Hunters, Climbers, Flaneurs: How Video Games Create and Design Tourism

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Setting the Scene: Tourism as a Playful Experience

In 2016, the augmented reality application *Pokémon Go* inspired people of all ages, all over the world, to go out and catch virtual creatures. Designed by Niantic, in collaboration with Nintendo, the game created a virtual map over our familiar surroundings, placing large "gyms" and "Pokéstops" on well-known spaces. As I traveled through Japan in 2017, *Pokémon Go* was still popular and included many new features. In the metro and on the streets, we ran into many Japanese people of all ages that were also playing the game. Though we did not speak their language, we could tell by their screens and the strategic ways in which they walked that these were our team members and, in some cases, our competitors in the game.

Gaming and tourism went hand in hand in our travel group, as we caught new Pokémon and engaged in gym battles together. Games allow us to immerse ourselves in new, virtual environments, but also to experience offline locations in new ways. Unlocking new areas and new Pokémon can be a great incentive to play *Pokémon Go* abroad. However, the game is also a helpful aid for any traveler, as it helps navigate an unknown town more easily. Since landmarks of the game correspond with real landmarks, Players who walk to active spots in the game are treated to popular sightseeing spots in the town as well, such as beautiful statues, parks and stores. Above all, most games give us a sense of wonderment and exploration, as we engage in new localities in meaningful ways.

This sense of exploration is an essential component in many modern games today, whether we think of majestic fauna in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011), or the ever-expanding forests, deserts and river beds in *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2016). Even shooters such as the *Call of the Duty* (Activision et al., 2003-ongoing) series, or minimalist games such as *Tetris*, produce a sense of space that players need to master, and operate within. Even in the independent game scene, where titles are produced by small teams, exploration and perspective has become essential. One of the most popular indie genres today is the "walking simulator", in which players explore and walk through an environment, but in which interaction is kept at a minimum. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese

Lightroom, 2012) was one of the first and most well-known games in this genre, and is best described as a poetic game in which players navigate through an island and listen to a melancholic voice over to recover their identity. Later games in this genre, such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013) and *Firewatch* (Santo, 2011), offer similar experiences of walking, listening, and observing the environment. The gaze of the player is essential in these games, which have a first-person perspective, and allow for immersion in detailed spaces. These games are not about acting, but about exploring and above all, observing.

Now that we have reached an era of "media life" (Deuze, 2012), in which mobile and connected technologies affect all our practices, we need to rethink how tourism can be reconceptualized. John Urry (2001) already stated that the figure and gaze of the tourist have changed, due to globalization and mediation: ´Tourist sites proliferate across the globe as tourism has become massively mediatised, while everyday sites of activity get re-designed in 'tourist' mode, as with many themed environments´ (p. 7).

Since digital games rely heavily on virtual and offline spaces, it would not be odd to speak of tourism in games. How can we envision virtual tourism in games today? How are virtual environments experienced by their players? Can the virtual spaces of games be recreated in real life, and where might we find such sites of media tourism? This chapter examines the capacity of games to create new localities as virtual environments. Recent game successes, such as *Pokémon Go,* also demonstrate that games enhance bodily experiences and shape the environments that we are already familiar with through augmented technology. Games, then, do not only rely on our gaze to examine the new and virtual, but may force us to re-examine the offline and familiar as well.

In this chapter, I argue that video game tourism is fundamentally different from other types of media tourism, since tourism is actually heavily embedded within the structure of these media. This chapter introduces a conceptual and descriptive understanding of game tourism. It analyzes new spaces of tourism as they emerge in relation to new media, such as virtual reality, and to the particular medium of games and play.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Studies on Media Tourism

In this chapter, I rely on studies done on the mediation of tourism and narratives. Of particular interest is the field of media tourism, which points out the importance of traditional places in media and fandom.

These studies focus heavily on locality and media, and analyze *media places*, such as production spaces (e.g. film sets) and narrative spaces connected to media (e.g. theme parks). Media tourism is an important field that often shows the intensity and affect when fans visit a place that is integral to the cult text. *Twilight* fans, for instance, visit the film sets to re-experience the romance novel that shaped their youth (Lundberg & Lexhagen, 2012). That tourism helps audiences access, interpret, and actualize the beloved narrative anew explains how fiction is envisioned in these places by tourists (e.g. Cartmell, 1993). By travelling to certain locations, fans experience where authors wrote their famous novels (Watson 2010), discover film sites or the villages that star in their beloved fiction (Gordon, 2003) and even retrace the steps of a character (Reijnders, 2009, 2011).

In media tourism, media scholars have argued that actual places are transformed by the narratives and the memories that we associate with them. Specifically, Nick Couldry (2000, 2003) investigated media tourism as a type of pilgrimage that involves an affective travel to get closer to the 'media centre'; the ritual heart of the media product. The journey, then, matters as much as the space itself.

My own studies on fan tourism focused on the pilgrimage of going to a fan convention, a large gathering of fans in hotels or other public venues to celebrate their love for certain (genre) fiction. By doing field research on large comic cons, anime conventions and Japanese comic markets, I explored the role of belonging in fandom, and its relation to global fan identity (Lamerichs, 2014). By dressing up as fictional characters (engaging in *cosplay*), and by re-enacting scenes from specific media, fans created themed environments in which they could reconnect with their beloved series again. While spaces such as hotels are fairly neutral, and unrelated to the production of a narrative, the space gains interpretive meaning through the fan practices that are hosted there and its history of fan activity.

While the connection to virtual spaces (e.g. forums and fan sites) is often analyzed in the field of media tourism, the attention to games has been limited. This may be related to the fact that games are spaces of imagination. Games are fictional and virtual worlds that we inhabit and that have no real life counterpart, as is the case in the *Dragon Age* and *Zelda*

series. In general, the idea of touring and revisiting spaces known from fiction is not that common in the case of video games, since they lack offline counterparts such as a film set.

However, the study of videogames as touristic spaces could provide new insights. Both virtual and traditional games (e.g. board games) are different from media such as novels or film since they allow developers and players to create and experience new locations. Video game tourism is different from other forms of media tourism since games are performative media which rely on actions of the player as well as a sense of space. Game worlds themselves allow for touristic practices, especially virtual sightseeing, which is heavily connected to the control of the player, and his or her perspective through the playable character (the avatar).

While game tourism can be partly rooted in real life, as I will show in the next sections, I want to specifically unpack the relation with virtual. Furthermore, I will explore how this may fuel new understandings of tourism, which resonate with Urry's touristic gaze 3.0.

Methodology

This chapter is a pilot, which may be followed up by a more exhaustive study on video game tourism. My method is a combination of close-reading, (ethnographic) participation in games and online forums. I rely on small-scale, recent data sets gathered through a combination of ethnography and online research or "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010; Markham, 1998).

In 2017, I searched *Assassin's Creed* fan tours on Tripadvisor and Reddit and read reviews, first exploratory, and then in detail. Moreover, to study virtual reality tours, and virtual reality as way to market and gamify holiday destinations, I studied footage on platforms such as YouTube. Finally, I relied my own experiences as an active player, scholar and reviewer of video games to conceptualize this framework.

My aim with this study is to draw attention to the production of locality in global media spaces, by using digital games as a case-study. I reflect on the transnational spaces of online gaming, as well as the impact that games have on their players as affective spaces (Hills, 2001).

While this chapter focuses primarily on digital games, it is important to note that most games, even traditional ones, are rich spaces in which meaning is created. Paul Booth's *Game Play* (2015) encompasses a wide range of board games and reveals that traditional games

are very apt at mediating existing fiction and narratives. Game designers can establish a new sense of place and ownership related to well-known universes and locations, such as *Game of Thrones'* Westeros or the wizarding school Hogwarts from *Harry Potter*. The study of game tourism, then, could even be applied to traditional games, but this is outside of the scope of this chapter.

Sightseeing Inside and Outside of Games

While studies on media tourism often focused on official tours, as well as fan tours, the idea of "touring" to real life locations is not that common in videogame culture. Games do not have many production spaces that one can visit, since they are digitally created, and thus do not have a set life, such as movies. Though scholars have studied theme park rides inspired by films or the *Harry Potter* series (Waysdorf, 2016), there are hardly any real life locations specifically inspired by games. In the case of films and fiction, fans can also go to the places and towns that inspired that fiction. They visit Abbey Road, or Forks, known from *Twilight*. Games, however, are often creative worlds, and are in some ways more similar to art and animation than to film. As simulations, games do not often offer real world counterparts.

While video game tours are rare, some franchises have sparked this practice. A well-known example is the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007-ongoing). This action-adventure series has a strong historical component and relies primarily on stealth as players adopt the persona of an assassin. The series is praised for its aesthetic and complete recreation of historical cities. *Assassin's Creed* has remediated historical Palestine, Florence, Boston and Paris, amongst others, and always with great attention to detail.

In many towns, unofficial fan tours are organized inspired by the series, which allow fans to walk through the towns together and see the spots that they know from the game. Moreover, fans give each other tips on forums such as Reddit, or share their experiences when they individually (without a guided tour) explored the town. The game is known for its climbing mechanic, which allows you to climb unto huge buildings and towers. In their reviews of tours, or forum posts of their experiences, fans often reflect on how beautiful it is to see these large buildings in real life.

One tour that is organized in Florence for *Assasin's Creed* fans is *Tatiana's walking tour*. One reviewer writes: 'mazing! Tatiana was extremely well versed in both the history of

Florence and the *Assassin's Creed* storyline. I found this tour to be very thorough. The historical information is plentiful making the tour enjoyable even for those unfamiliar with the game. Naturally the comparisons between reality and the game make the tour. If your (sic) a fan of the game, you must take this tour. Play the game one more time before going and you'll enjoy it even more!" (User 1 – Tripadvisor, 2013).

As a metaphor for exploration and the leisurely enjoyment of games, the figure of the *flaneur* maps onto the figure of the player quite adequately. Players leisurely stroll through cyberspace, and enjoy the scenery. Benjamin's flaneur (1983) is an urban spectator, who is defined by his inquisitive gaze and appreciation. However, being a flaneur is not only about seeing but also about being seen. In many games, the player is not truly seen and part of the urban population, but part of a small team, or playing individually.

It is only in the gazing and observing that the parallel with flaneurie works well. Games have a sense of space which is crucial to the experience of the player. This sense of topography and space is not new by any means. Decades ago, educational games such as *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego* (Broderbund, 1985) or *Oregon Trail* (Gameloft, 1971) created maps to teach topography and culture to children. Simulations may have become became more advanced, but a space has always been a factor in games.

In his article 'Beyond Cyberspatial Flaneurie: On the Analytical Potential of Living with Digital Games', Bart Simon (2006) examines the gamer as a *cyberflaneur*. Large games allow us to travel and experience new cultures, and this holds especially true for online games. Simon elaborates: 'It is in this sense that massively multiplayer online games like *Everquest*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, or even *The Sims Online* more so than Web sites, multiuser domains, or even spatially intensive virtual world games like *Myst* are commonly described in terms similar to how one might describe travelling to another country (Book, 2003). Indeed, it would seem that the more immersive the game, the greater this sense of transportation becomes. The age of virtual world tourism has arrived' (p. 62).

The semiotic and rhetorical way to analyze the game space has hitherto been dominated by the concept of the magic circle. In his anthropological study of play, *Homo Ludens* (1970 [1938]), Dutch scholar Huizinga envisions the game space as demarcated by rules that form a "magic circle" defining the context of the game. This concept has been picked up by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) in their influential handbook *Rules of Play*. They

argue the following: 'In a very basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins' (p. 95).

While the circle can be understood as a semiotic domain or context, the concept is contested and interpreted differently throughout game studies. Scholars that use the term often point to fandom and game culture to show how games are not only within this circle, but often outside it a well. Games influence other contexts than the game itself, such as everyday life, identity and belonging (Pearce, 2009). After all, fans extend the playful moment through their social and creative activities (Consalvo, 2007; Taylor, 2006). The circle, for starters, is a wide one since games spaces have become large virtual worlds over the years. Typically, videogames create worlds that players can conquer or master, or even manipulate or create altogether. Games are about creating a journey. The magic circle is considered fluid in many recent game studies.

Moreover, the space of games has become a market space that we can often only master by buying some new downloadable content (e.g. new items) and that we pay to win. Immersive virtual reality spaces are practically available to just about anyone in demand, if they are willing to pay. Touring in *Pokımon Go*, for instance, often means paying to go ahead or spending hours and hours of tedious game play to level up one's team. In this sense, tourism in gaming should not only be seen as an artistic experience or an aesthetic endeavor, but as deeply commercial and marketed. In other words, like any type of tourism, game tourism is not only a type of leisure, but involves economic structures and labor.

Re-experiencing the City through a Tourist Gaze

At the heart of games lies exploration, and even the mastery of geography. In sociological terms, games allow us to transform a neutral place to a space, a site that is colonized, explored and connected to our personal stories (Newman, 2004, p. 113). Creating spaces is an apt conceptualization of what it means to play recent games, such as *Pokémon Go*, which connect the game space to offline spaces. Augmented Reality games connect multiple technologies and interfaces, such as our mobile screens and templates from Google Maps, and use this to create mediated layers over our traditional environments. The predecessor of *Pokémon Go*, *Ingress* (Niantic, 2014) already successfully created a post-apocalyptic

narrative across the world, which allowed two factions to compete. The game offered a new way of seeing the world and known monuments through a dystopic narrative.

Playing games such as *Pokémon Go* offers us a new way to see the world, and to traverse familiar streets. Playing the game often reminded me of De Certeau's famous essay *Walking the City* (1983). In this essay, De Certeau coins "strategies" and "tactics" as a way of analyzing the role of power and discourse in culture. In his essay, De Certeau shows that the city is produced by strategies (structures of power), which create a unified whole, but consumers can choose to act with or against these strategies. These tactics are captured by the pedestrian in Manhattan, who navigates the city in a tactical way, according to De Certeau. This walker may choose shortcuts, and may choose to ignore the grids of New York. The city is but one example of how strategies and tactics work in our culture. Consumers are always influenced by structures which are outlined by others, but never fully determined by them.

Pokémon Go brings these concepts to mind. The players of the game engage in tactics and look at the city in new ways. They take shortcuts to get to the next Pokéstop or Pokémon. As a result, they may behave in unexpected ways, which has also led to much critique of the game, and even led to some cities, such as The Hague, trying to ban the game. Walking has clearly become a tactic, a bottom up practice. However, we should also be careful not to exaggerate what the game does. In their own way, consumers are led by strategies and rules of the game. They are, for instance, drawn to the newest "lure" which attracts Pokémon as a result, because this is the best reward in the game for now. Similarly, players may team up for a gym battle, because this is of use to them, but may disperse afterwards. In other words, we must not exaggerate what games do, since they create new structures in and of themselves which affect consumers.

Pokémon Go creates new ways of interacting with our environment, similar to other location-based games. The app combines elements of traditional scavenge hunting with competitive aspects, such as gym battles. There have been other location-based games that achieved popularity, such as *geocaching*, a recreational activity which allows players to hunt for containers ("caches") at specific locations, based on GPS coordinates. Similar to Pokémon Go, geocaching shares aspects with traditional games such as treasure-hunting and letterboxing. However, *Pokémon Go* is undoubtedly the first mainstream success in this area

of location-based games. It created its own unique story line, connected to a beloved franchise, and made full use of the functionality of the maps and mobile screen. The success may have to do with the fact that the rewards in this game are all virtual. The caches are all experience points, and new Pokémon, which means that the players do not actually have a physical object to engage with like they do in geocaching.

Touring new locations with *Pokémon Go* is a joy, and one way in which we could consider this game as virtual tourism. However, physical tourism also flourished as a result of the game. For instance, in my home town Utrecht, local shop owners clearly wanted to profit from the game, as they put up signs welcoming all Pokémon hunters, and sold special Pokémon cupcakes. It seemed that some shops, which permanently had lures on them to attract Pokémon, perhaps even bought in-game items to attract hunters. In Japan, there were special events offering double experience, as well as raids and unique Pokémon such as Farfetch'd which can only be caught in Asia. This makes playing *Pokémon Go* abroad a very rewarding experience for players. When we travelled Japan with our group, for instance, catching Farfetch'd was an iconic moment for one high-level player, who immediately sent pictures of the Pokémon in Tokyo to her friends and family.

In this sense, tourism also flourished in real life, as many players spent the summer in towns and beaches abroad on their quest for Pokémon.

Virtual Tourism

While entertainment games allow for a touristic gaze or play style, it is equally important to examine the virtual reality (VR) games and applications which are increasingly designed for touristic purposes. The primary point of these apps is to inform consumers about a destination, which may affect their decision making process and customer journey when choosing a holiday destination.

A related function of these apps can even be to simulate threatened sites, or to create a virtual substitute for tourists who for physical, economical or other reasons are not able to attend that holiday. In an extensive overview of VR applications in tourism, Daniel Guttentag (2009) writes that, based on existing studies, it is unlikely that virtual reality apps will function as substitutes to real life holidays. VR, for instance, can still not simulate all sensory experiences that come with a holiday, such as the feeling of the sun, or the sand under your

feet. Guttentag cites a study conducted by Sussman and Vanhegan (2000) who surveyed 50 people in Britain and came to the conclusion that "virtual holidays cannot replace the real holiday experience, regardless of apparent inconveniences and environmental dangers to destinations" (id. p. 6, cited in Guttentag, 2009, p. 644). Guttentag summarizes various other studies which found that spontaneity, the lack of sensory experiences, the inability to buy souvenirs and other options make VR an unlikely substitute for real holidays in the near future.

In the past years virtual reality has developed rapidly with technologies such as Oculus Rift and Playstation VR. Low-key virtual reality headsets also allow consumers to easily play 360 degree films and small VR applications on their phones. Platforms such as YouTube have made it easy for everyone to upload their own 360 degree videos, which can be viewed on a headset. While the technology is still being experimented with, today most companies that design VR focus on digitally designed applications, created in software such as Unity, as well as 360 degree videos which are essentially shot as film footage. Virtual reality is not only applied to gaming at the moment, but also to architecture, health, and pornography. There has been a rapid development of content in these areas, which is still growing.

With the emergence of these technologies, we have seen many businesses, such as travel agencies, explore the use of VR. Airway company Lufthansa (2016) created several 360 degree films on locations such as Hong Kong and Tokyo of 46 minutes, which fully allow you to fully immerse yourself in these destinations. Similarly, British Airways teamed up with Avios to launch a new virtual reality campaign that relies on 360 footage of various locations in Madrid, such as San Miguel Market and Retiro Park. Thomas Cook partnered with Samsung and VR company Visualize in 2015 to create short films about various destinations, which could be viewed on the Samsung Gear VR headset in stores. However, many of these films offer nothing but shots of locations, with a limited degree of storytelling. Some videos, such as the ones from Lufthansa, rely heavily on music rather than voice-overs or environmental sounds. This creates the ambience of a 360 degree music video rather than an informative or truly touristic experience of the site.

An exception is Marriott Hotels *Vroom Service (*2015) which allows hotel guests to borrow a VR device and experience short stories in Randa, Chile and Beijing. These "VR

Postcards" give viewers the glimpse of a destination. Their mission statement is to "move beyond simply showing aspiration destinations towards a platform for delivering emphathic personal stories about exploring our world. A transportative call to action" (framestorevr.com, 2017). Still, even their videos with a clearer focus on humans and culture rely heavily on depicting the scenery to create the sense of the traveling experience.

The quality of the videos, and their storytelling, is clearly still developing. At the moment VR is still being invented as a genre. Creative breakthroughs in VR are still scarce, though The Guardians *6x9* (2016) might be an achievement which can push the genre forward. In this app, the designers simulated solitary confinement, by relying not only on footage, but also on sound and the psychology of being alone in a tiny room. It creates awareness and empathy for solitary confinement, which is still a common practice today.

While touristic apps may still follow the route of advertisements and travel programs to showcase holiday destinations, other apps managed to generate empathy and to create a real story through place. In the future, we will undoubtedly see more applications of this in the area of tourism and marketing as well.

Implications for Popular Culture Tourism

The current media landscape is one which goes beyond the boundaries of a medium. We live in times of transmediality in which virtual and actual spaces mingle, and the online and the offline are not clearly separate anymore. The notion of cyberspace, as one virtual space disconnected from reality, no longer holds true. Today, games are connected to actual locations or have become locations in and of themselves which we live to visit and live in.

In this chapter, I have shown that game tourism is fundamentally different from other types of media tourism. The medium of digital games relies heavily on its game spaces which, unlike film and novels, often do not have a real life counterpart. However, games do offer us virtual sightseeing, and new ways to observe familiar environments. This trend will only increase the coming years as game worlds become bigger, faster, and more detailed. More than ever, games offer us the physical, kinaesthetic pleasure of exploration. This sense of space is heavily connected to tourism, both as a practice of discovery and a way of seeing, as well as a commercial endeavor.

However, we must be wary of the fact that the virtual realities of gaming cannot yet replace real tourism. Its simulations are a poor substitute for what we see in real life. The near future, then, seems to rely more on the gamification of real places. We see this in both of the key cases in this chapter. Assassin's Creed is mediated in the form of tours to allow fans to re-experience the game in urban environments. In the case of *Pokémon Go*, however, which integrates gaming with real life, we see that gaming can motivate, and even supplement, real experiences. Mediation is key in this case, since the game shows us that familiar environments can be "themed" to create a touristic experience.

The coming years, game spaces will advance even more. Tourism could take many forms: Will we in the future buy in game and out of game souvenirs? Will we book trips to digitally designed spaces? Whatever the case, it is important to conceptualize game tourism, and this is a first step in that process. Game tourism can show us many things about identity, belonging, and location. It is an important point of comparison with other media, which create unique spaces of identity related to an existing narrative or point of production. Games, however, do show us that media themselves allow for flaneurie and sightseeing. Media do not only open us up to new experiences, but also enhance our gaze, and make us see things that we were never aware of before. Within tourism studies, we need to reflect more on the playfulness of today's media, and its consumers.

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