accounts of our relationship to the city, writers like Mitchell (2003) have highlighted the exponential complexity of the built and social environment, as well as its integration and dependence on networks often involving non-human actors. Writing not long after the World Trade Centre attacks he notes the degree of this interdependence:

We had become inseparable from our increasingly capable electronic organs; our very limbs had become fleshy antenna supports; our interconnections had ramified and intensified to an almost incomprehensible degree...our bodies now existed in a state of continuous electronic engagement with their surroundings. (Mitchell, 2003, p. 2)

In this paper we also concentrate on this interdependency, looking particularly at the mediating influence of simulated urbanism in extending our understanding of how individuals and groups come to understand the non-simulated, or real, city spaces. As Margaret Morse has observed with regard to the effects of media on such linkages, the giddy world opened up by contemporary media appears to destabilise connection to a 'real' world:

'Freeways, malls, and television are the locus of an attenuated *fiction effect*, that is, a partial loss of touch with the here and now, dubbed here as *distraction*...momentarily closing off the here and now and sinking into another world – promoted within the apparatuses of the theatre, the cinema and the novel' (Morse, 1990)

In this paper we suggest that some groups, in this case video gamers, may be exposed to interconnected experiences of different forms of urbanism played out in both simulated and real spaces, often on a daily basis. We ask what impact the emergence of these *flâneurs électroniques* might have on our understanding of the constitution of the city if we are able to know, navigate and interact within these realistic simulations. We suggest that such players move between a game space and real urban space, a move which has the effect of destabilising the sense of a clear definition and differentiation of these spaces. These issues appear to unlock a series of deeper questions about how urbanity is mutually constituted via the representations of urban space found in video games and other media. In other words, our interpretation of real urban space may be warped, or more subtly, influenced, by the depth that gaming experiences now offer.

For writers like Baudrillard the growth of simulation has meant that 'no adequate analysis of systems of representation can, simply, refer to the "real" world (the referent), as if this was unproblematic' (Gane 1991, p. 95). To this extent it is difficult

to sustain a sense of urbanism that is completely distinct from games or other mediated experiences. Our sense of the urban has loosened and been re-framed by fantasy and other media representations, this hyperreal, in which we have lost the ability to fully distinguish reality from fantasy, has become significant.

For some years commentators have referred to the study of games in general as ludology, from the Latin *ludo* (game), yet with the emergence of video gaming the term has tended to be applied to the study of this specific area of gaming. We try to encapsulate this idea of a ‘played world’ using the term ‘ludodrome’. We use the term ludodrome, then, to refer to the played space of in-game environments, but also to express the way in which real space may be suffused with elements of simulated space and the blending of this element of popular culture. In this sense the ‘real’ itself becomes, at least in part, a played space for the gamer who mediates between these two spaces. In other words, it may be that exposure to extensive gaming (and to particular types of game and of game world) may be influential to an unknown degree in shaping player interactions with real world spaces.

The format of the paper is as follows. We begin with a review of the relevant empirical literature on gaming and consider the relationships that have been explored between game environments and real interactions. We then present the methodology and results of a study of video gamers in Australia who had extensively played the *GTA* games. This research was used to understand the degree to which game worlds filtered or interpenetrated with the gamers’ understanding of real city life. We end with a discussion of our findings that appear to show two particular types of such effects which we label slips and segues. The significance of these findings is assessed in concluding.

2. Narrative, Simulated and Overlapping Realities

In contrast to television, cinema and other forms of mass media, online game (or in-game) environments provide immersive and interactive experiences that are increasingly becoming more realistic in representing out-game environments — in-game environments are moving closer to resembling and reassembling reality. Games like *Project Gotham Racing* contain racing circuits based on tens of thousands of photographs of numerous world cities so that photoreal game play is combined with real places. Knowing a city in detail before seeing it in reality has become possible. In this section we look at the research literature examining these linkages.

Murray (2005) argues that games do not operate through a uni-directional process in which gamers simply soak up their simulated experiences in their engagement with the game — gamers are not ‘intellectually passive’ or easily susceptible to some kind of video game brainwashing. Beavis (2000, p. 111) comments on how young people in video game and other media research are constructed as ‘unwilling dupes of technological change’, ignoring the agency and resistance that young people bring to their engagements with electronic games and new media technologies. While electronic games may shape the way young people perceive and experience the world, young people are active constructors and meaning-makers, albeit within certain parameters, in an interactive process.

From its debut in 1998 and spanning across seven stand-alone games, *Grand Theft Auto* has become established as a unique gaming phenomenon in video gaming. Rockstar's *GTA* games are well known for providing gamers with advanced forms of gamer interactivity, combining the pleasures of watching and interacting through elaborate cinematic features and multiple points of view; the series is also notoriously recognised for depicting violence and 'adult' content throughout its game sequences (Murphy, 2004).

In his essay 'Sim Sin City' (2003), Frasca identifies two key features of *GTA III* that mark it as a gaming revolution. Like Juul, Frasca refers to freedom and the suspension of morality as two key strands of its recipe for success. *GTA III* (2001) provides gamers with a vast urban playground with each iteration of the game achieving ever larger city spaces to explore (from an essentialised representation of New York in *GTA III* to an entire state in *GTA: San Andreas* that included a miniaturised LA and Las Vegas). While goals and missions are present their completion is not crucial for enjoying the game except in unlocking additional areas of the city to explore.

With the ever-increasing popularity of video gaming some communication scholars have turned to the theory of 'cultivation' to assist in understanding how media systems, such as electronic games and television, may impact on the cultural and ideological beliefs of heavy and long-term gamers and viewers. Cultivation theory focuses on the 'aggregate effects of massive and long-term exposure of publics to centrally produced, mass-distributed media systems of stories', predominantly television programming and broadcasting (Gerbner, Goss, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994).

Within this model, television is interpreted as a significant source of popular values, beliefs and images that reflect dominant ideologies and value systems to a typically heterogenous population. Television in Western societies enters the daily lives of most people from infancy, and cultivation theory attends to the ways in which the 'consequences of growing up and living with television' and being exposed to the long-term repetition of shared images, sounds and narratives interact with and shape our perceptions of reality, including cultural values and belief systems (Gerbner et al., 1994, p. 37).

Gerbner et al. have stressed that cultivation theory does not imply a crudely conceived unidirectional understanding of causation in which television consumes the passive mind of its viewers. Rather, the term cultivation is intended to capture what is in reality a dynamic, interactive and variable process between the shared symbols and images broadcast through television programs on a mass scale and the diverse social and cultural contexts through which viewers participate in such viewing (Gerbner et al., 1994).

Cultivation theory has been applied to the implications of in-game worlds that simulate the appearance and experience of everyday environments. In Williams's (2006) work, cultivation theory was used to predict whether the 'more time players spend in a game the more they come to see the real world through the imagery' (p. 74) of video gaming. In an important controlled quantitative study of MMRPG role-playing games, specifically focusing on the fantasy world generated through the PC game *Asheron's Call 2*, Williams (2006) found that gamers changed their perception

of real world dangers over the course of regularly playing the game for one month. Younger men in particular were more likely to believe that people experience robbery through the use of weapons in the 'real' world in comparison to other treatment groups, providing support for a cultivation effect generated by extensive gameplay.

Williams's discussion implies a more causal relationship that moves away from Gerbner et al.'s (2004) emphasis on interactivity. It also demonstrates the possible blurring of boundaries between in-game and out-game environments and the shifting perceptions of gamers between these realities. Murphy (2004) suggests that lived spaces between the digital world (in-game) and the physical world (out-game) should not be perceived as dichotomous spaces but instead as *overlapping* — gamers both live in (and rely on) the physical world while interacting with digital worlds. While players may be immersed in fictional environments the line between them and the bodily experience of these game worlds is increasingly blurred.

Juul's (2005) description of electronic games as 'half-real' provides a useful means of rethinking the way in which games intersect between reality and simulation — gameplay is governed by real rules (i.e., winning or losing is a real event) played out in real-time through fictional characters that roam around simulated gaming environments based on 'real' landscapes. However, as Guest (2006a) argues, it may be useful to consider online or other game environments as *extensions* of the out-game world, as opposed to viewing these realities as 'alternative' worlds or realities. Both in-game and out-game environments exist only in relation to each other and are mediated through the gamer.

In examining the narrative structure of *GTA III*, Frosh (2004) describes the plot as intricate and essential to motivating gamers for each mission while individual missions simultaneously drive the plot. In spite of these narrative trends in game studies, virtual worlds can be interpreted as both lived narratives and simulations of the physical world (Klastrup, 2002). However, Frasca (2001; 2003; 2006) has argued that we need to study video games as a process of interactive *simulation* as opposed to interpreting video games through a narrative lens. Nevertheless, selecting simulation theory over narratology may neglect the layered complexity of game-playing which combines both narrative and simulated dimensions as intrinsic elements in successfully completing games (Ang, 2006).

Immersion and presence govern the analysis and understanding of video game design. Immersion is a key principle through which gamers experience simulated environments (Frasca, 2006). Presence refers to the sensation of 'being there' in gaming environments. Bracken, Lange & Denny (2005) classify presence into a physical sense of being somewhere combined with immersion, a social presence of 'being together' with others, and co-presence as a feeling of being with another person present. It has both social and interpersonal dimensions as well as environmental considerations. From their focus groups Bracken et al. concluded that online gamers may experience all three types of presence. However this raises further considerations for stand-alone video games such as *GTA* in which the physical is prioritised over other forms of presence and whether this detracts from the sentiment of 'being there'. Interactivity functions alongside presence and immersion in electronic games to enhance the experience of engaging with 'another world' for gamers.

Figures 1 and 2 below highlight important distinctions between the kind of relationship gamers have to aspects of sociability and gameplay in their experience of a game like *GTA*, a delimited urban environment containing only the player's character, and that of multi-user contexts whose social content may be amplified within gameplay. As Figure 1 shows, the *GTA* context implies a one-to-one correspondence between gamer and player-character with no networked linkages other than the ability for friends to be playing at the same time or for other secondary forms of social communication between the gamer outside the game environment itself.

In many networked games offering differing degrees of urban and other fantasy simulation we find (Figure 2) that the possibilities of networking (local and fully online) offer the possibility for communication while playing within the game space as well as the possibility that player characters can interact, fight or engage in dialogue within the game. These distinctions are important in considering the social and socialising capacities of different game formats, to say nothing of the particular game genre or specific moral and violent content of a given game. Increasing levels of interactivity between the game and the gamer can lead gamers to a state of mind referred to originally by Stromberg as 'enthralment' — gamers engage in fictional in-game environments through which they subconsciously comprehend as 'fantasy' while feeling and believing it to be both true and real (cited in Jansz & Martens, 2005, p. 337).

Second Life is one virtual world that is growing significantly in this way, allowing gamers to experience everyday and parallel lives in an artificial environment — a world that is increasingly overlapping with the off-line world. The allure of playing out virtual selves and lives can become enticing for gamers; Guest (2006b) reports that a third of *Second Life* gamers are spending more time in the game world than the offline world. *Second Life* is a unique open-ended environment which allows gamers to design their own avatars and worlds (Delwiche, 2006). Games such as *Second Life* and *Sim City* symbolise the closing gap between lived experiences in out-game environments and simulated experiences through in-game environments.

Multi-user virtual environments also succeed in constructing persistent online communities that cannot be easily switched on or off; they have an emergent quality that partially mirrors the entry and exit of actors in real social settings (Delwiche, 2006). Herman et al. (2006) state that MMRPGs are 'sociologically distinctive as "persistent worlds"...they function as ongoing social systems replete with their own forms of governance and moral economies of practice' (p. 191). For stand-alone games like *GTA* that do not provide multi-user environments (the game is not available online), gamers are positioned as isolated and alone in expansive virtual cityscapes, without the company of other players in the cities they play in. However, games like *GTA* are 'social' to the extent that they seek to create a plausible simulated urban reality. Outside the game environment play may also be supplemented by playground and water cooler discussions, email lists, chat rooms and gaming message boards which provide an opportunity to share experiences and to develop a shared interpretation and understanding of these virtual cities.

Figure 1: Single player simulated urbanism

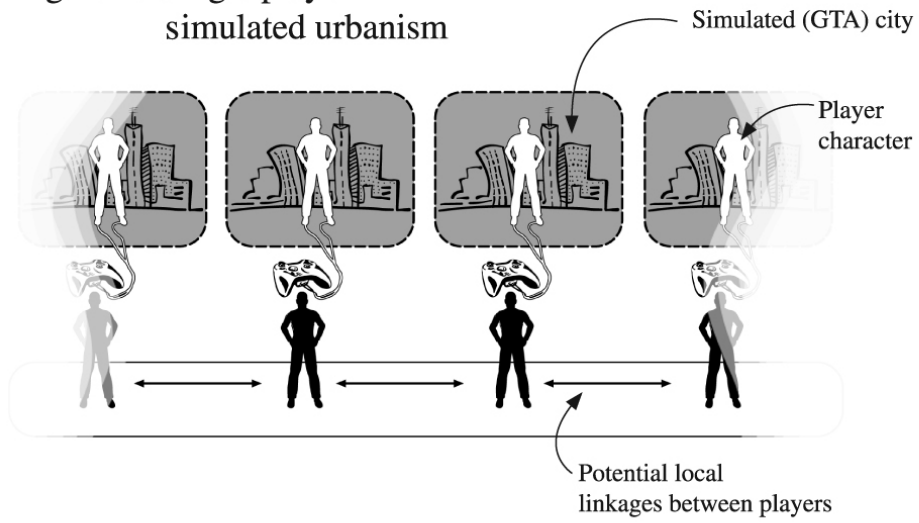
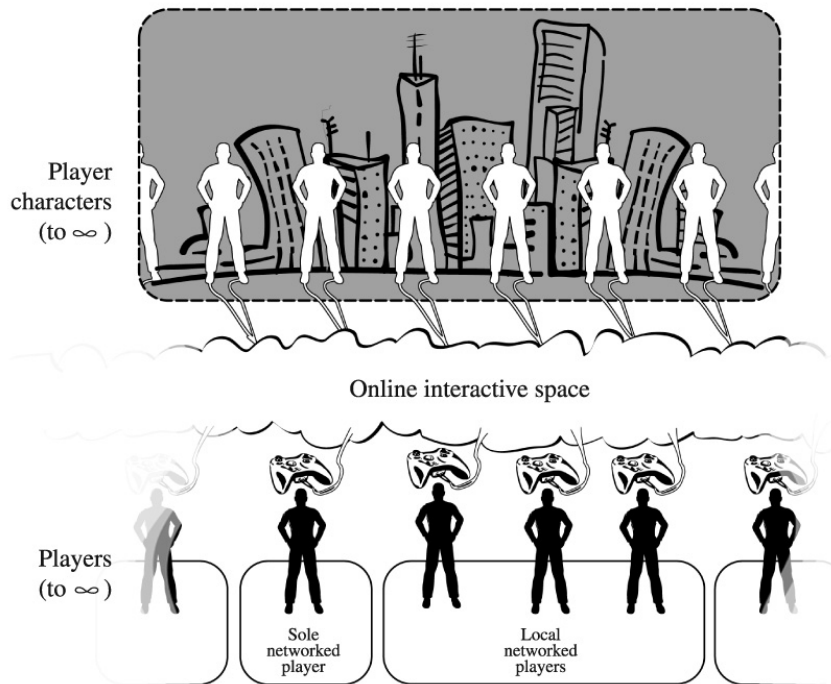


Figure 2: Multi-user simulation



3. Research approach

Fourteen young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty (with one person aged thirty-nine) were self-selected to participate in the research. Thirteen men participated in a series of panels while one young woman elected to participate via email response to the same schedule of questions used in the groups. The project was advertised in two Australian city locations — Hobart and Melbourne. Participants responded to a series of poster advertisements placed around university campuses in both city locations, posted online in the form of bulletin board notices through popular gaming websites such as ‘AusGamers’ (<http://ausgamersforum.ausforums.com/>), and displayed in local video gaming retailers. As the majority of posters were displayed around university campuses this attracted mainly tertiary students to the project. The posters and web-postings invited regular *GTA* gamers (people who appreciated the game series and had been playing *GTA* games over a lengthy period of time) to email the researchers if they were interested in participating in a series of group discussions focusing on simulated cities and their interpretations of the urban environments depicted in *GTA*.

Two focus group panels were facilitated in two contrasting cities — Hobart is a regional city with a considerably smaller population of 202,000 in comparison to Melbourne, which is the second largest city in Australia with an observed population of 3.6 million recorded in 2004 (ABS cat. no. 3222.0). In regards to population and size Melbourne shares a much closer affinity with the urban environments depicted in *GTA*. However it is worth remembering that we conducted this research in Australia and that all of the three key *GTA* games we explored in this research are chiefly essentialised representations of American cities.

Separate panels were organised for Hobart and Melbourne with both panels meeting twice; six people participated in the Hobart panels while seven people participated in the Melbourne panels. Both rounds of focus groups were set at fortnightly intervals so we could explore changes in perceptions of urban space engendered by the first contact with our ideas from the first set of focus groups. The groups met on campus locations at the University of Tasmania in Hobart and RMIT University in Melbourne, with each meeting running for no longer than two hours. Each participant received vouchers for a franchise video game store as tokens of appreciation for their time and efforts which also acted as incentives to attend both group discussions — a \$20 voucher was initially received followed by a further \$40 voucher after attending the second meeting to prevent panel attrition.

3. Building the Ludodrome: Gamer Experiences of Simulated and Non-Simulated Urbanism

In this section we examine the thoughts and responses of our research participants in relation to the question of how the simulated urbanism of a game like *GTA* might begin to shape or affect the negotiation, interpretation and constitution of real cities. Following our analysis of the results of our focus groups we have grouped this presentation according to the central areas of insight generated. This is presented in three stages. First, we examine the quality of the in-game city for these gamers and the distinctions and similarities observed in relation to real cities that they had experienced or imagined to exist in the real world. We then move to a critical distinction that emerged from our analysis of the connection between gaming and the negotiation of real urban space. Our typology of these connections is twofold and distinguishes between ‘slipping’ and ‘seguing’. Some elaboration of these ideas is necessary before we move into the presentation of these results.

Our use of the word *slip* in this context refers to the temporary interpretation of an element of real urban contexts in the language, narrative or physical constructs of a game world. A *segue*, or smooth transition, represents a more sustained interpretation of the real urban environment in these terms. Our aim here is to explore the ways in which players mediate between these two spaces and the degree to which these two types of overlap of virtual space into the real world took place. Indeed, as we show later, the canvas of the game world also provides a place in which real life concerns and dramas are mapped or projected within the game parameters.

3.i. *The game world as real/unreal/hyperreal*

How realistic do these game environments appear to people playing them extensively? As we have already noted, the *GTA* urban world is often seen as a comprehensive, plausible and choice-laden space, albeit within the parameters of the mission-driven gameplay. We started by asking gamers how realistic this environment felt to them and followed this by asking about what elements of the game environment generated disbelief or were felt to be unrealistic. This ‘copy’ or representation of an urban system became a temporary envelope of urban reality, something that was occasionally slipped into or visited at least in part because it was considered to be so realistic and, thereby, intrinsically satisfying as a game experience. Sequences and events in the game world helped to sustain this strong sense of realism, contributing to a feeling of engagement with what might be a real city. For example, the realistic behaviour of pedestrians in-game to a car crash was noted, as was their more general behaviour:

- *But that’s the thing that gives it the impression of reality because they’re [pedestrians in GTA] going about their normal everyday thing.*
- *And suddenly there’s a car going sideways through a red light.*
- *Yeah. And then they all go ‘Aaahhh’.*
- *And they run away.*
- *And they go over and look over the bodies*
- *[laughs] Yeah, that’s also funny too. It’s like ‘Are you all right?’ ‘No.’*

However, the suspension of disbelief and apparent realism of a living and breathing city context was betrayed at times by a wide range of subtle behaviours that were quickly picked up on by many of our participants. As one said, ‘It’s real right up to the point where you try and look any deeper.’ Another gamer referred to the feeling of enthrallment, the sustained sense of believing you are actually immersed in a city, despite the noticeable flaws that became more obvious on closer inspection:

The cities have flaws and the gamers realise that they have flaws, but still when you’re actually gaming you don’t notice those flaws... when you are playing the game it’s actually like you are in a city and at that point you don’t say things like, I guess this turn is not suitable or this shouldn’t be here, it should be a little further off. At that point it’s perfect for you.

A key feature of the apparent realism of these spaces was linked to their ability to promote feelings of opportunity and freedom. The simulated urban landscapes featured in *GTA* were regularly described as vast and open ‘sandboxes’, expansive arenas almost without bounds, as well as mischief. Emphasis was given to feelings of freedom and the sensation of being able to ‘do anything’ such as this typical response:

Well, I wouldn’t pick playing GTA over going to a real city, but one of the bonuses of a city in a game is the absolute — programming permitting — freedom and lack of responsibility you get in a game. You can just run around, doing whatever you want in these games. You can do the missions or just drive around or think of funny ways to destroy as many cars as you can!

The ability of the game environment to be intrinsically interesting also twists the notion of gameplay since gamers remarked that wandering around, taking in certain vistas and urban viewpoints was sometimes a release and of interest in its own right. We return to this point later yet it is worth emphasising that the common excitement at the pure spectacle of the city generates a sense of wandering in simulated environments that, to some extent, parallels that of the urban flaneur. Since the game was seen as realistic and satisfying it was possible to ‘play’ the game from a purely experiential viewpoint:

So it was like a whole new game kind of an experience, you know... You could roam around, just do nothing in the game and still have fun.

Another key point about these games is the degree to which they were seen as places which simulated and represented real places:

And that’s the thing I love about it too, like Liberty City is so obviously New York, and Vice City is so brilliantly Miami, it’s just so cool. And it is, it’s like that hyperreality. It’s like we’re going to take all the best bits of Miami and put them in here, and we’re going to take out all the crappy bits, all the things that annoy us about Miami, we’re not going to put them in here, we’re just going to have the cool bits.

Nevertheless these representations were often understood to be essentialised as well as partially miniaturised representations of these places:

*Int: How realistic did you feel that was as a representation of a city?
- Has anyone watched the extras on the DVD for Team America?... when they're in France everything is really close to everything, like the Louvre is just down the road from the Eiffel Tower... and it's the same problem with GTA 3 because everything is next to each other.*

However, similar comments regarding the freedom to 'do anything' were also made in relation to real cities, suggesting that the constraints and opportunities available in simulated cities parallel the parameters of real cities as one participant noted: '*There are things you can do in the game that you can't do in a real city, but there are things you can do in a real city that you can't do in a game, either*'. Reflexive comments such as these confirmed that gamers were aware of the restrictions within gaming environments and simulated cities like *GTA*. Sometimes the game environment and its character as a place of desperation and violence was seen as unrealistic and therefore the game emphasised the more positive qualities of real city spaces:

And in the game when I play it I think, oh, it's an extremely bad situation, like it's you can be a bad person or bad people in the game. I never feel like it's how life is, I feel more relaxed. I feel like, oh life's so good, you know, life's so calm, life's so safe and easy and you can get whatever you want, you can do whatever you want.

For some participants a credible sense of realism was achieved through the similarity of *GTA* cities to other cities they had visited in real life, locally and overseas – these cognitive geographies overlapped to some extent. Aspects of in-game urban design and landscape were noted, but we also found that it was the social character of these cities, their populations, that provided a sense of particular crossover and realism with real urban spaces. The inspiration for the *GTA* city in real urban environments was clearly understood by the players.

In knowing that it was a distinctively American urbanism that provided the template for these games we found that the gamers were then able to provide subtle interpretations of the degree to which these spaces were consonant with local city spaces:

I like the fact that the cities in Grand Theft Auto, they're sort of Canberra-esque [Australia's planned capital city]. Like, if you take a normal city, like Hobart, streets don't necessarily run at right angles all the time, and there's one way roads and there's roads you can't drive down this way, and you know, it's organic.

To take a more concrete example, in the following discussion the urban geography of Melbourne and its suburbs is compared to the layout of cities represented in *GTA*. As we return to later in this paper, the keen sense of social ecology and the mapping of social space via physical conditions and services comprised a very strong device used in the game and in player readings of these and real urban spaces. Realism was conferred because in-game places contained identifiable social areas characterised by critical signifiers through which social and areal changes were noted:

- I definitely feel it because I sort of live out in the north-east northern suburbs and you come in and you come face the city — depending on which way you sort of come into the city, if you go through Thomas Town, Reservoir [Melbourne], you're coming through there, you can definitely feel a sort of change because there's a lot of canary yellow V6 Commodores going around.

These patterns of social and areal recognition appeared to be clearer for 'hardcore' gamers who had, at certain times, had played the game continuously and then disrupted this sense of realism by seeking basic necessities such as groceries or cigarettes. During these moments it was the fleeting glimpses of the real world that interrupted the everyday and extensive activity of playing the game:

- I guess right at that moment, like right when you're doing it, like I played it for eight hours straight, and I'm out of cigarettes and I just run to the shop right around the corner to get some more cigarettes, there are like those little small shops in San Andreas actually where you can ...

- They're 24/7.

- Yeah like you have with 7/11 and it's like the small market...and you actually say, yeah this is pretty much like the game... So by the time I get to the place I'm all dazed up, I have those views still there of the thing I was doing...you have those visions still there. You think about what you were doing last, your walk changes and you're like this is how I was walking in there, more mechanical...

Nevertheless it would be wrong to suggest that the game was understood by players as something other than a simulation or that the connections between gaming and real environments were anything other than temporary, even if perhaps significant, intertwinings of simulation and the interpretation of everyday spaces. Clear boundaries were marked out by gamers between real cities and simulated representations of cities and it was clear that all of the gamers did not want to be seen as social, or game, 'dupes' in which their sense of reality had been impaired. However, as we show later, the maintenance of a distinction between the game world and real urban spaces was sometimes undermined by the way in which the same players often described an engagement with the city which revealed subtle connections between play in-game and the 'play' of real urban life. However, for apparently all of our participants, gaming experiences were declared to have no influence on their everyday lives and perceptions:

My life is still the same after playing GTA3, I value it no differently. It's simply a game, trying to emulate reality with its own little spin...They are simply two different worlds which I can't see melding together. Crime like that exists, but it's not as obvious here as they try to perceive it in GTA

In some instances this distinction between the *GTA* world was focused on the narrative devices used which were considered to be too fantastic to hold any resemblance, or connection, with the experience of real cities:

The stories in the game don't really hold any personal meaning for me. They're more like film storylines than anything I'd ever experience. It just seems so 'out there'.

The ability to detach from the game was seen as a valuable part of gaming by these participants, yet in-game realism was seen as generating greater potential for some crossover between real life and these environments:

But I've never seriously considered the idea of 'Oh yeah, I could go on a shooting rampage now, because I've been playing so much Grand Theft Auto.' But some people would. The more realistic you make it, I think the more it will influence people of that bent.

There were also many *GTA* moments or visuals which gamers perceived as 'unrealistic' or removed from their perception of what constituted a real city. These included the constant changing cycles of weather, the sparsity of traffic (especially at peak times), and the overly high population of suburban areas. These moments anchored the perception of these game cities as realistic yet flawed, or unreliable representations of real cities for gamers and confirmed gamers' interpretations that this was very much 'only a game'. However, as we move to report now, this distance between game and reality was interspersed with a series of observations that linked the culture and gameplay elements of these spaces in which a blurring between real and simulated cities occasionally occurred.

3.ii. Slipping from simulation into 'reality'

In this first substantive engagement with this interstitial play space, between real and simulated urbanism, we present the ways in which gamers made momentary lapses or connections as playful thoughts slipped into their perception of real urban space. A significant area in this respect emerged in gamer discussions of the way in which in-game music soundtracks were connected to the real world. For several gamers music from the game played outside of that context provided a means of reconnecting with the positive and pleasurable elements of remembered gameplay and its cinematographic aspects.

GTA contains a gameplay feature in the form of the in-car radio which has several 'stations' of pre-recorded DJs, talk radio and themed music so that players can skip between these as they drive around. Music themes vary from pumping techno, drum and bass, to rap and 80s pop. In short, players are given the ability to experience the in-game city with, within certain parameters, the soundtrack of their choice. This creates a powerful interconnection and sense of hyperreality as well-known tracks from the real world are played or, as in this particular case, as tracks associated with the game are played in real life to achieve a sense of being 'pumped' or exhilarated in real driving experiences:

It used to pump me up. Like if a track comes on and I'm driving the bridge, because the speed cameras are never on you can just cane the shit out of it over the bridge. It does, it pumps you up...I've still got them on tape somewhere.

The radio function was seen as a powerful in-game device which added depth to the game experience but, like other game elements, there was an element of wishfulness attached to it — the desire that life might be as good. In this next quote a participant

relays a common sentiment which is also suggestive of the way in which moments in real environments may be ‘read’ through the filter of the game, or in which the game itself slips into the consciousness of the gamer:

Sometimes when I’m listening to the radio, I wish there was a GTA radio station in real life because the radio on those games cracks me up. Or when I’m stuck in traffic and wish I could just zoom past someone going 30 k’s below the limit.

In the game environment itself music was seen as a powerful element of gameplay which added realism as well as depth to the narrative. The complex overlaps between these sensory and emotional moments of connection between the game and real environment around the player were often noted. Here we can see the way in which music provided an important bridge to the rationales of in-game character motivation as well as to the ways in which the game could connect with the player’s own local context:

There was times when I’d be playing San Andreas and I would literally just park in a car park and just have my stereo up and I’d be sitting in my room listening to music, but I’d feel like I was down Bell Street [place in the game] sitting there listening to music in my car, but I wasn’t, I was sitting in my room listening to music with my character sitting in his car parked in a car park listening to music. So I really get that feeling when I’m playing and then when I’m actually driving and the song comes up I’m like yeah let’s go run over someone, this is the song I was listening to when I shot that guy.

Popular catchphrases or expressions from the *GTA* series were sometimes repeated amongst gamers’ social groups as in-group jokes and humour, acting as a point of shared commonality between friends and experiences of video games in which the game slipped into everyday parlance or conversation:

Well, there’s this one you get all the time — there’s this mission where you have to do this low rider thing [controlling the suspension of a car to make it bounce in particular directions], and you have to do it to the music — like bounce the hydraulics. And after that there’s these Mexican dudes come up to you, and they’re like picking a fight and stuff like that, and then this other guy calls them up and goes ‘Oh blah blah blah’ and just says like ‘You’re lucky he has spoken for you’ and he goes ‘Let’s get some fucking beers!’ It’s just so funny, and now we always go, when we’re about to have a drink, ‘Let’s get some fucking beers!’ like that.

In these small ways the video game environment appeared to slip into moments of negotiating and experiencing real urban spaces. We also found ways in which events in real spaces could slip into the game environment. To take one example, it would appear that the violent events played out in *GTA* provided an outlet for replaying frustrating moments experienced by players in real life. The violence of the game was seen to have an intrinsic satisfaction because of its extremity and lack of repercussion. These ideas playfully crossed player minds, yet they also show how player interaction in this relatively open and freeform virtual urban system allowed small real-life vendettas or violent impulses to be released. Not only was the violence itself an outlet,

the similarity of scenarios allowed the re-enactment of frustrations, like road rage, to be played out in-game:

It's just a way to take out your frustration. Like if you've had a bad day, or like if you're driving and someone cuts you off, or something, or if you're on a motorbike and something similar and you just get really frustrated. Rather than taking it out on the person in the real world, you just play your game just trying to annihilate as many people as you can.

Alongside these violent acts there were other momentary lapses into game-fantasy. These included playful imaginings and slippages into the frame of the game boundaries such as car jacking, light jumping and killing people. It was also interesting that playing the game generated a sense of real urban life which was opened up through gameplay as particular in-game subjectivities and strands of social life were experienced as of playing the game:

I was in the city, might have been about two weeks ago, and my friend had his car towed and when we picked it up he was really, really pissed, right he was so angry and he booted out of the street and came flying down Flinders Street [central Melbourne] and I'm like 'Man, this is San Andreas right here!' He was cutting in all this stuff, I was freaking out, I was so scared but like I was playing San Andreas, I wanted to hang out the window and start shooting!

These were playful moments of fantasy imagined while driving or as a passenger, stimulated by the potential exhilaration of reckless driving. This 'sensation' was only available specifically to gamers who regularly travelled through cities in their own vehicle; some participants did not share these driving experiences so did not share these slips. Several participants described moments or flashbacks of imagined subjectivities from GTA in which everyday life was briefly interrupted by fleeting urges to re-enact familiar gaming moments:

I was driving last night and there was a guy walking on the side of the road and he had a bandana over his face and he had his hood up and I was like - I am playing the game right now - if I was playing it I would lean out of the car and I would shoot that man.

In particular cases we found evidence of temporary slips in which gameplay itself was infused with a sense of realism and connection with the in-game character. For example, one participant described his feelings of connection with the game character:

I've sort of — when I'm playing the game, and I'm just going out to kill as many people as I can sort of thing, I find that as I'm doing it I sort of feel like it's me. Like, if someone knocks me down, I feel like, shit, I've got to get up; I've got to make sure that they're dead...That was me, I'm going to get you back for that!

This catalogue of shifts between the in-game environment and urban contexts suggests that such temporary 'slips' are not rare occurrences. Rather, interaction between the game space and the increasingly playful way in which real space is described and imagined, highlights the role of the player as mediator between these

two spaces. While gamers are highly self-aware in their delineation between the game and real world they are also quite clearly prone to these shifts and temporary overlaps in which the precise boundary between play and reality is blurred.

3.iii. Segueing between gameplay and the city

In this section we look at what we term the segueing of gameplay and urban game worlds into players' interpretation and reading of real urban space. We use this term because it adequately captures, in analytically grounded terms, the ways in which players talked about their interactions with the game and real city environments. We should re-emphasise that this is not used to suggest the emergence of fantasy into the real world. Such a crude impression of this blurring is eschewed here in favour of what can be seen as more sustained slips, or the bleeding of the game world — its gameplay syntax, narrative structures and apparent representation of real places — into the real world for the players.

The idea of segueing gameplay into real life continues to hinge on the apparent realism of these games in the eyes of the players. For such shifts to take place, then, the notion of this overlapping of virtual and real urban space into some reconfigured sense of space is potentially important in understanding how game and real urban spaces come together through player experiences. While such game environments are programmed and remain relatively constrained spaces, their apparent freedom, in game terms, means that this level of interactivity generates some sense of connection with the perceived freedom associated with real urban space.

Gamers sometimes commented on how they missed their interactions with what became familiar spaces in these simulated cities, noting the absence of urban familiarity in their own daily lives. The necessity of intimately familiarising oneself with city landscapes to successfully complete missions in *GTA* heightened gamers' appreciation for the memorable and recognisable in these in-game environments:

Like, I know it's not a real place, but it's still somewhere I like to visit. It's like a bit of a holiday like you were talking about earlier — it's a good place to go and visit, have some fun, get away from whatever it is you're worrying about in the real world. So I suppose my take on it is it's a bit like going on a holiday for a bit. Its escapism, it's good. Basically they've created a world where it's OK — it's fun to escape to.

This sense of deep engagement in the game world could also be connected with a deeper sense of exhilaration, curiosity and excitement with real world urban spaces. In-game exploration of the city became matched, to some extent, with a greater playfulness and interaction with real local city spaces. This also could be seen to generate a greater appreciation and awareness of how cities are structured in physical planning and social terms. For this gamer the location in a personal and suburban space generated a desire to see in-game spaces of a similar character yet where a very different set of play parameters could be played-out:

*I liked more going out to the country. I know it wasn't in *GTA3*, the later ones, sort of in the suburbs and the country, I like that more because I grew up in the suburbs and I sort of can relate to how the suburbs been set up...*

because I'm in the city now and I see the city all the time, I'd probably drive around in the country [in the game] more so.

The compulsion to explore unfamiliar or uncharted streets and suburbs in real cities was sometimes connected with a desire to explore and unlock new aspects of these simulated cities:

- It makes me think I'd like to go down streets I don't usually go down.

Int: Here?

- Yeah, here. Because when I drive somewhere, I generally go the same way, and it sort of makes you think 'Well, there's more than one way to get to this place.' And you try different ways. You think 'Maybe I will go down this dark alley. What could be down there?'

This kind of engagement with real urban space was seen as something that was generated, in part, by the way in which driving around *GTA* cities opened up new ways of thinking about navigating the city, as we relate later on. However, it also appeared to make gamers feel enthused about the exploration of simulated and real cities, again reinforcing the impression of these gamers as flaneurs. These motivations spilled over into the desire to see new parts of their own cities or being motivated to visit new real cities. In this sense games such as *GTA* acted as new media travel guides:

*See, my wife watched me play Vice City, because she's always had this thing she wanted to go to Miami, and we played Vice City and she'd watch, which is a first in the *GTA* series — like she just doesn't get into them — and she would be like 'Yeah, that's really cool. We really should go to Miami.'*

The process of generating spatial awareness of the layout of the city fostered apparent skills and abilities in navigating city streets and suburbs more generally. Gamers spoke of negotiating unfamiliar streets in real life with greater confidence, as with this gamer:

- I actually got lost in Brisbane and Melbourne a while ago, in both cities, and managed to find my way out probably a lot easier than I would have if I'd not spent so much time lost in virtual cities.

Int: How can you explain that do you think?

- Well I think it's just sharpened up my sense of direction.

In these examples gamers use in-game devices, the save point at which the game is started and ended in each session and way marks, to describe how they were helped in navigating a real city. What is notable about this engagement with real space is the way in which the game provides a means for talking about how such processes of orienteering are undertaken, the game provides a means of articulating these decisions that might not otherwise be present. In this example a gamer uses the realism of the in-game city layout and map to provide a means of mapping and moving through a real city's space:

I think one of the ways you navigate in-game is really based on the way you navigate in real life: it's 'How far is this from home?', wherever home is at

this particular point...And in-game, you always have a fairly good idea of which way you have to go — which streets you go down — to get back to that safe haven, so that if the heat is on you pretty hard, you can go that way. You do know where you're going, I mean, it's always on the map, anyway, where your home base is, but you get used to landmarks like 'Oh, I'm only three blocks away from the alleyway that I turned down to park the car.'

The final example of these sustained shifts is the interpretation of the social ecology of the city through stereotypes employed in the game. *GTA* has thrived on an often playful presentation of gang violence, often drawing upon other representations found in film with references to popular culture in its cut-scenes. Voice acting, like that of Michael Madsen (from *Reservoir Dogs*), aids this authenticity and anchors the series in 'real' popular culture while the city environments represent 'real' cities including New York, Los Angeles and Miami. This sense of overlapping presentational techniques and source material creates a sense of hyperreality and intertextuality. A particular feature of this level of realism is generated by the modelling of neighbourhoods and their gangs in which ethnic and urban stereotypes are deployed to create a clear sense of demarcated gang spaces, amplifying the social/physical connection and social ecology of the city.

For some players the constitution of the city was seen as being uncertain such that even if it might be true in part then this would be off-putting to the possibility of visiting places that resembled these cities in real life:

*I can't say that I want to travel because of the games in particular. It makes those places seem kind of scary actually, if they're anything like *GTA*! No, I'm not particularly interested in doing a Liberty City-like cities tour of the world.*

The negotiation of real space was partially imbued with assumptions generated by gameplay. While some players suggested that they might be more cautious about particular spaces that might resemble the spaces presented in the game, others felt that perhaps the awareness of street layouts and social situations in the game space could be projected onto the real world:

When you're cruising along and you're like 'Oh, the buildings are looking shabby...Let's leave this neighbourhood' — because obviously if the buildings are looking shabby, shabbier people live here. And you get in game because you drive a long time and you're like 'Holy crap, in the space of two blocks I've entered Dodgeville', you know?

This raises interesting possibilities for the way in which media of this kind might shape the reading of real urban spaces. If game spaces are projected and received as realistic representations, even if these are known to be distortions by gamers, it would seem that there are significant consequences stemming from this hybridisation of simulated and real space and the social flows within them:

So when you walk into a big city you just kind of go 'Hey, there's the city centre, watch out for dodgy alleyways and stuff.' You know, you're pretty much right walking down the main road during the day, the hookers come out

at night. Stuff like that. You can kind of start of by saying 'Well maybe I know something about this place even if I've never been there'.

This illustrates how there is a keen and subtle awareness of the playfulness of these stereotypes, images that are culled from real life and other media. The suggestion that areas can be 'read' in this way and that broader signals of danger and social typifications can be taken from the way that buildings and people appear seems to be reinforced by gameplay. Our participants were keen to reinforce that these opinions were based on *GTA* as one strand in a range of source material that was now strongly interrelated. And yet, while denying the influence of these media, they showed how powerful these influences might be in their reading of real social and physical spaces. In particular we found that where social situations were seen to resemble in-game constellations and narrative patterns, this resonance generated suspicion or mild anxiety, even if the player knew that this interpretation of the possible reality of that moment was anchored in their gameplay experience:

I was at Bell Street Maccas [Melbourne] at an outrageous hour only a few days ago, it would have been maybe 2 a.m. and the place was packed full of people. There was plenty of VL Commodores there and there was cars chock a block full of dudes, like all with the seats back and the tinted windows and all that crap and I guess I got a feeling of these gangs this is sweet, these guys are gang members now. I'm with some gangs, they're going to do a hit or something like that, they are going to come out with bandanas and purple jeans and all that sort of stuff like that.

This discussion raises the possibility that players may attribute a 'false light' to the quality of such encounters. That is to say, they knowingly and sometimes playfully attribute situations and encounters with the characteristics, experiences and rule-based interactions found in the game world:

The reason that you can use stereotypes as a game mechanism is because people already have an archetype set up from popular culture, and you reinforce that popular culture mythos with the stereotypes you use in games. If you had gang members that ran around hugging people, it would be incongruous. So you need to have that — there's already that basis in popular culture which is reinforced by a game, which then colours your perception of popular culture in the world outside the game.

Certainly popular stereotypes of gangs and gang members from *GTA* were referred to as mediating figures when sighting gangs or particular social groups moving around real cityscapes, generating caution and wariness from gamers when approaching such groups:

It kind of adds to the stereotype... you go into this game and it is, it's like that, and you've got your Asians, your Americans, black people, whatever, and then suddenly you look at the game and say 'Well maybe it is true. I'd better watch out for those kinds of things.'

*Like just see the sort of the people in *GTA* and sort of when you're just out and about, you see those sort of people and you think 'I wonder what they're*

up to?’ What you’ve seen in the game, so those stereotypes are built into the game.

Much of this suggests that gameplay in these environments is a reinforcing supplement, rather than a single or even dominant process of typification and categorisation. Gamers are aware that these are stereotypes even though, at particular moments, they knowingly deploy them to offer recipes for action in street situations.

4. Discussion

Our exploratory work in this paper appears to open up a range of possibilities for rethinking our relationship to ‘real’ urban environments: their perception, mediation and interpretation. The words of our respondents yield a range of insights into the way in which these sites may be read, particularly insofar as part of such readings may become inflected by the culture, configuration and narrative devices of games like *GTA*. Under certain conditions including the extent of immersion in these games the urban condition may become blurred so that temporary slips or longer-term segues emerge. These forms of overlap affected underpinning assumptions about incentives and exhilaration but also risk and fear where such contexts appeared to collide with in-game presentation of particular social groups.

What is particularly striking about the way in which the urban is reformatted by its connection to the game environment is that strands of gameplay become embedded in the player’s experience of the city. The generation of the ludodrome, emerging outside gameplay, is one side of a mediated relationship. Just as the game appears to support the notion of video game and interactive media as mediated connections with the urban, so too does gameplay set free imaginations and extend gamers’s understandings of their own local urban context which can be, at least in part, set free by the freedom attributed to the *GTA* game cities.

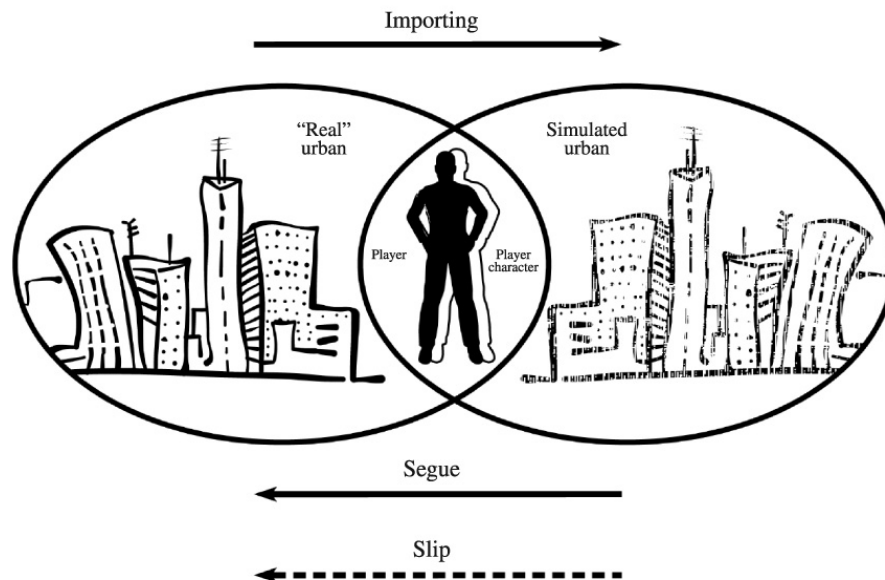
Through games like *GTA* the reality of the city becomes partly constituted by game frameworks, scenarios, sounds, characters and landscapes and other possibilities which are mutually constitutive of a simulated urban environment. The lived city becomes a simulation without reality as the extent of mediated representations extend into the consciousness of gamers, just as media presentations of the city and its fears and exhilaration are presented to a wider population through film, drama and news media. These effects are presented in Figure 3 below which situates the gamer and their player character at the nexus of a mediated relationship between the simulated and their real urban surroundings. Just as the uneven effects of gameplay partially emerge into the experience of these surroundings so too have we seen how players import frustrations and experiences into their play within the game context.

It is clear that gameplay does not concretely enforce a particular impression of the city or a concrete set of direct effects on players’ interpretations of such spaces. Nevertheless, playing games like *GTA* has become part of a wider universe of pixellated representations and forms of exposure differentially received and understood by players and viewers. These bridges between personal biographies, media and game diets mean such connections range from being tenuous to occasionally clear interweavings and overlaps between particular moments,

experiences or atmospheres in virtual and real urban space. However, this game culture and the cultural reference points and stereotypes from which it is generated, and subsequently generative, all subtly interweave with personal experience. In this modulating set of connections within a ludodrome space the sense of what is real or stable in either the concrete urban or virtual city has further shifted, blurred and subtly been inflected with certain strands of this kind of gameplay.

Many of the experiences of these gamers show an interest in the intrinsic qualities, narratives and encounters with these spaces of simulated urbanism. They appear as *flâneurs électroniques* in the sense that they take time to wander, explore and find excitement in spaces that are not ‘real’ and yet have reality components built into them. This also extends to a sense of play and curiosity in their experience of real cities. As Walter Benjamin suggested, the connection between the city wanderer and his very personal experiences meant that ‘in the course of flânerie, far-off times and places *interpenetrate* [italics added] the landscape and the present moment’ (Benjamin, 1990, p. 419). As a point of mediation between simulated and real urbanism, the ludodrome may be a compelling way of understanding the intermingling of senses of place and play that video gamers move through — from a world to which they are connected by wires and monitors, to another to which they have more direct or relatively unmediated access. For these *flâneur électroniques* some degree of fictive, or hyperreal, crossover between the world of play and the urban world is evident.

Figure 3: Mediating simulation and ‘real’ urbanism



In this paper we have set out the key features apparent in the mediatisation of urban environments through gameplay in virtual urban environments, exemplified by the world of *Grand Theft Auto*. In doing so we have seen that gamers are affected, to differing degrees, in the way that the urban is connected to, and interwoven by, gameplay experiences. Feelings of excitement and fear, the appreciation of urban spectacle and the cultivated awareness of underbelly urban life are all experienced to a greater or lesser intensity. These issues provides reasons to connect gaming to other sources of social and interactive influence, the effect of these is the cultivation of a particular hybrid, temporary and perhaps more unstable sense of urban space.

As simulation of the city reaches photo-real clarity and greater narrative complexity, immersion in these popular environments suggests a new set of relations between players, cities and simulated urban space. Thus this simulation offered by the *GTA* cities (NYC, Miami and LA) is differentiated from 'real' cities, yet specific patterns of experience (groups of people, similar built environments or facilities) continue to trigger memories of the game which then appear to act as a framework for reinterpreting these patterns. While the player knows that a group of cars and young men are not a gang on their way to commit a crime this possibility and sense of almost delirious intertextuality between game and experience is occasionally raised as a result of deep gameplay experience.

The sense of overlap between game and urban in the mediated space of a players ludodrome appears to force the collapse of meaningful distinctions between the boundaries of games and 'reality'. 'Real' urban environments have become the source for game code while such games encode, to some degree, the player interaction with real urban space. Future immersion and enthrallment with simulated cities is likely to see ironic and playful references between real and physical cities crumple still further. For players immersed in this was from an early age these cultivated effects may be even more pronounced, making a meaningful distinction difficult for gamers entering these immersive worlds so early. As our analysis appears to indicate, these boundaries are already porous.

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