ON VIDEO GAMES

THE VISUAL POLITICS OF RACE, GENDER AND SPACE

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3

The Landscapes of Games as Ideology

> Landscape might be seen more profitably as something like the 'dreamwork' of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance.[1]
>
> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*

> [C]ompleting the game means penetrating its space, defeating obstacles, coming to the end of the story. The designer of game environments employs the visual tricks of the garden designer to create an active space, where narrative and spatial progress merge. The visitor to the digital gamescape is no mere spectator, however, but an actor.[2]
>
> Eugénie Shinkle, 'Gameworlds and Digital Gardens'

Introduction

In his informative look back at *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, a game developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published by Ubisoft in 2010, creator and designer Jordan Mechner mentions the following maxim: 'Build a Playground for Your Hero.'[3] Rather than focusing on the 'hero', this chapter concerns itself with the 'playground': the game space built as a complex site where the player/hero enacts their journey. Game spaces are central to player experience. This has long been understood from a production standpoint, and has even been explored in relation to the transformation of the lived world through gamification.[4] Yet the fundamental role and cultural meanings of in-game landscape have received little critical investigation.[5] Particularly in regard to a politics of representation, it makes sense that most of the focus would fall to the figures imaged, rather than the spaces within which they move. But navigating and engaging with game space in a sustained way is highly complex, and indicative of larger cultural value systems. The world-making of games has become a paradigmatic form of contemporary visual culture that models relations between player and space in significant ways. Within the study of video games, the construction of space has largely been theorized from a formal perspective. However, turning a visual studies lens to gamescapes in order to understand these landscapes as ideology, we can begin to see how these spaces naturalize a certain set of relations through a highly curated framing of the playable environment. This chapter asks: how can the combined knowledges of formal game studies and visual studies provide new insights to game space and the potent cultural 'dreamwork' it undertakes?

Although there are many AAA titles that present extremely compelling environments, I have chosen the culturally loaded *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. The chapter will place particular emphasis on its spatial features, as well as the game's constructed and highly ideologically weighted

landscapes. *The Phantom Pain*, a Japanese title, was developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami Digital Entertainment in late 2015. I specifically chose this mainstream stealth-themed game for several reasons, including its status as an iconic title that resonates with mass audiences and its legendary director Hideo Kojima. Moreover, *The Phantom Pain* belongs to a legacy brand (*Metal Gear*) that dates back to 1987, which is undeniably one of the most successful franchises in console game history. *The Phantom Pain* additionally utilizes the Fox Engine, a proprietary game engine developed by Kojima Productions and notable for its advanced photorealism, rendering power, possibilities for 'realistic atmosphere' and enhanced sandbox capabilities.[6] After its release, *The Phantom Pain* was especially lauded for the freedom of engagement possible within its massive spaces, and critics identified it as a major technological benchmark for its detail and open-world potentials (see Figure 3.1).[7] In this, it epitomizes the best mainstream games have to offer in terms of the sought-after objective of a highly convincing 'world', and it generally conforms to the typical use of a game landscape as a theatre for asserting dominion over space through the player's mastery of gameplay.

Figure 3.1 Snake on D-Horse in Afghanistan. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

While the game is an iconic tactical stealth action adventure with elements of speculative fiction, it is the space itself (rather than the hero or the action) that concerns me here. Through its invoked themes, its loaded geographical manifestations and its symbolic embodiment of neoliberal ideals, the constructed landscape models a visual culture of global capitalism. But I am also interested in W.J.T. Mitchell's query in relation to ideological constructions of land, from his now-canonical *Landscape and Power*, which 'ask[s] not just what landscape "is" or "means" but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice'.[8] He explains:

> Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus,

> landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which 'we' (figured as 'the figures' in the landscape) find – or lose –ourselves.[9]

Mitchell's description regarding still imagery, in which landscape is constructed *as* cultural medium – as opposed to merely rendering the thing-in-itself – takes on heightened significance when considering game space. As a *playable* space, it lends itself even more to the 'dreamwork of imperialism' to which the art historian refers. Particular kinds of fantasies are enacted within a fully realized simulation that purports itself as given and inevitable, although it is not. And, in relation to third-person perspective games, the configuration of a playable character in the frame repeats the paradigmatic situation of figure within the pictorial landscape, albeit a dynamic one, in which we, too, lose and find ourselves. As I discuss in this chapter, with games like *The Phantom Pain*, the contextualization of landscape becomes vital for what it *does*, in terms of understanding how setting (just as much as spectacular action) may drive meaning. Additionally, the 'givenness' of the game's site as constructed landscape shapes relations to space that echo a set of ethical relations to the lived world.

I have stressed that game representations in general are thoroughly intentional (see Chapter 2). Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire have, already in the early beginnings of game studies, made a similar assertion regarding in-game environments:

> Game worlds are totally constructed environments. Everything there was put on the screen for some purpose – shaping the game play or contributing to the mood and atmosphere or encouraging performance, playfulness, competition, or collaboration. If games tell stories, they do so by organizing spatial features. If games stage combat, then players learn to scan their environments for competitive advantages. Game designers create immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences.[10]

The awareness of games as utterly purposeful in their design, and intended for particular rule-based engagements with the space (which may also be innovatively repurposed by the player), points to a central concern for much of game design: world-building. While effective strategies around game space development are key for immersive gameplay, I am also particularly interested in the ways open-world games speak to the complexities of power in light of current social and cultural anxieties. The constructions of game landscapes are revelatory in this regard, because they model systems of engagement that betray values, priorities and biases.

In their highly influential *Game Cultures,* Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy remark on the centrality of cultural context for an understanding of how space functions in games: 'Although games and play take place in their own time and space, this "location" is intimately related to the wider cultural landscape […] it can be argued that we can only understand the game space through its relation to the non-game space.'[11] The importance of understanding this situatedness of meaning within a culturally inflected time and space cannot be overstated. Games – though different from novels, films, songs, television shows and plays – similarly possess meanings that shift in relation to cultural context, as well as the myriad subjectivities brought to their interpretation by user experience. Dovey and Kennedy also point to the earlier work of Lev Manovich, which underscored how movement through game space partly constitutes its enjoyment, since time and narrative become mapped onto spatial

movement.[12] The co-authors make reference to 'cultural landscapes', which implies literal game space, but more importantly, connective relations to the lived world. Jenkins and Squire seem to refer more directly to the literal construction of game space, which has subsequently been conceived as world-building (in the sense that Mechner wrote of when he mentioned building a playground for a hero).

This chapter invites the reader to ponder the multiplicity of the term 'landscape' in relation to the world-building that is manifested in games, larger cultural landscapes and the connectedness between these possible spaces. As a part of a larger project of modelling how to generatively apply cultural analysis of the image to game studies, I read *The Phantom Pain*'s first site, Afghanistan, for meanings conveyed through its playable landscapes.[13] Bringing together studies of game space from medium-specific theorizations from game studies and the theorization of landscape from the history of art and visual culture, this chapter proposes a critical framework for the world-building at play in dominant games. As the seminal work of W.J.T. Mitchell and Leo Marx will help me explain, video games *as visual culture* always make a set of claims about land, space and place.[14]

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain begins in 1984 in a remote hospital in Cyprus. The story finds the once-great hero, Snake (aka 'Big Boss'/'Boss'), in a compromised position: recently awoken from a nine-year coma, disoriented, one-eyed and highly traumatized. The legendary character is clearly past his prime and in a weakened condition. With a body riddled with shrapnel and scars, not to mention an amputated left hand, Snake is far from battle-ready. At first, he can only use his elbows to drag his sluggish, atrophied body.

What unfolds is a vendetta narrative that explores themes of the psychological toll of war and the atrocities of military conflict. In an opening interlude, the player controls Snake, who wears only a pair of scrubs. Without a weapon or even shoes, he must navigate a besieged hospital with the help of a mysterious guide. Once he negotiates the corridor-based engagement with enemies and the destructive supernatural entities that pursue him, the land opens up before him into a grand expanse of steep hills and valleys. Snake is rescued, outfitted with a bionic prosthetic hand, patched together and reintegrated into private mercenary work in Afghanistan (see Figure 3.2). The player divines after some time that this is a vendetta narrative, and a series of missions will be executed in order to build and grow the mercenary group, the Diamond Dogs, and their stronghold that was destroyed in a previous game. The narrative and gameplay that follow contain elements of horror and fantasy, in addition to more conventional attributes of the military genre such as the use of missions, strategy, stealth, increasingly spectacular weapons, combat, scavenging and navigation.

Figure 3.2 Snake the mercenary. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

The cinematics and naturalistic physics of space in *The Phantom Pain* are impressive technological feats, allowing for free traversal of the terrain and offering myriad opportunities for large and small missions in a highly articulated, photorealistic environment. One's initial companion or 'buddy' – a white steed, code-named 'D-Horse' – accompanies the character and helps to cover the ground faster than Snake can on foot. Players eventually unlock other buddies including the useful canine 'D-Dog', the mechanical bi-pedal transport device called 'D-Walker' and the bikini-clad, mute female assassin, Quiet. Given the time of the game's release, it bears mentioning that the much-criticized Quiet reads as both a blatant stereotype, and a dig against the mounting critique against retrograde female imagery in games (see Introduction).[15] Initially experimenting within the space, one can duck and cover, run, charge, dive, climb and use an array of weaponry, as well as engage in hand-to-hand combat. While an instructive voice-over suggests that it is up to the player to decide whether to handle missions with stealth or aggression, a combination of both will likely produce the best results. A player must take into account various natural and built elements, including identifying good places to hide or stash downed enemies, to observe the passage of time in terms of the most opportune moments to launch a mission, and to use the harsh weather – namely, sandstorms – as cover from the enemy. Snake's first mission is to recon intelligence ('intel') and then use it to rescue an old ally from Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. The mountainous landscape is craggy and harsh, with ruins dotting the landscape and brushy valley regions. One engages with the space from the third person with occasional first-person perspective when necessary for gameplay. The action is seen from a floating camera-eye perspective, mostly above and behind the player-character's figure. Particles of dust, droplets of water and Snake's blood when he is injured all gather on that window, providing the sense of being in an action *film* (a mediated experience) as opposed to being immersed in the action-adventure itself.[16] The aural components of the game confirm this, as one can hear a rustling noise that imitates wind resistance against a microphone, when running or on horseback, suggesting *mediated* sound. Each 'Episode' or mission has its own title sequence, another reference to cinema. The figure-ground relations are such that the playable character is usually fairly small and dead-centre in the

image, which in filmic terms might convey a sense of entrapment or diminutive relation to the land. However, the practical function of this is that the player may see the character being controlled, as well as roughly 180 degrees of the surrounding space.

In Episode Three, entitled 'A Hero's Way', Snake's mission is to capture or eliminate a Soviet Spetsnaz Commander known for his brutal scorched-earth campaigns against guerrillas in the region, particularly the mujahideen. Once deployed, Snake must cover a great deal of ground in order to reach the zone in which his target may be found. The durational nature of traversing the space and the changing light across the environment provides indexical reference to the passing of time and a sense of distance. The land is immediately striking for its specific type of terrain: arid, brush-covered and severe. Using the advantages of the ruins dotting the area, the high ground for remote visual identification of foes, as well as the cover of night, this game configures the land strongly in terms of its use-value for the completion of objectives (see Figure 3.3). The space is, however, startlingly devoid of local people, eliminating the possibility of friendly fire or collateral damage. The land yields resources like medicinal plants and raw diamonds, but is just as easily a site of unexpected danger, such as animal attacks or passing Soviet trucks filled with enemy soldiers. Interior spaces similarly contain details that lend a certain texture and authenticity to a notion of militarized Afghanistan as represented in lived-world news media.

Figure 3.3 Snake surveils. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

Scavenging leads to the discovery of useful intel, objects that can help reconstruct and fund home base, or 'Mother Base', a repurposed oilrig in the Seychelles (see Figure 3.4). This remote site, accessible by helicopter, presents a starkly different environment. A rig juts from an azure, oceanic horizon seemingly at a remove from any shore. It is as sun-drenched as Afghanistan in the day, but with a completely separate visual texture and spatial quality: it is Technicolor instead of beige, definitively industrial. The mega-construction (whose colour is initially orange, but ultimately customizable) is a stark contrast to the desert and, though militarized and severe, offers a welcome reprieve filled with comrades (the Diamond Dogs) who venerate Snake (as 'Big Boss'). Exploration

of its spaces reveals all manner of useful supplies, as well as providing remote support and upgrades while in the field. The detail is painstaking, enlivened and offers great variety of possible interactions.

Figure 3.4 Mother Base. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

The various simulated landscapes of *The Phantom Pain* give the appearance of a more immersive or 'real' experience.[17] In relation to his discussion of another military-themed game, *Spec Ops: The Line*, Matthew Thomas Payne has indicated that this idea of the 'real' in games is a slippery proposition at best, because naturalistic imaging is falsely confused with authenticity and realism:

> Realism – understood as a set of claims about the world – is not necessarily synonymous with verisimilitude, or a media technology's ability to re-present worldly sights and sounds. And yet, the entertainment industry purposefully conflates the war game's ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound with broader notions of experiential realism.[18]

In this critique of militainment, Payne contends that the photorealism of the imagery and immersive aural elements of these games provide a formal fidelity, while often eliding larger and much more problematic realities of war that tend to be far less cinematic. *The Phantom Pain* lapses into moments of fantasy and horror so exaggerated as to be impossible to conflate with the 'real'. It evokes certain spaces, but does not replicate them. Its affective qualities of space, place and mood invoke an impersonal mechanical vision, even while it elaborately stages the irrational and psychological. While the game itself approaches photorealistic detail, it is important to differentiate its lack of fidelity to actual spaces as well as its hyperreality. Used by Jean Baudrillard, this term describes a sense in which the real itself is inaccessible, and can only be understood within a system of signs that reduplicate the real again and again until the object of the representation becomes lost and unattainable. What remains is simulation that staves off its own 'crisis of representation' by hysterically repeating itself.[19]

The experience of moving through *The Phantom Pain*'s Afghanistan is not faithful to the actual

Afghanistan. But what concerns me here is how the highly mediated space of the game simulates particular ideas about a lived place, even while it traffics in ideology – and does so as an extension of power. For example, throughout the game, spaces are visually treated as uninhabited, except by occupying Soviet soldiers. That is to say, in the clusters of buildings and rundown maze-like villages, through which one engages in semi-urban warfare, the inference made by the nature of the space is that they no longer contain Afghanis engaged in their everyday lives. These sites have been taken over by the Soviets and are now outposts for the 'enemy'. This manoeuvre eliminates ugly complications that may arise from the presence of non-combatants, and displaces the sense that such military engagements routinely injure and kill civilians as a by-product. Although it is highly culturally loaded, the space is treated as politically non-particular. The excessive repetition of the game's episodes (mostly: creep into enemy territory, abduct a human asset, return to base) takes place in a site that has strong current US political and cultural resonance with national traumatic dimensions. The hysterical (i.e., panic-stricken and irrepressible) impulse toward re-enactment is not without critical significance, and is tied specifically to the landscape in which it occurs.

That *The Phantom Pain* is a Japanese product does not lessen the reality of its sophisticated address of American anxieties, and in fact it is interesting to consider the forms of critique taking place. What potential criticisms of US dominion over space may be built into a simulated scenario of Snake in his initial setting of 1980s Afghanistan? Snake is a normative white male rugged hero, an American-born private military contractor who operates beyond nation-states. He is set against a backdrop in which Soviets are constructed as adversaries and, as will become clear, his role would generally conform to a US-aligned position. *Metal Gear Solid* creator/director Kojima's self-described obsession with American movies is apparent in his video games, and is featured in his public facing profile on social media, such as his official Twitter page. During an interview at the Tribeca Games Festival in 2017, the director even described how Snake's iconic bandana is a reference to the one worn by Michael (played by Robert De Niro) in *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978). Other games like the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997–), particularly beginning with *GTA III*, are known for the impressive open-world possibility and myriad ways in which to engage with space via land, sea or air. Though much of the popular outrage about *GTA* focuses on its representations of criminal activity, the actual game experience is largely one of sheer exploration and discovery. Not only does it impart an impactful sense of place, but the gameplay also demands that one learns the space well in order to progress through missions. But is important to remember that *GTA*'s jaded renderings of 'fictive' cities based upon actual ones (those stereotyped versions of places like Los Angeles, Miami and New York) are bitingly satirical interpretations, engineered by non-nationals. In the case of *GTA*, brothers Sam and Dan Houser who co-founded Rockstar Games are English with a core team originating in Scotland, and highly influenced by filmic representations of American crime stories.[20] Their numerous Rockstar Games offices are global. Many mainstream games like the *GTA* and *Metal Gear Solid* series overtly appeal to the representational logics of an American audience, likely due to the global popularity and cultural cache of American film. As a result, things like representations of a normative American male protagonist, situated in a fraught global site of political intensity for the US, then told from the perspective of a Japanese force in the global game industry, becomes extremely complicated.

Game Spaces and World-Building: Formalism

This is not to say that games are the same as films. Given the specificity of playable media, it is vital to account for characteristics of form, and how this may provide insight into games as highly constructed landscapes. Scholars of digital media in general, and game studies in particular, have engaged with notions of space from the moment the technology permitted even the most rudimentary spatial representations. Much of the early writing has been organized around defining what makes games formally distinctive from other media. Janet Murray, in her seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* foregrounds the ability to render navigable space as a key asset of digital media.[21] New media scholar Lev Manovich has identified eminently traversable space as a 'key form' of new media.[22] In the same year as Manovich, games scholar Espen Aarseth declared: 'The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, *implement* – space.'[23] Focusing on the three axes of action, time and space, Aarseth argues that the landscapes of games are highly unrealistic in the sense of how they conform to the lived world. Even the most 'open' of these generated landscapes are designed with play in mind, skewed in order to design a curated gameplay experience. Though nuanced readings of their works reveal differences in their approaches, it is certain that game space and its navigation constitute one of the elements that differentiate games from previous media forms.

Henry Jenkins has argued for 'an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects'.[24] In his 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', Jenkins describes game consoles as 'machines for generating compelling spaces'. In earlier writings he has even gone so far as to suggest that these simulated spaces compensate for disappearing lived-world territories of play.[25] Jenkins, in relation to the potential of games, points not to their ability to reproduce literature in playable form, but their evocation of pre-existing literary familiarity and visual literacy, as places where the mise-en-scène may be built up, and as sites for engaging with emergent narratives.[26] These spatial stories, Jenkins argues early on, 'are pushed forward by the character's movement across the map' and telling these stories well becomes about 'designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution'.[27] The challenge, for him, is to create a balance between openness and structure so that the potentials of playable media are maximized, while retaining narrative coherence in the episodic presentation.

Several spatial formations must intersect within a video game in order for world-building to be successful. Michael Nitsche, in his book-length analysis, identifies five distinct 'planes' for approaching the subject of game space. These include the 'rule-based space' that sets the mathematically delimited parameters for what is possible in the space; the aural and visual presentation or 'mediated space' that is seen onscreen; the 'fictional space' or imagined comprehension of what is experienced; the 'play space' or interplay between the human and hardware; and finally the 'social space' which includes other players and observers in their direct or indirect engagement with the game.[28] As Nitsche argues, these in-game and extra-game elements work in concert to provide a whole experience, and a sense of presence in the immersive space.[29] While surveying a history of approaches to various dimensions of game spaces such as player reception, the notion of a 'magic circle' (which separates play from other everyday activity), and design of level

architecture, Nitsche suggests that the confluence of these elements engenders an experience of game space:

> The better this world operates, the less the players have to understand the code logic underneath, which was so crucial for the knobs-and-dials system. A game world does not ask interactors to understand the internal computer processes and the mathematical logic of the code. Players do not have to translate the metaphors and the 3D game spaces back into their technical generation, but instead are asked to connect them to a consistent fictional world.[30]

The structure of the game's virtual space, Nitsche argues, affects how the player may engage with a space, and it also may inform the experience of their missions, and general interactions within it. One of the key identifications made regards the simulation of a camera, where there is in fact none. Arguing that the virtual camera mediates engagement with game space and therefore the building of the world depends upon it,[31] Nitsche writes:

> In order to shape this camera work, virtual cameras can mimic all of the mentioned real-camera behaviors in their presentation of a video game space without any physical restraints. Paradoxically, this freedom of digital cameras can initially result in a shrinking of applied artistic practice. A virtual camera lacks the functional parts of a real camera apparatus that codefine [sic] cinematic language. There are no lenses, filters, shutters, no iris, or film stock in a virtual camera; the camera does not weigh anything and does not make any noise – yet all these elements are responsible for a range of cinematic effects and the development of cinema's form. Without these defining features, virtual cameras lack an important incentive for artistic development: the creative encounter with the limitations of the technology.[32]

This also applies to gamic landscapes, since the mimicking of 'camera work' always 'frames' and mediates the game, which suggests a meaningful affective experience. If we revisit the kinds of mediated 'seeing' that are possible in *The Phantom Pain*, for example, this directly relates to how the virtual camera images a particular moment in the visual representation of the game, which in turn connects to the presumption of a pre-existing visual literacy of film and television in the player/viewer. Specific camera angles may evoke particular known filmic and televisual genres, or expressive cues. For example, the simulation of lens-like depth-of-field renders objects within a focal point sharply, while other objects in the foreground or background are blurry (see Figure 3.5). Or, depending upon which direction Snake faces, and what time of day, bright light from the sun may enter the 'camera' and scatter, creating a simulated lens 'flare' – something that is not native to the form, but added for dramatic effect (see Figure 3.6). Additionally, elements such as directional sound and a sophisticated aural environment contribute to the rendering of a convincing sense of spatial experience. Non-diegetic sound like music may alert the player to pending danger, indicate that a combatant is near, or simply provide atmosphere or emotional affect. In other words, these elements in combination help to relate a sense of 'being there' or sustained presence within the environment.

Figure 3.5 Observing from a distance. Snake in the foreground is blurred, while the focal point at a distance is sharp, emulating a conventional lens. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

Figure 3.6 Snake conducts an extraction. Notice the lens 'flare' aesthetic. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

The notion that the virtual 'camera' does not provide the context for a 'creative encounter with the limitations of the technology' is well taken, but with a caveat. The virtual camera sets the terms by which the visual access to the game is made possible, and it surely does not inherently possess the same aesthetic markers ('limitations' of film stock, lenses, filters, shutters, etc.) that a conventional camera apparatus does, and which does lend specificity to the visual image. However, digital media present their own limitations and aesthetic languages. These are defined by, for example, rendering capacities and numbers of polygons.

In an example like *The Phantom Pain*, which refers so directly to film, the virtual camera of the video game functions as an apparatus that organizes relations between the player/audience, the

playable character, and the space. Theorization around the nature of these relations has some precedent in modern social theory. Particularly with respect to the technological image and its reproductions, philosopher Walter Benjamin has famously articulated the relations between actor, camera and audience in a recorded performance, such as in a film. 'The audience's identification with the actor,' Benjamin writes, 'is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.'[33] This notion of 'testing' is significant and refers to a correlation Benjamin makes between the actor and mechanical equipment like the film camera. In this relation, the film actor is increasingly tested in terms of their ability to translate their expressivity into a form legible to the camera, and transmissible through its organizing systems. He relates this to the increase in the testable in relation to the individual under extended economic conditions of capitalism. In this system, 'vocational aptitude tests' increasingly delimit the measure of the individual. 'The film shot and the vocational aptitude test are taken before a committee of experts. The camera director in the studio occupies a place identical with that of the examiner during aptitude tests.'[34] A game 'camera' or cinematics reconfigure this relation again so that the identification that the player/viewer may have with the playable character, is actually an identification with the computational. This is about calculation, processing and problem-solving, and encourages a framing of the landscape through this rationalizing lens.

In Episode Eight, 'Occupation Forces', one is asked to locate and eliminate a Colonel, then stop the deployment of his tank unit. Loaded with gear, Snake must stealthily move through a compound, gathering intel and incapacitating enemies. The land is steep and craggy, with the compound built into it. One's purpose is always the collection of resources in the form of intel, manpower and raw materials for use at Mother Base. In the process of completing missions like this, one accesses the heads-up display on the player's screen that allows for the marking of enemies and locations, commands, alternative screens that image relevant maps on the iDroid, menus of available weapons for selection, active weapon status, cross hairs for particular weapons, measures of relative distance and mission updates. This is just some of the information overlaid onto the in-game visual space. As with many military-style action stealth games, *The Phantom Pain* offers a tremendous amount of information that a player must constantly absorb and negotiate in order to succeed. In addition, players must continue to consider the development of the Mother Base and persistent management of its resources during their missions. Effective management results in additional resources in the field, such as the ability to conduct remote strikes on a marked target.

On the iDroid, layers of menus and sub-menus drive the management of one's resources. For example, in the management of Mother Base, one sees under that tab on the iDroid screen options: customize, development, resources, staff management, base facilities (for construction and expansion of the base) and a database. Choosing 'Base Facilities', a sub-menu appears with different aspects of the Mother Base Command Platform, which provides information for your combat units, R&D teams, the base development unit, support unit, intel team, medical team, waiting room, sickbay and a brig. Many of these can in turn be managed. In separate tabs, one can look at a map of the immediate gameplay territory or select from unlocked missions. The highly individuated levels of selection suggest extreme personalization and asset micromanagement to the point of absurdity.

The persistent aptitude tests configure a relation in which the player identifies with the computational. This becomes the 'culture' that engagement with the game imparts. Nitsche does discuss the function of games as culture, suggesting that, '[g]ames have become widespread cultural

artifacts. As a result video game spaces increasingly become places of cultural practice and cultural significance.'[35] When he discusses this, he refers to how people engage with each other within the context of virtual communities. For him, games become places where culture is *enacted*: social spaces. This presents a more sociological or anthropological notion of 'culture' – one consistent with the study of 'game culture' as 'player culture' or the study of 'game communities.'[36] Within this framing, it would be likely that the most optimum object of study would be games that largely create scenarios and sites for sustained communal online engagement, such as multiplayer online games.

Nitsche's assertion is valid, but 'culture' has slippery meanings and in his case aligns more with the sociological than with visual culture studies (see Introduction). This chapter suggests that the complex representational practices, and underlying ideologies that may be revealed through the close consideration of games as visual culture, speak to the contexts in which they were made. As such, I am less interested in games as a place where people engage with each other in a mediated sphere for social interaction or community, than games as concentrated forms in which a given society finds its cultural expression through a politics of representation. But if we agree with Nitsche that games spaces are sites of cultural practice and cultural significance, it is necessary to take into account just how player experiences are enframed by those spaces.

Mark J.P. Wolf, who has written extensively on game worlds and how effective world-building occurs across many forms, contends that playable spaces themselves demand critical attention. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* connects the spaces of games to the development of other kinds of world-building, such as those that can be found in literature, table-top games, dollhouse play, building sets, role-playing games and the like, as well as text-based adventures and graphical adventure games.[37] He groups these disparate but, according to him, connected phenomena under what he calls the 'imaginary world tradition', suggesting that what players of games experience in the simulated spaces of playable media finds its precedence in thousands of years of human storytelling and play:

> The notion that 'things could have been otherwise than what they are' is the idea behind the philosophy of possible worlds, a branch of philosophy designed for problem-solving in formal semantics and, that considers possibilities, imaginary objects, their ontological status, and the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world. Possible worlds theory places the 'actual world' at the center of the hierarchy of worlds, and 'possible worlds' around it, that are said to be 'accessible' to the actual world. These worlds are then used to formulate statements regarding possibility and necessity.[38]

Conceptualizing mainstream games like *The Phantom Pain* in relation to a philosophical exercise that mobilizes 'possible worlds' suggests a melancholic or wishful re-enactment of problem-solving within allegorical spaces, especially when they are connected to lived national traumas in what Wolf calls the 'actual world'. This is a point to which I will return in relation to *The Phantom Pain* specifically. What may be called upon as a possibility, and what is deemed necessity, is largely bounded by the qualities of the world that is imagined. Therefore, it is important to ask critical questions about the game space itself, which functions as a territory for the philosophical imagination of what things may be, as Wolf said, 'otherwise than what they are'.[39]

As a franchise, *Metal Gear Solid* represents sophisticated and coherent world-building that has allowed the brand to thrive for more than a quarter of a century.[40] In this regard, it can be thought of

as highly accessible, simulated and convincing in its consistency, across numerous titles. Wolf's research purportedly focuses on the theoretical and formal development of convincing world-building. Explicating mechanics of infrastructures that hold worlds together and new technologies to generate worlds, of integrating multiple narratives and even how multiples of the world may occur, Wolf suggests that by better understanding these 'secondary worlds' we may gain insight into our own 'primary world'.[41] This insight gestures toward a well-understood 'given' from the perspective of visual and critical studies. Namely: that which affectively pricks the emotion of a viewer/player issues both from mastery of form, but surely also from cultural resonances and (as Mitchell stated) a 'dreamwork' of a given society. Truly, in consideration of sophisticated game spaces, formal concerns quickly become inextricable from the cultural dimensions of world-building.

Studying Game Space in a Cultural Context

While game spaces – like video games in general – are vastly understudied from a critical cultural perspective, some groundwork has been laid. Henry Jenkins, along with literature scholar Mary Fuller, make implicit connections between sixteenth and seventeenth-century New World travel narratives and the organization of game space.[42] Addressing what they call the spatial logic and cognitive mapping of games as digital spaces, Fuller and Jenkins deconstruct the language around space and the framing of game worlds within the logic of 'heroic metaphors of discovery'.[43] The co-authors argue that the rhetoric around computer software and innovation reproduces similar colonial paradigms and frontier ideologies, producing a vision in which '[v]irtual reality opens new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining.'[44] Key to how the exploration, colonization and exploitation of resources work within a generated game space is flexibility in the utility of its sites. They postulate that if, as according to Michel de Certeau, every story is a travel story, then games as our new stories similarly constitute a 'spatial practice', to use the French theorist's term. And, in our central cultural drive to explore and possess new territories, games also mirror these core narratives. As Jenkins and Fuller explain, through de Certeau, places become spaces through activation of the narrative action. The landscape only fully comes into being as a result of its potential for narrative action, and its capacity to be colonized by a narrative agent. According to their description of the difference between place and space for de Certeau, the place simply represents a site that has not yet been transformed through engagement. 'Places are there but do not yet matter, much as the New World existed, was geographically present, and culturally functioning well before it became the center of European ambitions or the site of New World Narratives.'[45] This is a startlingly anthropocentric vision of the world, but one that they duly point out as constitutive of game space design because of the way it organizes the representation of land through its use-value for the player. The segmentation of space through its framing on the media screen, as well as the very notion of 'missions' or 'episodes' through which systematized gains are made, ensure a sense of progression:

> The frontier line is literalized through the breakdown of story space into a series of screens. The narrative space is not all visible at once. One must push toward the edge of the screen to bring more space into view.
>
> The games also often create a series of goalposts that not only marks our progress through

> the game space but also determines our dominance over it. Once you've mastered a particular space, moved past its goalpost, you can reassume play at that point no matter the outcome of a particular round. These mechanisms help us to map our growing mastery over the game world, our conquest of its virtual real estate. Even in the absence of such a mechanism, increased understanding of the geography, biology, and physics of the different worlds makes it easy to return quickly to the same spot and move further into the frontier.[46]

The two scholars also discuss what they call 'warp zones' or secret ways to move from one portion of the game to another as a means of pushing out the territory of the game, of maps and tours that share various dimensions of the activated site for players, and the central importance of narratives in the legitimation of their claims to particular lands. This is consistent with many games today, though these observations were made in 1995. For example, in *The Phantom Pain*, one has several possible means of moving from one site to another via warp transport or 'fast travel', initially symbolized by a helicopter pick-up. Eventually, in a more creative and cheeky use of resources, one may use a large cardboard box to ship Snake between transport sites, allowing for fast travel between locations. Games scholar James Newman argues that for Fuller and Jenkins 'at least part of the pleasure of videogame play is derived from the transformation of the place to space, the eradication of the unknown and the bringing of uncertain geographies under the control and influence of the player.'[47] As Newman describes the connection between game space and travel narratives, the 'heart of these narratives [is] the transformation and mastery of geography – the colonization of space.'[48] Newman himself characterizes the progress through a particular game as quite often contiguous with progress through its world, and suggests that 'gameplay may not be seen as bounded in space, but also as a journey through it.'[49]

William Huber similarly connects the speed with which one moves through game space to a sense of domain over it:

> Velocity compresses the experience of place and creates the passing landscape, or spaces of transition. There can be affective shifts associated with moving through a space quickly through which one once moved slowly – even without conflict, a kind of mastery is produced, and the satisfaction of this telescoping mobility is a significant element in the aesthetics of the play of these games.[50]

This connection between velocity and mastery also describes a historical precedent of the imperial drive toward expansion, embodied in the domestication of the frontier and the colonial impulse. The persistent notion of a predatory eye, the gathering of resources and global expansion resonates strongly with the procedural rhetorics of *The Phantom Pain*. As Fuller and Jenkins suggest, 'Cultures endlessly repeat narratives of their founding as a way of justifying their occupation of space.'[51] In relation to the troublesome site of Afghanistan for the United States, it serves as a logical site for enacting foundational stories of establishing the nation, within the logic of the game as a site without indigenous people, and as a space that is ideologically constructed to demand its own domestication. This is manifested in the very form of the game space which provides a site for repeating and perfecting precision engagements that unlock enhanced possibilities for play and access to expanded territories.

Comparatively few scholars address game space in relation to the cultures that inform them. In her

writing on game space, Bernadette Flynn has discussed game experience as cultural practice and underscored the importance of looking at the aesthetics of navigation as constitutive of that cultural practice.[52] She questions the kinds of representational contexts that are created, what choices designers make, and how they choose to situate players within those spaces. She advances the notion of a particular kind of engagement with the space – picking up clues, strolling through the space, witnessing the built world – as consistent with a kind of flânerie, something she sees as more possible in games of discovery and puzzle-solving than those of high action. Flynn's writing highlights the significance of the space itself as constitutive of the experience of gameplay early on in game studies, as opposed to the foregrounded actions and plot points. In her writings, she challenges Jenkins particularly around his early focus on narrative as experienced through navigation of the game world, arguing instead that the spatiality of the game is distinctive from earlier forms, and contributes to an experience of 'play action' that outstrips earlier conventions around play, story or plot.

Arguably one of the most important documents to model a framework for studying games and culture is *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts*. In it, co-authors Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska describe the functional use of varying degrees of utility, accessibility and comparative freedom of game worlds, depending upon technological limitations – but also what various types of gameplay necessitate. The scholars maintain that, 'the world of the game is often as much a protagonist, or even antagonist, as its inhabitants.'[53] They do not discuss the spaces of games in relation to the history and scholarship around 'landscape' as a highly constructed and mediated form of looking at a site. However, they do – like Fuller and Jenkins – connect the exploration of gamescapes with that of European colonial exploration, and its more contemporary connections to global capitalism. Among other things, King and Krzywinska argue that '[i]f the appeal of spatial exploration in games is closely connected with a continual search for avenues of fresh stimulation, this might also be strongly resonant with broader processes within capitalist/consumerist culture, which relies on the constant creation of new "desires" to be satisfied.'[54] It is very difficult not to see a similar engine for the stimulation of new desires in *The Phantom Pain*, in its core mechanic of persistent collection, which ranges from a kind of desperate scavenging to a plundering of any available raw and refined resources. While they connect what they call 'management' or 'strategy' games that utilize such elements in gameplay to titles like *Civilization* or *Sim City*, which simulate a god's-eye perspective and objective distance over a system, these characteristics are also found in aspects of games like *The Phantom Pain*. Indeed, a significant dimension of the game consists of the collection of human, animal, plant, mineral and other collateral resources that the player then allocates toward various objectives that mostly expand and enhance Mother Base (see Figure 3.6).

Framed in the third-person perspective, *The Phantom Pain* affords a specific viewpoint that encourages a particular set of relations to the land. King and Krzywinska deconstruct the mobilization of linear perspective and its connectedness to the player-character, in terms of the action of the game and the 'impression of a world that is centred on, and revolves around, the position of the player and/or the player-character.'[55] *The Phantom Pain* largely conforms to this perspective. The virtual camera generally floats behind and slightly above the player-character, and the space imaged is most frequently that which would be in front of the character. With Snake placed in the middle of a space organized around a Cartesian logic, the player that controls him operates within a highly curated manipulation of perspective. In a presentation on the relationship between the language of the garden

and the space of nature in video games, scholar Eugénie Shinkle identifies how world-building in games is shaped to communicate and guide:

> Familiar and easily navigable, with a wide field of vision and a distinct foreground, middleground, and background, Cartesian space enhances the player's sense of presence by enabling them to situate themselves in space and understand the orientation of visual objects. Positive and negative space is used to create areas of depth and areas of blockage; players will tend to move straight ahead into areas of depth without too much prompting, with massed objects and paths directing their progress when necessary.[56]

This importantly identifies the design of the space respective to the tendencies of the player to respond to it in particular kinds of ways. But these cues, which are initially formal elements, give rise to more complex cultural logics. As Shinkle argues in the epigram above, these are communicated through a discourse of landscape, in which the player becomes an actor.

> Like the perspectival foundation on which it is constructed, landscape representation is a paradigmatic form; a means of inscribing deeply-held cultural attitudes into an apparently neutral space of representation. Viewing a landscape is, of course, not a natural way of seeing, but a visual habit that transforms experience. And landscapes, in turn, are not simply representations of particular states of nature, but created contexts within which politics and ideology take shape. The discourse of landscape – its definition, its conventions, its history – authorizes a specific cultural vision of nature, and its political potency is, in part, a function of its ability to naturalize this vision, to conceal deeply rooted cultural sensibilities behind a screen of benign realism.[57]

She applies this logic to the landscapes of games, which in turn become spaces that borrow from the pre-existing discourse of landscape. Within these highly ideologically concentrated sites, which are often deceptively taken to be 'realistic' representations, players enact relations to the world. However, this 'screen of benign realism' that Shinkle identifies constricts the potential range of activities and engagements with space to relations like domination, penetration, goal-orientation and control.

As King and Krzywinska have pointed out, it is only possible to understand a game world in relation to the context of its non-game space.[58] Pre-video game theorists of play such as Johan Huizinga initially argued for the sanctity of play as occupying a 'magic circle' that separated the special activity from the normal world, its concerns and rules. However, this has been long contested.[59] In her essay 'There is No Magic Circle', Mia Consalvo challenged the usefulness of this formal approach for video games, illustrating the tremendous amount of seepage along the boundaries between territories of play and the lived world. In addition to her primary discussion of cheating in games as a paradigmatic example of how in-game players' behaviours might relate to their extra-game lives, Consalvo valorises the 'real lives, real commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires' of the real people who play games.[60] The work of King and Krzywinska, as well as Consalvo, constitutes a distinct intervention in games scholarship that gestures toward a critical cultural approach to games. Although their work unlocks potentials for games scholarship, this avenue of inquiry nonetheless deserves greater expansion to meet the increasing complexity of game representations and

technological capacities.

Calling games a form of 'landscape representation that communicates ideas about how the world is and how it should be', geography scholar Michael W. Longan argues that simulated terrains mirror aspects of the lived world.[61] His represents one of few analyses of the relationship between landscape and game space and seeks to understand games as tools for learning about the lived world. He states that games potentially reveal the 'often hidden social processes behind the production of real world landscapes' – calling attention to the scholarship around landscape from a visual studies perspective that already understands landscape as ideological.[62] Longan argues that games contain deeply moral considerations embedded in the very instantiation of their landscapes and gestures towards the need to develop more sophisticated understandings of those representations.[63] Likewise, Miguel Sicart points out that computer games 'create game worlds with values at play'.[64] Players, he says, engage with these spaces, understanding that while they may cheat or test the system, they are mostly subject to its rules. These rules, he argues, generate a world suited to the goals of play.[65] There are ethics involved in rule-making, and of course the spaces that are generated would be, as Sicart characterizes them, 'ethically relevant' to analyze.[66]

While questions of form regarding building a better game space or convincingly rendering a game world are key to successful game development, games are also visual culture. Although separate from other media forms, they do call upon pre-existing literacies and traffic in more than the spectacularly technological. Development of some of the most sophisticated games in both the mainstream and alternative or 'indie' contexts display a nuanced relationship between the environment created and the affective relations to the player, between 'actual' world concerns and the 'in-game' space. Like King and Krzywinska, Consalvo, Longan and Sicart argue, this research underscores the entangled relations between the lived world and the game world. Truly, the rule-based worlds of games are landscapes that model value systems and ethical considerations, *not only on the level of action within the place, but within the place itself.* As a means to better understand landscape as a cultural construction rather than objective vision, and the embedding of value systems and rhetorical elements within manifestations of space in image-making practices, the next section explores landscape representation and cultural power from a visual studies perspective.

Theorizing Game Space as Ideological Landscape

In his essay on imperial landscape, W.J.T. Mitchell describes how representations of the land in Western imaging practices, as they emerged in the seventeenth century, were specifically connected to social engineering[67] around imperialist expansion into the West.[68] Calling upon a history of scholarship on the development of landscape painting and its penchant for particular kinds of representations, he asserts these images are always already 'secondary representations'.[69] That is, nature itself is mediated by cultural constructions around its meaning, before then undergoing a secondary transformation under the process of representation. Utilizing a history of scholarship around landscape representation, including the work of Jay Appleton, Ann Bermingham and Kenneth Clark, among others,[70] Mitchell asserts that landscapes are central to the construction of particular ideologies about the land, nation and social identities that shore up how cultural power functions.[71] Key to Mitchell's analysis is his understanding of 'place', 'space' and 'landscape', which he defines as a 'specific location', a 'practiced place', and a 'site encountered as an image or "sight"',

respectively.[72] He attributes these definitions largely to the influence of Henri Lefebvre's concept of triangulation as a strategy against binary thinking about space and place, and sense of how landscape is constituted through mediation. And, he additionally appropriates concepts from Michel de Certeau, particularly his theorization of space as activated through various registers of engagement.[73] Like Mitchell, this chapter presumes the notion that these three concepts operate in tandem; as Mitchell puts it, they 'dictate a process of thinking space/place/landscape as a unified problem and a dialectical process'.[74]

Although Mitchell never specifically identifies games as a medium of expression, this notion of 'secondary representations' – as necessarily formulated cultural constructions by virtue of having re-mediated already mediated natural occurrences – applies particularly well to playable media. This is because of the nature of games as utterly constructed, both on the level that they literally 'simulate' a sense of space and place, and because they are the secondary manifestation of code, which is technical but also necessarily cultural.[75] I similarly assert that in relation to games, 'landscape is better understood as a medium of cultural expression,' and that representations of that landscape (in this case, within games) reveal 'ways of seeing the landscape, *but as a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right* (emphasis added)'.[76] This is significant because, like Stuart Hall identified in his canonical essay, 'Encoding, Decoding', the messages within media have a 'complex structure in dominance' that reflect power relations at each stage in the production and consumption of the text.[77] Importantly, these messages may have an apparent sense of realism, but as Hall argues, this '[n]aturalism and "realism" – the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented – is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the "real." It is the result of a discursive practice.'[78] These codes, in other words, may be so universally accepted as to appear natural, but it is extremely important to understand that this is the by-product of the code having reproduced a largely unquestioned perception in the viewer (or in this case, player). In an absence of understanding how these many layers of meaning-making take place, through representation and secondary orders of representation (which drifts in orders of degree away from the thing in itself), the highly ideological images of games may become taken for granted as realism. Actually, they have already been mediated through multiple layers of cultural intervention at several points in their process of production. The visual power of so-called photographic realism in games may obscure this, and their technical frameworks may naturally invite formal approaches. However, it is vital to consider games as *at least* second order representational formulations.[79] This is one of the ways in which games are quite literally culture – that is to say, as I have argued elsewhere in this book, they are *necessarily formulated cultural constructions*. This is evidenced in their landscapes, and so it is possible to look to in-game landscapes themselves, for insight into the cultures in which they originate.

Of note as well is the 'practised' dimension of the place; that is to say, actions within virtually all playable media are repeated until perfected enough to proceed.[80] Most importantly, Mitchell ties the gaze upon the land, via Appleton, to 'the eye of a predator who scans the landscape as a strategic field, a network of prospects, refuges and hazards' – a mode of looking that is eerily concomitant with the opportunistic eye of the shrewd player.[81] These definitions and concepts provide useful means of thinking through a paradigmatic example of an immersive game space that presents itself as aesthetic, but that must be carefully observed and understood affectively in terms of what Mitchell calls the 'violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye'.[82] Within *The Phantom Pain*

itself, there are specific and elaborate ways of looking at the landscape; this activity is in fact exceedingly bureaucratic in its character. One can observe the enemy from a distance via in-game binoculars. Seeing them through this technologized vision (which is a doubling again of a view on a simulated space through the 'enhancement' of simulated binocular vision) permits the identification of enemy soldiers and then the marking of combatants with a red triangle. Once classified as enemies, soldiers with markers can always be seen and their distance from the player is noted numerically in metres. In short, they no longer possess the element of surprise, a key advantage for the player during engagement. Significant objects of interest are noted as well, and observation of the space often reveals additional intel through remote communications that will prompt a player about their mission and best strategy.

Within this scenario, observation carries with it a kind of dominion; it is opportunistic. Seeing, while no guarantor of success, maps territory, hostiles and key targets. Scavenging for intel may become as (or even more) important than the hunt for objects, and it begins to take on bureaucratic dimensions when elaborate schemas of collection of information and resources (like raw diamonds, processed materials, fuel, medicinal plants, specialists in bionics and translation) directly allows for Mother Base to be expanded and the main character's abilities to be enhanced. Gameplay even allows for micromanagement of Mother Base's resources and redistribution of individual recruits, per their special abilities. Under categorical types of engagement with Mother Base – such as development, resources, staff management, base facilities and database – a player enhances their functionality in the field through the strategic use of resources. Eventually, one's income to the base is enhanced through various indirect means, such as the establishment of a 'Merc Deployment Unit Function', which allows the player to dispatch mercenaries to other conflict zones for profit. Managing and allocating all these hoarded resources can begin to feel like work. This complex demand to multitask and simultaneously understand the game through various visual references (on the ground during active play; through the 'iDroid' screen that presents a map and multiple tabs and pull-down menus for the activation and administration of various resources; and the binocular view) presents a quintessential twenty-first-century multiplex management strategy. In their overview of how values are communicated through games, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum effectively argue that even these seemingly neutral diagrams contain beliefs, moral positions and politics.[83] In relation to the simulated Afghan landscape, a map becomes a complex representation of potential objectives and notions of progress.

Looking is also done within the framework of a space/place/landscape that has overdetermined signification for the present-day US audience. *The Phantom Pain* is set in 1984, during the historical moment now known as the Soviet Union's 'Vietnam War' – named so because of the Red Army's unsuccessful ten-year attempted invasion of Afghanistan and the sense that this conflict contributed directly to the erosion of the Soviet Union's power.[84] During this clash, the Soviet Union engaged in a war against the mujahideen, guerrilla Afghan freedom fighters, sending upwards of roughly 118,000 Russian troops by the time in which the game takes place.[85] The United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan collaborated in the funding and training of the mujahideen, who were successful in forcing a Soviet retreat by 1989. Although there are some instances of chronological inconsistency within the game, it nonetheless contains specific references to key US interventions. For example, in one episode, Snake must recover a weapon called a 'Honey Bee' from hostile forces: a tactical ground-to-air missile launcher. The shape and size of the fictive weapon meaningfully resembles the actual

hand held 'Stinger' anti-aircraft missile, which the United States is known to have provided to the mujahideen, and which were decisively effective against Soviet planes and helicopters.[86] In the wake of the actual conflict, the political and religious Taliban movement arose from within the mujahideen. While the audience for this game may know little of the specifics of the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–89, the more recent 2001–14 US-led war in Afghanistan ('Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan'), which came as a result of the World Trade Center attack on 11 September 2001, was an unprecedented mediatized event and remains a raw national trauma.[87] The choice of this particular historically laden 'playground' for the hero of this game certainly instils a potent affective quality that ties into a cultural imagination and national feeling about a particular place.

Mitchell conceives of the viewer of the land as a kind of predator. Setting aside the form of strategic looking that scans the landscape with binoculars in order to 'mark' enemies, there is a larger sense in which games encourage the address of the game space and all that is within it from the viewpoint of its prospective use-value for the player. It is an opportunistic and exploitative form of observation. This predatory viewing is not limited to military tactical shooters, since many forms of games demand strategies around the effective use of space. Mitchell, in relation to the history of Western landscape painting, connects this active predatory looking to imperial expansion. He describes a set of binary hierarchal relations between Western and non-Western aesthetics of landscapes. Among these is the notion that the non-Western native of the land does not see the land for its abundance and promising economic value. They are constructed as failing to 'exploit, develop, and "improve" the landscape' in such a manner that normalizes its rapacious appropriation by the West.[88] The genius of this position is that the construction of the land as underused (by the predatory, desiring eye) provides its own verification by virtue of what it sees. 'Landscape,' Mitchell concludes, 'thus serves as an aesthetic alibi for conquest, a way of naturalizing imperial expansion and even making it look disinterested in a Kantian sense.'[89] This sets up an interesting paradox, in fact, that runs the gamut between desiring or opportunistic looking and the naturalization of expansion as originating from a disinterested place.

In *The Phantom Pain*, the landscape as an already mediated site of the game further undergoes a second mediation of playable engagement, which allows the experience to come into being. The experience is activated in particular ways, and encourages seeing the landscape from a particular perspective. For example, during gameplay, one's relation to the game space is largely tied to the impulse toward collection. This is evidenced in a core game mechanic that uses a 'Fulton Recovery Device' – that is, a balloon apparatus to which one may harness collected assets like animals, objects and tranquilized enemies. Once attached, it quickly inflates and then spirits the 'package' back to Mother Base. One cannot set aside the cheekiness of seeing a befuddled, partially tranquilized enemy or wild animal dangling from the harness and then yelping with confusion as they are harmlessly yanked straight up into the sky and out of the frame. This has a startling visual effect, and with repetition, it conveys an offhand technological and physical mastery over a lesser prey. It makes light of Snake's dominion over anything he can collect (see Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7 Snake activates Fulton Recovery Device. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

As a character, 'Snake' introduces a highly technologized and militaristic intervention onto the landscape of Afghanistan (and later, the Angola–Zaire border area): one that normalizes engagement with a space in a seemingly distanced or disinterested way.[90] That is, while there may be a desire for objectives to be completed, the onscreen emissary of the player possesses a certain nonchalance, a coolness, a dispassionate relation to the undertaking. Like many military games, the primary character is often relatively inexpressive, verbally or physically. With his back mostly turned to the player, facial expressions do not come into play; iconic masculine stoicism that typifies such representation compounds this. And, of course, as I have mentioned, the territory of the game is often mediated by in-game technologized vision enhancements of GPS mapping, binoculars or weapons scope – all of which foreground mechanized and, by implication, rationalized looking.

In addition to a view of the landscape that configures the looking as opportunistic, yet rationalized and disinterested, there is the matter of how landscapes are mobilized in the service of empire. Scholar of American studies Leo Marx famously explicates the power of the pastoral ideal during the discovery and colonization periods, and how it serves an American theory of society.[91] Searching out the 'more elusive, intangible effects of change – its impact on the moral and aesthetic, emotional and sensory, aspects of experience', he turns to what may be found in the poetry and fiction of the time.[92] In his canonical work, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, originally published in 1964, Marx exploits the ideology of the wilderness, specifically the desert, as an access point to foundational American constructions of landscape. He describes the curious dual image, which oscillates between an Edenic vision and hostile wilderness:

> To depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian–aspirations toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence.
>
> To describe America as a hideous wilderness, however, is to envisage it as another field for the exercise of power. This violent image expresses a need to mobilize energy, postpone immediate pleasures, and rehearse the perils and purposes of the community. Life in a garden is

> relaxed, quiet and sweet [...] but survival in a howling desert demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of the forces of nature, including, of course, human nature. Colonies established in the desert require aggressive, intellectual, controlled and well-disciplined people.[93]

In the above, he refers to an Elizabethan-era (early 1600s) imagination of the New World, and its ideological condition of being in an uncivilized state. The notions of this space varied, as Marx well describes, from the garden to the wilderness. What is key here is that the land, as formulated into *landscape*, was in both cases envisioned as a progression toward a 'benign and ordered nature'.[94] That is, Marx shows how there was a cultural captivation with the New World as a land that would *become* the pastoral space of English ideals and utopian notions. However, he importantly notes that the pastoral and the primitive were often interchangeable in terms of how poets of the period envisioned the new continent.[95] In the cases where travellers encountered nature's rough treatment upon reaching the New World, they spun literary tales of a dangerous wilderness, filled with treachery and severity. Notions of America circulated between these two poles: the garden and the howling desert. This, Marx argued, marked two positions in relation to the land that one could more rightly describe as imagined worlds that were extensions of ideologies driving imperialist expansion. On the one hand was the notion of the Arcadian vision of plenty, an Edenic nature, which came along with the sense that humans' experience within it would be one of 'abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence'.[96] On the other was the notion that Marx described above, of a space that demanded intellectualism, discipline, mastery, manipulation, aggression and self-sacrifice. To some degree, the embedded cultural imagination around severe landscapes, particularly in relation to the desert, is associated with these qualities of the West. But these were also political landscapes, designed to stimulate the collective imagination in such a manner as to encourage a particular cultural, political and economic push toward expansion.

As Marx himself readily admits, turning to fiction and poetry does not produce empirical results in terms of historical record – but it does tap into a certain *zeitgeist* and illuminate how its ideological needs and its cultural formations intersect.[97] Similarly, one might debate the intrinsic cultural value of mainstream video games, and conclude that even the better exemplars hold little, if any. Yet, in the affective experience of these games as cultural expressions, we may find similarly eloquent and telling expressions of nebulous drives and anxieties, and the formulation of a similar national push toward political, social, cultural and economic aims.

In this, *The Phantom Pain* provides a paradigmatic example of a natural environment-turned landscape. Figure/ground relations in this imagined space – in the first part of the game, specifically Northern Kabul, Afghanistan – surely differ from the conventional images of earlier expressive forms like poetry, fiction and painting of an imagined pastoral American land. In this procedural game world, the view and engagement is shifting, commanding a particular set of relations to the space. It is discursive, rather than fixed, but fundamentally structural in the sense that the 'image' still operates within the bounds of a constructed rule-based system (a game made of software) that is delimited, culturally contextual and necessarily ideological. Its playability as a media form renders it distinct from earlier forms of landscape. However, the landscape of *The Phantom Pain* similarly configures the space as overarchingly devoid of 'natives', and instead illegitimately occupied by an invading Soviet force. And, it presents the Afghan landscape as a new wilderness space to be dominated and

domesticated through aggressive, intellectual, controlled and well-disciplined manipulation (see Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8 Snake on D-Horse. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.

There is No Such Place: Afghanistan in *The Phantom Pain*

This comes to the matter of the persistent affective quality of the game (the moral and aesthetic, emotional and sensory dimensions of experience, of which Marx wrote) and its connection to the agitation of a particular kind of feeling about the place it purportedly represents. In respect to the portion of the game presented in the Northern Kabul region, the landscape is consistent with popular news imagery and films, which present a certain bracketed vision of the place as bombed out, arid and asynchronous with modernity. For example, the limited US news reportage from the conflict at the time suggested that without modern weaponry, Afghan freedom fighters are 'eighteenth-century [men] fighting a twentieth-century war'.[98] In another example, documentarians Hilda Bryant and Richard Pauli describe the landscape of Afghanistan as 'mud holes of an ancient people pulverized by heavy Russian artillery'.[99] For the sake of agitating for anti-Communist intervention in the region, 'many reports showed the Afghans to be a mountain-dwelling, medieval, and tribal people facing a faceless military machine' in the form of the Soviet Union, with its superior technological force.[100] The formal aesthetic sensibility of the game, as has been described, mirrors the Afghan landscape of the American cultural imaginary: rocky, arid, brushy, unforgiving, sun-beaten and brutal from a sensorial perspective.

But for the sake of this discussion, most importantly, Afghanistan is configured *as in need of intervention*. Neda Atanasoski has discussed the strange transfiguration of Afghanistan in the American popular imagination in her research on humanitarian militarism, and its connection to postsocialist imperialism.[101] Particularly, the construction of 1980s Afghanistan as a site in need of humanitarian intervention has morphed from a sense that communism and inhumanity must be fought, into a post-9/11 ideology of rescuing innocents (especially women) from repressive fundamentalist

Islam. In her essay on US media representations of the Soviet–Afghan War, Atanasoski writes:

> The contradiction between the messianic overtones of President Ronald Reagan's foreign policy promising a postsocialist future and the place of Islam and Muslims in that future came to a violent head after 9/11. Currently, the memory of U.S. military and humanitarian aid to the mujahideen has become an alibi for the perpetual military occupation of Afghanistan. The implication that humanitarian investments unaccompanied by U.S. military oversight fail to properly 'discipline' Islam frames the necessity for U. S. imperialism in the Middle East […] Throughout the Reagan presidency, the Afghan freedom fighters were enfolded into a U.S. narrative of secular progress, which would bring about a free world, as well as into a messianic narrative of deliverance from Communist oppression […] Yet because of the objectification of the mujahideen for the purposes of a U.S. global vision, after the fall of the Berlin Wall they themselves came to embody the totalitarian and oppressive evil once associated with Communist ideology.[102]

Atanasoski discusses how, despite an enforced Soviet media blackout that rendered the conflict largely a 'hidden war' from most of the press, those images and news reports that did enter into the US largely framed the American role as one of necessary moral intervention into a progressing communist imperialist expansion. And the blackout suggested a new 'heart of darkness' for a colonial imperialist power (the Soviets), a moral darkness that the United States might battle, in order to cover up its own stench of past imperial violence in Vietnam. Through humanitarian intervention against the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan, the US could publicly redeem itself by fighting against totalitarianism – even though, as Atanasoski well argues, the connectedness between US actions in Vietnam and the USSR's actions in Afghanistan were similarly imperialist. However, with the defeat of the Soviet Union in the region, the US ceased its militarized humanitarian aid, leaving a crippled war-torn country in turmoil. The rise of the Taliban occurred in the vacuum of this 'hollow ideal' of American humanitarianism.[103] In an impressive form of ideological acrobatics, the US transforms the guerrilla freedom fighters they once covertly backed into the enemies of freedom and democracy in the world.[104] Atanasoski ultimately contends that, paradoxically, the 'buried memory of the Soviet-Afghan War reaffirms US morality in the Middle East in the present.'[105]

Set upon this fraught theatre of war, the moral, aesthetic, emotional and sensory dimensions of gameplay in *The Phantom Pain* are overdetermined by this morass of complex relations. Whether or not an individual player is aware of the historical details, these affective elements nevertheless circulate in the cultural imaginary, manifesting themselves in popular films and other media imagery.[106] These contribute to a 'feeling' that connects both to the visual trigger of the imaged place and the traumatic weight of the September 11 attacks, which were attributed to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. For it was Afghanistan toward which the US first directed its military arsenal, with the aim of invading in order to root out the Taliban, who was believed to have harboured al-Qaeda. The game's setting, then, is a landscape. It is a simulated and controlled version of something that is in itself mediated within the Western dominant image-making machine in order to signify in particular ways. Those significations, as I have described them, includes a complex fear/fascination with Afghanistan that has existed for 40 years, and which forms a flashpoint for affective engagement. This simulated landscape also constitutes a way of seeking to conceptually frame the space as a part of

bracketing the historical and domesticating it into a particular understanding. On this subject, in relation to visual culture, Richard Dyer has written:

> The idea of a landscape, framed and perspectively [sic] organized, suggests a position from which to view the world, one that is distant and separate. Moreover, the very grasping and ordering of the land on canvas or in a photograph suggests a knowledge of it, bringing it under human control. Even the wildest, most dwarfing landscapes may also suggest Western man's heroic facing up to the elements or at any rate, in his apprehension of their sublimity, making him aware of his special perception of the divine.[107]

The contradiction is that this game simultaneously immerses a player by creating a durational, haptic experience of a landscape, even while the extreme framing and perspectival organization has a distancing effect from what one might call the thing-in-itself. It is a fantasy. Despite its apparent photorealism and historical contextualization, there is no such country, there are no such people.[108] This recalls the theorizing of Jean Baudrillard as well, who declared, to the ire of many, that 'the gulf war did not take place.'[109] With this statement, Baudrillard challenged the notion that the televisual representation of the first Gulf War, as a media event, in any way addressed the lived experience of the war. In its mediation into images, at the virtual speed of real-time reportage, the war became inaccessible, viewable only through the lens of 'mass-manipulative rhetoric'. Likewise, the landscape of *The Phantom Pain* with its experiential force might be thought of as a manifestation of the dreamlife of a culture, or as Mitchell indicated in the above epigram, the '"dreamwork" of imperialism', which reveals at once the utopian vision of a 'perfected imperial prospect', while also trafficking in 'fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance'.[110] From a visual studies perspective, the game's representation of Northern Kabul operates as an incredibly experiential, affective display of a particular world(view). It is real in the sense that innumerable hours can be spent there, in the space/place/landscape; nevertheless, it does not take place.

Conclusion: A Particular View of a Particular World

Video games that render land make claims about space, place and landscape. As the many forms of landscape that came before them, games are tools of power, and particularly in relation to lived spaces, may be thought of as connected to imperialist expansion. As 'practiced' forms of place, the spaces of games in which players move often tend toward a predatory vision of landscape, in the sense that the space is observed from a privileged position, and often assessed in an ongoing, activated manner for its use-value or exploitability for success within the rule-based system of play. In the case of the specific possible world of *The Phantom Pain*, the wilderness (the howling desert) of the game recalls in many ways literary and poetic precursors, which constructed North America in terms of a primitive space in need of domestication through aggressive and highly disciplinary means. This domestication process is repeated incessantly in the theatre of war, represented in episodic form. And in the case of the game's specific site of Afghanistan, the landscape is configured as in need of intervention. This is the extension of a historical rupture initiated by the US intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and complicated by a fraught web of unintended consequences, including but not limited to 9/11. The game's representations are not a given, nor are they natural, but a complex

calibration of rich significations within which it becomes possible to enact an array of relations to that history and its ambient effects.

This chapter is primarily concerned with landscape as a highly politically and culturally mobilized form of visual representation, and the ways it bears upon how we think about game spaces. These critical tools are extremely useful and draw attention to the primary role of culture in shaping the formal dimensions of landscape. The politics of identity of the dominant group (with the greatest power to represent their subjectivities) addresses its concerns through the medium of video games to its audience. Game worlds encourage ways of thinking about particular spaces, and while they do not entirely dictate our understandings, they can be persuasive, particularly when they aspire to 'realism'. Game spaces, like landscapes, are highly formulated cultural constructions. They are practiced through action, which is necessary for movement through and engagement with games. Film theorist Dudley Andrew once said that,

> Worlds are comprehensive systems which comprise all elements that fit together within the same horizon, including elements that are before our eyes in the foreground of experience, and those which sit vaguely on the horizon forming a background. These elements consist of objects, feelings, associations, and ideas in a grand mix so rich that only the term 'world' seems large enough to encompass it.[111]

As in film, the world-building of video games consists of a framing that constitutes itself as representing that which can be seen within it, *in relation to what is presumed to persistently exist beyond it*. There is a sense that what cannot be seen nevertheless exists, and lives in a totality beyond the frame of the playable image.

In the case of *The Phantom Pain* as one of many potential examples, the complex engagement with a troubling, fraught history of the US with Afghanistan forms the affective and literal 'ground' upon which the game is built and enacted. The space is configured as bureaucratic, and seen through the violent predatory gaze, which reconfigures the land as something to be exploited and disciplined by Snake and his well-oiled Diamond Dogs (see Figure 3.9). Notions of progress toward goals in the game are linked to seeing, mapping, claiming and managing. It is impossible to fully understand the game decontextualized from its moment of coming into being. Given that landscape has been shown to legitimize conquest, the predatory gaze directed toward a game world for the purposes of better exploiting its puzzle-solving potentials comes as no surprise. Ideological needs and cultural formations intersect in mainstream games, which seem to convey much more about our desires, than their lived-world counterparts. In the end, whether players are specifically aware of cultural references made, the game world still works on players in terms of their affective engagement with the space. It behoves game designers to fully understand the nuanced cultural references they invoke, as well as the reality that space is more than an immersive setting. It is also constitutive of the value systems set forth, and delimits possible worlds. Likewise, critically activated game players will likely demand more of game worlds than the incessant repetition of narratives of conquest, and logics of bureaucracy.

Figure 3.9 Snake aka Big Boss and the Diamond Dogs. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) developed by Kojima Productions and published by Konami. Image courtesy of ©Konami Digital Entertainment.